

The Book of James

Introduction

James' letter is unsurpassed in providing insight into how our faith can be demonstrated in our everyday living. There are few sections of New Testament scripture which are as practical as the book of *James*. Therefore, the effort you exert to understand the book will be handsomely repaid in your endeavor to live the Christian life. One author states its main theme this way: "true faith is a faith that *works*."

James has been called "Proverbs for the Christian" and likened to the Sermon on the Mount; it is more "sermon" than letter. There are about 50 imperatives in the book – lot's of "oughts."

Author & Date

The author identifies himself simply as "James, as servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. . ." (1:1). Who was this James? There are four possibilities, if the author, as is probable, is one of the James' mentioned in the New Testament:

1. James the son of Zebedee, brother of John (cf. Mk. 1:19; 5:37; 9:2; 10:35; 14:33). He was one of the twelve but it is unlikely that he wrote James since he died in AD 44 at the hands of Herod (Acts 12:2).
2. James the son of Alphaeus. Also one of the twelve, he is mentioned only in the lists of the apostles (unless he is James the Less, mentioned in Mk. 15:40).
3. James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot). See Lk 6:16; Acts 1:13. He is otherwise unknown.
4. James the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:19).

James the Lord's brother is the most likely author of the book. He was counted among the non-believers earlier (Jn. 7:5), but later became prominent in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:9). The Jewish character of the book, among other factors, has led most scholars to believe that this James is the author.

Eusebius and Josephus agree that James was stoned in A.D. 62 by the scribes and Pharisees for refusing to renounce his commitment to Jesus. Furthermore, the lack of any mention of the Jerusalem Council (AD 48-49) has led a number of commentators to place the dating of the book before that time, probably around AD 45-46, making it the earliest book in the New Testament.

Recipients

The letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (or "of the dispersion") (1:1). This term probably refers to the *New Israel*, the church (cf. Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6; Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3) who had been scattered abroad after Stephen's stoning in Acts 7 (see Acts 11:19). Another possibility is that the term "dispersion" (Gk., *diaspora*) is a metaphor which characterizes Christians as living here on earth as "strangers and pilgrims" (cf. I Pet. 1:1).

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Occasion and Purpose

If James is writing to the literal *diaspora* (Jews scattered throughout Gentile communities) then the purpose is to encourage them and direct them as they live in a hostile environment. Their commitment to Christ would be met with opposition by both Jews in those areas and by the native pagans. Presumably, reports of these problems throughout the churches in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:19) reached James and he wrote from Jerusalem to help correct them.

Among other themes, his letter warns the rich and ungodly who were oppressing the Christians (5:1-6); discrimination against the poor (2:1-13), claims of faith without action (1:22-27; 2:14-26) and bitterness in speech (3:1-12). He also touches on a number of other important themes, such as: suffering/testing, eschatology (the doctrine of “last things”), Christology, poverty-wealth, the relation of law, grace and faith, wisdom and prayer. His tone is authoritative and firm as he “preaches” through his letter to his audience. In all, there are fifty-four imperatives (“do this, do that”) in the book.



EVERY GOOD AND EVERY PERFECT GIFT IS FROM ABOVE

James 1 : 17

Outline

- A. Salutation (1:1)
- B. Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)
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- E. The Relation of Faith and Action (2:14-26)
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B. Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)

1. The Testing of Faith (1:2-12)

James 1:2-12 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. 5 But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8 *being* a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. 9 But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; 10 and the rich man *is to glory* in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. 11 For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. 12 Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him.

James first address the trials (Gk., *pierasmos*) which are making their harsh demands on his readers. He assures them that these trials will accomplish a purpose in them which will bring joy which will far outstrip the temporary difficulties (see Rom. 8:18; II Cor. 4:16-18 for similar thoughts by the apostle Paul).

James uses several word-plays (words similar in sound and meaning) in his letter, some apparent only in the Greek. “Greetings” (*charein*) is followed by “joy” (*chara*). “Patience” in v. 3 links with “patience” in v. 4; then “perfect” connects with “perfect and complete,” all in v. 4. Then the word “lack” (“lacking” v. 4 and “lacks wisdom” v. 5) connects vv. 4 and 5. James’ point is that there is a proper way for Christians to face “various trials” (meaning “tests of faith,” whether illness, financial loss or outright persecution). They are to “count it all joy.” James does not say the trials themselves are a joy, but that they are to “count it all joy.” “Count” means to consider or to think about in a certain way. When they confront these troubles, they are to consider it a joy, even though it causes pain.

Why are they to “count it all joy”? Because these trials will give them an opportunity to perfect their faith. Peter made the same argument in I Peter 1:6-7, “*in this you greatly rejoice though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials (pierasmos), that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” See also Romans 5:2b-5.

Testing recruits patience (endurance) and patience, when it is completed (compare with “sin, when it is full-grown. . .” v. 15) has its perfect work, the completion of Christian character. This endurance is necessary because this work is a life-long process. Perfection (*telios*) is the goal, not just a “maturity,” though certainly maturity will result from the aim for perfection. James

uses the adjective “perfect” more than any other New Testament writer. He uses it to describe God’s “gift” (1:17), the “law of liberty” (1:25) and the man who is able to bridle his tongue completely (3:2). Trials accelerate our efforts to strive for (not necessarily reach) perfection. Therefore, we should “count it all joy” and “let patience have its perfect work.”

What is the secret to viewing our trials in this way? Wisdom! How do you get wisdom? Ask! Who do you ask? God! Why Him? Because He gives “liberally and without reproach” (cf. Prov. 2:6a). The word translated “liberally” (*haplos*) comes from a root word meaning “single” or “simple,” meaning God’s gift is undivided, unwavering, without reservation (compare with the double-minded man of v. 8). He gives “without reproach,” meaning He does not give a “lecture” with the gift – He gives without criticism and “without reminding us endlessly of the value of the gifts He gives” (Moo, *Commentary on James*).

Notice that James says the gift is conditional. While gifts are always free – that is, they are never earned, otherwise they would not be “gifts” – there is nearly always some condition to fulfill before *receiving* the gift. For example, if a supermarket decided to give away a shopping cart full of money, the money would be “free”; but they would have a right to expect the winner to come to the lot and take the cart away. Likewise, James says in v. 5 if you want wisdom (if indeed you recognize that you need it), you need to *ask* for it (cf. 4:2, “you do not have because you do not ask”). Not only must you ask, you must *ask in faith* (v. 6). He defines what he means by faith when he says to ask *without doubting*. The man who doubts is like (note the word-picture) the waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. In other words, such a man is unstable, trying to look both ways. His doubt about receiving the gift becomes the *cause* for not receiving the gift. God is a liberal giver, but we don’t believe it! And the man that won’t believe “shouldn’t suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (v. 7).

Here’s another word play (v. 9), evident even in the English: “the brother in *humble* circumstances ought to take pride in his *high* position (NIV). Meanwhile, the one who is rich should glory in his humiliation (v. 10) because his riches are coming to nothing. There is a difference of opinion among scholars about whether the rich in this passage are Christians or not. It is likely that “brother” (Gk - *adelphos*) of v. 9 refers both to the one in humble circumstances and the rich. Later on, in chapters 2 and 5, James will criticize the rich, probably non-Christian oppressors. But here, there is no criticism, just a warning: whether rich or poor, life is short; as grass withers and the flowers fail, so will we all perish from the earth. In other words, “you can’t take it with you.” The statement sounds like a maxim made up of a combination of warnings found in Isa. 40:6-8 and Psa. 49:16-17. The poor who is faithful is as rich, spiritually, as anyone else; the rich who is faithful will not glory in riches but in his humble obedience to God. In Christ, all are equal, regardless of their physical circumstances (cf. 2:1ff; Gal. 3:28).

In v. 12, James picks up the theme started in v. 2 when he pronounces a blessing upon those who endure temptation (i.e., a challenge to their holiness). The NIV says, “perseveres under trial; “test” in v. 3 and “temptation in v. 12 come from the same Greek root word, *dokim*. “Blessed” is not ad-

equately translated by the English word “happy.” The Greek word is *makarios* and, biblically, refers to “the distinctive religious joy which is one of the benefits of salvation.” It is more *verdict* than description or admonition. If you “fall into” various trials (v. 2), then you are to consider yourself “blessed” because the testing will help you get to heaven (“receive the crown of life”). The crown is the Greek word *stephanos* which usually means a crown of victory (as compared to *diadem*, a crown of royalty). Life is a race (hopefully not a *rat-race*!) which must be run with endurance (cf. Heb. 12:1-2). Steadfastness is sometimes difficult even when things are going well. If one is unable to endure during the good times, he will probably not handle adversity very well. The time to practice endurance is now, for it is only when we are “approved” (cf. Rom. 5:4, NASV – “approved character”) that we shall receive the crown of life.



Questions

1. What is “joy”?
2. What is the difference between “perfect” (coming to completion) and “mature”?
3. What is “wisdom” and why do we need it?
4. What does it mean when James says God will give “liberally and without reproach”?
5. Are you rich? Are you poor? Should either state affect your Christianity?
6. What does it mean to be “blessed.” Are you blessed? Do you feel *less* blessed when trouble comes? Why or why not?



**CONSIDER IT ALL
JOY, MY BRETHREN,
WHEN YOU
ENCOUNTER VARIOUS
TRIALS. . .**

J A M E S 1 : 2

2. The Source of Temptation (1:13-18)

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. *14* But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. *15* Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. *16* Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. *17* Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. *18* In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

Trials have the potential to change us in dramatic ways. Temptations to sin often come through the same door with the trouble, as we seek to alleviate the pain. Some will blame God for the temptation itself, but James is emphatic: “let no one say...” God has no desire to see His people sin and will not do anything to promote sin – He cannot! “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.” Of course, God tests people, as He did Abraham (Gen. 22:1). That is, He brings them into certain situations in order to test their willingness to obey Him. But though the words are similar, there is an important difference between the trials, which emanate from outside, and the enticement to sin, which comes from inside us. James argues that God is not associated with any kind of impulse to evil, or “temptation.” Therefore, He cannot desire in people what He Himself is not susceptible to. The main point of the argument, as James will show, is that we are responsible for our own sins – God doesn’t lead us into it.

We are tempted when we see something we “desire,” like a fish looking at a worm on a hook. We are “drawn away” by that desire, as a fish follows after the baited hook. It all begins with desire, which is not necessarily wrong in itself, but becomes illicit when it becomes so strong that it gives birth to sin. Desire is the mother of sin, which can then grow into a monster and kill the person, spiritually. James appropriately adds: “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren” (v. 16) – sin is a product of your own lust, not God’s enticement.

Verse 16, then, serves as a linchpin between vv. 13-15 and 17-18. God does not tempt anyone. In fact, every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from Him (v. 17). He is unchangeable and unchanging and transparent: He is no shifting shadow or variation in Him. He is the “Father of lights,” which probably has reference to the celestial bodies, the sun, moon and stars. In other words, among His good gifts is creation itself. But more than that, He is responsible for the greatest gift of all – our spiritual birth (v. 18). It was by His will (grace) that we have been brought forth by His word (cf. I Pet. 1:23) and we are “firstfruits,” an Old Testament term that refers to the first gathering of crops that was to be offered by the priests (see Ex. 23:16, 19; 34:22, etc.). It is used to describe Christ in His resurrection as the “first fruits of those who sleep” (I Cor. 15:20, 23) and the first converts in a district (I Cor. 16:15). Since James is writing to Jewish Christians, he probably has in the mind the same thing that Paul meant when he said the gospel had been preached “to the Jew first...” (Rom. 1:16). God is a giver of good and perfect gifts, not a tempter to evil. Questions

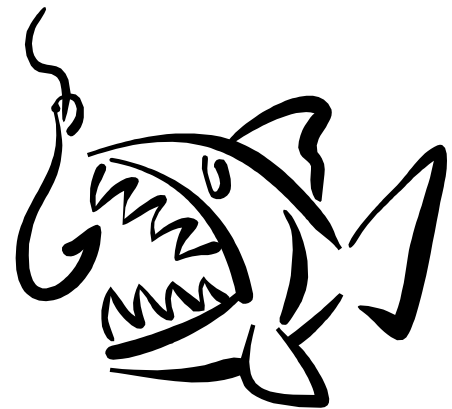


Questions

1. Who is responsible for sin?
2. Trace the process of sin. What causes it and to what does it lead?
3. How does James describe the things that come from the Father?
4. How is the Father described? What is the significance of the description?
5. By what are we "brought forth? To what end?

**BUT EACH ONE IS
TEMPTED WHEN HE
IS CARRIED AWAY
AND ENTICED BY HIS
OWN LUST.**

J A M E S 1 : 14



C. The Practice of the Word (1:19-27)

19 *This* you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Verse 22 summarizes the entire letter: hearing the word without practicing it avails nothing. Faith *works*. **This point is stressed in this and the following sections of James. “Be doers of the word, not just hearers.” This is the fruit of being brought forth by God (v. 18). We must continue to live by the word even after we’ve been saved by it. As “first fruits” of God, we must bear fruit. In the simplest terms, that means we must do the word; otherwise, our faith is vain (the subject of Chapter 2).**

James begins (v. 19) with another of his practical imperatives: be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to get angry. Be a good listener, think before you speak and develop a long fuse. It's a challenge, because we love to make our points and get our way and grind our ax. What is really dangerous is when we do it “in the name of Jesus” as if we are defending His truth. Too often, we are far from it – we're just spouting our opinions. Later on, James will say “let not many become teachers...they will incur a stricter judgment” (3:1). Yet so many fancy themselves as “lights” to the brethren, while pressing their pet views. When you disagree with them, they are quick to get angry and belittle you.

James says: quick to hear...slow to speak... slow to anger. The Greek word for “anger” is *orgee*, the word most often used to describe God's wrath. Another Greek word is *thumos*, which describes the kind of anger we mean when we talking about someone “losing his temper.” *Orgee* is a settled anger, an anger that continues to burn over time. God is “angry with the sinner every day” (Psa. 7:11) and is a “consuming fire” (Hb. 12:29). His anger is constant and settled against sin. James tells us to be slow to develop this anger. He not talking about duration as much as patience: beware that your “anger” (settled wrath) is proper (i.e., “righteous”) because “the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (v. 20). An anger that issues from human motives is not righteous. This implies that there is an “anger of God” or an anger that flows from a godly perspective (e.g., anger against sin, injustice, oppression, etc.).

The mention of the righteousness of God seems to prompt James to begin a discussion of working righteousness. “Therefore,” he says, “putting

aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted which is able to save your souls” (v. 21). James is calling for a revival and in any revival, there must be a rooting out of sin before God’s word will take hold in the heart. We see this in the Old Testament when kings like Josiah and Hezekiah made tearing down the places of idolatry the first order of business in their new kingdoms. Afterward, there was a call to worship God. Likewise, James says we must do some “putting aside” (Gk., *apotithemi*, “to put or cast from”). We are to “put off,” as a pair of dirty jeans, “all filthiness” and “overflow of wickedness.” In 4:7, he will advise us to resist the devil and he will flee from us. We are to take an active part in dealing sin and are not to be satisfied until we have removed “all that remains of wickedness.”

The goal is ideal: to search our souls to find the last trace of evil, and to remove it. Then, we will be ready to receive (with *humility*, the antithesis of anger) the implanted word which has the power to save our souls. There’s a paradox here: we are to *receive* – make effective – that which has already been implanted (the word which has been taught to us). Note that James, speaking to Christians, says the word “is *able* (present tense) to save your souls.” Ours is to do the word, and not just hear it (v. 22). Christianity is supremely practical – it is not a philosophy or a “better way of life” or a “feeling better felt than told.” It is *action*. A daily life devoted to God. We give attention to details and do not rely on unbiblical concepts and platitudes like, “grace will cover me” or “God wouldn’t send me to hell for that.” No, all sincere (“true”) Christians are idealists and strive for the best out of a heart that demands the best of themselves.

Frankly, everyone who merely hears and thinks hearing is sufficient is deluding himself. Hearers are those who have ears but don’t really hear. They don’t listen, with an aim to doing what they hear. God spoke to Ezekiel about them: “Son of man, you live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear; for they are a rebellious house” (Ezek 12:2). Jesus, on several occasions, said “he who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Sometimes people don’t hear because they are too quick to speak (see v. 19). Whatever their problem, they will not *do* what they hear. There are people who have been in the church for years and have never changed anything in their life based on what they’ve heard in the preaching and teaching of God’s word – and they are not about to change! They are satisfied with themselves. “The righteous have no need of a physician” (Lk. 5:31-32).

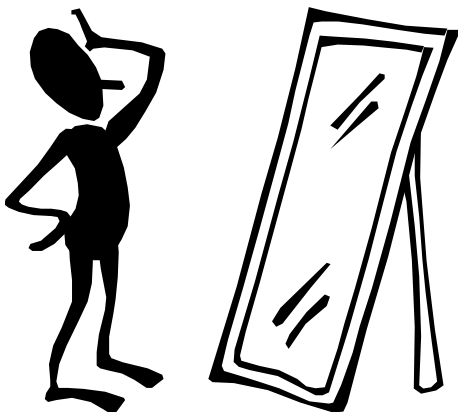
Christianity is about *change*, personal change. James describes the man who refuses to change as a man who intently looks in the mirror, perhaps seeing that he needs to wash his face, but and then walks away (vv. 23-24), forgetting what he saw and having no intention of going to the sink. When we look into the mirror of God’s word and see that change is needed (as we often will if we’re really *hearing* God’s word), we must walk directly to the sink and wash. How? We don’t wash with the mirror! We must make the necessary adjustments in our life so that when we look in the mirror we’ll see a different image (see Paul’s more technical way of saying the same thing in Rom. 8:16).

As far as what image we are trying to achieve when we look in the mirror, note II Cor. 3:18).

The “blessed” person is the one who “looks intently at the perfect law of liberty” (v. 25) and *does* it! “Looks intently” translates the same Greek word used in John 20:5, 11 to describe Peter as he looked into the empty tomb and Mary as she did the same. It is an absorbing look that grips the man. He looks at the “perfect law of liberty,” another designation for “word of truth” (v. 18), “the implanted word” (v. 21) and “the word” (v. 22). The word is with him at all times; he reads it, studies it, talks about, meditates on it and lives it. So steeped in the word, he’s able to see trials in light of how he can improve (see Psalm 119:71, 107; cf. vv. 147-148). The word is truly “implanted” in such a person and he is blessed.

It is the effectual doer that is truly “religious” (Gk., *threskeia*, indicates scrupulous observance of the external rules of religion, whether genuinely or hypocritically). Some people think they are religious just because they “belong,” but true religion is not defined by affiliation. James describes *true* religion in vv. 26-27. If a man cannot bridle his tongue, his religion is vain (v. 26; remember the “slow to speak, slow to anger” admonition?). It is the man who works who’s religion is “pure and undefiled” (uncontaminated). He “visits” orphans and widows, that is, he cares for them in their affliction. When they are in trouble, the true Christian is quick to come to their aid. He pays attention to their needs and addresses them with whatever resources he has. And, the truly “religious” before God are those who keep themselves “unstained by the world.” They do not dabble in worldliness. Instead, they remain aloof, not from sinners, necessarily, but from sin, definitely (cf. I Cor. 5:1-13 and 2 Cor. 6:14ff.).

The use of the word “religion” is rare in the New Testament, used only in this passage and in Acts 26:5 and Col 2:18 (translated “worship”). It often means “outward acts of worship,” that which is “seen.” What James is saying, lest anyone miss his point, is that *doing* is a product of who you are and necessary to it. That makes “religion” worthwhile. But religion which ignores God’s instructions (even if they “hear” them) is vain. God’s religion (“pure and undefiled”) is one characterized by obedience from the heart. The other kind deceives the heart.



“FOR IF ANYONE IS A HEARER OF THE WORD AND NOT A DOER, HE IS LIKE A MAN WHO LOOKS AT HIS NATURAL FACE IN A MIRROR; FOR *ONCE* HE HAS LOOKED AT HIMSELF AND GONE AWAY, HE HAS IMMEDIATELY FORGOTTEN WHAT KIND OF PERSON HE WAS.”

J A M E S 1 : 23 - 24



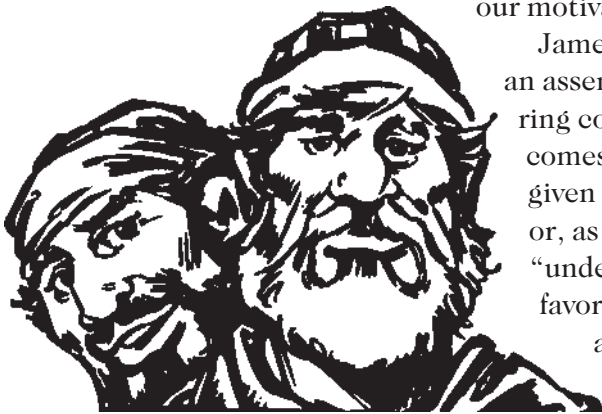
Questions

1. Who is commanded to be “quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger”?
2. What are the possible interpretations of the phrase, “the righteousness of God”?
3. What is the prerequisite to growth in Christ (cf. Heb. 12:1-2 for a hint)?
4. How does one who only “hears” delude himself?
5. How are we to look at the “perfect law of liberty”? What law is that?
6. Is there a difference in being “religious” and “blessed”? What kind of religion is acceptable to God?
7. Summarize Chapter 1 in your own words, with a note to yourself about how you need to change:

D. The Condemnation of Partiality (2:1-13)

James 2:1-13 My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of* personal favoritism. 2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? 8 If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin *and* are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all. 11 For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the* law of liberty. 13 For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

As we have seen, this book is famous for its discussion of faith and works, of being a doer and not merely a hearer of God’s word. “Works” (Gk., *ergon*) means taking action appropriate to our profession of belief in God (see 2:14ff.). James says also that our faith is something we “hold”; it is in a “container” of sorts, and the container is our attitude. We must “walk the walk,” but we must also always be examining our hearts and testing our motivation (II Cor. 13:5).



**“DO NOT HOLD YOUR FAITH IN
OUR GLORIOUS LORD JESUS
CHRIST WITH AN ATTITUDE OF
PERSONAL FAVORITISM”**

J A M E S 2 : 1

James illustrates by envisioning two men who may come into an assembly. One is a rich man in fine apparel who wears the gold ring common to those in the Roman upper-crust. Another man comes into the assembly wearing shabby clothes. The rich is given the best seat, but the poor is told to “stand over there” or, as Phillips translates, “if you must sit, sit on the floor” (lit., “under my footstool”). James says when we show this kind of favoritism, we are judges with evil motives – we have a poor attitude.

The word “partiality” comes from a Greek word which means “to regard the face” and has to do with making distinctions based upon outward appearances. God condemns our tendency to judge based on appearances (cf. Jn. 7:24; see Dt. 15:9, where the cries of the oppressed are heard by God).

Specifically, James is concerned with the treatment of the poor. In Roman society, the poor had no right to initiate law suits against the rich, though the

rich could sue the poor. That may be why James says the poor are the *heirs* of the kingdom. To the poor, “kingdom” referred to the Romans – to power and strength and resources, all things they had very little of. But, James tells them, it is the poor who are *rich* in faith (v. 5) and that they are the ones who will inherit the kingdom (cf. Mt. 5:5).

Meanwhile, it is the rich who oppress the poor, yet, the rich are honored and the poor dishonored simply because they are “rich” and “poor.” The rich, as a class, even blaspheme the “fair name by which you have been called” (v. 7). We recall that it was the Sadducean aristocracy who persecuted Christians most severely.

There is a bit of irony in this warning since most of those who were reading James’ letter were very poor themselves. Perhaps there’s a twist here. In defending the honor of the poor man in shabby clothes, James may be reminding his readers that in God’s kingdom, all are equal, even the poor and rich. Perhaps he’s trying to gently coax them out of feelings of inferiority. Christie and I experienced this recently when some Christians visited us from a poverty-stricken foreign country. They were so deferential to us, we felt as if they thought of us more as a king and queen than as brethren. I’m sure they didn’t think of it consciously, but feelings of inferiority come easy when those who live on precious little come to a place where even the average people live like kings.

Loving our neighbor by showing him the respect he deserves, irrespective of his financial status, is an example of keeping the “royal law.” A “royal law” was higher than the law of the rich (the aristocracy) because it came from the king. This law is “royal” because it comes from *the* King, Jesus Christ.

All the law comes from the same Lawgiver. If you show personal favoritism you are convicted by that same “royal law.” The Jews believed that the willful violation of even a “minor” provision in the law amount to violation of the whole law. James picks up on that common understanding to make the point that being a fair judge is as crucial as the other, more “notorious,” provisions in the law (v. 11).

Is James taking us back to the law for justification? No. His point is that we must take seriously all of God’s law and not fall into the trap of thinking we can ignore the parts we think are less important. James is concerned with our attitude toward law: we must be idealists in our effort to keep the law.

We are to speak and act with the knowledge that we will be judged by the “law of liberty.” This is the second time we’ve encountered this description of God’s law (see 1:25). Jewish teachers taught that the law of God frees man from the burdens of this world’s affairs. It may be politically correct to honor the rich and despise the poor, but we are not seeking worldly acceptance. We are seeking God’s approval and are judged by His law. Our lives (words and deeds) reflect that.

Those who are partial and show no mercy will answer to an *impartial* Judge. Mercy overcomes judgment. If that were not true, we would all be lost! So practice what you’ve experienced. Otherwise, you bring judgment on yourself (compare, for a similar thought, Mt. 6:14-15).



Questions

1. What kind of judgment is condemned by James?
2. How has God “chosen” the poor to be “rich in faith” and “heirs of the kingdom”?
3. Why did James call the law “royal”?
4. What law is James talking about?
5. Is James teaching a doctrine of “works-righteousness” in v. 10? What is he teaching?
6. By what will Christians be judged?
7. How does “mercy triumph over judgment”?

E. The Relation of Faith & Action (2:14-26)

James 2:14-26 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself. 18 But someone may *well* say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." 19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received 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.

This passage caused Martin Luther no little grief, prompting him to call James an "epistle of straw." Luther thought James flatly contradicted Paul's teaching of justification by faith. It is possible that James is reacting against abuse of Paul's teaching (cf. Paul's own reaction in Romans. 3:8; 6:1, 15). But that is unlikely, especially if James wrote his letter in the 40s.

James and Paul were both talking about faith, but from different perspectives, and neither would disagree with the others' assessment (since the Holy Spirit was directing both Paul and James, a claim that they are contradicting each other is a claim that God contradicts Himself!). James is saying that faith is more than profession: it must be lived out; i.e., faith works. Paul does the same thing in his letters when he gives instruction in marriage, parenting, morals, etc. It is never enough to profess belief; it must be displayed. Like James, Paul did not conceive of a "faith" that did not include works.

It is important though to distinguish between the way Paul and James use the word "works." James employs it in the usual sense to describe our deeds. Paul, especially in Romans and Galatians, uses it in a more technical sense. He is talking about doing "perfect works of righteousness" in order to be saved. That would be "justification by works" and no man save Jesus has been able to live the law in a perfect way. Paul's argument is that one would have to do the law perfectly in order for God to "owe" him salvation (cf. Rom. 4:4; 10:5; Gal. 3:10). But one sin rings the bell and from that point forward, the only hope a man has is to put his faith and trust in the work of Christ.

Paul never argues that faith is passive. Implicit in everything he says is the idea that when you fully trust in God, you do what God says. He stands shoulder-to-shoulder with James and asserts that if a man says "God save me" without constant obedience to God, his "faith" is as dead as can be. Paul would never call that "faith." While Paul never contends for salvation by works (*any* works), neither does he contend for salvation by "passive acceptance of Christ." For both Paul and James, faith is, "active reliance on the words of God."

James uses the technique of the rhetoricians of the day to make his point. He asks a question which has only one logical answer. “What use is it...” if someone claims to have faith but is unwilling to do what is needed to take care of someone’s needs? That kind of faith will neither save the man who “believes,” nor feed and clothe the person in need; such “faith” is utterly worthless (vv. 14-17) .

James argues that faith is *demonstrated* through works. Otherwise, faith is just a personally held conviction that benefits no one – not even the one who has it! The devils have a non-working faith: they believe in God and even shudder. But their “faith,” devoid of good fruit, is useless. Only fools fail to recognize this obvious point (18-20).

Abraham is a perfect example of one who was justified (“declared righteous”) by works when he offered Isaac, as God had instructed him to do. This act, the ultimate test of his life, proved his faith beyond doubt. James says, it “completed” (“perfected”) his faith, which had been demonstrated many times before. James quotes Genesis 15:6 in connection with the offering of Isaac, though in the original context the statement was made when God took the still childless Abraham outside and said “your descendants will be as numerous as the stars above.” Abraham “believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness” then, and he believed God again when he was told to offer Isaac. Same faith, same result. His faith caused God to call Abraham His “friend” (see II Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8).

Genesis 15:6 is a favorite proof text of Calvinists since it appears from that text that faith is passive. James’ use of it to illustrate Abraham’s offering of Isaac, however, shows that faith does whatever is called for. And the view that faith is passive looks positively absurd in light of v. 24. How can anyone look with favor on creeds which profess that we are saved by “faith only” when the only verse in the Bible which uses the term uses it in the negative? (Your guess is as good as mine).

Rahab is offered as another example of faith. What does she have in common with Abraham? They were both hospitable people, which fits the context of 2:1-13 (see Gen. 18:1; Joshua 2). More importantly, they both had faith and their faith caused them to act. They were both justified by a working faith. Their faith was alive. Faith without works is dead as a body without a spirit (v. 26 provides us with the biblical definition of death, though that’s not the main function of the verse).



**“WAS NOT ABRAHAM OUR FATHER
JUSTIFIED BY WORKS WHEN HE OFFERED
UP ISAAC HIS SON ON THE ALTAR?”**

**J A M E S
2 : 2 1**



Questions

1. Is faith passive or active?
2. How can faith be “by itself” (v. 17)? What is faith “by itself”?
3. Describe the relationship of faith and works?
4. Acknowledging God puts us in whose company?
5. What is James main point and what examples does he use to illustrate it?
6. Compare James 2:21ff. with Romans 4. What are the distinctions and similarities in the arguments?
7. How is faith perfected (the Greek word means “brought to its intended goal”)?
8. Define “works.” How are justified by works?
9. What is faith without works?

F. The Control of the Tongue (3:1-12)

Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. 2 For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. 3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 4 Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. 5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8 But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10 from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. 11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh.

James takes up a discussion begun in chapter 1 (v.19f.) and which he will pick up again in 4:11f. about pure speech. There are few things more destructive to the Christian community than problems caused by verbal anger, backbiting and sniping. James begins his discussion with a reference to teachers since the tongue is the main implement of his role as a teacher, and is most difficult to control. James says that only those who are able to control the tongue should be teachers.

The context of the statement in v. 1 does not support a general prohibition or limitation on teaching except as it relates to the use of the tongue. James' argument is not that only those who have "talent" should teach (though that may be true, to some extent; cf. Rom. 12:7; Eph. 4:11), but that teaching comes with a special responsibility. "Teachers" must weigh their words carefully since they shall "incur a stricter judgment" (lit., "a greater condemnation"). James is not suggesting that different degrees of punishment will be meted out at judgment, but that teachers will be judged by a stricter standard of judgment than others. Why? Because their influence is greater. Jesus said, "to whom much has been given from him much will be required" (Lk. 12:48).

James makes the point that controlling the tongue is a difficult task, not to be taken lightly. In fact, he says, if a person can bridle the tongue he can probably do anything! "We all stumble in many ways" acknowledges that we all have our own burdens to bear, different temptations to face. But everyone stumbles when it comes to the tongue, whether you are a teacher or not.

James illustrates his point with six illustrations popular among the Greeks and Hellenistic Jews. In his first two illustrations, he shows how little things control big things: the bit in the horse's mouth controls the whole

beast, and the little rudder on a ship turns the whole vessel. Likewise, the tongue, though a little member, boast great things (see Psalm 12:3; Pr. 26:20).

In his third illustration, he uses fire as an example: the tongue is like a match to dry embers – though small, it’s capable of inflicting great damage. Not only does the tongue start fires, it is itself a great fire, capable of defiling the entire body and is set on fire by hell itself! Jesus said that what comes out of a man defiles him and warns of idle words (Mt 12:34ff.). The tongue is the power of Satan himself and he uses it in willing participants at every opportunity.

James uses the example of wild beasts in his fourth illustration. While men have been able to tame virtually every wild beast, no one has found a remedy for the sins of the tongue – it remains unruly, full of deadly poison (like a venomous snake?). Then, in his last two illustrations, he illustrates the duplicity of which men are so often guilty — the inconsistency of cursing men while blessing God. It is like a fountain that produces both salt water and fresh water at the same time, or fig tree producing olives or a vine producing figs. It doesn’t make sense. But a man speaks out of the abundance of his heart (Mt. 15:18-19) and too often his heart is full of hate, envy and jealousy. And “whatever is in the well will come up in the bucket.”



Questions

1. Name the six illustrations James uses to describe speech, and the meaning of each.
2. To what does he liken the damage the tongue can cause?
3. What is the source(s) of impure speech?
4. What is the remedy for impure speech?
5. Give some examples of constructive and destructive uses of the tongue with which you are familiar:

G. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. *14* But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. *15* This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. *16* For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. *17* But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. *18* And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

“Wise (*sophos*)” was, among Jews, a technical term for teachers. More broadly, he is speaking to those who consider themselves “wise and understanding” (cf. 1:5, where he tells those who “lack wisdom” to pray for it). A certain kind of behavior characterizes those who are truly wise. Note that the outstanding characteristic of the wise person is “gentleness,” a term which denotes a patient submissiveness to offensive acts without malice and a desire for revenge (Mt. 5:5; II Cor. 10:1; Gal. 5:6). The opposite of gentleness is “bitter jealousy” (lit., “harsh zeal”; a desire to promote one’s own opinion to the exclusion of all others) and “selfish ambition” (*epitheia*, the personal ambition of rival leaders; “a party spirit”). Where these two exist in a person, he only arrogantly *thinks* he has wisdom; but he is lying in his arrogance. This is a kind of wisdom, but it is earthly (versus heavenly), natural (versus spiritual) and demonic (versus godly). Jealousy and ambition prove a lack of wisdom and the presence of disorder and “every evil thing” (v. 16). “Disorder” means “trouble” and suggests, in the context, the kind of trouble stirred up by sectarians. Where jealousy and ambition rule, any evil may be justified in order for these people to exert their influence.

The kind of wisdom that comes from above is described by James with eight adjectives in v. 17. It is first *pure*, which may mean moral blamelessness (integrity) or pure in motives (as in “pure in heart,” Mt. 5:8). It is *peaceable*, *gentle*, *reasonable* (“willing to yield – NKJV; cf. definition of “bitter jealousy”), full of *mercy* and *good fruits*, *unwavering* (undivided, loyal, wholehearted), *without hypocrisy* (genuine, without show or pretense). These traits all have to do with the way we deal with people. True, practical, godly wisdom is far from the self-seeking, grasping, striving sort of thing which we see in so many people, who view the world as “dog-eat-dog.” As someone once said, “in the church, it’s just the opposite.” Such sectarianism is an earthly, natural, demonic wisdom that stamps it’s owner as an unspiritual earthling.

Finally, (v. 18), James implies that those who are truly wise will be characterized by peace, not the in-fighting, arguing and needless wrangling of those who are bent on promoting themselves. Nothing in the contexts suggests “peace at any price”; rather, as the NIV says, “Peacemakers who sow in peace will raise a harvest of righteousness.” As Jesus said, “blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt. 5:9)

James words are badly needed today by all of us. It is apparent (and perhaps inevitable) that people, especially those in leadership roles, use the church as a means to make a name for themselves. Involved in that self-seeking pursuit is all kinds of prejudice, bitter wrangling and pressing of rights. James says that true wisdom produces just the opposite: gentleness and peace (v. 18).



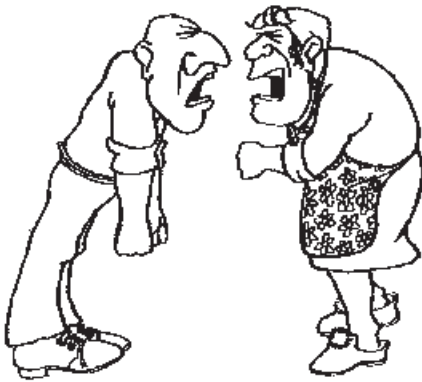
Questions

1. How do you know if someone has heavenly wisdom?
2. What is James specifically speaking against in this section?
3. Describe earthly wisdom (explain James' terms):
4. Describe heavenly wisdom:
5. What kind of people sow peace?
6. How does this section of James compare with Paul's statement in Gal. 5:19ff.? Compare the two lists.

H. The Worldly Attitude (4:1-10)

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ² You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”? ⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” ⁷ Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

Those who are “wise and understanding” (3:13) are those who make peace. Apparently, there was some strife among the people to whom James was writing, so he begins this paragraph with a question: “Where do wars and fights come from among you?” (4:1). “Wars” is the chronic state of war while “fights” refers to the particular battles and conflicts. If everyone was wise, in the heavenly sense, there would be no war (either among Christians or in the world!). But jealousy and self-seeking stir up disputes among all of those who are seeking power and place (cf. Lk. 22:24). “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing” (3:16). The source of the fighting is the “pleasures” (*hedonon*, from which we get our word, “hedonistic”) which wage war “in your members.” “Members” probably refers to the individual, not the church (cf. Gal. 5:17; Rom. 6:13).



“WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF QUARRELS AND CONFLICTS AMONG YOU? IS NOT THE SOURCE YOUR PLEASURES THAT WAGE WAR IN YOUR MEMBERS? YOU LUST AND DO NOT HAVE; SO YOU COMMIT MURDER. YOU ARE ENVOUS AND CANNOT OBTAIN; SO YOU FIGHT AND QUARREL.”

Verses 2-3 should be taken together: the fighting occurs because these power-brokers want something they shouldn't even be wanting (“their pleasures”). Yet they do not get what they should have, because they do not ask for what they should have; and when they do ask, they do not ask with proper motives, but “amiss,” so they can get what they want: “their pleasures.” Their self-seeking prayers go no higher than the ceiling. Our focus when we pray must be on the things of God (see Mt. 6:9-10) and our motive must be to do God's will, not our own.

This desire for human attainment is worldly to the core and worldliness is hostile to God (4:4). Those who desire friendship with the world cannot be friends with God. When one turns back to the world, he or she commits spiritual adultery (v. 4a). Remember that he is talking to Christians. Being filled with envy and self-seeking, even while a “member” of the church, makes you a worldling. V. 5 is a difficult verse, but it probably means that God “earnestly desires” that we walk according to the Spirit that He has given us. The Lord is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5) and demands total, unreserved allegiance to Him. What “Scripture” is James referring to? There is none which

exactly reproduces his words, but if the interpretation of the passage is correct, then he could be thinking of a number of Old Testament passages which refer to the jealousy of God (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Zech. 8:2).

“Grace” (v. 6) tempers the jealousy of God. That is, God enables us to meet the requirements of His jealousy – He gives us all we need to please Him. The condition is humility. If we are humble, God’s grace will see us through. If we are proud, God’s jealousy will turn to wrath.

What follows (vv. 7-10) is a call for repentance. “Therefore,” James says (v. 7), submit to God (be humble), and God’s grace will be effective for us. If we resist the devil, the devil will flee (through God’s gracious deliverance). If we draw near to God (note the condition, again), He will do the same to us (v. 8). In any case, we must come to God with “clean hands.”

The term “clean hands” is used in law school in the study of “Equity.” It means that if one party is going to sue another he cannot expect to be successful unless he comes to the court free of guilt for the same crime. For example, if I conned a man out of his pig and then you do the same to me, “Equity” would intervene and prevent me from suing you for gypping me out of the pig I had obtained unethically; I wouldn’t have “clean hands.” In like manner, James encourages his readers to put away such double standards and double-mindedness (cf. 1:6-8).

If the rebuke applies, James is demanding true repentance, involving lamenting, mourning and weeping (v. 9). When a man truly repents, he knows it, God knows it and everyone else knows it. True repentance involves godly sorrow and true humility (cf. 2 Cor. 7:8-11). In the kingdom of God, the first step is down.

No NT writer, including James, criticizes the desire to be exalted. God put “eternity in our hearts” (Eccl. 3:11) and expects us to reach upward, for heaven. As Robert Browning said, “our reach must exceed our grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” What is condemned is *self*-exaltation. To reach the heights, we must be willing to humble ourselves before God – then He will exalt us “at the proper time” (cf. I Pet. 5:6).



Questions

1. What war takes place before “wars and fights” break out among people in the church?
2. Is all “desire” evil? What makes it evil?
3. Why does James call these people “adulterers and adulteresses”? What is the essence of that sin?
4. Do you think they were literally murdering each other?
5. What is the key to peace?
6. What is involved in “humbling” yourself? Is it wrong to desire to be exalted?

I. Faultfinding (4:11-12)

Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge *of it*. 12 There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

The discussion of humility leads naturally to another “mini-sermon” on speech. This time, the emphasis is on judgmental speech. When we speak evil of a brother and judge a brother, we speak evil of the law and judge the law. Why? Not all speaking about others is “evil speaking” and not all judgment is evil judgment. It is when we put ourselves in the *place of the law* and speak and judge as if we are the standard, in lieu of the Lawgiver, that we become “judges with evil thoughts” (Jas. 2:4; cf. Jn 7:24; I Cor. 5:13).

“Judging” is sorely misunderstood. Nobody who is doing evil wants to be “judged,” and thereby confronted with the evil. The most common appeal is to passages like this one or Matthew 7:1ff. But the word “judge” is capable of a number of meanings and is not prohibited in every case (see the passages above). We are to make accurate judgments about our own conduct and the conduct of those who claim to be our brethren. Failure to do so exposes the church to the potential for all kinds of evil, including false teaching. Paul tells us to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph. 5:11); Jesus tells us not to cast our pearls before swine (Mt. 7:6). One must make judgments in order to carry out these commands.

James, with Jesus, is condemning a judgmental attitude. We should not rush to judgment and be anxious to find fault in a brother or sister. Such an attitude is prohibited because the judgment is usually based upon our own standards, instead of God’s standard. James says that when we judge with unrighteous judgment, we “judge the law.” Since the law prohibits evil speaking, when we engage in it we judge the law unworthy to be kept – we place ourselves “above the law.” We should examine our motives every time we feel it necessary to speak about a brother or sister in Christ. Someone said that gossip is sharing information about another person with someone who is not part of the solution. Make sure you do it only with an open Bible and an honest and loving heart.



Questions

1. Describe some types of “evil speech.” What forms does it take?
2. Where does Jesus talk about this problem? What does He say?
3. How many ways is the word “judge” used in the Bible?

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4. Why is it not possible for a “judge” of the Law to be a “doer” of the law?
 5. How many Lawgivers are there?
 6. What is the significance of the terms “save and destroy” in v. 12?

J. Arrogant Self-Sufficiency (4:13-17)

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” *14* Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. *15* Instead, *you ought* to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” *16* But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. *17* Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

The connection with the previous section on humility is obvious, but there is probably more of a link to what follows in 5:1-6, where

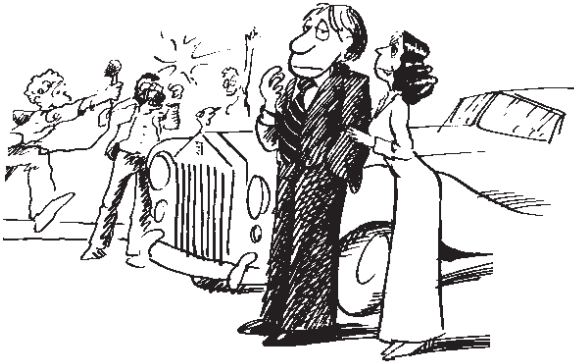
James addresses the rich. Here, his comments are directed toward (wealthy?) businessmen who “make plans” to go to the city and do this or that piece of business. He is criticizing those who go about making plans but leave God out of the picture, as if they direct their own lives. The fact of the matter is that we don’t know what will happen “tomorrow,” if indeed it even comes. God controls our todays and our tomorrows. He is eternal while our lives in the flesh are but puffs of smoke – “here today, gone tomorrow.” Therefore, we are silly to “boast in our arrogance” about things over which we

have no control. Proverbs 27:1 warns: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.” We should be living “one day at a time.”

The saying in verse 17 is probably a maxim which was well-known at the time and James uses it to make the point that when we know what to do but refuse to do it, it is sin. In this case, Christians know that life is short and that God is in control. Failure to act in accordance with that knowledge is sin.

Questions

1. Is James condemning foresight in this section? If not, what?
2. What kind of people are coming under fire from James?
3. What is “boasting”? What is “arrogance”?
4. How do we know what good to do? What happens if we don’t do it?



K. Denunciation of the Wicked Rich (5:1-6)

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! 4 Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, *and* which has been withheld by you, cries out *against you*; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. 5 You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and put to death the righteous *man*; he does not resist you.

As he did in the last section, James begins with “Come now...,” his comments directed to wealthy landowners who have abused people to get their riches. There is a division of opinion among scholars about whether James is talking to (or about) Christians or unbelievers. There are compelling arguments on either side, but I believe James is speaking about *non-Christians* who are oppressing the brethren. Note the sudden change in tone in v. 7, where James encourages the brethren to be patient, perhaps due to the trials inflicted upon them by the rich. It’s not, of course, that “Christians” are incapable of the sins mentioned by James (for example, many “Christians” owned and even mistreated slaves during the early years of our country’s history). But James is writing this as encouragement to his scattered audience. First, do not envy the rich, for their woes will come in time; and second, be patient under trial (5:7ff.). The scalding rebuke of James, in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, would serve both purposes quite well.



Questions

1. Is there any note of hope for the rich in this section?
2. Describe the crimes of the rich that James mentions here:
3. What are the “last days” (v. 3)?
4. What does “Lord of Sabaoth” refer to?

L. Miscellaneous Exhortations (5:7-20)

1. Concerning Patience (5:7-11)

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. 8 You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. 10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

James returns to a discussion of patience under trial, with particular reference to the mistreatment they were enduring from the rich. The reason they are to be patient, instead of anxious, is because the coming of the Lord (*parousia*) is "near." First century believers lived in the constant expectation of the return of the Lord (as we should today). Since no one knows the day or hour (Mk. 13:32), we ought to live each day as if it is our last on earth.

That would preclude, then, a grumbling against those who give us trouble, let alone our brethren.

But the "coming of the Lord" may here mean an intermediate judgment of some kind. Much of the persecution of Jewish Christians in the early days of the church was carried out by Jews. Perhaps the "coming of the Lord" refers to the judgment on Jerusalem that would come in a little over twenty years from the time of the writing of the letter. V. 3 refers to the "last days," which could have reference to the last days of the Jewish system. Of course, the promised judgment may even be more general, a restatement of 5:1-3a.

In any case, there is a judgment due those who oppress the poor. James encourages his readers to take a look at the Old Testament

and learn from the examples of suffering they find there. We "count them blessed." Why? Because they endured suffering in faith and patience. Job is an outstanding example. His story proves not only the perseverance of Job but the truth about God – that He is compassionate and merciful.



**“YOU TOO BE
PATIENT;
STRENGTHEN YOUR
HEARTS, FOR THE
COMING OF THE
LORD IS NEAR.”**



Questions

1. What is the point of the analogy with the farmer?
2. What is the “coming of the Lord” which James refers to?
3. How and why are we to “establish our hearts”?
4. Give a couple of examples of prophets who endured suffering.
5. What happened to Job at the end?

2. Concerning Oaths (5:12)

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.

The “above all” presents something of a problem here, since the verse does not appear to have any clear connection with the previous passage. Perhaps this is James’ way of showing that he is about to draw the letter to a conclusion. In any case, to understand this statement you must understand the almost identical statement of Jesus in Mt. 5:34-37. It appears that James is consciously reproducing Jesus’ prohibition, with some slight changes. The point in both is the same. Christians are to be people who can be believed without having to “guarantee” it by an oath. Neither James nor Jesus are prohibiting official oaths which responsible administrators ask us to take, such as in a court of law. The warning is about dishonesty. A Christian may testify “under oath,” but whether he is under oath or not, he will always tell the truth.

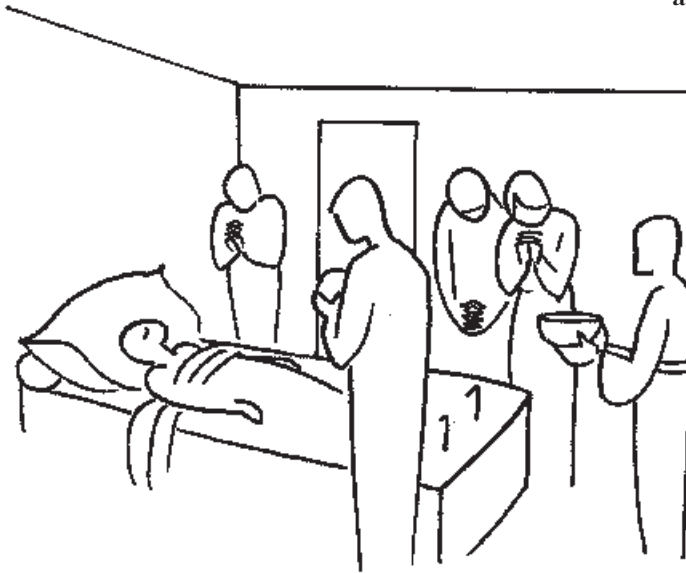


Questions

1. Read Mt. 5:34-37 and compare Jesus' words with James. Are there any differences?
2. How we let our "yes" be 'yes' and our 'no' be 'no'?"
3. What is the consequence for dishonesty?

3. Concerning Prayer (5:13-18)

Is anyone among you suffering? *Then* he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. *14* Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; *15* and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. *16* Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. *17* Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. *18* Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.



This prayer made in faith will heal the sick. (James 5.15)

Again, James begins a discussion of a subject seemingly disconnected from the preceding context. However, one of James' continuing themes is perseverance under trial and there is no difficulty in seeing how the subject of these verses, prayer, fits that theme. His point is that we need to be in constant communication with God, making our requests known to Him and thanking Him for every provision He makes for us.

There are a couple of questions raised by statements in this passage. The first is whether James is discussing physical illness or spiritual illness. Does "sick" mean *spiritually* sick? That conclusion is supported by the command to "confess your sins to one another" in v. 16. But it is doubtful that James had only spiritual sickness in mind. After saying "the prayer

offered in faith will raise him up” James adds, “and if he has committed sins...” “Committed sins and being sick are separate issues and thus “sick” cannot mean “sinful.” The physical nature of the request is further shown by the use of Elijah praying for rain as another example of the power of prayer.

The second issue is more difficult. James says the elders are to be called when one is sick and they are to pray over the sick person and “anoint him with oil.” Does this passage impose an obligation on the elders to “anoint with oil” all those who are sick?

In the Old Testament, anointing with oil was associated with sanctification of priests and kings and even the tabernacle and other objects of sacred significance (Ex. 29:7; 40:9; II Sam. 14:2; Gen. 28:18;). Sometimes it is used to describe something like putting perfume on when dressing up (Dt. 28:40; Micah 6:15, in negatives contexts, “you will not anoint yourself with oil” because of judgment; Lk. 7:46, Jesus tells disciples that they did not anoint him with oil, but Mary anointed Him with perfume). Mk. 6:13 is the only other passage besides James 5:14 that connects oil with sickness. We can gather that, at least, it was a common medical practice; we can infer that it had some religious significance as well, but exactly what that significance would be is not stated.

For an example to be binding, there must be some information in the binding passage that shows method, means, frequency, etc. In this case, the only information we have about “anointing with oil” comes from the Old Testament sources mentioned above and nearly all of those are references to sanctifying religious articles or people. We know nothing about the oil, other than it was probably olive oil. We conclude that elders could anoint the sick with oil if they desire to, but there is no duty to do so imposed by this passage.

Prayer is the avenue to God’s help, whether we are suffering, sick or sinful. There is strong encouragement to be faithful and to place the emphasis on spiritual things (e.g., forgiveness). But we are to go to God in prayer in all things, including physical concerns. Fervent, frequent prayers from those who are righteous will have a great effect, James says. An example of effectual prayer is Elijah (I Kings 17-18). He prayed that certain things would happen (according to the Lord’s will) and those things happened. He was fervent and he was righteous and his prayers were answered. The comfort lies in the fact that he was a man “with a nature like ours.”



Questions

1. What were the elders of the church to do for the sick?
2. What is the significance of “anointing with oil”?

3. What connection is there between physical sickness and forgiveness (v. 15)?
4. What is involved in confessing our sins to one another?

4. Concerning the Wanderer from the Truth (5:19-20)

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, **20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

There have been over fifty imperatives (commands: “do this,” “don’t do that”) given by James. Now, instead of closing his letter with various greetings and benedictions, he issues a call for action. Do not leave well enough alone, but turn the sinner from the error of his ways. If he has wandered from the truth as presented here and elsewhere in scripture, turn him back to God. Whose soul will be saved and whose sins will be covered? The Greek is ambiguous, but both probably refer to the soul and sins of the *wanderer*. It is unlikely that James is teaching us to take up the work of turning people back to God so that our own sins will be covered. We need to confess and repent of those ourselves. And we need to love our brethren enough to do all we can to see that their souls are saved from death and that their sins are covered.

Questions

1. Some people don’t like the term “erring brethren.” Does James seem to believe that there is such a thing as an “erring brother”? How about a “wandering brother”?
2. What does it mean to “wander from the truth”?

