

*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

## Faith That Works

### *An Exposition of the Book of James*

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<sup>1</sup>James<sup>ab</sup>, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ<sup>c</sup>, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad<sup>d</sup>: Greetings.

<sup>a</sup> The book of James has long been the subject of controversy among scholars because of apparent contradictions between it and the letters of Paul. Sixteenth century church reformer Martin Luther said in 1522 in the preface to his New Testament translation of James, "On that account the epistle of James, compared with [the other epistles of the New Testament] is a veritable straw-Epistle. For it lacks all evangelical character." It is true that the epistle of James does not offer a full theology of redemption, but James belongs with the New Testament redemption letters like pictures of vegetables belong in seed catalogs. You get green bean seeds in the mail, not the green beans from the picture, but you cannot have one without the other. James certainly believed in salvation by grace through faith as we learn elsewhere (Acts 15:11), but he teaches us that genuine faith produces works. This letter portrays the lifestyle that identifies someone who has received this salvation.

Much praise is due to the man who unfavorably compared the faulty doctrine and practice of his church with the Bible, but Luther was nevertheless wrong on several points he made about James: (1) That the early church rejected the book; (2) That James emphasized the law as opposed to grace; (3) That James and Paul made contradictory statements in their letters. The alleged contradictions will be addressed to him in comments on chapter edit 2.

<sup>b</sup> 1:1 **James**. The identity of this James has been much debated. There are four well-known men with his name mentioned in the New Testament. We can all but eliminate the first three from our consideration:

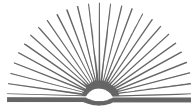
- James the father of the apostle Judas (not Iscariot) is unlikely because nothing is known of him outside of the mention of his name in Luke 6:16.
- James "the less," the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), is an interesting study because so little is known of him and yet so much speculated about him. His obscurity and the relative absence of early claims to his authorship of this letter all but eliminate him from the discussion.
- James the son of Zebedee likely suffered martyrdom at the hands of Herod Antipas before this letter was written (Acts 12:2).

Most Bible scholars are agreed that this is "James the Righteous," the half-brother of Jesus, who became recognized as the shepherd of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Mary and Joseph did have other children after the birth of Jesus, as shown by Matthew 13:55, Mark 3:31 and John 7:3. His prominence among the Jerusalem believers kept him from having to add a lot of credentials behind his name in this letter. Several early Church fathers believed the books of James and Jude to be authentic Scripture penned by half brothers of our Lord before they were officially recognized as part of the canon.

<sup>c</sup> 1:1 **a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. What is noteworthy about this James is his unwillingness to "drop names" in this epistle. Who wouldn't want "devoted brother of Messiah" on his resume? Instead he chose to use what he considered to be a more important relationship to the Lord: "bond-servant" (Greek *doulos*, "slave" or "bond-slave"). James was not always a devoted follower of his brother and Messiah. He is described in John 7:5, along with Jesus' other brothers, as an unbeliever. He may have been among the family members who wanted to put Jesus under protective custody during a frenzied portion of his ministry (Mark 3:21).

<sup>d</sup> 1:1 **To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad**. The "dispersed" tribes (Greek *diaspora*) were the believing Jews dispersed throughout the Roman empire. To address a "Christian" letter to the tribes of Israel is problematic to some. Some people think Israel has been set aside temporarily, making it unnecessary for a New Testament letter to be addressed to the nation. Some people think Israel has been effectively replaced by the church, thus spiritualizing this introduction to the epistle of James. Another way of looking at this introduction is to understand

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<sup>2</sup>Consider it all joy<sup>a</sup>, my brethren, when you encounter various<sup>b</sup> trials<sup>c</sup>, <sup>3</sup>knowing that the testing of your faith<sup>d</sup> produces endurance<sup>e</sup>. <sup>4</sup>And let endurance have its perfect result<sup>f</sup>, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing<sup>g,h</sup>

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that, since God is not through with his people, James is addressing the “nation” of believing Jews into which we Gentiles have been grafted.

<sup>a</sup> 1:2 **Consider it all joy.** The word translated “consider” is normally used of rendering a definite decision. In other words, James calls his readers to look decisively on their trials. Who other than one who fully understood the great paradoxes of Christianity would dare urge sufferers to rejoice? The world cannot give or understand this kind of peace. Only one who knows the Savior “who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2) has eyes to see the attractiveness of fellowshiping in the sufferings of Christ. The sufferers know a joy the comfortable can never know.

<sup>b</sup> 1:2 **when you encounter various.** The word translated “various” here is *poikilois*, which means “multi-colored” or “variegated.” Like blessings, trials come in all shapes, sizes and colors. James did not need to address a specific trial or his readers might have concluded that God could not give pure joy in some hard situations. Whatever the color of your trial, there can be fullness of joy in the midst of it—no exceptions.

<sup>c</sup> 1:2 **trials.** This word (*peirasmois*) is the same word used in verse 12 (“perseveres under trial”). Is it possible that James was present on that mountainside around twenty years earlier when his older half-brother and eventual Lord said, “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice [a word related to the “joy” James commands] and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great...” (Matthew 5:10-12)? How can it be said that James and Paul wrote from contradictory viewpoints when we compare the above words of James with Paul’s challenge to the Romans, “...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:4)?

<sup>d</sup> 1:3 **the testing of your faith.** The word *dokimion*, a word that when used as an adjective has been translated “genuine,” has been used to describe refined or tested metal. The same word is used later (“when he has stood the test”). Peter uses this same word twice of the testing of faith in 1 Peter 1:7. This is not like running a stress test to see how well your heart does. Stress tests do not make your cardiac health better. Faith testing is different because it refines your faith, i.e., what you really believe. It strips away non-essentials and makes you run to what you really believe.

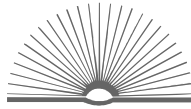
<sup>e</sup> 1:3 **endurance.** One noteworthy part of the writing style of James is the way he completes a phrase with a word or thought and then inserts the word or thought into the next phrase. More than a poetic device, James gives the reader the chance to learn the meaning of his words by using them more than once. For instance, he follows “trials” in verse two with the same word “testing” in verse three. Here he says that endurance is the results of testing and further describes endurance in the next verse.

<sup>f</sup> 1:4 **And let endurance have its perfect result.** Notice that endurance is said to have work to do. This use of the word is like asking a friend, “Is the pain-killer you took for your headache *working yet?*” When you have a “headache” it is best to take a proper dose of endurance and let it do its work. Its work, unlike a pain-killer, may not make your “headache” go away, but endurance is designed with an end in mind: spiritual maturity. Endurance is a hard worker and the finished product is worth the wait.

<sup>g</sup> 1:4 **perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.** “perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (KJV); “completed and rounded out with no defects whatever” (*The Modern Language New Testament, New Berkeley Version*); “mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way” (*The Message*). It is God’s will that His people continually grow toward maturity. They will not grow without perseverance. They will have no perseverance without trials. The evidence of the complete maturity that comes from perseverance is... perseverance.

<sup>h</sup> 1:1-4 This letter offers more commands per verse than any other New Testament letter. The first two commands are found in the first four verses of James. They call us to find joy in hard

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<sup>5</sup>But if any of you lacks wisdom<sup>a</sup>, let him ask of God<sup>b</sup>, who gives to all generously and without reproach<sup>c</sup>, and it will be given to him<sup>d</sup>. <sup>6</sup>But he must ask in faith without any doubting<sup>e</sup>, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind<sup>f</sup>. <sup>7</sup>For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord<sup>g</sup>, <sup>8</sup>being a double-minded man<sup>a</sup>, unstable in all his ways<sup>b,c</sup>.

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times and to learn the lessons from hard times. Here are some reasons why you should find the joy in hard times:

1. Because hard times bring endurance. People who live in comfort complain far more about life's little inconveniences than people who are persecuted for their faith. You should find joy even in those little inconveniences because God is making you grow up.
2. Because hard times bring maturity. To be mature is to be like Christ. He is the standard for what is "normal." The world has no standard for "normal" and therefore no legitimate goal for the help it offers people. All the world can do is help you cope. God is taking you to a predetermined goal. We often become angry when things do not go our way. We want things to get back to "normal" and are very discontent until they do. Knowing this keeps you from getting bitter in hard times. God is making you normal.
3. Because hard times bring abundance. You have to lose some things in order to gain more important things. As the poet has pointed out, God cannot pour his riches into hands already full.

<sup>a</sup> 1:5 **if any of you lacks wisdom.** Notice the writing style of James. He spoke of the way God brings his people to maturity so they "lack" nothing and in the very next verse speaks to those who still lack something. Evidently he does not assume his readers have arrived. This tells us that wisdom is one of those things God gives to his people along the rocky path to maturity.

A Hebrew reader of this letter would have connected wisdom (*sophia*) with the Scripture's version of wisdom. Beyond the quality personified in Proverbs 8 as a woman crying out from a prominent place in town (Proverbs 8), it is shown as that quality which:

- enhances creativity (Exodus 28:3; 31:3)
- displays a lifestyle of obedience (Deuteronomy 4:6)
- prepares a person for leadership (Deuteronomy 34:9)
- gives a person eyes to see what those around cannot (2 Samuel 14:20)

<sup>b</sup> 1:5 **let him ask of God.** We are not urged in Scripture to pray for God to reveal his plans. We are urged to ask for wisdom. He is the source of wisdom. James is making one of a number of direct or indirect allusions to the Sermon on the Mount.

<sup>c</sup> 1:5 **who gives to all generously and without reproach.** This first adverb can describe God's giving as generous or "clear" (Matthew 6:22). The concept of a gracious, single-minded, loving God, from whom men may seek gifts, is foreign to any ignorant legalists reading this letter, but it is not foreign to those Jews who knew the Scripture. This wisdom-giving God is the Lord mentioned in Proverbs 2:6, who "...gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding." Luther's view that James focused on law to the exclusion of grace goes against what you see plainly in the text here, elsewhere in this epistle and in the understanding of grace shown by the words of this same author in Acts 15. Who is your God, James? He is the same one your brother and Master said would respond graciously to prayer (Matthew 7:7-11).

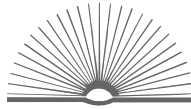
<sup>d</sup> 1:5 **it will be given to him.** This is not a proverb but a promise. How does God give wisdom? He gives wisdom like he gives everything: generously and without reproach.

<sup>e</sup> 1:6 **But he must ask in faith without any doubting.** To ask in faith is not so much believing you will get what you want as it is trusting the character of the one you are addressing. Does it require more faith to move a mountain or to still proclaim that God is good God when you fall from the mountain?

<sup>f</sup> 1:6 **the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.** James is a master of metaphor. Here, in this first example, he paints the memorable picture of a turbulent sea, unstable and out of control.

<sup>g</sup> 1:7 **that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord.** James has already shown us a God who is sovereign. If he is in control, what good does it do to pray? Much. This sovereign God has determined in his plan to work through the people who delight

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<sup>9</sup>But the brother of humble circumstances<sup>d</sup> is to glory in his high position<sup>e</sup>; <sup>10</sup>and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation<sup>f</sup>, because like flowering grass he will pass away<sup>g</sup>.  
<sup>11</sup>For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and

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themselves in him (Psalm 37:4). They get what they want in prayer because they have learned to want what he wants.

<sup>a</sup> 1:8 **being a double-minded man.** The word “double-minded” literally means “two-souled.” The only other place it is used in the New Testament is James 4:8, where the double-minded are shown to need a cleansing of the heart. People who claim to be God’s but question His ability to give wisdom evidence a serious contradiction in belief systems. Atheism may be a growing threat to vulnerable people in our day, but believers who disbelieve advertise a lesser God than the one they claim to serve.

<sup>b</sup> 1:8 **unstable in all his ways.** The word “unstable” is the New Testament word “appoint” or “ordain” with a negative prefix. Like a battered wave, the doubter has no stability or consistency. Look up the word “waffle” in the encyclopedia and you find his picture there.

<sup>c</sup> 1:5-8 James began his letter speaking of God’s purpose in trials. Prayer is the natural Godward response of the believer being molded by God. Believing and praying increase as your view of God gets higher. Here are some good reasons why you should pray:

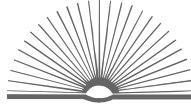
1. Because God has a work to finish in you. Remember that, if you are a believer, James said that God is in the business of making up for what you lack. Would you hesitate to call out to God and say, "Finish your work in me"? If so, you should get to know him a little better.
2. Because God is a giver. He helps those who cannot help themselves. The One to whom you pray has more to give than you could ever ask for.
3. Because God is trustworthy. There is no need to be double-minded. What you hear about him when you sit in church is what remains true when your life is falling apart.

<sup>d</sup> 1:9 **But the brother of humble circumstances.** Mary the mother of Jesus applied the word translated “humble circumstances” to herself in the Magnificat saying, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble” (Luke 1:52).

<sup>e</sup> 1:9 **is to glory in his high position.** James is using irony here that promotes a healthy view of the Christian’s view of prosperity. The person in “high” position is not necessarily the person with the most wealth and the least trials. The Lord Jesus helps his people to become like him through allowing them to experience his trials. See Luke 14:11 and Luke 18:14. As the Lord Jesus taught in the Beatitudes, real satisfaction may not be found in “living the dream,” but in having your dreams crushed.

<sup>f</sup> 1:10 **the rich man is to glory in his humiliation.** Some have concluded that, since James does not call the rich man a “brother,” that he is contrasting a believer and an unbeliever. More likely the word “brother” is assumed here. The reason the rich man can glory in his humiliation is that it leaves him in a position to see he has nothing to offer the God before whom he stands.

<sup>g</sup> 1:10 **because like flowering grass he will pass away.** Notice that James does not say the rich man should not be rich. It says he should have a humble attitude toward his riches. They do not make him better than the person of humble circumstances. We might expect James to tell us that the riches will not last. Instead he tells us that the rich man will not last. The word translated “pass away” it is used of the eventual demise of heaven and earth (Matthew 24:35), of the passing of time (Mark 13:30) and the passing away of the believers are life (2 Corinthians 5:17). The humbling message for us wealthy Westerners is this: “You are going to die. Then what?”



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the beauty of its appearance is destroyed<sup>a</sup>; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits<sup>b</sup> will fade away<sup>c,d</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial<sup>e</sup>; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life<sup>f</sup> which the Lord has promised to those who love Him<sup>g</sup>. <sup>13</sup>Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"<sup>h</sup>; for God cannot be

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<sup>a</sup> 1:11 **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.** There are lots of ways to lose all the earthly things that we think will matter most. As Jesus pointed out in Matthew 6:19-21, earthly treasures are susceptible to moth-eating, rust or theft (see my notes on 5:1-6).

<sup>b</sup> 1:11 **so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits.** The word "pursuits" refers to "journeys" and, by implication, carrying out business. James later reminds us that we are vapor, thus making all our plans subject to change if God wills (James 4:13-16).

<sup>c</sup> 1:11 **will fade away.** Peter uses the same word with a negative prefix speaking of an inheritance that will not "fade away" (1 Peter 1:4).

<sup>d</sup> 1:9-11 Texts like this one do not reveal James as a hard-hitting legalist calling people to renounce their wealth so that they can attain eternal life. This small passage is one of many in this letter that strips away human achievement and leaves man standing before the judge, pleading for mercy. Consider the things men value that get in God's way:

1. Position. The people of this world crave power. God exalts those who have no strength but his.
2. Riches. The people of this world worship the comfort wealth brings. God supplies the needs of those who are satisfied with what he gives.
3. Beauty. The people of this world value beauty over character. God creates an unfading beauty that improves with age (Proverbs 31:30; 1 Peter 3:3-4).
4. Business pursuits. The people of this world plan their lives with no thought of eternity. God changes plans to show us there is more important business at hand.

<sup>e</sup> 1:12 **Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial.** Once again James is sounding like his brother-Master Jesus when he spoke the Beatitudes. The Lord Jesus said:

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

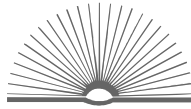
Consider this next to verse two. There is joy in the midst of your trials because you know God is at work. There is also a blessedness at the end of the trials for those who endure. The word translated "perseveres" means literally "to remain behind." It is the verb form of the word translated "endurance" in verses 3-4. See also Psalm 1.

<sup>f</sup> 1:12 **for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life.** Several crowns are mentioned in Scripture besides this *crown of life* promised here to those who persevere (also promised in Revelation 2:10 to those who are faithful to death). Others are: *the crown of beauty* given to those who acquire wisdom (Proverbs 4:9), *the garland instead of ashes* given to a repentant Israel (Isaiah 61:3), *the imperishable wreath* given to those who run a good race (1 Corinthians 9:24-27), *the crown of joy or exultation* given to those who take people to heaven with them (The crown is actually the people, Philippians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:19), *the crown of righteousness* given to those who have loved his appearing (2 Timothy 4:8) and *the crown of glory* given to faithful church elders (1 Peter 5:4). Whether or not these are going to be visible laurel wreaths is beside the point. Our task is not to make sure we get the crown from God so our neighbor does not. The 24 elders of Revelation 4:10 cast their crowns before the throne anyway. How can you keep one of those things on your head in the presence of the one who made it possible for you have it? The crown of life is one of the heavenly crowns promised by God as rewards for believers.

<sup>g</sup> 1:12 **which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.** Here is the key to perseverance. Those who persevere do so because they love their Lord.

<sup>h</sup> 1:13 **Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God."** Most of the confusion on this passage would be resolved if the reader would understand that the word for

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tempted by evil<sup>a</sup>, and He Himself does not tempt anyone<sup>b</sup>. <sup>14</sup>But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust<sup>c</sup>. <sup>15</sup>Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin<sup>d</sup>; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death<sup>e</sup>. <sup>16</sup>Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren<sup>f,g</sup>. <sup>17</sup>Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from

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“temptation” has varied meaning based on context. James used the noun form of the word early in the chapter in the context of life’s multi-colored difficulties. Here he uses verb forms of the word that indicate an enticement to do evil things. God does the former (allows chastening for your good) but cannot do the latter (try to get you to sin).

<sup>a</sup> 1:13 **God cannot be tempted by evil.** The questions arise, “What about the temptation of Christ? Wasn’t He God?” The Bible does in fact say that Jesus was tempted. One way to illustrate this is to picture the human side of Jesus as a stick and the divine side as a rod of iron. The two are bonded together. His human side made Him subject to temptation (see also Hebrews 4:15) but His divine side made Him “unbreakable,” incapable of sin.

<sup>b</sup> 1:13 **He Himself does not tempt anyone.** Some would point to an apparent contradiction between this statement and others in Scripture. Remember that the word translated “tempt” can mean either bringing into a hard time or soliciting to do evil. God certainly puts his people to the test. This very letter mentions the testing of Abraham’s faith in the next chapter. The key is understanding that God was not trying to get Abraham to sin when he asked him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. He was seeking to display to the world that Abraham’s faith was legitimate.

Second Samuel 24:1 says, “Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them...” On the surface it appears that God lured David and Israel into this sin. A reading of the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 21:1 shows that it was actually Satan doing the tempting. God allowed the temptation to occur as a judgment on a disobedient nation.

As the Lord Jesus gave his disciples a pattern for prayer (Matthew 6:13), he said, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Here again the word “temptation” can also mean a time of difficulty. Jesus was not implying that we should ask the Father to protect us from himself. It is “evil” or “the evil one” we want to avoid. Jesus instructed us to ask the Father to keep us out of trouble and, knowing that trouble is inevitable, to deliver us when we find it.

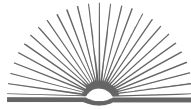
<sup>c</sup> 1:14 **each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.** James is quick to point out what the Lord Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount: sin starts in the depraved heart of man, not in the plan of God. When people do evil things, unbelieving hearts are quick to suggest that a “loving God” would never let these things happen. In truth only an unbelieving heart could ever conceive the notion to blame God for all that. The trouble is our lust (*epithumia*). We normally think of lust in sexual terms, but James is talking about any intense desire. Find out what people want the very most—what they think they cannot live without—and you will see at what altar they worship.

<sup>d</sup> 1:15 **Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin.** Life begins at conception. So does sin. When we finally get what we want the very most, we become the parent of a bouncing baby sin. Trouble is, the baby doesn’t stay a baby.

<sup>e</sup> 1:15 **and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.** Death? We can play the role of the skeptic here and look at Genesis 3. God told Adam and Eve that they would die the day they ate the fruit. The text goes on to demonstrate that they were still breathing and walking and talking after eating the fruit. Romans 6:23 tells us that the wages of sin is death. I don’t know about you, but I sin quite a bit and I am not dead yet. Sin brings three kinds of death. It causes man to die spiritually, rendering him incapable of pleasing God or thinking spiritual thoughts. Sin’s curse on the world brought the onset of physical death—separation of the person from the body. Sin ultimately brings eternal death: inescapable separation of the sinner from the presence of God in eternal torment. This baby named Sin may have been cute at the start, but he grows up to kill his parents.

<sup>f</sup> 1:16 **Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.** James likely included this phrase as a transition between verses 12 through 15 and the next couple of verses. It is deception both to fall into sin and to think God is responsible for anything other than the good you enjoy in this world.

<sup>g</sup> 1:12-16 As a son or daughter of Adam, you are in a battle. You may not feel like you are, but, as God warned Cain, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you. Here is the way you do battle against sin in your life.



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above<sup>a</sup>, coming down from the Father of lights<sup>b</sup>, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow<sup>c</sup>. <sup>18</sup>In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth<sup>d</sup>, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures<sup>e,f</sup>

1. Endure with the end in mind. We already learned at the beginning of this chapter that the race should be joyful. That does not mean it will not be difficult. Keeping your eyes on the finish line will help you persevere.
2. Run to the character of God. Every response of the child of God to any situation must be Godward. Is life hard? Take courage that God is good, that he is in control and that he has a very good end in mind. Far better to run to him than from him.
3. Beware of your own weakness. First Corinthians 10:12 warns us not to think we cannot fall. God is infallible. You are not.
4. Remember the consequences of sin. Professing believers who sin and take comfort in the fact that their sin did not end in death are treading on dangerous ground.

<sup>a</sup> 1:17 **Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above.** Already James has given us a lesson in theology. He has told us that God answers prayer, gives wisdom generously (without finding fault), rewards those who love Him, cannot be tempted and gives every good and perfect gift. He is about to tell us that God never changes and that he sovereignly chooses his children and brings them to birth.

<sup>b</sup> 1:17 **coming down from the Father of lights.** This is not a phrase used in the New Testament, but “father of...” is an expression that means the same as “origin of...” For instance, in Genesis 4:20 Jabal was called “father of all who dwell in tents and have livestock” and his brother Jubal (v. 21) was called “father of all who play the lyre and pipe.” These men were the first to develop their trade. As the Father of lights, our God is revealed as the source of creation itself.

<sup>c</sup> 1:17 **with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.** The terms “variation” and “shifting shadow” are unique to this verse in the New Testament. Both were used for describing astronomy, which fits the context of James. The heavenly bodies change. God does not. Be thankful. Change in him could spell destruction for his people, as he spoke through Malachi (3:6): “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”

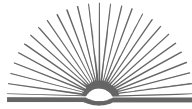
James here corrects the dualistic notion that God hands out treats with one hand and poison with the other. Not only is there no hint of evil in Him, He doesn't even have an evil counterpart. Satan is the exact opposite of Michael the archangel, not God. God alone is the unrivaled One who dwells in inapproachable light. He has no “dark side.”

<sup>d</sup> 1:18 **In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth.** Note that there are two kinds of conception and birth mentioned in this passage. The first is the evil conception—almost a spiritual rape by our own desires—that gives birth to sin and eventually death. The second birth is the result of the planting of the seed of the gospel. This second birth is the consequence of God's eternal plan. See again the writing style of James, introducing the idea of the conception and birth of sin and then following up with the new birth of the people of God. Maybe James does not unfold every aspect of the atoning work of Christ on the cross, but he does give us a view of regeneration that coincides with the works of the other apostles. See other Scripture that speaks of this birth: John 1:10-13; 3:1-15; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:3-9, 23-24; 1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1-4. This new birth, unlike the common teaching, is the result of God's choice, not man's. We who are quick to ask, “What about the free will of man?” should be quicker to ask, “What about the free will of God?” Regeneration (the new birth) does not come as the reward of faith but rather produces saving faith.

<sup>e</sup> 1:18 **so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.** The picture is the beginning of the harvest. God is the farmer. We are his crop. God's chosen people are referred to as “first fruits to God and to the Lamb” in Revelation 14:4. In Romans 16:5 Paul calls Epaenetus, the first convert to Christ in Asia, the “firstfruits of Asia” and the household of Stephanas from Corinth the “first fruits of Achaia.”

<sup>f</sup> 1:17-18 The wife of the prophet Hosea took Hosea's gifts and gave them to her lovers (implied in Hosea 2:8). The people of God do the same thing when they assume their possessions are their own to offer their substitute gods. Before you spend God's gifts, remember this:

1. You are a manager of what is not yours.



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

<sup>19</sup>This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear<sup>a</sup>, slow to speak<sup>b</sup> and slow to anger<sup>c</sup>; <sup>20</sup>for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of

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2. You enjoy things because God made you to enjoy them.
  3. Your “free will” needs to bow to God’s free will.
  4. You are his work.

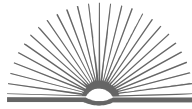
The “bottom line” in verses 17-18 is this reminder: If it’s bad, it’s your fault; if it’s good, it’s God’s. It reveals that (as Ephesians 2:10 says) we were created for better things than we do by nature. This section of the letter shows vividly the contrast between the living God and man. Unless man has the knowledge of how far short he has fallen of God’s perfect character, he will never see his need of a Savior. Here is one more place where James is teaching us about grace. We have evil desires; He does not. We have a “dark side”; He does not. We change; He does not. He is the giver of good gifts. He is the Father of lights. He is immutable. He is the giver of the new birth.

<sup>a</sup> 1:19 **This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear.** The word “quick” is used in contrast to the word “slow.” It was used by John of his own speed in reaching the empty tomb “faster” than Peter (20:4). The word translated “hear” means simply “to hear,” but in context carries more than just the idea of a passive hearing (as you would listen to the drone of a distant lawn mower on a summer day). It is used in Matthew 12:42 of the Queen of the South coming to “hear” Solomon. In Matthew 13:9-43 it is used several times in a parable about responding to God’s word. In Luke 16:29 and 31 it is used of the brothers of the doomed rich man refusing to “hear” or “listen” to “Moses” (Scripture). This is the idea James has in mind: you should sprint to give others your attention.

<sup>b</sup> 1:19 **slow to speak.** The word “slow” stands in contrast to “quick” in this verse. The only other place the word translated “slow” is used in the New Testament is in Luke 24:25 when Jesus told the Emmaus disciples that they were foolish and “slow” to believe the scriptural prophecies about the suffering of Messiah. They just didn’t get it. To be slow to speak, however, does not mean you are an imbecile. It means you are relationally restrained, and that is wise. Holding your tongue is being neighbor-loving (more on that in James 3). Instead of blurting out what is in your heart you should weigh what you are going to say or whether you will even open your mouth. James looks like the book of Proverbs again here because of all the exhortations in Proverbs about self-restraint, particularly with the tongue. For instance, just as James calls us to be slow to speak, Proverbs exhorts us, “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Proverbs 10:19), “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13) and “A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back” (Proverbs 29:11).

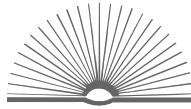
<sup>c</sup> 1:19 **slow to anger.** The word “anger” used here commonly translated “wrath” in the NASB.

- “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the **wrath** to come?’” (Matthew 3:7)
- “After looking around at them with **anger**, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.” (Mark 3:5)
- “So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the **wrath** to come?’” (Luke 3:7)
- “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and **wrath** to this people” (Luke 21:23)
- “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the **wrath** of God abides on him.” (John 3:36)
- “For the **wrath** of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” (Romans 1:18)
- “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of **wrath** and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,” (Romans 2:5)



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

- “but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, **wrath** and indignation.” (Romans 2:8)
- “But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts **wrath** is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)” (Romans 3:5)
- “for the Law brings about **wrath**, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.” (Romans 4:15)
- “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the **wrath** of God through Him.” (Romans 5:9)
- “What if God, although willing to demonstrate His **wrath** and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of **wrath** prepared for destruction?” (Romans 9:22)
- “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the **wrath** of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19)
- “for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings **wrath** on the one who practices evil.” (Romans 13:4)
- “Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of **wrath**, but also for conscience’ sake.” (Romans 13:5)
- “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of **wrath**, even as the rest.” (Ephesians 2:3)
- “Let all bitterness and **wrath** and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” (Ephesians 4:31)
- “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the **wrath** of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” (Ephesians 5:6)
- “For it is because of these things that the **wrath** of God will come upon the sons of disobedience,” (Colossians 3:6)
- “But now you also, put them all aside: anger, **wrath**, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.” (Colossians 3:8)
- “and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the **wrath** to come.” (1 Thessalonians 1:10)
- “hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But **wrath** has come upon them to the utmost.” (1 Thessalonians 2:16)
- “For God has not destined us for **wrath**, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,” (1 Thessalonians 5:9)
- “Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without **wrath** and dissension.” (1 Timothy 2:8)
- “AS I SWORE IN MY **WRATH**, ‘THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.’” (Hebrews 3:11)
- “For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, ‘AS I SWORE IN MY **WRATH**, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST,’ although His works were finished from the foundation of the world.” (Hebrews 4:3)
- “This you know, my beloved brethren But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to **anger**,” (James 1:19)
- “for the **anger** of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” (James 1:20)
- “and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the **wrath** of the Lamb;” (Revelation 6:16)
- “for the great day of their **wrath** has come, and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:17)
- “And the nations were enraged, and Your **wrath** came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.” (Revelation 11:18)



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

God<sup>a,b</sup> <sup>21</sup>Therefore, putting aside<sup>c</sup> all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness<sup>a</sup>, in

- “he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His **anger**; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.” (Revelation 14:10)
- “The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce **wrath**.” (Revelation 16:19)
- “From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce **wrath** of God, the Almighty.” (Revelation 19:15)

<sup>a</sup> 1:20 **for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.** James does not use the ordinary, general word for “man” in the phrase “anger of man.” It is the word that is almost exclusively used of a male. James is not saying that women cannot be guilty of this type of anger, but he is describing the type of rage most of us have only seen in men. Consider all the places in the New Testament where wrath is mentioned. Do you see the commonalities? The only time wrath accomplishes righteous ends is when it is God’s wrath. You can never get something good done by doing something evil.

Remember that the Lord Jesus connected anger with murder when he said:

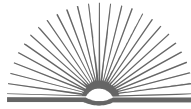
You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Matthew 5:21-22

In context, remember that James just told us a few verses ago that sin brings forth death. Refusing to listen is prideful. Flying off the handle is selfish. You will never be used of God as long as you are prideful and unteachable.

<sup>b</sup> 1:19-20 James touches on human anger here for the first time in his letter. He does so in contrast to the character of God, the giver of good gifts (verse 17). Human wrath or “man-anger” is one of those desires that must be conquered before it “brings forth death.” It shows up when desire is conceived. This wrath moves us either to physical violence, fits of rage or the passive and internally destructive bitterness. How do you crush you that kind of anger?

1. Become an active listener. Value what others have to say, especially God. Do people tell you that you do not listen to them? Why is that? Before you give me an acrostic label to excuse your attention deficit, remember that you will listen to what you value. When you value looking right more than you value being good, you will find yourself in frequent conflict with others. Most conflicts start because someone goes off with limited information. Rather than working so hard at thinking up a good comeback, spend more energy on the command to consider others better than yourself. The maxim, “Seek to understand before trying to be understood” is a biblical maxim.
2. Don’t say it. Remember that keeping your mouth closed honors the people around you. Rather than thinking of the next thing you are going to say, curb the desire to get the last word.
3. Direct your passion toward God-pleasing activity. Remember that wrath almost never pleases God. Consider the man who comes home from work wanting nothing more than some peace and quiet after a long day. When he becomes short with his wife or harsh with his misbehaving children it is likely not because he is zealous to seek first the kingdom of God. The real reason we exhibit wrath is because we are seeking first our own kingdom.

<sup>c</sup> 1:21 **Therefore, putting aside.** James uses the word “therefore” because the following words continue to show us that we are in need of a righteousness that we cannot produce in the flesh (e.g., produced by anger). The word translated “putting aside” is the picturesque word for taking off a garment. It is a common picture also used by Luke (Acts 7:58), Paul (Romans 13:12; Ephesians 4:22, 25; Colossians 3:8), the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 12:1) and Peter (1 Peter 2:1; 5:5).



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

humility receive the word<sup>b</sup> implanted<sup>c</sup>, which is able to save your souls<sup>d</sup>. <sup>22</sup>But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers<sup>e</sup> who delude themselves<sup>f</sup>. <sup>23</sup>For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks<sup>g</sup> at his natural face in a mirror<sup>h</sup>; <sup>24</sup>for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was<sup>i,j</sup> <sup>25</sup>But one who looks intently<sup>a</sup> at the

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<sup>a</sup> 1:21 **all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness.** The word translated “filthiness” is only used elsewhere in the New Testament in James 2:2. There it is used as an adjective to describe the dirty clothes of a poor man who wanders into the assembly. Here James is obviously talking about moral filth. Rather than “all that remains of wickedness,” the idea is probably better pictured as an abundance of wickedness. The English Standard Version renders this “rampant wickedness.” Some people are much more afraid of stinking in public than they are sinning in public. James says the filthy lifestyle must be shed.

<sup>b</sup> 1:21 **in humility receive the word.** When one thing is “put off” something new must be “put on.” Just as the old garment is a symbol of our pride, the new one is the picture of humility. Peter says the same thing:

You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. 1 Peter 5:5

The word is of course the revelation of God. We would say “The Bible.” God’s word humbles you. When you sit in church or otherwise meditate on Scripture stripped of your filthy pride, God’s word penetrates and he cleanses your soul.

<sup>c</sup> 1:21 **implanted.** James uses the same type of illustration for the word of God that Jesus used. The message of the gospel is like a seed. God’s word planted in a receptive heart grows and produces salvation and fruit. The word that saves is the word that sanctifies.

<sup>d</sup> 1:21 **which is able to save your souls.** Readers have been troubled because it appears that James has things backwards. Must sinners clean up their act in order to receive salvation? Is this more evidence that James believed there is human merit in salvation? Consider this. What James is saying here is no different than John the Baptist (Matthew 3:5-12) calling the religious leaders to flee from the coming wrath and display fruit in keeping with repentance. It is also helpful to understand that God’s forever salvation is pictured three ways:

- We have been saved (Ephesians 2:8-10).
- We are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18).
- We shall be saved (Matthew 10:22).

<sup>e</sup> 1:22 **But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers.** We will get more on this later from James. Parroting Sunday School answers does not demonstrate the change that accompanies salvation.

<sup>f</sup> 1:22 **who delude themselves.** The deception in verse 16 was to think that in some way God is responsible for evil. The deception here is to think that the word of God is merely enjoyable for listening. Some people like to listen to a good sermon and that is about as close as they come to escaping their old life.

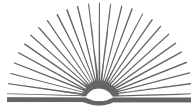
<sup>g</sup> 1:23 **he is like a man who looks.** The word used here does not refer to a casual look, but means “to fix the mind on.” It is also used in the very next phrase. The Bible is a mirror and when we get a good look at ourselves we become accountable. Contrast this “look” word with the one used in the next sentence of looking into the “perfect law...”

<sup>h</sup> 1:23 **his natural face in a mirror.** Literally “the face of his birth.” There is no deep hidden meaning here, only this: When you are exposed to the word of God you begin to see yourself as you really are—no makeup or masks.

<sup>i</sup> 1:24 **once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.** This is human nature. We remember the good things people say about us (and let people know, sometimes in an exaggerated form), but conveniently forget when we learn that something about us has to change.

<sup>j</sup> 1:21-24 This text is very similar to the Sermon on the Mount because it leaves the hearer in need of an unattainable righteousness. Just as Jesus said, “I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20), James calls sinners to look into a mirror that reveals sin without

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Steven Svendsen, Sr.



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perfect law, the law of liberty<sup>b</sup>, and abides by it<sup>c</sup>, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer<sup>d</sup>, this man will be blessed in what he does<sup>e</sup>. <sup>26</sup>If anyone thinks himself to be religious<sup>f</sup>, and yet does not bridle his tongue<sup>g</sup> but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless<sup>h</sup>. <sup>27</sup>Pure and undefiled religion<sup>i</sup> in the sight of our God and Father<sup>j</sup> is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress<sup>a</sup>, and to keep oneself unstained by the world<sup>b,c</sup>.

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correcting it. So how can sinners change? If you ever find yourself despairing that you cannot keep up with the rules, here is hope:

1. Because of the cross, evil can be put aside. Next to God's righteous standard our evil is so evident that there can be no doubt what has to go.
2. Because of the cross, the law can be written on the heart. In others words, real change happens when people begin thinking God's thoughts. This is what Jeremiah 31:33 prophesies: "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."
3. Because of the cross, sinners can do what God says. Obedience does not result in salvation, salvation results in obedience.

<sup>a</sup> 1:25 **But one who looks intently.** This word translated "look" is used in Luke 24 and John 20 of disciples stooping to look into the empty tomb and in 1 Peter 1:12 of angels desiring to look into God's salvation of men. The way we are to approach Scripture is with the same curiosity of one searching out the unknown, but with an anxious passion knowing that what we find will be great.

<sup>b</sup> 1:25 **at the perfect law, the law of liberty.** The law of the Lord is perfect (Psalm 19) because it reflects the holy character of God. The Ten Commandments, for example, did not bring Israel into bondage. The law was given in the context of their *release* from bondage. Want to be free? Live under the rule of the Great Emancipator. Here is another proof that James understood and wrote about grace. The believer in Christ does not look into the Scripture and see that needed change comes through adhering to a list of rules. He sees a message of life that sets him free from such bondage. Living by the precepts of the Bible becomes a joy instead of drudgery.

<sup>c</sup> 1:25 **and abides by it.** This means that living by God's moral code becomes a lifestyle rather than an unattainable standard.

<sup>d</sup> 1:25 **not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer.** James relates this back to verse 22. The word of God is transforming in its "effects" when it is lived out in a life.

<sup>e</sup> 1:25 **this man will be blessed in what he does.** This is the blessed life of which Jesus spoke in the beatitudes.

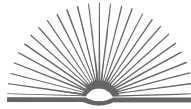
<sup>f</sup> 1:26 **If anyone thinks himself to be religious.** We evangelicals often think of Christianity in terms of a relationship with God and dislike the word "religion" (see also Acts 26:5 and Colossians 2:18) because it seems to promote the works-based righteousness from which God rescued us. James is pointing out that the outward display that is called "religion" is not bad in itself.

<sup>g</sup> 1:26 **and yet does not bridle his tongue.** This is a humorous picture if you stop and visualize it. The control of the tongue is personal. You do not bridle, tame and ride any tongue but your own.

<sup>h</sup> 1:26 **but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.** You deceive yourself when you have a high opinion of yourself outside the boundaries of God's kind of religion. In other words, even the worst among us may say they consider themselves basically good people. "Good" is not defined by how we feel about ourselves but by what God says about us.

<sup>i</sup> 1:27 **Pure and undefiled religion.** God established outward rituals as pictures of unseen reality. He points out the threefold picture of "pure religion" in this passage: tongue control, care of the weak and moral purity.

<sup>j</sup> 1:27 **in the sight of our God and Father.** This is one of many references in Scripture to the constant gaze of God. David danced for the eyes of the Lord in 2 Samuel 6. Living with the estimations of God in mind rather than the estimations of man or even ourselves is what James is talking about here.



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

<sup>1</sup>My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ<sup>d</sup> with an attitude of personal favoritism<sup>e</sup>. <sup>2</sup>For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and

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<sup>a</sup> 1:27 **to visit orphans and widows in their distress.** Caring for the most vulnerable among us (those who have no one to care for them) is the way we are like God in this world. See Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:19-21; Psalm 68:5; 146:9; Isaiah 1:10-17; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3.

<sup>b</sup> 1:27 **and to keep oneself unstained by the world.** This is the challenge to the one who wishes to properly respond to God's word: Keep yourself in the world as an ambassador of Christ ministering to the weakest souls without becoming stained by the world system. James has shown us that the way to remain pure is gazing on and obeying God's word. Listening to the word displaces resident anger and other filthiness because the word properly "listened" to (see note above on "listen") cannot coexist with such things.

<sup>c</sup> 1:25-27 Has there ever been a time in your life when you lived by bare minimums? That is, you wanted to be just good enough to make it to heaven or—for that matter—not quite bad enough to get sent to hell. The idea behind such a philosophy is that doing what it takes to get to heaven robs us of the freedom we could have to live as we please in this world. Notice that James has already reminded us that God is the giver of good things? He is not the designer of ways to make us bored and joyless but the Author of the only path to real delight. Remember that garden he made?

So then, the only real freedom to be had in this life is to live within the boundaries set by the creator of pleasure. God's changeless moral law brings about more than cosmetic change. The freedom spoken of here is not freedom from bondage to God's law but freedom from bondage to sin. If you are finding it hard to measure up the answer is found in rightly relating to the one who holds the ruler. Note the internal changes that come when you are set free from your sin:

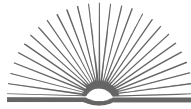
1. You learn to control yourself. For example, putting a bridle on your tongue (as we will learn later) is a means of harnessing the heart that drives you. No fun? Ask anyone who has lived awhile without being able to say "no" to themselves how much freedom they have. God created us with moral limits like he created fish to live in water. There are reasons for the boundaries.
2. You have compassion for those in need. There is no freedom in living selfishly. Life becomes a drudgery when your primary goal is to look out for your own needs and get others to do the same. God knows that and designed us to be his instruments in caring for others. There is great freedom in caring for the needs of others.
3. You maintain internal purity. The world that corrupts us is not the created order that declares the glory of God. It is the fallen system that stands in rebellion against God. By nature people look at Jesus Christ and his standards and say, "We will not have the man to rule over us." To keep yourself unstained by the world is not to move away from the world but to refuse to become part of the rebellion.

<sup>d</sup> 2:1 **My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.** James is not talking about a quality of belief when he speaks of "your faith," but the religion of Jesus Christ as a whole. This use of "faith" is like the one Jude inserts when he urges his readers to "earnestly contend for *the faith* which was once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3). The behavior James is about to describe has no place within the boundaries of "the faith."

<sup>e</sup> 2:1 **with an attitude of personal favoritism.** "Personal favoritism" may not be the best way to translate this because it is not necessarily wrong to have favorite people. The issue is judging others for morally neutral things beyond their control. Racism and belittling people who seem mentally slow are examples of this. These things have no place in the family that will ultimately represent every tribe tongue and nation.

The phrase "an attitude of personal favoritism" comes from one word in the original. It is used in Romans 2:11 to show that God is not a racist. He judges evildoers and rewards the good regardless of people group. The word is used in Ephesians 6:9 to remind masters that God does not esteem them above their slaves. Colossians 3:25 is a warning to slaves not to expect partiality before God if they misbehave. Notice that each of the other times the word is used it is used to describe an attribute of God. God's judgment is not based on things outside our control.

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dressed in fine clothes<sup>a</sup>, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes<sup>b</sup>, <sup>3</sup>and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes<sup>c</sup>, and say, "You sit here in a good place<sup>d</sup>," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool<sup>e</sup>," <sup>4</sup>have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives<sup>f</sup>? <sup>5</sup>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<sup>g</sup>? <sup>6</sup>But you have dishonored the poor man<sup>h</sup>. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court<sup>i</sup>? <sup>7</sup>Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called<sup>j</sup>?<sup>a</sup> <sup>8</sup>If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU

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We should not show preferences for the rich or the poor, but our responsibility is to care for the weakest among us. James is using a principle that is founded on commandments in earlier in Scripture:

You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. Leviticus 19:15

<sup>a</sup> 2:2 **if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes.** The word "assembly" is actually "synagogue." Believers in Christ still met in synagogues in the first century. A gold ring and fine clothes would have been status symbols in a first century assembly, while we take such adornments for granted. Because we are already so rich in our day, we might parallel these things with a Rolex watch or an expensive luxury vehicle.

<sup>b</sup> 2:2 **and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes.** Most of us could not imagine such poverty. Most of us wear rings. Most of us have an extra set of clothes to wear while our other clothes are being washed.

<sup>c</sup> 2:3 **and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes.** The heart issue behind this kind of favoritism is selfishness. We tend to gravitate to people whom we perceive have something to offer us. This is wrong because God has commanded us to take care of the weakest among us (widows, orphans and strangers).

<sup>d</sup> 2:3 **You sit here in a good place.** Seating arrangement certainly indicated power and importance but it also affected how well an individual could participate in the synagogue service.

<sup>e</sup> 2:3 **You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool.** Notice the attitude toward the man who apparently has nothing to offer. We are not in a position to decide which people are worthy to hear the word of God.

<sup>f</sup> 2:4 **have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives.** Your actions reveal your thoughts. Judging itself is not the evil here. Judging one person as more valuable than another is.

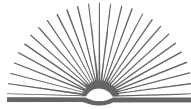
<sup>g</sup> 2:5 **did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him.** Again we go back to the beatitudes. Jesus spoke of the good side of poverty and hunger when he said the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit and that those who are hungry for righteousness will be filled.

<sup>h</sup> 2:6 **you have dishonored the poor man.** If you scold someone by saying, "You just dishonored that person," you might hear, "So? Is that a crime?" Yes. We have the command to "honor all people" (1 Peter 2:17). That is because people were made in God's image and we have no business making judgments he does not make. Proverbs 17:5 says, "He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker; He who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished."

<sup>i</sup> 2:6 **Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court.** James is not engaging in the same prejudice he is trying to combat here. He is merely saying that wealth does not make people virtuous. As an example he points to the way powerful people in his day were using their wealth to persecute believers. We might use the same argument to say that people who hold office are not better than people who do not. We would argue, "Is it not elected officials who have repeatedly refused to stand up for the unborn?" This does not make all elected officials evil. It merely points out that being a public official does not make you more valuable than average citizens.

<sup>j</sup> 2:7 **Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called.** To blaspheme is to "speak evil." A blasphemer is one who lightly regards the name (i.e., the character) of God.

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SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well<sup>b</sup>. <sup>9</sup>But if you show partiality, you are committing sin<sup>c</sup> and are convicted by the law as transgressors<sup>d</sup>. <sup>10</sup>For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all<sup>e</sup>. <sup>11</sup>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<sup>f</sup>. <sup>12</sup>So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty<sup>g</sup>. <sup>13</sup>For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy<sup>a</sup>; mercy

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This, of course, violates the third commandment. Consider the foul-mouthed characters, particularly in the entertainment industry, who are admired by believers.

<sup>a</sup> 2:1-7 There is good cause for a modern Christian to consider the implications today of this first century illustration. Even in a day when Christians were still meeting in "synagogues," the assembly needed to carry on ministry with an eye toward outsiders—we call them visitors.

Today we might apply this teaching as a command not to over-specialize church ministries. For example, attempting to reach young families may bring excitement to the assembly, but it should not be done to the exclusion of reaching older folks.

Another application is the way we treat those who walk into a service not knowing anyone. One church has an unwritten rule that for three minutes after a service the congregation will speak with no one but visitors instead of immediately gravitating toward their friends and family. Some Christians consider their church loving, meaning that the people who are already committed love each other. This is good, but what do the people say who come into that "loving" church and do not return because the people loved each other so much that they did not have time for "aliens"? Consider the attitudes demanded by this text that will change the way a church looks at others:

1. We exist for God and others. This is God's vision for the church and individual believers.
2. We already have all we need. This attitude springs from the truth that God is the giver of all good gifts. Coveting springs from the attitude that God has not been good to us.
3. When we dishonor others we dishonor God. The way we treat others affects our relationship with God.

<sup>b</sup> 2:8 **If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture...you are doing well.** What is this law and why is it called "royal"? The word translated "royal" means "kingly" or "belonging to the king." The royal law is the law of the King. He alone, as sovereign, has the right to tell us how to live. It is possible to embrace God's sovereignty over our salvation and the events in the universe and overlook his sovereignty over our moral lives. The God who chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world takes those he chose and makes them like his Son. Are you "doing well" at living under his authority?

<sup>c</sup> 2:9 **if you show partiality, you are committing sin.** Notice the contrast: "you are doing well...you are committing sin." These verses are connected to the exhortation of first seven verses of this chapter to show love impartially.

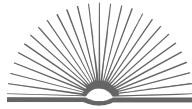
<sup>d</sup> 2:9 **and are convicted by the law as transgressors.** James is doing what Paul did in Romans and what Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. He is revealing that we are all under the weight of sin. In this context James is saying we should welcome messed up people because we are messed up people. You cannot read this letter (or Romans or the Sermon on the Mount) without seeing how short you fall.

<sup>e</sup> 2:10 **For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.** This statement shows the unity of God's law. Consider each of the Ten Commandments as they relate to mistreatment of the poor man in the synagogue. When we encounter people who say they are seeking to live by the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount we might ask, "And how are you doing on them so far?" Remember that the Bible puts you under a curse if you have broken any of them.

<sup>f</sup> 2:11 **if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.** When we favorably compare ourselves to others we set the laws we break as of less importance than the one others break.

<sup>g</sup> 2:12 **So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.** Here again is the law of liberty (1:25) that we have been urged to *do* as well as listen to. I do not think James is

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triumphs over judgment<sup>b</sup>.<sup>c</sup> <sup>14</sup>What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works<sup>d</sup>? Can that faith save him<sup>e</sup>? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food<sup>f</sup>, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled<sup>g</sup>," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is

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suggesting that this law is distinct from the whole of Scripture. This royal law that calls us to love neighbors rather than judge them was revealed in Leviticus 19. It is the truth that sets us free.

<sup>a</sup> **2:13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.** Compare this to Matthew 7:1-2. Not only do the merciless face the wrath of God, they have to live life being treated like they treat other people.

<sup>b</sup> **2:13 mercy triumphs over judgment.** This sounds like a headline from the sports page. The word "triumphs" is the common word for "boasts" or "exults." Like a sports team might dominate another, the power of God is shown in his mercy. Picture Israel looking down from the safe side of the Red Sea at all the Egyptian bodies washing up on shore. Crushing the Egyptian army was a powerful act of judgment, but what about the powerful act of mercy in bring a nation through a sea bed on dry ground? That's triumph.

We can look at this statement either as a challenge to believers to show mercy or a statement about God's mercy. Either view fits the context. Perhaps both are what James has in mind. We who have no future hope apart from the mercy of God have no business behaving toward outsiders in any other way. One who shows mercy displays a change of heart that the Old Testament Law had no power to bring. Refusal to show mercy is evidence of an unchanged heart. There will be a judgment, but the judgment will reveal the hidden depths of the human heart.

<sup>c</sup> 2:8-13 You cannot study texts like this without seeing yourself in need of mercy. What should you conclude following an honest look at this text?

1. Following Christ is an "all-or-nothing" proposition. The Master had a way of discouraging halfhearted disciples. All of the Law must be obeyed to avoid becoming accursed.
2. Seeing yourself as you really are leaves you pleading for mercy. When you see that you have not measured up—that you have "stumbled in one point"—there is no hope apart from someone else bearing your curse.
3. Obtaining mercy must lead to showing it. If you have received much mercy it follows that you have no right to be merciless.

<sup>d</sup> **2:14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works.**

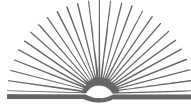
James is saying that there is no advantage or "use" (see also verse 16) in making claims that cannot be supported. As Proverbs 14:23 says, "In all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty." Professions of faith get nothing done.

<sup>e</sup> **2:14 Can that faith save him.** The KJV translates this "can faith save him?" If this were correct, we might legitimately wonder if James contradicts Paul. However the original has an article and is properly translated "*that* faith" or "*that kind of* faith." It is not *faith* that James belittles in this passage, but *fraudulent* faith. There are different kinds of faith, as he goes on to illustrate.

<sup>f</sup> **2:15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food.** Those who see a contradiction between James and Paul overlook a number of things, not the least of which is the fact that Paul's Galatian legalists did not encourage compassion. The encouraged circumcision. Neither James nor Paul demand outward conformity to the Royal Law as a means of salvation. Both James and Paul (Ephesians 2:10) demand other-focused lives as evidence of genuine faith.

<sup>g</sup> **2:16 one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled."** This could be translated "warm yourself and fill yourself." Either way, the well-wisher is excusing himself from helping a vulnerable person. The well-wisher is sending someone away in need, hoping someone else will bother to help. Certainly this applies to those who have no food, but it also applies to our personal ministry to hurting people. What do you do when your friend is depressed or even suicidal? What do you do when your friend is bingeing and purging or cutting herself? It is much easier to pass them off to a secular "professional" or let them fade into the loneliness of the church than it is to gets your hands dirty and minister God's all-sufficient word to their problems.

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that<sup>a</sup>? <sup>17</sup>Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself<sup>b</sup>.<sup>c</sup> <sup>18</sup>But someone may well say<sup>d</sup>, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works<sup>e</sup>." <sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one You do well<sup>f</sup>; the demons also believe, and shudder<sup>g</sup>. <sup>20</sup>But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless<sup>h</sup>? <sup>21</sup>Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar<sup>i</sup>? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was working with his works<sup>a</sup>, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected<sup>b</sup>; <sup>23</sup>and the Scripture was fulfilled which

<sup>a</sup> 2:16 **and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that.** See the echo of "what use?" from verse 14. Claiming faith without works is of no more benefit than well-wishes to a starving person. Feeling for someone does not help them.

<sup>b</sup> 2:17 **Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.** Man was not created as an image to be put on display. He was created to live. Likewise faith.

<sup>c</sup> 2:14-17 There are certainly differing viewpoints on the correct interpretation of James, not the least of which is the disagreement over whether we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Some see a disagreement between James and Paul. Others reconcile the two but argue that Paul also believed we are saved by faith plus works. Others like me hold vigorously to the position that no works (legal or compassionate) can change our standing before God. Why even enter the debate? Is this relevant to real life? Yes. Here is why:

1. There are different kinds of faith.
2. You either have saving faith or you do not.
3. The kind of faith you have is a matter of public display.

<sup>d</sup> 2:18 **But someone may well say.** James is making use of a debate technique where he creates an imaginary "someone" to raise common objections to his teaching.

<sup>e</sup> 2:18 **show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.** Here is the key phrase in this section: "show me." James readily confesses in the next paragraph that Abraham was justified before God because he believed, but that faith convinced no one on earth. The world stands by and watches those of us who claim to believe in Christ and says, "Show me."

<sup>f</sup> 2:19 **You believe that God is one You do well.** Believing the great Jewish confession of faith found in Deuteronomy 6:4 is the foundation of knowing God. But is memorizing the catechism and "believing in God" proof of a changed heart? Read on.

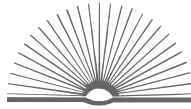
<sup>g</sup> 2:19 **the demons also believe, and shudder.** Can a demon have faith? According to this the answer is yes. This argument reinforces James' contention that there are different kinds of faith. The kind of faith that saves is distinct from the kind of faith that gives intellectual assent. Even a demon knows the facts of his own imminent demise and believes them. Albert Barnes points out that demons are not atheists (as much as they must like to promote it). The word translated "shudder" implies something shaggy or bristling like hair standing on end. There may be some sarcasm on James' part here. He may be saying, "at least the faith of demons produces something in their lives."

<sup>h</sup> 2:20 **But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless.** The older manuscripts have a play on words here (works/useless = *ergon argay*). The foolish or "empty" fellow does not see that faith without works is "inactive and ineffective and worthless" (*Amplified Bible*).

<sup>i</sup> 2:21 **Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar.** Does James contradict Paul? It will help us understand the apparent contradiction if we recognize that the word "justification" is used in more than one way. We properly understand the biblical doctrine of justification as the judicial act of God by which he declares men righteous based on the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). But words mean different things based on context. Clearly Paul used the word *dikaioo* to describe the imputed righteousness of Christ. Elsewhere the word was used to mean "to vindicate."

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. Matthew 11:19

For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. Matthew 12:37



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as a result of the works, faith was perfected<sup>b</sup>; <sup>23</sup>and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,"<sup>c</sup> and he was called the friend of God<sup>d</sup>. <sup>24</sup>You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone<sup>e</sup>. <sup>25</sup>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<sup>f</sup>? <sup>26</sup>For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead<sup>g,h</sup>.

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When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. Luke 7:29

Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children. Luke 7:35

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. Luke 18:14

and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. Acts 13:39

<sup>a</sup> 2:22 **You see that faith was working with his works.** This is a very straightforward translation showing that faith and works are inseparable.

<sup>b</sup> 2:22 **as a result of the works, faith was perfected.** That is, faith was brought to maturity. A tadpole is a frog but you cannot see it until its legs come out and it loses its tail. Likewise genuine faith finds its maturity in good deeds.

<sup>c</sup> 2:23 **and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."** James did not seek to correct or contradict Paul as some have surmised, especially since he wrote these words several years before Paul write Romans.

<sup>d</sup> 2:23 **and he was called the friend of God.** From God's viewpoint, Abraham was justified by faith.

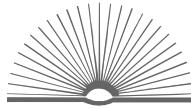
<sup>e</sup> 2:24 **You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.** So why is precisely the opposite statement one of the five solas of the Reformation? As has been demonstrated, James and Paul are looking at justification from two angles. Alexander Ross, in his commentary on James, points out the complementary theology of Paul and James (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament*) by saying, "They are not antagonists facing each other with crossed swords; they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the gospel."

<sup>f</sup> 2:25 **was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way.** Rahab risked everything for the armies of the living God.

<sup>g</sup> 2:26 **For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.** The word "spirit" may refer to our immaterial self or simply our "breath" as evidence of life. A mirror held to the mouth of a corpse will not fog. Doing good works is the breath of faith.

<sup>h</sup> 2:18-26 Genuine faith demands more than just warm feelings toward God or toward people in need. Genuine saving faith comes out when you are confronted with difficult circumstances. Here are three examples:

1. When confronted with a needy person, compassionate works come out. This comes from the front end of this text. Seeing people without basic necessities stirred our Master (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). It should move us.
2. When confronted with a difficult command, compliant works come out. Abraham's obedience went against the strongest human attachment because his faith was genuine.
3. When confronted with a risky mission, courageous works come out. Rahab demonstrated loyalty to the Lord even when she could have paid with her life.



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

<sup>1</sup>Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren<sup>a</sup>, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment<sup>b</sup>. <sup>2</sup>For we all stumble in many ways<sup>c</sup>. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man<sup>d</sup>, able to bridle the whole body as well<sup>e</sup>. <sup>3</sup>Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well<sup>f</sup>. <sup>4</sup>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<sup>g</sup>. <sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things<sup>h</sup>.<sup>a</sup> See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire<sup>b!</sup> <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire, the very world of

<sup>a</sup> **3:1 Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren.** We have switched from talking about the display of genuine faith to the way we use our tongues. This is really no shift in thought at all. James is not saying speaking of the expected role of “teacher” that every mature believer must have with children and younger believers. That kind of instruction is essential rather than optional. James is likely talking about the public teaching role that rabbis and pastors or Bible teachers have. Almost every New Testament use of this word refers to Jesus or a prominent teacher.

The warning is likely to those who have lots of words to share—good or bad—and think that qualifies them to assume the role of teacher. There are good reasons to hesitate before pursuing this title. Paul says the office of overseer is a fine thing to desire (1 Timothy 3:1), but that new converts should be kept from the office because of the danger of pride (1 Timothy 3:6). James is about to give the reason for his warning.

<sup>b</sup> **3:1 knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.** Notice the “we.” James considers himself one of the teachers warned. This statement could refer to human judgment, since James has just been talking about showing our faith to men. More likely the common interpretation is correct, that this is a reference to God’s judgment being stricter on those who teach the Bible. To misrepresent the Scriptures is to get in the way of God’s message. Jesus said that we will all one day give an account for every careless word we say.

But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. Matthew 12:36

<sup>c</sup> **3:2 For we all stumble in many ways.** This is a humble admission by James that should put to rest any ideas that entire sanctification is possible in this life. Once again the reader is left wondering what hope there is for change that can only come down from the Father of lights, the giver of all good (James 1:17).

<sup>d</sup> **3:2 If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.** Remember that the New Testament word “perfect” does not refer to sinlessness (see the previous phrase). This could be translated “a complete husband.” Single ladies looking for “Mr. Right” would do well to pay attention to the way potential suitors use their tongues.

<sup>e</sup> **3:2 able to bridle the whole body as well.** This is a picturesque phrase, another in a new string of metaphors in James.

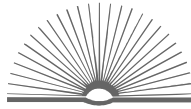
<sup>f</sup> **3:3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.** A piece of metal strategically placed inside the mouth of a 2000 pound animal can make it do things it would never volunteer to do on its own.

<sup>g</sup> **3:4 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.** Notice the emphasis on the smallness of the rudder and the desire of the pilot.

<sup>h</sup> **3:5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.** The word translated “boasts” was commonly used of things growing. Just as you might leave home for a week or two and return to find your garden plants (and weeds) significantly larger, the tongue is also capable of big surprises. This is similar to a comparison in Proverbs:

Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; coney are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces. Proverbs 30:24-28

Three small things are mentioned here that make big things happen: bits, rudders and tongues. The tongue is not just a force for great evil (as the next verses will show us), it can also bring much good.



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

forest is set aflame by such a small fire<sup>b</sup>! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity<sup>c</sup>; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body<sup>d</sup>, and sets on fire the course of our life<sup>e</sup>, and is set on fire by hell<sup>f</sup>. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race<sup>g</sup>. <sup>8</sup>But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison<sup>h</sup>. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been

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<sup>a</sup> 3:1-5a The challenge of the first verses of James 3 is not entirely negative. Knowing that the little tongue can do powerful things reminds you that there are very positive results when you use your tongue wisely. With your words you can proclaim how great is our God, express love, give instruction, share ideas and offer encouragement. But the negative warning to prospective teachers implies the great damage that can be done by the tongue. With your tongue you can blaspheme God, express hatred, rebel against authority, complain and criticize others. If you claim to follow our Savior your desire to please him will largely influence your tongue. With a force like that inside your own mouth, you should desire to bring it under his rule. Here are three truths from this text that should motivate you to control your tongue.

1. You are accountable for what comes out of your mouth. Words are not neutral. Some words may seem empty of meaning, but they are taking up space that could have been better used otherwise.
2. You cannot call yourself mature until you can control your tongue.
3. You will follow your tongue. This does not seem like the biblical view that says, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” The tongue is not the same as the heart, but it is trained by the heart. You follow your tongue like a horse follows the bit and bridle. The truth of the situation is not that the bit and bridle are so powerful but that the horse is trained to follow them. Likewise your tongue.

<sup>b</sup> 3:5 **See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire.** Management of campfires was not invented by Smokey the Bear. All of human history has seen the destruction of a little flame left uncontrolled. Continuing the “little things can effect big changes” theme from the first part of the chapter, James turns to an example more negative than bits and rudders.

<sup>c</sup> 3:6 **And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity.** By describing the tongue as the “the very world of iniquity” (or “the realm of unrighteousness”) it appears that James is saying we possess a little fallen world of our own right inside our mouth.

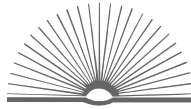
<sup>d</sup> 3:6 **the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body.** Certainly there are things you can do to sin without using your tongue, but the thoughts of the heart are amplified when words come out. Bitterness increases in you and spreads to others when you voice what could have been extinguished in your heart.

<sup>e</sup> 3:6 **and sets on fire the course of our life.** The word translated “course” means “wheel” or “circle.” The “circle of life” term has been used by pagan religions that teach the evil doctrine of reincarnation. Why would James make use of it? He is likely saying that an every aspect and every season of your life can be dominated and destroyed by the words you use.

<sup>f</sup> 3:6 **and is set on fire by hell.** The word translated “hell” is *Gehenna*. Jesus used this word to describe the place of judgment. In the days of James and Jesus, Gehenna was a valley to the south of Jerusalem where refuse was dumped and burned. Centuries earlier babies had been sacrificed to the god Molech until King Josiah put an end to the practice (2 Kings 23:10). The place of continual rotting and burning, where cruel acts have been perpetrated is a valid description of the tongue.

<sup>g</sup> 3:7 **For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.** James is likely referring to Genesis 1:26, where God gave man dominion over the fish, birds, cattle and “creeping things.” We have brought the earth into submission but the tongue is out of control.

<sup>h</sup> 3:8 **But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.** James is not stating that controlling the tongue is an impossibility, only a human impossibility. This phrase actually could read, “no one *of men* can tame the tongue...” Once again we are directed to the need for help from above, from whence comes “every good and perfect gift” (1:17).



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

made in the likeness of God<sup>a</sup>; <sup>10</sup>from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way<sup>b</sup>. <sup>11</sup>Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water<sup>c</sup>? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh<sup>d,e</sup>. <sup>13</sup>Who among you is

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<sup>a</sup> 3:9 **With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.** James, again following the teaching of his Lord, points out the hypocrisy of praising God while cursing men. The reason God has permitted capital punishment for murder is because it is an attack on those created in His image (Genesis 9:6). But would you consider slander or gossip a capital crime? Jesus placed anger at a brother in the same category as murder (Matthew 5:21-22). Like murder, such malicious behavior is an attack on the image of God. Under God's economy, gossip and slander are akin to attempted murder.

<sup>b</sup> 3:10 **from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.** James is returning to his attacks on "double-mindedness." A recurring theme in this letter has been the inconsistency of those who claim things that they deny with their lives.

- He said double-minded people—those who pray but doubt God—are unstable (1:8).
- He said people who claim to be religious without bridling the tongue deceive themselves (1:26).
- He said that those who put on a show of faith in Christ but favor wealthy people over poor people are judges with evil motives (2:4).
- He said that those who say they have faith but no works have a faith that does not save (2:14).
- Here (3:9-10) he points out the inconsistency of blessing God and cursing men.

<sup>c</sup> 3:11 **Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water.** This, James says, is unnatural. Why, then, would we think that a person without control of the tongue

<sup>d</sup> 3:12 **Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.** The problem, James says, is the source of the words. The Lord Jesus pointed this out while teaching about the dangers of blaspheming the Holy Spirit:

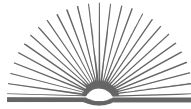
Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. Matthew 12:33-35

To borrow an illustration from author Paul Tripp, if I shake a bottle of water, spilling some, and ask you, "Why did water spill on the floor?" you might say, "Because you shook the bottle." In other words, the shaking is to blame for the water on the floor. If I ask you, "Why did water spill on the floor?" you might say, "Because there was no milk or pop in the bottle." This is the point of James. Why does anger and vile language spill out of people? It is not because they are shaken or the fault lies with whatever did the shaking. No, the problem is that there is anger and vile language inside, waiting to be shaken and spilled.

<sup>e</sup> 3:5b-12 Like an animal, your tongue needs outside help to tame it. Do you want to change the way you talk? Motivation:

1. Your whole life will follow your tongue. Proverbs 18:21 says that death and life are in the power of the tongue, that you will eat the fruit of your own words. Angry, bitter people use angry, bitter words and they do not "grow out of it." Likewise people who are cruel or vulgar with their words.
2. Your tongue can destroy others. With the tongue you can destroy yourself and take others with you. Even using words that cast a shadow over the reputation of another can have terrible long-term effects. Remember what Jesus said about murder in Matthew 5:21-22.
3. Your words betray what kind of person you really are. We do not like to think of ourselves as bad people even if we use our tongues wrongly. The Bible says otherwise.

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wise and understanding<sup>a</sup>? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom<sup>b</sup>. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter jealousy<sup>c</sup> and selfish ambition in your heart<sup>d</sup>, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth<sup>e</sup>. <sup>15</sup>This wisdom is not that which comes down from above<sup>f</sup>, but is earthly, natural, demonic<sup>g</sup>. <sup>16</sup>For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing<sup>h</sup>. <sup>17</sup>But the wisdom from above<sup>i</sup> is first pure<sup>i</sup>,

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4. Your hope for change is clear. If you have concluded that you are a fire-starter, a poison-giver or a tongue-murderer, take heart. It is outside you and comes from the Giver of everything good.

<sup>a</sup> 3:13 **Who among you is wise and understanding.** We should not forget the beginning of this chapter. James is likely continuing the thought he started regarding those who wish to be in leadership or teaching positions. The concepts of wisdom and understanding take us back to the book of Proverbs.

<sup>b</sup> 3:13 **Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.** Once again James challenges the reader to give outward proof of an invisible spiritual quality. James first said, "Show me faith." Now he says, "Show me wisdom." Proverbs 15:33 says, "The fear of the LORD is the instruction for wisdom, and before honor comes humility." When you look at the Bible's qualifications for leaders (Deuteronomy 1:13, 15; 1 Timothy 3), more are character-related rather than ability-related. All of the wisdom qualities listed in this passage are woven throughout the Bible's Book of Wisdom, Proverbs.

<sup>c</sup> 3:14 **But if you have bitter jealousy.** Note that James is using the same word for "bitter" he used of a bad spring in verse 11. Envy destroys relationships because it starts with the premise that you are more important than the person you envy. Proverbs says the opposite of envy is a tranquil heart. Notice that the opposite of envy (passion here) is a tranquil heart:

A tranquil heart is life to the body, but passion is rotteness to the bones. Proverbs 14:30

<sup>d</sup> 3:14 **and selfish ambition in your heart.** As James pointed out earlier, the source of outward evil is the human heart. Selfish leaders do much harm.

A worthless person, a wicked man, is the one who walks with a perverse mouth, who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet, who points with his fingers; Who with perversity in his heart continually devises evil, who spreads strife... There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers. Proverbs 6:12-14, 16-19

<sup>e</sup> 3:14 **do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.** This statement continues the thought about the hypocrisy of using the tongue to praise God and curse men. The source of these behaviors is not God's wisdom.

Buy truth, and do not sell it, get wisdom and instruction and understanding. Proverbs 23:23

<sup>f</sup> 3:15 **this wisdom is not that which comes down from above.** Again, there are two kinds of wisdom.

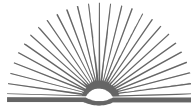
<sup>g</sup> 3:15 **but is earthly, natural, demonic.** The "lords of the Gentiles" certainly lead, but their wisdom does not have its source in Truth. Even demons have wisdom. They also have faith. So we learn that there is more than one kind of wisdom like there is more than one kind of faith.

<sup>h</sup> 3:16 **For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.** James pulls out these two common traits of bad leaders again as in verse 14 to describe the chaos that results.

<sup>i</sup> 3:17 **But the wisdom from above.** Compare this list with the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-24.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Galatians 5:22-24

Notice the recurring theme in James. Everything good comes from above. Everything evil is "earthly, natural and demonic."



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then peaceable<sup>a</sup>, gentle<sup>b</sup>, reasonable<sup>c</sup>, full of mercy<sup>d</sup> and good fruits<sup>e</sup>, unwavering<sup>f</sup>, without hypocrisy<sup>g</sup>. <sup>18</sup>And the seed whose fruit is righteousness<sup>h</sup> is sown in peace<sup>i</sup> by those who make peace<sup>j,k</sup>

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<sup>j</sup> **3:17 is first pure.** If those who follow you were to describe your leadership with a word, what would be “first”?

Evil plans are an abomination to the LORD, but pleasant words are pure. Proverbs 15:26

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Matthew 5:8

<sup>a</sup> **3:17 then peaceable.** This does not mean wise people never have confrontations but that their goal is to restore instead of win.

Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but counselors of peace have joy. Proverbs 12:20

<sup>b</sup> **3:17 gentle.** Very few people regret exercising gentleness.

She extends her hand to the poor, and she stretches out her hands to the needy. Proverbs 31:20

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5

<sup>c</sup> **3:17 reasonable.**

Hear, my son, your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching; Proverbs 1:8

<sup>d</sup> **3:17 full of mercy.**

He who despises his neighbor sins, but happy is he who is gracious to the poor. Proverbs 14:21

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

<sup>e</sup> **3:17 and good fruits.**

My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold, and my yield better than choicest silver. Proverbs 8:19

<sup>f</sup> **3:17 unwavering.**

To show partiality is not good, because for a piece of bread a man will transgress. Proverbs 28:21

<sup>g</sup> **3:17 without hypocrisy.**

Do not eat the bread of a selfish man, or desire his delicacies; for as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, “Eat and drink!” but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the morsel you have eaten, and waste your compliments. Proverbs 23:6-8

<sup>h</sup> **3:18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness.** The end a wise leader has in mind is God's end. The rewards of seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness are far greater than the power and wealth available to the kings of this world.

The wicked earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness gets a true reward. Proverbs 11:18

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Matthew 5:6

<sup>i</sup> **3:18 is sown in peace.** Leaders reap what they sow.

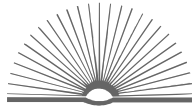
Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but counselors of peace have joy. Proverbs 12:20

<sup>j</sup> **3:18 by those who make peace.** Compare what Proverbs says of wisdom with what Jesus said about his people:

Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace. Proverbs 3:17

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Matthew 5:9

<sup>k</sup> **3:13-18 James is giving further qualifications for leaders or teachers here and a pattern of wisdom for everyone else.** Notice the connection between the abusive speech of the previous verses (3:9-10) and the anger of the following verses (4:1-2). The connection is wisdom from above. God's kind of wisdom is more than common sense. It comes down from above and changes those it touches in visible ways.



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

<sup>1</sup>What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you<sup>a</sup>? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members<sup>b</sup>? <sup>2</sup>You lust and do not have; so you commit murder<sup>c</sup>. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel<sup>d</sup>. You do not have because you do not ask<sup>e</sup>. <sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures<sup>f</sup>. <sup>4</sup>You adulteresses<sup>g</sup>, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God<sup>h</sup>? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God<sup>i</sup>. <sup>5</sup>Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to

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Do you aspire to lead others? Then you need God's kind of wisdom. Here are two facts about wisdom none dare go without.

1. You cannot rightly relate to God in the absence of biblical human relationships. This is why the local church is such a vital part of your relationship with God.
2. You cannot produce biblical human relationships in the flesh. God's kind of wisdom is not something you learn academically nor can you become a better spouse or parent by reading a book.

<sup>a</sup> 4:1 **What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you.** This is not a reference to some internal human struggle, but quarrels between people. The question could be paraphrased: “Why do people get into fights with each other?”

<sup>b</sup> 4:1 **Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members.** Here is the internal human struggle. Fights come from fleshly desires to have what you want. This is the struggle Paul spoke of in Romans 7:7-25 that brought him to say in verse 24, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

<sup>c</sup> 4:2 **You lust and do not have; so you commit murder.** “You” are not personally being accused of murder, but you are part of a race of people prone to take extreme measures (even murder) to get what they want. James again has created a dialogue with an imaginary person to make a point.

<sup>d</sup> 4:2 **You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.** This is the word for coveting.

<sup>e</sup> 4:2 **You do not have because you do not ask.** Our problem is that we think that the source of real satisfaction is in getting people to do what we want them to do. That is why we do not ask God. Why pray when you can stew, worry or manipulate?

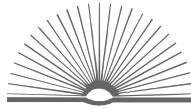
<sup>f</sup> 4:3 **You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.** James speaks more of prayer in chapter five, but this statement is key to why many people do not get what they ask for in prayer. They are praying selfishly.

<sup>g</sup> 4:4 **You adulteresses.** This language refers to idolatry in the Bible. Spiritual adultery was the repeated charge against idolatrous Israel (see Hosea). That which you think you cannot live without can be an idol you have set up in your heart (Ezekiel 14:1-8).

<sup>h</sup> 4:4 **do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God.** People have been labeled “worldly” based on fashion, forms of entertainment and diet. While there are external symptoms such as these, James is teaching us that worldliness is a condition caused by the desire to carry on a lasting relationship (“friendship”) with this world. Because God and this world are at odds, you cannot have both.

<sup>i</sup> 4:4 **Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.** The word translated “friend” is the common word used of those who are more than casual acquaintances. Abraham is called a “friend of God” (James 2:23). Jesus called Lazarus a “friend” (John 11:11). Likewise, the word for enemy is common, used by Jesus in a parable to describe the relationship between the devil and God's people (Matthew 13:39). This statement is an extension of God's demand that we keep company with no other gods.

<sup>j</sup> 4:5 **Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose.** This would be a terrible charge against the word of God—that its words are empty.



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dwelling in us?"<sup>b</sup> <sup>6</sup>But He gives a greater grace<sup>c</sup>. Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE<sup>d</sup>." <sup>7</sup>Submit therefore to God.<sup>e</sup> Resist the devil

<sup>a</sup> **4:5 He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us.** There is more than one way this statement has been understood. The word "spirit" could be translated "Spirit," referring to the jealous desire of God's Holy Spirit to have all of us instead of share us with the world. This is not biblically inaccurate, but the only other place James uses the word "spirit," he is referring to the immaterial part of man (2:26). The NASB gives a footnoted alternative translation which seems to best fit the context of craving worldly alternatives to the living God: "The spirit which He has made to dwell in us lusts with envy."

<sup>b</sup> 4:1-5 What do these statements have in common?

- "I want no more than to have a good relationship with my mother."
- "I will do whatever it takes to get my children to follow Christ."
- "I would give anything if my husband were a godly leader in our home."
- "Today I will offer a sacrifice to Baal so we can have rain on the land."

They are all the statements of idolaters. Puzzled? Consider the content of all four statements. It is very natural and good to want to relate well with your mother, to want your children to follow Christ, to want your spouse to be godly and to want rain to fall on your crops. The desire is not the problem. Idolatry begins when we think we *must* have those things and when we are willing to do whatever it takes to get them. Idolatry begins when we become angry if we do not get our desires satisfied. Again, the desire is not the problem. Here are some reasons why you should beware of *misplaced* desire:

1. Because it is the source of all conflicts. If you have ever seen someone become sinfully angry you know there is an idol lurking close by.
2. Because it is the root of bad praying. People who effectively pray, "My kingdom come, my will be done..." have usurped God's authority. They need to repent of their praying.
3. Because it is the launching pad for heart idolatry. We create images in our minds of the way we think things ought to be and then become very dissatisfied when life does not look that way.

<sup>c</sup> **4:6 But He gives a greater grace.** And who needs grace more than a sinner who sees his or her own covetousness (see previous verses)? This verse has the only use in the epistle of James (twice here) of the common New Testament word for "grace," but that does not mean the concept is foreign to the letter. The very first chapter (1:17) identified God as the giver of everything good. Even though this letter was likely written before Paul wrote so much about grace, do not be deceived into thinking the doctrine was "undeveloped." Grace is not confined to dispensations, as is revealed by what Noah found in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8; see also Numbers 6:24-26; 2 Samuel 9; Psalm 45:2; 84:11; Esther 2:17; Jonah 4:2).

<sup>d</sup> **4:6 GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.** This comes from the book of Proverbs:

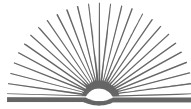
He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble. Proverbs 3:34

What a dreadful thing to find yourself on the wrong side of God. Imagine picking a fight with the Creator! The best way to do this is to seek to usurp his right to rule. This sin is called pride.

There may be a connection between pride here and the desires of the previous verses. Note the immense contrast between what God gives the proud and what he gives the humble. Have you ever run into the hand of God rather than taking what is in it? Based on this section of James, the marks of a "worldly" person are: wanting your own way, seeking satisfaction in what people can give you, prayerlessness, selfish praying, covetousness and pride. If you have a choice between the riches of the world and the riches of God, which would you choose? Humble people willingly accept whatever comes from God's hand. Proud people want their own way and invite judgment.

<sup>e</sup> **4:7 Submit therefore to God.** "Submit" means "To place under." This is the word that is used of citizens submitting to rulers and wives submitting to husbands (Ephesians 5; 1 Peter 3). Submission is the opposite of resistance. The Lord Jesus has been charged with being less than God because He obeyed the Father. Would he have been more convincing if he had *resisted* the

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and he will flee from you<sup>a</sup>. <sup>8</sup>Draw near to God and He will draw near to you<sup>b</sup>. Cleanse your hands, you sinners<sup>c</sup>; and purify your hearts, you double-minded<sup>d</sup>. <sup>9</sup>Be miserable and mourn and weep<sup>e</sup>; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom<sup>f</sup>. <sup>10</sup>Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you<sup>g,h</sup>. <sup>11</sup>Do not speak

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Father? So, then, to submit is to be like Jesus. The appearance of “therefore” leads you to the previous verses. The reason we submit to God is that God opposes the proud (4:6).

<sup>a</sup> 4:7 **Resist the devil and he will flee from you.** Naturally, the way you respond to God ought to be the opposite of the way you respond to the devil. Some people have it backwards and resist God while submitting to the devil.

The idea of waging war against the devil has been taken to some unbiblical extremes. Some people become very intrigued with the works of Satan and seek some sort of mystical power to expel him. Daniel prayed and obeyed. Our Lord quoted Scripture to him. We are not commanded to “bind” him or “claim authority” over him. We are commanded to resist him.

<sup>b</sup> 4:8 **Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.** This is not proof that God helps those who help themselves. It is a command to keep your relationship with God fresh. Believers have already been brought near to God because of the cross (Colossians 1:22).

<sup>c</sup> 4:8 **Cleanse your hands, you sinners.** If you would not approach a meal after working in the barn without first washing your hands, why would you draw near to God with no intention of changing your sinful behavior? Acts 19 records a group of young believers burning the books that assisted in their spiritual blindness before they met Christ. Some people would call this a foolish waste of money. James calls it washing your hands.

<sup>d</sup> 4:8 **purify your hearts, you double-minded.** Sometimes you need a good “brain washing.” Here is another connection between James and the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Matthew 5:8

James does not point out a problem without giving hope. He certainly points out that it is bad to be “double-minded” (“two-souled,” see also James 1:8), but he also shows the way to be purified. Double-minded people need cleansing in the heart. The “heart” is the core of your being, the center of all your functions. Certainly this includes the mind, observing that this bit of advice is addressed to the double-minded. These people need cleansing in the heart.

<sup>e</sup> 4:9 **Be miserable and mourn and weep.** Jesus called mourners “blessed.”

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Matthew 5:4

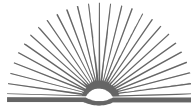
In this case the mourners are those who see their sin and find that the remedy is clear. Better to mourn and find refuge than to be happy all the way to hell.

<sup>f</sup> 4:9 **let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.** There are many things that should make you very serious. God wants you pure before He wants you happy.

<sup>g</sup> 4:10 **Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.** This call to repentance follows on the heels of several sin-revealing challenges (your untamed tongue, your lack of wisdom, your anger, your idolatry). An honest self-appraisal brings you to the realization that you stand filthy in the presence of the God who is completely pure and who can allow no filth in his presence.

<sup>h</sup> 4:6-10 Those who charge James with presenting a legalistic message fail to see the hope he offers. We have all met people who are very critical. People like that are sometimes fun to be around because they use wit to criticize people you do not like. Then you find out that they have some biting jabs for you as well. The criticism James levels here is very different because rather than cursing our darkness it points us to the light. He points out the sins that plague us and then shows us the only way out. Consider why these are hope-giving verses:

1. They reveal God as the only hope for sinners (not religious performance of any kind). James presents a God-centered theology. Like the story of the great flood in Genesis 6, James is not short on judgment, but clearly directs attention to the God of grace who always provides a way of escape.
2. They identify conditions for which there is a remedy. Dirty hands and impure hearts can be washed. Critics merely tell us how bad we are. James is like a faithful physician who sets the grim diagnosis before us and then says, “There is a cure.”



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against one another, brethren<sup>a</sup>. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law<sup>b</sup>; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it<sup>c</sup>. <sup>12</sup>There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy<sup>d</sup>; but who are you who judge your neighbor<sup>e</sup>?<sup>f</sup> <sup>13</sup>Come now, you

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3. They sanctify legitimate grief. Genuine joy is a missing element in the lives of many believers, but so is genuine mourning. We love comedy in our culture but forget that tragedy is God's powerful tool to bring us to himself. No one will ever laugh themselves into the kingdom of God.
  4. They point us to a future hope. There are some tragic lives that are a continual nightmare. Most of us know very little of the hard times that make us want to escape this world. When you find yourself in place in grief because of your own sins, the sins of others or just the realization that you are living in a sin-cursed world, James tells us there is a place to run where you will be exalted.

<sup>a</sup> 4:11 **Do not speak against one another, brethren.** To "speak against" is to slander. The word can also mean "speak evil." The noun form of this word has been translated "backbiter." This is what the people did to Moses as recorded in Numbers 21:5 (see also David's comments in Psalm 101:5). In context (see also 3:9-12), the way you speak about your brothers is an indication of your fellowship with God. Some people make fun of people who are not nice looking or not terribly intelligent. They need to know that we could never call someone to repent of being ugly or stupid, but we should rebuke those who make fun of people. This is what James is talking about.

<sup>b</sup> 4:11 **He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law.** This needs some explanation. James is apparently referring to Leviticus 19:16 and other parts of that chapter. Moses told people to love neighbors instead of slandering them.

I do not think James is speaking of those who dislike the Bible. I think he is talking about those who use it to their own selfish ends. When I become the standard by which others are judged I have supplanted God and his law. Someone who genuinely sees himself, apart from grace, as one worthy of judgment should have no aspirations toward ascending to the judge's chair over his brother. Attacks on men are attacks on the law of God and the image of God.

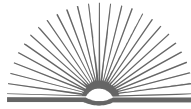
The problem is not that our views are wrong. The problem is that we exalt our application of the commands to the same level of the commands themselves. So when I criticize you for the way you dress your daughter or the food you eat or your views of contraception I may be completely right in my opinion and still be attacking God's word.

<sup>c</sup> 4:11 **but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.** Remember that James calls us to be more than merely hearers of God's word (1:21-25). Too often the sermons we like best are the ones we know will really put some other sinner in church in their place (or we wish they had been present to hear it).

<sup>d</sup> 4:12 **There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy.** Judgment is not only pointing out where the other guy has failed. It is prescribing a sentence. This is the difference between legitimate and illegitimate judging. If I come to you and lovingly call you to turn from a specific sin mentioned in Scripture I am simply a messenger of God's judgment. If I criticize you for violating the way I apply God's word or if I pronounce my own sentence on you for violating God's law, I am illegitimately judging. God will make the ultimate call, which is why Jesus' landowner in the parable of the wheat and the tares told his workers to wait until harvest to separate the two (Matthew 13:24-30).

<sup>e</sup> 4:12 **but who are you who judge your neighbor.** Certain circumstances require discernment about character and behavior, but we have a direct command to love our neighbors, not judge them (Leviticus 19:18).

<sup>f</sup> 4:11-12 Standards are essential. Craftsmen use them. Try building a house when each subcontractor uses a different standard of measurement. Scientists and mathematicians use them. If your two and two does not make four we cannot get together and build a safe bridge. Likewise you want accurate standards when you are buying meat or gasoline. So when James speaks of judgment here he is speaking of standards. He is saying the same thing Paul taught the Corinthian church:



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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<sup>a</sup>." <sup>14</sup>Yet you do not know what your life will be

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Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? 1 Corinthians 4:5-7

Do not think we have left the subjects of leadership and humility. James is talking here about sinful judgment, a clear mark of pride that makes our preferences the standard by which others should be judged.

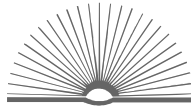
We have learned from James since the beginning of chapter three that God's kind of leaders care more about character than titles. In other words, good leaders are not the standard; they *teach* the standard. This is why James speaks of judgment here immediately after speaking of humility. Humble people cannot be negative and critical toward others. They are hard to offend because they have a great respect for God's straight standard and a great awareness that they are crooked. Steps that should keep you from judging people:

1. Make sure you have your facts straight. I legitimately associate this statement with this text because of the word "judge." Scripture commands us not to make judgments without sufficient evidence (Deuteronomy 19:15). Sometimes patience will reveal the rest of the story, save us from embarrassment and most of all honor God. God holds you accountable not only for the way you treat others but also for the way you think about others.
2. Remember that the person you are criticizing was created in the image of God. Anger toward others is rarely righteous and may be murderous (Matthew 5:21-22). We are even prone to judge people because they were not gifted with beauty or intelligence. Proverbs 31 says charm and beauty are deceitful and vain. Charm and beauty can cover up the heart and do not last. Just ask Samson.
3. Do not "exceed what is written." We get into trouble when we elevate our application of God's word over the word itself. You, your likes and your dislikes are not the standard by which others must be judged.
4. Remember your own failures. Admit that you also fail to measure up next to the real standard. Remember that you and the sinners around you need to be rescued.

<sup>a</sup> 4:13 **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.** Once again James is striking up a conversation with an imaginary person to teach a lesson. These words are simply an illustration of an attitude, but notice the elements of that attitude: "I know where I am going, how long it will take and the results." Remember that James already showed us that wars begin when people do not get what they want. He must have heard his Master-brother's parable of the rich fool who also had this attitude:

Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Luke 12:13-21

This is about more than greedy business people or children squabbling over an inheritance. You may have a dream house, a dream job, a dream vacation or a dream marriage, but this text teaches us that our dreams must bow the knee to God's dreams.



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like tomorrow<sup>a</sup>. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away<sup>b</sup>. <sup>15</sup>Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that<sup>c</sup>." <sup>16</sup>But as it is, you boast in your arrogance<sup>d</sup>; all such boasting is evil<sup>e</sup>. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin<sup>a,b</sup>.

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This passage fits properly into James' discussion of worldliness. The attitude of the world toward planning and goal-setting, even among those who claim to be believers, is practical atheism. Pious statements like "God willing" mean nothing if the heart is craving the things of the world. It is good to say, "God willing" of when he wills to bring you low or shatter your dreams you can still say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

<sup>a</sup> 4:14 **yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.** The key words here are "you do not know." Implied in this statement is that God *does* know what your life will be like tomorrow.

<sup>b</sup> 4:14 **You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.** The word for "vapor" only occurs elsewhere in the New Testament in Acts 2:19, where smoke or steam is pictured. The original word is the source of our word "atmosphere." Vapor is elusive. It is possible to contain it only until something happens to release it. Then it is gone. The brevity of life should temper all planning in your life. The message is: don't waste your life. Wise people often evaluate their priorities based on the old rhyme:

*Only one life,  
`Twill soon be past;  
Only what's done  
For Christ will last.*

<sup>c</sup> 4:15 **Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."**

Underlying this statement is more than a nice-sounding phrase used by religious people. By saying "God-willing" you are saying he does more than allow events. He plans them. You are saying, "He might not be willing and that's okay with me—in fact, I will take pleasure in having my plans smashed to bits if it pleases him."

There are two ways of looking at the term "will" of God. The first is His *moral desire*. It is possible for you to know everything about this aspect of the will of God. He has revealed it to you completely in His word. You do not need to pray about God's moral will. You need to seek it out and obey it. Ephesians 5:17 says, "...do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."

The second way the term "will" of God can be understood is used here. It refers to His *eternal decree*. You normally (unless Scripture prophesies) cannot know this part of God's will until it happens. You also do not need to pray about this because God's purposes will be accomplished.

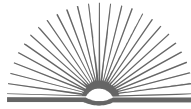
Practically speaking, you might be wondering about decisions you have to make. You might wonder: "If I don't have to pray concerning God's will for my life, aren't my decisions atheistic?" Not if you apply the proper kind of praying recommended earlier in James. If you want to know God's moral will you have to study. If you want to know God's eternal decree you have to pray. But "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). When you face major decisions, obey the moral will of God, pray for the wisdom of God and wait for the eternal will of God.

<sup>d</sup> 4:16 **But as it is, you boast in your arrogance.** Praying about plans is often less committing results to God than it is an attempt to bring God onto our team. After all, what visionary leader wouldn't want the Creator of heaven and earth to endorse his plans? Can't you hear the planning meeting? "Okay, we've got a vision guy, a finance guy and a marketing crew. What do you say we approach God about the possibility of joining us? He might really round out the completion of our vision."

James is pointing out the arrogance of dreaming big without being fully aware that the living God is the king, not a useful team member. What he wills happens. It is arrogance to suppose that our corrupt wills have any power against the free will of the sovereign God.

<sup>e</sup> 4:16 **all such boasting is evil.** James is not saying that planning is evil. This would contradict the commands and examples elsewhere in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus did not flit about during His ministry with no agenda. Paul did not set out on his journeys without a plan (only remember how often God changed Paul's plans). What is evil is not *planning* but *boastful*

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<sup>1</sup>Come now, you rich<sup>c</sup>, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you<sup>a</sup>. <sup>2</sup>Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten<sup>b</sup>. <sup>3</sup>Your

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*planning.* Boastful plans are those that do not take into consideration that God may have other plans.

<sup>a</sup> 4:17 **Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.** James is teaching the concept of “sins of omission.” It is not enough to stay away from what is wrong. You should also pay attention to doing what is right. Proverbs 3:27-28 says:

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, “Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it,” when you have it with you.

In this context, James (note the word “therefore”) is saying that the “good” you ought to do is keeping Christ at the heart of all your plans. The broader context of this letter shows the “good” that should come out of the life of a child of the One who gives everything good. Neighbor-loving people do not simply stay away from bad things. They do good things. This is the big picture of a faith that works.

<sup>b</sup> 4:13-17 This study could carry the title “Keeping Your Plans in Pencil” or “Shattered Dreams.” You should make plans. It is just good stewardship of time to make such decisions. However, behind every plan needs to be the awareness that God may change it. Here is the attitude you need:

1. Learn to enjoy it when God changes your plans. It is good to confess that God has planned the future—hard times as well as easy. It is better to confess the truth and know it is best for you. It is best to take what God gives you and rejoice in it.
2. Plan with eternity in view. The marks of a good plan include how well it can endure over time. Ask yourself, “What difference will this make in 100 years?”
3. Create an active plan to do good. Do you know some good you could do? Purpose in your heart to find a way to get it done for the glory of God.

<sup>c</sup> 5:1 **Come now, you rich.** The only other time the words translated ““come now” are used in the New Testament is in the last chapter (4:13) when James is addressing people who make plans without God. Perhaps James is using it as an expression of disgust like we might groan and say, “Ahh, come on!” This one begins a section that first rebukes wealthy people and then encourages oppressed people.

Elsewhere James was not easy on the rich of his day:

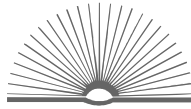
But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. James 1:9-11

But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? James 2:6-7

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. James 4:13

But we should not be so blind as to miss the modern target of this rebuke. How should we identify the “rich people” James addresses here? Certainly by first century standards there are very few modern Americans who could be classified as anything other than rich. But James does not just identify the “rich” by their wealth. This specific class hoarded wealth, kept it at the expense of employees and engaged in the oppression of innocent people.

Was James supposing that the class of people he addresses would be among the readers of this epistle? It is possible that within the professing Church there are and have always been wealthy people guilty of this type of sin. However James may have been using the same technique as the psalmists who addressed evildoers as a means of comforting the downtrodden (“Away from me, you bloodthirsty men,” Psalm 139:19; “in your heart you devise injustice,” Psalm 58:2).



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gold and your silver have rusted<sup>c</sup>; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire<sup>d</sup>. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure<sup>e</sup>! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you<sup>f</sup>; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth<sup>g</sup>. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure<sup>h</sup>; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter<sup>i</sup>. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you<sup>j,k</sup>.

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<sup>a</sup> 5:1 **weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.** The word translated “howl” (*ololuzontes*) is a word like “buzz” that sounds like what it is. The words “weep and “howl” picture those who are being judged.

<sup>b</sup> 5:2 **Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.** First century standards of wealth were primarily measured by agricultural products, clothing and precious metals. You can see that James addresses the demise of all three. James had evidently been present when his Lord and half-brother warned people (Matthew 6:19-21) to lay up treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt and where thieves do not break in and steal. Luke 12:31-34 records Jesus counseling his disciples about the use of wealth in his kingdom:

But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

<sup>c</sup> 5:3 **Your gold and your silver have rusted.** James was not unaware of the way precious metals resist corrosion. His point is that they do not last.

<sup>d</sup> 5:3 **their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire.** This is a very disturbing picture—and may refer to a judgment on unbelievers after this life—but likely is used symbolically of the end of people who rely on riches being the same as their riches.

<sup>e</sup> 5:3 **It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure.** The mention of “last days” is possibly a reference to the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans that occurred in A. D. 70.

<sup>f</sup> 5:4 **Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you.** This is an imaginative word picture, wages crying out. James is referring to related commandments in Torah that spring from the command not to steal:

You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning. Leviticus 19:13

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the LORD and it become sin in you. Deuteronomy 24:14-15

You see that Deuteronomy speaks of the worker crying out to God and James speaks of the wages crying out. The same technique was used by God when he told Cain that Abel’s blood was crying out to Him from the ground (Genesis 4:10). God is not deaf to prayers of the oppressed or blind to the oppression itself. Two or three witnesses are required by God to demonstrate to truth of a matter. Rotting riches take the stand to testify against the rich.

<sup>g</sup> 5:4 **the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.** This is the Lord of armies, the one whom David warned Goliath he should not defy.

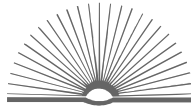
<sup>h</sup> 5:5 **You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure.** Hedonism is not new to our age but we are perfecting it.

<sup>i</sup> 5:5 **you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.** The picture is a great harvest of meat benefitting the harvesters. Trouble is, the meal comes at the expense of the weak who have been harvested.

<sup>j</sup> 5:6 **You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.** The righteous man either could do nothing about his sentence or he refused to take revenge because he was righteous.

<sup>k</sup> 5:1-6 The practical applications of this text may appear difficult on the surface, but the passage does apply to us for two reasons. First: We live in a time of wealth unparalleled in human history.

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<sup>7</sup>Therefore be patient, brethren<sup>a</sup>, until the coming of the Lord<sup>b</sup>. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it<sup>c</sup>, until it gets the early and late rains<sup>d</sup>. <sup>8</sup>You too be patient; strengthen your hearts<sup>e</sup>, for the coming of the Lord is near<sup>f</sup>. <sup>9</sup>Do not complain, brethren, against one another<sup>g</sup>, so that you yourselves may not

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Second: We live in a nation that is ripe for judgment. How, then, should we view our material resources?

1. Do not count on them to last. Even gold gets “rusty” eventually.
2. Do not count on them to satisfy. Ask the fellow who “has it all” if he wants anything else.
3. Do not use them to oppress or control others. God takes care of the weak. Do not get in his way.
4. Do not think they have been given to you to use on yourself. The strong have great responsibility as they see the weak ones around them.

<sup>a</sup> 5:7 **Therefore be patient, brethren.** The word “therefore” connects this passage with the previous one about “rich people.” What do the two have to do with each other? One possibility is that believers enduring hardship can take heart that the things they lack materially do not last long anyway. James addressed the rich not because they would be the primary recipients of his letter but as a comfort to the persecuted. Now he addresses the temptations of his persecuted “brethren.” This passage most certainly addresses believers because unbelievers are not motivated by the promise that Jesus is coming back to set things straight.

<sup>b</sup> 5:7 **until the coming of the Lord.** This statement could refer to the return of Jesus Christ to judge those who mistreated the recipients of this letter. It is tempting to interpret “the coming of the Lord” as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem that likely occurred shortly after James penned this letter. The trouble with that interpretation is that the word “coming” usually refers to someone’s physical presence and—specifically—the physical return of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of the ages. James urges patience (longsuffering) so the people would not take revenge into their own hands against their rich oppressors.

<sup>c</sup> 5:7 **The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it.** This is the first of two primary words for “patience” used in this passage. This one means to suffer long, to be long-winded instead of short-tempered.

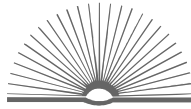
<sup>d</sup> 5:7 **until it gets the early and late rains.** The newly sown fall seed in Israel needed rain in October or November and the maturing plants needed rain in April or May. Farmers relied on God’s timely supply of rain for their livelihood and God promised to send it as long as the nation followed his commands.

For the land, into which you are entering to possess it, is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you used to sow your seed and water it with your foot like a vegetable garden. But the land into which you are about to cross to possess it, a land of hills and valleys, drinks water from the rain of heaven, a land for which the LORD your God cares; the eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning even to the end of the year. It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the LORD your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, that He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early and late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil. He will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. Deuteronomy 11:10-15

<sup>e</sup> 5:8 **You too be patient; strengthen your hearts.** James uses a word translated “strengthen” that means “to make stable.” When you do not handle hard times well, your whole life (your heart) becomes turbulent. James says there is stability in preparing for the future. He is giving practical advice for that preparation.

<sup>f</sup> 5:8 **for the coming of the Lord is near.** This is the same word for “near” John used when he said “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Near does not mean we will live to see it, but it does mean it is coming.

<sup>g</sup> 5:9 **Do not complain, brethren, against one another.** Literally translated, “Stop grumbling...” The word “complain” means “to groan or sigh” and is not necessarily bad in itself (Romans 8:26 says the Spirit does this when He intercedes for us). The trouble with this type of groaning is that *it is directed at others*. People have unpleasant things happen and often look around for someone to blame instead of responding in a godly way. We far too easily turn opportunities to grow our relationships into moments of angry words.



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be judged<sup>a</sup>; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door<sup>b</sup>. <sup>10</sup>As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord<sup>c</sup>. <sup>11</sup>We count those blessed who endured<sup>d</sup>. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings<sup>e</sup>, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful<sup>f</sup>.<sup>g</sup>

<sup>12</sup>But above all<sup>h</sup>, my brethren, do not swear<sup>a</sup>, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath<sup>b</sup>; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no<sup>c</sup>, so that you may not fall under judgment<sup>d</sup>.<sup>e</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> 5:9 **so that you yourselves may not be judged.** This is one of several similarities between this passage and the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." James' commentary substitutes "grumble against each other" as amounting to the same thing as judging. People who have trained themselves to turn stressful moments into angry moments rob God of his perfecting work in his people. Remember James 1:2-4.

<sup>b</sup> 5:9 **behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.** Jesus used similar language in Matthew 24:33. This text compares our ability to look around and observe the seasons to our ability to know the "season" when Jesus will return.

<sup>c</sup> 5:10 **As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.** The Bible records many instances of God's representatives facing hostile crowds. People like Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptist, who spoke the truth under threat of violence, serve as our pattern. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness" (Matthew 5:10).

<sup>d</sup> 5:11 **We count those blessed who endured.** This is a form of the word Jesus used in the beatitudes recorded in Matthew 5:1-12. It means "happy." "Endured" is the second "patience" word used in this passage. A. T. Robertson distinguishes the two like this: the first is "restraint from retaliating" and this one is "not easily succumbing."

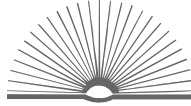
<sup>e</sup> 5:11 **You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings.** Literally, "You have seen the end of the Lord," i.e., "You have seen the way the Lord finishes things." It is always best to let your Master finish the fights others pick with you.

<sup>f</sup> 5:11 **that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.** Rehearsing this statement keeps you from supposing that God is out to get you or your children. Hard times are his gift like the pain of some medical procedures are a gift. He is good and what he does is good.

<sup>g</sup> 5:7-11 What does a man facing the death penalty for being a Christian have in common with a man who has chronic problems with his lawn mower? Few of us in free nations know what it would be like to live under oppressive persecution by powerful people, not knowing whether we will live or die. We also do not know what it would be like to have our survival depend on whether or not it rains on our crops. But the same principles apply to our minimal hardships as they do to life-threatening hardships. Here James draws yet another metaphor, comparing believers enduring hardship to farmers waiting for rain. He tells us how to occupy our time while we wait for God to deliver us from evil or even from little hassles:

1. Get your thinking under control. Strengthening your heart involves thinking true thoughts. The farmer strengthens his heart by saying, "It is going to rain. That is what happens this times of year." The heart is only weakened by statements of despair like, "But what if this year is the exception?"
2. Love those around you. Some people show anger in hard times toward the very people they should be serving. The look around for someone to blame for their discomfort. The Judge standing at the door knows this is the time to serve instead of grumble.
3. Rehearse the attributes of God. How has he acted in the past? What do you know for sure about him?

<sup>h</sup> 5:12 **But above all.** This phrase translated "above all" is used two other times in the New Testament. In Colossians 1:17 Paul says the Lord Jesus is "before all things." Peter (1 Peter 4:8) told his readers, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another." You can see that James is not simply saying, "Oh, and here is one more related thought." What he is about to say sums up the call to demonstrating personal faith in this letter.



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

Most people asked to choose a primary command from the epistle of James would not choose this one. Letting your “yes be yes and you no, no,” however, does demonstrate the kind of faith for which James argues in this letter. It can be persuasively argued that it is the double-minded person one whose “yes” is not necessarily yes and whose “no” is not necessarily no. Consider how letting your “yes be yes and your no, no” affects the way you keep the other commands of this letter:

- You claim to be a follower of the sovereign Lord Jesus Christ so you find joy in a time of trial (1:2-7).
- You confess in a time of trial that God does not waver on his word and his gifts (1:17).
- You speak what you believe with your good works (1:19-27).
- You sincerely welcome all kinds of people into the assembly (2:1-13).
- You say you have faith and back it up with your works (2:14-17).
- You bless men like you bless their Maker (3:1-12).
- You speak wisdom that is “unwavering and without hypocrisy” (3:13-18).
- You say you are a friend of God and so cannot maintain a friendship with the world (4:1-10).
- You say you will pay your employees and you do it (5:1-6).
- You claim to believe God is compassionate and you patiently wait to observe it (5:7-11).

<sup>a</sup> 5:12 **do not swear.** Our culture has largely forgotten what “swearing” is. Vulgarity or restroom wall language is not swearing. That kind of talk is bad, but it falls into the category of an “unwholesome word” (Ephesians 4:29). I have heard preachers say that when the Matthew 26:74 says Peter began to “curse and swear” during his three denials of Christ that he was resorting to using trashy language. This is not so. He was putting himself under oath as if to say, “May God strike me down if I know that man.” You see the seriousness of Peter’s denial. Even children understand swearing when they say, “Cross my heart and hope to die...”

The Hebrew Scriptures do not forbid oath-taking, only oath-breaking.

You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:11-12

When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised. Deuteronomy 23:21-23

Swearing is kind of like getting a co-signer on a loan. You put your own instability under the umbrella of one who is stable and say, “With God as my witness...” or “...so help me God.”

To clear up the biggest controversy about this text and its source text in Matthew 5, this command does not forbid ceremonial oaths. Oaths of office or the swearing in of court witnesses are not in view here any more than marriage vows. Caiaphas put Jesus under oath at his trial:

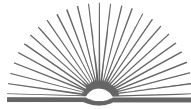
I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God. Matthew 26:63

The Master did not object to the oath, but answered the question in a way Caiaphas considered blasphemy.

The problem is the flippant way people invoke God’s name (take in vain) to add credibility to their words. The real issue is integrity. Your word should not need a stack of Bibles to make it trustworthy. You should not have to say, “I promise” to bind you to keep your word.

<sup>b</sup> 5:12 **either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath.** The Lord Jesus said this in Matthew 5:33-36, when he combined the oath commands from Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 23:

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, “YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.” But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.



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<sup>13</sup>Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray<sup>d</sup>. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises<sup>e</sup>. <sup>14</sup>Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church<sup>f</sup> and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord<sup>g</sup>; <sup>15</sup>and the

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Hebrews 6:16 says that when you swear you swear by someone (or something) greater than yourself.

<sup>a</sup> 5:12 **but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no.** The idea is that your word should be good enough. The Lord Jesus concluded the previous thought:

But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; anything beyond these is of evil. Matthew 5:36

<sup>b</sup> 5:12 **so that you may not fall under judgment.** You are accountable for the words you use. James just told us that we should not grumble since the Judge is standing at the door. We live before his face and he sees the intents of our hearts.

<sup>c</sup> 5:12 We give our word in marriage vows, business agreements, financial loans and simple statements of intent. James gives us some good motivation to say what we mean and mean what we say. Here are some good reasons why you should keep your word:

1. The way you value the truth will affect every area of your life. Some people become so good at cover-ups that they begin to believe their own lies.
2. Your word is not valuable if it has to be propped up.
3. You will give an account for the way you esteem truth.

<sup>d</sup> 5:13 **Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray.** The word James uses here for suffering connects this passage to the suffering of the prophets mentioned in verse 10. It also hearkens back to the challenge at the beginning of this letter to “consider it all joy” when trials come. It is not cruel to suggest that sufferers have responsibility. Hard times are not a license to complain or to express anger at God. Sufferers have an obligation to turn to him as their ever-present help in trouble.

<sup>e</sup> 5:13 **Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.** Just as the sufferer has a duty, so does the person whose cheer is good. Earthly cheer ought to bring you to song, whether feasting on a great meal, a skillful display of the arts or a good ballgame. The command to sing is one of the most common commands in Scripture (Psalm 147:7; Ephesians 5:19). If you are never cheerful you are evidently exempt from this command.

<sup>f</sup> 5:14 **Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church.** The word “sick” means “weak,” including by application people who are weak for reasons others than physical illness.

Elders are shepherds or overseers. The words elder, bishop (overseer) and a pastor are words used interchangeably of church leaders, never of distinct offices. God has governed his people by a body of elders throughout the history of Israel and into the post-cross era of the church (Exodus 3:16; 19:7; Acts 14:23; 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1; Revelation 19:4).

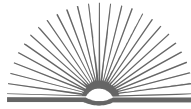
This phrase is instructional on a number of levels. It assumes the readers (or hearers) of this letter from James are connected to an organized body of believers called a “church,” not just part of the universal Body of Christ. It assumes the readers are under the plural authority of a group of church leaders called elders, an assumption consistent with the rest of Scripture. It assumes that in hard times the natural response of a believer should be to lean on the church.

This means church leaders should be equipped to respond to those who ask for help.

<sup>g</sup> 5:14 **they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.** Notice the phrase “pray over.” This could mean the sick person is bedridden or simply that the weak person should kneel as the elders pray.

The practice of anointing the sick with oil has been understood in different ways. Roman Catholicism has justified the sacrament of last rites or “extreme unction” based on this passage (But the end James has in mind is far different from that of a priest administering last rites). Many evangelicals view and practice this anointing with oil as God’s prescribed way to deal with the sick and to claim a promise of divine healing.

Oil throughout Scripture has been viewed as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, but was also used medicinally. What does James have in mind here?



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prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick<sup>a</sup>, and the Lord will raise him up<sup>b</sup>, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him<sup>c,d</sup>.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, confess your sins to one

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The anointing with oil was practiced by Jesus' disciples as recorded in Mark 6:13 and by the Good Samaritan in the parable recorded in Luke 10. Isaiah compared Israel's condition to a person with wounds "not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil" (Isaiah 1:6).

A case can be made that James is speaking simply of a medicinal use of oil. He does not use the word for ceremonial anointing (*chrío*) used of Jesus in Luke 4:18 and Acts 4:27. He chooses the word (*aleipho*) which was used of Mary pouring oil on Jesus' feet (John 12:3) and by Jesus in His instructions to people who fast (Matthew 6:17) to put oil on their heads so they don't appear to be fasting. James is speaking of anointing a sick person. This word was commonly used in the field of medicine in the days of James. The Arndt and Gingrich *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* uses the term "household remedy" of *aleipho*.

Jay Adams (*Competent to Counsel*, p. 108) summarizes this position: "And so it turns out that what James required by the use of oil was the use of the best medical means of the day."

One weakness of this argument is that it appears to place medical care in the hands of church leaders, a duty not required by Scripture or desired by most of us who are church leaders.

It could be that the ritual prescribed here is a matter of obedience we may not understand, but through which God may bring about healing.

The bottom line? When you are sick, call your doctor *and* your church elders. Don't think either one is expendable.

<sup>a</sup> 5:15 **and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick.** The word translated "prayer" here is a form of the common New Testament word for prayer. It is translated "vow" elsewhere.

The word "restore" could be translated "save," prompting some to suggest that this text has nothing to do with physical healing. That is a convenient way to dismiss supernatural healing as a possibility in our day. This text does not suggest individuals should start large public healing ministries, but it does suggest local churches carry on private healing ministries.

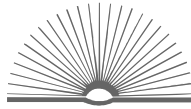
The "prayer offered in faith" may not necessarily be possible every time a body of elders prays. The apostles were evidently endowed with healing abilities at some times greater than others (Luke 10). Just as Paul was often unable to heal (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20; Philippians 2:25), the faith of which James speaks may be a gift bestowed occasionally when God "shows up" and confirms his power through the prayers of his people.

There is no promise here of immediate healing. Consider the poor soul who has not been healed having to carry the added burden of thinking it was because he or she lacked sufficient faith to be healed. The faith required here is the responsibility on the elders, not the sick person. God may in fact grow faith more quickly when the healing does not come. Early on in this letter James says we can be joyful for the work God is doing even when we are still in the trial.

<sup>b</sup> 5:15 **and the Lord will raise him up.** Some commentators have suggested that since James uses a word commonly used of resurrection (*egeiro*), that he is looking far beyond temporal healing. Use of this term could simply be evidence that the sick person is bedridden.

<sup>c</sup> 5:15 **and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.** The sin factor should never be dismissed in a time of physical weakness. The truth is that all illness is the result of sin—one sin in the Garden of Eden. While Job's friends improperly pointed fingers at Job when God was at work making his servant better, others in Scripture became ill as a direct result of their sin (Deuteronomy 28:58-63; Proverbs 3:28-35; 13:13-23; Luke 5:20; John 5:14; Acts 12; 1 Corinthians 11:30). The ministry of the elders should be to inquire about the spiritual health of the weak person. Good shepherds watch for souls and are accountable to God for that work (Hebrews 13:17).

<sup>d</sup> 5:13-15 This text tells us what the ministry of a local church ought to look like. The church is full of sinners who suffer because of their own sins, because of the sins of others and because they live in a sin-cursed world. The answer to all this suffering is not the creation of large global operations. It is local church ministry. The Body of Christ works on a local level. The church ministering to hurting people looks like this:



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another<sup>a</sup>, and pray for one another so that you may be healed<sup>b</sup>. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much<sup>c</sup>. <sup>17</sup>Elijah was a man with a nature like ours<sup>d</sup>, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain<sup>e</sup>, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months<sup>f</sup>. <sup>18</sup>Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit<sup>a, b</sup>.

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1. The church must promote a God-centered theology. This is done by teaching people to respond in a Godward direction whether times are hard or easy. You learn this best before the hard times come.
  2. The church must offer soul care by an equipped group of leaders. We should not outsource love for souls—particularly those who are hurting physically or otherwise.
  3. The church must promote the ministry of prayer. We ought to cry out to God on behalf of others, trusting his powerful character and promises. This is to be done privately and corporately.

<sup>a</sup> **5:16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another.** The word translated “confess” here is a form of the word used in 1 John 1:9 (“If we confess our sins...”). It means “to agree or admit” (literally “to say the same thing”). The idea is that when you sin you must call it what it is. If you show unrighteous anger toward someone, you don’t say, “Sorry. I just had to let off a little steam.” True confession to God or men demands that you say, “I had an outburst of anger.” True confession offers no excuses.

Confession of sin “to each other” is not a requirement that believers are to share all their acts of sin with other believers. Such a practice would destroy any church. It does mean that believers are to be humble enough to go to those they have wronged and make things right. Private sins should be confessed privately and public sins should be confessed publicly. In this context it means that when the possibility exists that an illness is sin-induced, the sick person should take the initiative and tell the elders about it. The sick person should not be offended if the elders ask about it.

<sup>b</sup> **5:16 and pray for one another so that you may be healed.** Notice there is no mention of the oil here. When you pray for a sick person and he is healed, you can give God the credit even if medicine is the means God used to heal.

Aside from the potential for God’s direct judgment on his disobedient children, the troubled conscience itself can produce a number of physical ailments. David testified to the physical effects of unconfessed sin:

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”; and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Psalm 32:3-5

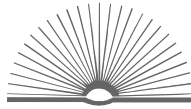
<sup>c</sup> **5:16 The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.** James is not urging us to be eloquent. He is calling us to work hard at prayer. He is urging us to pray out of our own weakness and from our righteous standing before God. This is blue collar prayer. Young’s Literal Translation makes the meaning of this statement clear: “very strong is a working supplication of a righteous man.”

<sup>d</sup> **5:17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.** This familiar statement is one that is easily dismissed even by those who believe the Bible. Most of us do not class ourselves with the prophet Elijah. But Scripture does not hide the weaknesses of God’s best servants. Elijah was prone to despair and self-righteousness (1 Kings 19). In some ways he was like Jonah and used fear as an excuse to run far from the commission of God.

<sup>e</sup> **5:17 he prayed earnestly that it would not rain.** Part of the hard work of prayer is knowing what to pray. We pray more effectively when we know what God has promised in his word. Elijah did not make up the judgment mentioned here. God had said he would stop the rain if the people broke their covenant with him (Leviticus 26:19). Israel and its leaders had abandoned the law of God and Elijah simply prayed that God would do what he promised to do.

<sup>f</sup> **5:17 it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.** Elijah did not have some special power over the amount of time the judgment would last. He claimed God’s promise to

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<sup>19</sup>My brethren, if any among you strays<sup>c</sup> from the truth<sup>d</sup> and one turns him back<sup>e</sup>, <sup>20</sup>let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way<sup>f</sup> will save his soul from death<sup>g</sup> and will cover a multitude of sins<sup>a, b, c</sup>

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withhold the rain and prayed again when it was evident that God could again bless Israel with rain.

<sup>a</sup> 5:18 **Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.** Elijah prayed again for deliverance on Mount Carmel when the people turned away from Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 18:39-46).

<sup>b</sup> 5:16-18 Our culture has defined prayer in such a way that it keeps most of us from praying much. Here is the common view: Prayer is to be used only in an emergency unless you know how to put the words together eloquently. That is why certain people are asked to offer public prayers. We do not want to be embarrassed by the words we use.

James is very blue collar. He urges those who have been declared “righteous” by God to pray all the time:

1. God wants his people to have that kind of relationships.
2. Prayer is for ordinary people.
3. Prayer is powerful.

<sup>c</sup> 5:19 **My brethren, if any among you strays.** This is a vivid word picture. The word translated “strays” often carries the more active meaning “to deceive.” Its passive picture here is that of a wandering sheep (Matthew 18:12, 13) or of those who “err” because they do not know the Scriptures (Matthew 22:29). James is describing someone who turns away from God’s word (see James’ use of “truth” in 1:18). Just like sheep wander away from the safety provided by their shepherd, so believers often wander from the refuge of God’s word.

People who wander this way are not innocent victims of the alluring greener grass on the other side of the fence. They are high-handed sinners in need of rescue. That is why Isaiah said:

All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. Isaiah 53:6

<sup>d</sup> 5:19 **from the truth.** There is absolute truth. When we look at someone who is messed up, we see outward signs of grief and outward consequences of bad decisions. It is easy, then, to think that the best help available will train the hurting person to make better decisions. James shows us here that the real issue is truth, not adapting to life in this world. God’s judgment is not for those who are guilty of breaching codes of social conduct. His wrath is toward lawbreakers and truth-suppressors.

<sup>e</sup> 5:19 **and one turns him back.** This is the common New Testament word for “convert.” Jesus used it when he spoke to Peter about his betrayal before it happened. He told Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan asked to have you, that he might sift you as wheat: but I made supplication for thee, that your faith fail not; and do thou, when once thou hast turned again, establish thy brethren.” (Luke 22:31-32).

These last verses of James take us back to the issues in chapter four. There (4:11-12) James taught us why leaders (and others) should not judge others. As James Commentator Daniel Doriani points out (*Reformed Expository Commentary*, p. 203), we are discussing the same type of person and two differing responses in these two passages. Comparing the two texts, when someone is in error we either criticize them or go after them. The responsibility of the leader is to turn sinners around, not judge them.

<sup>f</sup> 5:20 **let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way.** Just as God used Nathan to turn David around (2 Samuel 12:1-15), God usually uses human means to “convert” sinners from error.

<sup>g</sup> 5:20 **will save his soul from death.** There are three kinds of death described in Scripture: spiritual, physical and eternal. James does not specify which one here because he is likely referring to more than just physical death.

It is futile at this point to argue about whether James is speaking of believers or unbelievers. We can never really know for sure that another person is in God’s family. Those who wander from the truth need to be rescued. Let God sort out whether they are a backslider or a heathen.

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This statement has parenting applications. Proverbs 23:13-14 urges parents to discipline their children to save their souls from death. Parenting stops when we stand before God with our children.

<sup>a</sup> 5:20 **and will cover a multitude of sins.** The idea of covering sins may point back to Psalm 32. David spoke of the blessedness of having sins “covered.” He was not speaking of a blessedness that comes from successfully hiding sin, because he had just escaped that when he wrote the psalm. When your sin is covered before God it is not because you are good at hiding the truth from him. Since the atonement also pictures covering, we realize that the Father sees his bleeding Son bearing sin. His wrath is satisfied. Sin is covered.

Peter said, “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8; cf. Proverbs 10:12). Certainly the loving act of reaching a wayward brother “covers a multitude of sins” by turning him to the cross and keeping him from committing many more sins.

<sup>b</sup> 5:19-20 For those who contend that James wrote a letter de-emphasizing the importance of the cross and the gospel of grace, it should be noted that James ends this letter dealing with the remedy for error, sin, and death. After bringing us to despair that we do not have the kind of righteousness we need to approach God, James calls disciples to reach out to people with maladies no good work ever remedied. The cross casts its shadow over this entire letter. Error, sin and death are only taken away by the cross. The cross was just as much assumed in this letter as the work of God was assumed when the book of Esther was written. James is not a book about the cross like Esther is not a book about the providence of God.

You are your brother’s keeper. Personal ministry to wandering sinners must always start with what Jesus did on the cross. These last verses of James show us the cross and what happens when sinners are reached with the gospel:

1. Error ceases. The reason this points us to the cross is that Jesus died for people who fail to meet the standard of God’s word. Truth wins out next to error. The wandering sheep belongs inside well-defined boundaries and Jesus died to bring them back (see John 10).
2. Death is avoided. This directs us to the cross because Jesus died so that we might live.
3. Sins are covered. We are taken to the cross by the “covering sins” statement because our identity before God is wrapped up in the bloody death of our Redeemer. We dare not approach him with sins uncovered.

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