



Reflections on James

Don Merritt

Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

This little "document" is freely given to you. By all means, feel free to share it with others for free. Please do not use any of this for commercial purposes! Make use of whatever helps you grow in your relationship with our Lord and anything here that isn't helpful, by all means set it aside. Helping other believers in their walk with Christ is my only purpose here!

All blessings to you in Christ!

Don Merritt

lifereference@gmail.com

www.lifereference.wordpress.com

www.donmerrittonline.com

To Begin With...

There are five men named James in the New Testament who could have written been the author of this letter. Three of the five are high-profile enough to be good candidates, so let's have a very brief look at them.

1. James, the brother of Jesus.

2. James the Apostle, son of Zebedee. This James was one of the inner-circle of Jesus, along with Peter and John. Although he might be a good guess for authorship, he was beheaded by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2) around 44 A.D., meaning that this Letter would have been by far the earliest written of the New Testament books. If he had written it, one would have expected him to mention that he was an Apostle in the letter, and there is no mention of apostleship.

3. James the Apostle, son of Alpheus. Again, there is no mention of apostleship, so the same objection would apply. Very little is known about this James.

The other two men mentioned in the New Testament who have this name are quite obscure, making them unlikely authors of a major letter such as this. I would conclude that the author is James, (half) brother of Jesus and brother of Jude.

As for the date and specific purpose of the letter, James gives us no real clues, so in these posts, I won't speculate, rather I will focus on the more universal application as most commentators tend to do. It is an interesting letter, almost a moral code. The author seems to borrow from the moral coda of Leviticus 19, and parallels topically the Sermon on the Mount, and interestingly also appears to have been influenced by two Apocryphal books; I'll include a "Bonus Study" on that.

Looking at the theme and structure, James is interesting, for one could easily teach it by topic rather than by using an expository approach as I will do here. The topics are

1. Waiting for Jesus (1:2-4, 12-18; 5:7-12)
2. Wisdom (1:5-8; 3:13-18)
3. Rich and Poor (1:9-11; 2:1-13; 4:13-16; 5:1-6)
4. The Tongue (1:19-21; 26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12)
5. Prayer (1:6-8; 4:1-10; 5:13-20)
6. Faith and Action (1:22-27; 2:14-26)

To say the least, it's an unusual outline, and we'll get to it next, so have some hot coffee ready, pull up your chairs and fasten your seat belts, this is going to be a lot of fun!

Chapter 1

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

James 1:2-8

We begin our adventure with James on a good note; expectations running high. After providing his name and addressing his letter to the 12 tribes scattered all over, he jumps right into rich content with these verses. I used to think this was a really odd thing to say, you know consider it pure joy when you go through a trial. Yet James has a real point here, for we don't normally develop perseverance in any field of endeavor without facing a trial of some sort, and living in this world, we will surely need perseverance. Let's face it, nobody grows to maturity in life without developing some perseverance, and as time goes by, being immature ceases to be cute and moves into the category of unattractive.

Verse 5 has always been of particular interest to me; James makes it sound so easy. If you lack wisdom, ask God for it and He'll give it to you. Personally, I've noticed that if I ask for wisdom, I get trials. If I ask for patience, I get trials. If I ask for perseverance, I get trials. Do you suppose there is a connection? I admit that this isn't very scientific, anecdotal as it is, but James might be going somewhere like this in his thinking: Trials are an important part of spiritual growth and there is no way around that.

That brings us headlong into verse 6. When you ask God for wisdom, "you must believe and not doubt" and to be honest, it strikes me that this is where we sometimes go wrong. I don't just mean because we might have doubts, but because we often draw the wrong conclusion from James' remark. If I ask for wisdom and get a trial instead, is that because I doubted, or is it because wisdom comes from experience? All too often, the Sunday school answer to that is that we lack faith. This isn't the point James is making here. His point is much deeper than that.

Look at what comes next: Someone who doubts is like a wave that is "blown and tossed by the wind." This isn't talking about someone who doubts God will answer their prayer with a sort of direct download of the "Wisdom App" it is referring to someone who doubts that Jesus is the Lord. That person is likely to be tossed on the churning seas of this world, never quite getting their bearings, always unsure, confused, adrift. This is where I used to ask my students, particularly the grad students a question: Do you really believe that what you believe is really real?

Well, do you?

The answer to that question, dear reader, is not only the key to understanding this passage, it is also the key to understanding most things. The person with doubts will receive nothing much, for they are "double-minded" and "unstable in all they do." They are double-minded not because they are immature in their faith, but because they haven't made their minds up; they are still

holding back, holding on to the old life, seeking a compromise or a safety net. They are "unstable" because they haven't entirely committed, and how can we learn to persevere if we hold back, straddle the fence and don't commit?

Now you can see why I warned you to have your seat belts fastened, there will be some bumpy air at this altitude!

Rich and Poor

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

James 1:9-11

In this brief text, James jumps to a subject that will keep cropping up in this letter: Rich and Poor. James takes an approach to this subject that is very much in line with that of Jesus, and is quite different from the one most have today, for James sees material wealth as a snare.

Have you ever seen a TV show called "The Edwardian Country House"? In my history geek view, it is the best "reality" show of all time. A bunch of volunteers are placed in an Edwardian era country house in northern England, and they have to live and work as people would have in the Edwardian Era (1901-1910) for three months. There is a family who are designated as the Lord and Lady of the Manor, and they must live as such high-ranking people would have lived in those times, being waited on hand and foot. The rest are the servants, from the butler to the scullery maid, and they do all the work. Boy oh boy do these people have their challenges adjusting from the 21st century to Edwardian times!

In those days, everyone went to church. In one episode they show how this worked out. The Family rode to church in their motor car; the "upper servants" rode in a horse-drawn carriage behind, and everybody else walked the two miles each way. Now of course, everyone involved was a "good Christian" but they had very different stations in life. The rich landowners all sat in the front of the church in places of honor, while their servants sat in the very back or in the balcony in silence as second-class citizens.

I thought this was an important scene for any Christian to see, for it shows how the attitudes of this world have played out in the Body of Christ. Of course history shows us that this sort of thing has gone on since the very early days of the church, and we see much written against it in Scripture, such as in these verses; interesting isn't it? Have you seen things along these lines?

As for me, I've only seen this kind of thing expressed in subtle ways, but I've seen it, and it is nothing less than disgraceful. In Christ, we are equal. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, black or white, rich or poor, for in God's eyes we are His children... and we are all expected to love one another and to put the interests of others ahead of our own.

I think this is an important point for all of us to reflect upon and to ask for God's guidance in, that we might truly understand what it means to be a follower of Christ.

The Trails of Life

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

James 1:12-15

James is summing up this section here, and he returns to the idea of perseverance. We should consider trials a blessing, for in coming through trials, we learn to persevere in our faith, to remain firm in all situations and ensure that when the Day comes, we will receive the "crown of life."

This is indeed a message of hope, giving us, as it does, a whole different perspective on the trials that everyone faces in this life. James goes on to point out that trials do not come because God is tempting us, for God does no such thing, He doesn't need to; we seem to find our way into temptation quite on our own. Each of us has our own dark little secret place where we hide our desires and evil motivations. They pop up periodically and we follow them, and the result is that we fall into sin, and if we let that sin carry us away with it, death ensues. In this case, "death" is separation from God as opposed to in the physical sense.

So, there is the pattern, there is the cycle; the question is how can we stop it? In James's words, how can we "persevere" in our faith?

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

James 1:16-18

We have a pretty good hint in these verses, for as James says "every good and perfect gift is from above." Where can we look to quash those evil desires that lead us to temptation? Above! We can increase our focus on our relationship with Jesus Christ. God does not trick us, nor does He move the goal posts, for He is reliable, constant and true. He is our source of light, life and truth; He is where we need to look in a time of trial and testing, not this world or our own inner desires. As Paul put it elsewhere, we should set our minds on "that which is above". That is where our salvation from trials comes from; that is where we will receive the crown of life.

Slow to Speak

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

James 1:19-21

I really like these verses, they are both familiar and practical; to me they are also profoundly important as a way of life. Verse 19 is quoted so often that I'm not even sure those who quote it know it's from the Word and it is certainly great advice, but how often do we take the time to notice that it is only the introduction to a larger theme?

First the advice: Quick to listen. For many of us, that would be quite an accomplishment in itself. I don't know about you, but there are still times when I find myself neglecting this one. Slow to speak is the next one, and I know plenty of people who struggle with this. As for me, I'm usually slow to speak, but once I start you can't shut me up; OK, maybe we are all "works in progress." Slow to become angry is the third in this series, and it is a real problem for some. I doubt I need to say much more on this...

Verse 20 has the point James is setting up in verse 19, yet it isn't quoted so often as the previous verse for some reason. Human anger doesn't produce "the righteousness that God desires." Have you ever thought about that? What does our anger really produce? Out of every 10 times we become angry, how many times does our anger produce anything worthwhile? OK, I can see that there are rare cases when we become angry over an injustice and then we do something about it. Yet even in those times, if we are acting out of anger, how often can we avoid inflicting a second injustice because we don't stop soon enough? An example: We become angry because we see someone shove another person out of their way; how do we respond? We might let them have it with angry words, and call them all sorts of ugly names. Do two wrongs cure an injustice? It is very difficult to respond in anger without going too far.

Verse 21 is the conclusion, something we can tell right away because of the word "therefore." Therefore is always the conclusion when someone is making a persuasive case. What James was really getting at in the first two verses was this: "get rid" of all that "moral filth" and "evil" that is "prevalent" and "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

Let's pause a moment and think about this "get rid" part. This is a metaphor that is used several times in the New Testament, for in the Greek it looks like the "taking off" and "putting on" that Paul likes to use. Here it would go something like this: "Take off those filthy rags that are covered with evil and clothe yourself with the righteousness of God." Now, looking at verse 21 again, we can see that we are to take off (get rid of) the moral filth and evil, and put on (humbly accept) the Word that can save you. Here's a question you might want to ask yourself: Is the "Word" a what or a who?

If you regularly read Scripture, you should know that I am going to say that this "Word" that can save you is none other than the Person of Jesus Christ. Yes, dear reader, going back to the beginning, if we are quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, we would be putting our trust for Christ into action. Pretty cool, isn't it?

Do what it says!

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

James 1:22-25

One of my very favorite verses in all of the Scriptures is verse 22, and I can't help but notice that it's almost never quoted outside of a study of James; not even by me! I really love this verse because it just brushes past all the arguments and excuses and comes right down to the bottom line: *Do what it says!*

We aren't just to read the Word, we're supposed to follow the Word, just like we aren't just supposed to be in Christ, we are supposed to follow Him. So simple, yet so seldom done. If we just read it, we deceive ourselves because we get the idea that everything is great, after all, I read my Bible today. Then what do we do, go out and do what everybody else does? In the immortal words of Chef Gordon Ramsey, "That's not good enough!"

James follows with an interesting illustration, that of someone looking into a mirror, seeing their face and then forgetting what they looked like. Hearing the Word and not following it is pretty much a waste, for we are to put it into effect in our lives. Even better, James tells us exactly what he means.

We are to gaze at the "perfect law that gives freedom" intently, and then act accordingly. To fully comprehend James' instruction, all we need to do is to know what he means by "perfect law that gives freedom." I think Jesus can help us out here:

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22:37-30

James is talking about putting our love of God and of one another into action; if we do we will be blessed in everything that we do. What a simply amazing little passage, so simple, so clear.

What holds us back?

Love is Active

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 1:26-27

My first thought when it came to writing on these verses was that this would be a very easy post... and then I started thinking about it. The "catch" here is the part about keeping a "tight rein" on the tongue. My first thought was to go off on people within the church who abuse their positions of authority to say hurtful and ugly things to people from a position of self-righteousness. Of course it occurred to me that having a tight rein on the tongue probably applies to the keyboard as well. OK, I've heard the more traditional approach to this many times: watch your language! Somehow however, that always has struck me as being just a bit shallow. Yes, we shouldn't be tossing foul language around, but do you really need me to tell you that? I have the impression that James had considerably more in mind, particularly in this context.

Great: Now what?

The truth is that I think we often make a mistake in passages such as these by taking them too literally. I doubt that James wrote this to give us the perfect verse to enable an annual sermon on cussing, nor do I think that he wrote verse 27 to give us the perfect verse to justify our annual message on helping the needy or to raise money for an orphanage. After all, the context is love in action, and that is far broader than either of these two applications. Of course followers of Jesus shouldn't be using the filthy language of this wicked world, of course followers of Jesus should actively aid and protect widows and orphans; these are but examples of a larger truth.

In the larger context, it seems to me that James is giving instruction about the sanctity and sacredness of each one of God's children. He wants us to recognize the fact that every single person is valued by God, that we must make every effort to respect, love and cherish every single one. We mustn't be in the habit of denigrating anybody, for they are loved and cherished by our Lord, so much so that He willingly gave Himself up for them. Most of all, the little children who are innocent and helpless must be a high priority for us to love, nurture and protect from harm, as well as the widows who have been left alone and vulnerable... and anybody else who is unable to protect themselves from this harsh world.

This is what it means to love, to put that love into action, and to serve God. This is what Jesus did, and this is what His followers are to do.

Chapter 2

Favoritism

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

James 2:1-4

I remember a leadership meeting about 20 years ago when I nearly lost it. We were discussing a very tough issue that had come up in the congregation between two members. One of them was a well-to-do businessman and the other was a guy going through tough financial times. Both had a point in their favor, but neither was entirely right either and they had brought their dispute to the leadership. As you might guess, the dispute was about money. Of the two, I thought that the second man was in the stronger position than the wealthier man because he had documents that backed up much of his story.... and I pointed this out to the others; they were horrified. "Rich guy gives \$250. a week and Poor Guy barely \$20., we can't go against Rich Guy; we can't afford it" was the preacher's response. I was now horrified, and that horror turned to anger very quickly and I nearly lost my cool. I should point out here in all fairness, that this was way out of character for that preacher who was mortified at his own behavior the next morning. I guess we all have those times...

James has moved back to wealth in his discussion of the Christian life, and in this passage he points to something that must have happened often enough in the early church to be an issue: favoritism.

Look at his example here of a rich guy being shown the best seat in the place and the poor guy having no place at all to sit in the assembly. His remark that this is showing discrimination in the church is obvious, and will come up again, but his comment that they have "become judges with evil thoughts" is a disturbing one. What do you suppose the "evil thoughts" were? From the context, it would seem to have something to do with the love of money, the desire to be seen with the right crowd and the assumption that the man of lesser means must be less worthy of respect. As this passage continues, it will become clear that this is very wrong thinking indeed.

Oh, I never finished the story! Our discussion became a rather lengthy debate, the most heated debate I've ever seen in all of my time in church leadership, but we did arrive at a solution. We split the bill between us and gave the money to Rich Guy; peace was restored... Then one day about four months later Rich Guy found out that we had paid his bill and he became very angry. He had gotten his money, but not his way, and that wasn't acceptable. He and his wife found a different church. Even though those were challenging times for the church financially, we survived and flourished. The following year another Rich Guy joined us and one day he made a six figure contribution. The only condition was that we promise to let him know if there was anything he could do to help either the church or its members. Over the following years he never asked for anything, but always gave freely of his money and time. He remained in that congregation until the day he died.

What did I learn from this? I learned that if we remain faithful to God, if we do what is right and place our trust and faith in Him, things will work out just fine in His own good time. I suspect that James had something like this in mind as he wrote this letter.

Bonus Subject: James as “Wisdom Literature”

While our book of James is written in a letter form, there are no personal messages contained in it, for it is actually another literary form popular in the ancient world, a paracnesis or moral instruction. Proverbs in the Old Testament is also a moral instruction, and although other books have sections of such instruction, these are the two best examples in Scripture of this form. James does borrow from other writers in his letter, however. He has several quotations from the "Holiness Chapter" of Leviticus 19, he takes from two Apocryphal books, and he also relates freely from the Sermon on the Mount.

In the chart below, you can see the Leviticus references:

James	Leviticus Quotations
2:1	19:15
2:8	19:18
2:9	19:15
4:11	19:16
5:4	19:13
5:9	19:18
5:12	19:12
5:20	19:17

The two Apocryphal books that influenced James’ thinking are the books Ecclesiasticus, written c. 180 B.C. (sometimes called Sirach) and the Wisdom of Solomon, written c. 30 B.C. The Apocrypha is a collection of books not accepted as Canon by either Jews or Protestants, but which must have been familiar to James. In the chart below is a list of James verses that bear strong resemblance to these two works:

Topic	James	Ecclesiasticus	Wisdom
Patience	1:2-4	1:23	
Wisdom	1:5	1:26	

Doubt	1:6-8	2:28	
Trials	1:12	2:1-5	
Temptation	1:13	15:11-12	
Hearing	1:19	5:11	
Rich and Poor	2:6	13:19	2:10
Mercy	2:13		6:6
Brevity of Life	4:13-16		5:8-14
Money	5:3	29:10	
Righteous Killed	5:6		2:12, 20
Pray for the Sick	5:14	38:9	

James' use of these references is interesting in that he doesn't formally quote any of them as inspired Scripture, but instead uses them more as time honored traditions of wisdom within a very loose structure. As a consequence, it is very difficult to identify any real theme or outline as we might expect to do in other New Testament writings.

Bonus Subject: James and the Sermon on the Mount

The connection between James and the Sermon on the Mount is striking in that there are so many that James could almost be a commentary. Maybe it's just me, but I think that another curious feature of this connection is that while there are more direct correlations between James and Matthew than there are with Luke, James' language is actually quite similar to Luke in its phrasing.

While it seems unlikely that he had those Gospels at his fingertips, it is highly likely that the teachings of Jesus on that occasion were treasured and protected by the early church, and James would surely have been at the forefront of such an effort. In a letter that serves the purpose as the primary New Testament document of moral instruction, what better source to draw from than the Sermon on the Mount, the highest and most exacting moral teaching of all history? The chart below shows how James and the Sermon are connected:

James' Topic	Sermon on the Mount Reference
Trial 1:2-4	MT 5:10-12,48; LK 6:23
Asking 1:5-8	MT 7:7-8; LK 11:9-10

Riches 1:9-11	MT 6:19-21
God's Gifts 1:12-18	MT 7:11; LK 11:13
Listening 1:19-27	MT 5:22; 7:21-27; LK 6:46-49
Judging 2:1-13	MT 5:3,5,7,19-22; 7:1-5; LK 6:20
Faith and Works 2:14-26	MT 7:21-23
The Tongue 3:1-12	MT 7:16; LK 6:44-45
Wisdom 3:13-18	MT 5:5-9
Word of God 4:1-10	MT 5:4,8; 6:7-8; 24; 7:7-8; LK 6:25
Slander 4:11-12	MT 5:21-22; 7:1; LK 6:37
Tomorrow 4:13-17	MT 6:25-34
The Rich 5:1-6	MT 6:19-21; LK 6:24-25; 12:33
Patience 5:7-11	MT 5:11-12; 7:1; LK 6:22-23
Swearing 5:12	MT 5:33-37
Prayer 5:13-18	MT 6:12-15; 7:7-11

In case you didn't look all that closely at the chart, the entire book of James is mapped out here, and what really strikes me is how clear it is when you look at this that James is making direct application of the teachings of Jesus to the daily lives of the members of the early church. Even more interesting is that he isn't doing so in the legalistic way that so many people would do in later centuries, including our own, but in a way that preserves liberty while exhorting the people to hold high the standard of Jesus Christ in their love for one another.

To me, this makes James all the more useful and important a guide for every one of us.

Poor in Circumstances, Rich in Faith

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

James 2:5-7

James is in the midst of a section dealing with favoritism, and as you might recall, he has been clearly telling his readers that they must not show favoritism to the rich. Continuing now, he is making the point that God has chosen those who are poor in the "eyes of the world" to be "rich in faith." This is an important point for all of us to reflect upon, for actual money probably isn't James' only consideration here. The key, it seems to me is "in the eyes of the world". What kinds of people or things really look great in "the eyes of the world"? Money, yes, but what else? Accomplishment, fame, athletic prowess, talent, connections...

Our world, maybe more than that of the first century, places a high value on fame and celebrity, and that doesn't always mean someone is financially rich. Would we welcome a famous person into our congregations more than anyone else? Would we show favoritism on racial or ethnic grounds?

Yep, there's a lot to think about here.

James continues to make his point by reminding his readers that the poor will inherit the kingdom with the implication that if God shows such regard for his less well-to-do children, then they are worthy of no less honor than anybody else. Then he contrasts this with the fact that there are plenty of wealthy people who actually oppress the poor, particularly those in the Body of believers. The wealthy can be quite evil in their ways, just like anybody can, and thus their money cannot make them any more worthy of honor than anybody else.

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

James 2:8-11

How does favoritism demonstrate loving our neighbor as ourselves? Obviously it doesn't, thus there can be no special favor shown one person or group over any other, and James is making the point that the cultural "norm" simply doesn't apply within the church. He uses the example of the old Law to demonstrate the point. If you were to break any of the 613 laws of Moses, you were a lawbreaker; you might just as well have broken all 613. Jesus has commanded that we love one another. If we show favoritism, then we might be showing love to one or two, but not to the rest, and we become lawbreakers.

When we just break the passage down like this, it's hard not to see the point of James' instruction on favoritism, yet historically, our churches haven't done a very good job of following James on this. We may not be able to change the past, but we can make a difference now, so I must ask: How is your church community doing? And you, how are you doing on this one?

Faith Without Action is Dead

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

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:12-17

James now transitions from his discussion of favoritism into putting our love into action. Verses 12 and 13 accomplish this transition by reminding us that we cannot operate behind God's back or in secret. If we speak and act in ways that are not demonstrative of God's love in us, we will have a problem with God. This takes us to verses 14-17 where the old arguments take place; quite the battlefield with casualties littering the field.

"Faith versus Works": Oh my, here we go again!

I've lost count of how many times I've written this, but this argument is a complete non-starter and entirely invalid; they are not mutually exclusive. As I have written time and again, salvation is by grace through faith. Salvation, however, is not the end of the story, it is the beginning. Deeds are part of our response to this grace, they come *after* salvation. They are not the way we *earn* it, for salvation cannot be earned. The real difficulty comes when we receive our salvation by grace through faith and then boldly declare that all is done and we never need to "do" anything; this is a contradiction of Scripture, no matter how many verses you cite out of context!

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? James drops a rhetorical question here and then continues with a hypothetical. This hypothetical gives us a fairly obvious situation where action is required, in which any sane person would agree that action is required, and then points out that the kind of faith that would just wish the destitute person well but do nothing to help them is *dead*.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

James 2:18-19

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, then we will do as He did. If we love one another, our love must be active as His love was active. If we are servants of Jesus Christ, then we must serve Him by serving others and putting their interests ahead of our own. If we would share the love of God with others, then we must actually share it, and that involves much more than mere empty words. Having His love and compassion for others means more than preaching sermons and then saying we want higher taxes (on someone else) and then letting the government handle the problem, for the pagans and atheists do that much: We are different from the world! As His followers, we are called to actually share His love in an active way with those around us.

Yes, this requires that we DO something!

More Faith and Deeds

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

James 2:20-24

James' discussion of faith and deeds continues in these verses; it seems that James has heard a lot of silly talk. He gives us some evidence for his assertion that deeds must accompany faith, citing Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac when God told him to do so. Yes, Abraham had faith in abundance, and as a *result of that faith*, he was willing to respond in obedience to God's command.

Of course, we know the end of the story, God provided a substitute for Isaac, and Abraham passed his test of faith. As a result of that, the saying that "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness" was a true one, and James' conclusion is that we will be declared righteous by what we do and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

James 25-26

Of all of the possible examples of active faith in the Old Testament, James picks the one involving a Gentile prostitute, an interesting choice, but then James is the one who was just teaching us about favoritism in the last chapter. You might also recall that the author of Hebrews used these two examples as well, and that is one reason some have theorized that James could be the author of Hebrews.

Rahab's story is told in Joshua 2. It seems that she recognized the God of the Israelites as the true God, and when she encountered the spies, even though they were strangers, and even though she took a great risk, she saved them and aided greatly the fall of Jericho. Thus, because of her faith in the true God of Israel, she acted and is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus. Once again, James draws his conclusion: Faith without deeds is as dead as the body without the spirit.

I have noted the arguments that result from these kinds of statements often enough and I won't get into that again here. Rather than argue for our doctrinal position as opposed to another doctrinal position, I would hope that by now we can look at this passage and others like it, and ask instead what this tells us about our walk with Jesus. I can tell you one thing for sure: If all we can do with this text is argue, then our faith is dead! James is trying to teach us that our faith in Christ, our love for God and our position as Christ's Ambassadors have nothing to do with debates and arguments, for in debating amongst ourselves, we are not sharing His love. If we can't stop fighting, we can't share Christ...

Maybe it's the right time to stop all of this wasting of time and energy and get to work building His Kingdom in unity and love, to share His great love with those who have yet to receive it and bring hope to a dark world. What do you think about that idea; wanna argue?

Chapter 3

Teachers

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

James 3:1-2

As the third chapter begins, James abruptly changes the subject from faith and deeds to taming the tongue; to the extent that there is any transition at all, this is it.

So, you want to teach, do you? Teaching God's Word is a very high calling, but I wouldn't advise that you do it just because you want to be "up front".

As James clearly states, those who teach will be held to a higher standing. I must add that with this in mind, I would have expected that some of our "teachers" would be more careful about what they teach!

Teaching the Word is a calling, and it is not to be taken lightly. It seems to me that we all need to realize when we *know* something and when we *think we know* something and be willing to disclose the difference. All too often, Christian teachers present their systematic theology as an established fact when it really reflects an opinion... and this causes no end of trouble. The opinion may or may not be correct, you see. Other times, teachers are more concerned about being right than they are about making disciples, preferring to take the "my way or the highway" approach to everything. Careful, we are held to a higher standard!

Yes, we all stumble sometimes, for we are not perfect. In my case, I have no problem admitting that I am rather far from it. I am quite fallible; I make mistakes all the time. In fact, my dear readers have been known to let me know when I've messed up, or at least when they believe that I have. .. and that is fine by me, since we are all in this journey together. So, let's continue in our journey, giving God all of the glory while accepting none for ourselves, so that many may come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior, that they can join His family, and live in His love as we journey along the road of life in unity.

Taming the Tongue

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

James 3:3-6

In this curious little paragraph, James fixes his attention on the tongue, or maybe more correctly on what words it sends out...

Using three metaphors to make his point, James set his focus on the damage a tongue can cause. His first metaphor is a bit that is put into a horse's mouth. By the use of a bit, a rider can control where a horse goes. Next is the rudder of a ship. This relatively small device controls a ship's course and by adjusting the rudder, a ship can begin a whole new course for either good or ill. His third metaphor is a small spark that can set an entire forest ablaze. Small parts can do great good or great damage.

So it is with the tongue. It is a relatively small part of the body, but when it is misused, it can create tremendous damage, and set a dangerous course for its owner. Of course, the tongue itself is a metaphor, for James is not really talking about anatomy, but the words we speak.

When we speak (or write) we chart a course of sorts; we commit ourselves. We get married by saying "I do." We can pledge allegiance by saying the words, we can build others up by saying encouraging words, and we can tear people down with abusive words. We can give God glory and we can commit blasphemy with the words we speak. We can use our tongues to plot a course to either heaven or hell.

So what will we say today? Will we build up, or tear down. We will spread love and goodness, or will we spread evil and discord? Will we glorify God, or will we defame His name?

The choice is up to each of us.

Thoughts on the Words We speak

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

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

James 3:7-12

James' discussion of the tongue continues in these verses with a bit of hyperbole. While there are people who tame all sorts of animals, who can tame their tongue? Well, it isn't easy is it?

The hyperbole, as I see it, is in suggesting that the tongue cannot be tamed at all. Taming the tongue is very difficult for most of us, but if it were impossible, what would be the point of this passage? From time-to-time folks come along who insist on a literal interpretation of everything and they sometimes object to my assertion that the Bible contains hyperbole. In the unlikely event that you are one of those, let me just politely ask you if you would take this passage to

justify tossing "F-bombs" all over town... after all, the tongue cannot be tamed; "F-bombs" are normal, right?

James points out that the same mouth can both praise God and curse those made in His image and the very strong implication is that this is not an acceptable way for followers of Jesus to behave. Certainly, it is almost impossible for me to imagine Jesus doing this, and since He is our model, I think we can safely conclude that this is also not the way we should conduct ourselves.

At the risk of shocking some, I would also say that there is much more at stake here than some kind of a "violation" because we might have uttered a "forbidden" word. No, that is entirely an Old Covenant perspective of Law and violations. In Christ, things are different. Cursing our brother is not simply a "violation" of some code, it is tearing down one of God's sacred children. It isn't simply about one's choice of phrasing, it's showing disdain for someone who God loves so much that He was willing for His Son to die to save that person, and thus it is a direct affront to God Himself. It is surely not an example of love in action.

This is a pretty obvious point, and I realize that James (and I) have covered this same principle in the discussion about favoritism, so I will leave it at that. Instead, I will close by recounting something one of my instructors taught years ago that made an impression on me that has stuck with me over time. She said that the way you speak is the way you think; if your language is sloppy and undisciplined, so will your thoughts be sloppy and undisciplined. If that is the case, your reasoning will be virtually non-existent.

Something to reflect upon, perhaps?

Wisdom, Humility and Righteousness

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

James 3:13-16

James now enters into a little section that appears to be a summation of what he has covered so far, sort of a "here's the point" kind of section. What does all of his moral instruction thus far come down to? Wisdom.

Here, he will show wisdom of two varieties, that of this world and that which comes from God. If you stop and think about it, we've seen this in each section of the letter so far. If anyone in our midst is truly wise, then he or she must demonstrate their wisdom and understanding by living lives full of deeds that put their wisdom into practice; it isn't adequate for us to simply talk a good game, we must live the right way. In this, James mentions that our wisdom should result in humility, rather than envy and selfish ambition. Another way of saying this might be humility comes from wisdom, and selfishness does not.

Behaviors that come from selfish motives and attitudes are not from God, they are "earthly, unspiritual" and "demonic." Selfishness results in disorder and evil practices, and I doubt that any further elaboration of my part is necessary here...

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

James 3:17-18

There are few passages in the New Testament that show love in action more clearly than this one, in which James says we will reap a "harvest of righteousness." What is righteous? It is a life that is lived putting our love for one another into action; it fulfills all of the requirements God has ever placed on us, and it is exactly what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. What is left to say, other than to ask what each of us will do today to put our love into action?

Fights, Quarrels and Wrong Motives

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

James 4:1-3

Have you ever gone to the doctor with some sort of illness, and left with a fist full of prescriptions that only treat symptoms? Last time I had the flu, back in February of 2008, She Who Must Be Obeyed directed me to go to the doctor, a command I shockingly disobeyed. Why? Because going to the doctor for a case of flu, barring something in the extreme, strikes me as a complete waste. They'll give you something for the cough and fever maybe, but they can't treat the infection, and the infection will run its course in 3-5 days... no thanks to the doctor. In that case, I was good as new in 2 days. James, on the other hand, doesn't waste any time treating symptoms in this letter; he goes right for the infection itself.

These verses begin a new section, one that continues through verse 12. In this section, James will take us right to the root cause of our problems. As we go, I would suggest that we take our time and let his words soak into our minds so that we will get their maximum curative effect.

James begins with a simple question, a question we should all ask ourselves, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" Do you suppose James is talking about the quarrels we get into individually, or the ones we get into as a Body of believers... or both? "Both" would be my answer, but since I don't know what quarrels you get into, I can only comment of the "within the Body" quarrels here, but the principle applies in both cases. Why do different groups within the larger Body of Christ quarrel, and why are certain groups more prone to quarreling with others than most? I think James has some answers for us!

He begins to answer these questions by pointing out that we have desires that battle within us. I suppose that this can be as simple as a desire to be healthy and a desire to eat potato chips; the two desires seems to strive within us and sometimes our frustration oozes to the surface. In my case when this happens, I have ice cream instead!

"You desire but you do not have so you kill." There was a time when a group of believers might desire earnestly to follow God, and they might have believed that they had found Truth that others had missed, and thus they had a great desire that all Christians would see the Truth in just the same way they do, and when others didn't, they were killed. Yet, I think James is really talking about something much worse here, for I think in this scenario, all too often that group with those earnest desires ends up killing the faith of other Christians by their opposition, zealotry and overbearing behavior. Perhaps you disagree with me, but I think this goes on more than we realize, and I think the ones who do this would be shocked if they were accused, for I think they have no recognition they are doing it. For the record, I don't have anyone in particular in mind, this is a hypothetical.

So they want, but don't have and so they fight. Yet they don't have because they don't ask God, but if they do ask, they don't receive for their motives are wrong. In my hypothetical, the motives are wrong because when it's all said and done, they care more about being right than they do about following the Lord Jesus Christ, which is all about love.

There are 9 more verses in this section, so we're just getting started, we haven't heard the last of this issue, that's for sure.

Adulterous People

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

James 4:4-6

This is a continuation of James' discussion of things that cause us to fight amongst ourselves, in which he is getting at the root of the problem. In the previous verses (4:1-3) he pointed out that we fight because we have differing desires within us that are in conflict, now he gives us some insight as to why this is so; we are holding on to the world around us...

Right off the bat, he uses the words "adulterous people" an interesting choice, don't you agree? Adultery happens when one covenant partner becomes involved with a third party in an inappropriate way. James is telling us that we are a covenant people who are involved inappropriately with the world we live in, when we are supposed to be faithful to God's ways, not the world's. Holy cow that is why we have these competing desires within us: It would be just like having a desire to be with our spouse on the one hand, and with our "other" on the other hand. Our Lord is no more amused than our spouse would be; enmity results.

This brings us to verse 5 and your humble reporter has a judgment call to make. A thorough explanation of this would require a very long discussion, for James seems to be quoting Scripture without quoting Scripture. To keep this simple and not lose entirely the important point James is making here, I'll use an example you might be familiar with. Billy Graham used to say "The Bible says that..." fairly often in his sermons. He was asserting a principle without cluttering up his message with citations and undue formality, and I strongly suspect that James is doing that here. I think it is safe to say that when we stray from Him, God is jealous that we return to Him; after all, one of His names is "Jealous." This "spirit" that He caused to dwell in us" is the very essence of our being as humans, for we are spirits in bodies and thus unlike the animals. So, when we are "friends" of this world, God wants us back, and that's why He was willing to go to extraordinary lengths to redeem us. OK, back to the text:

While God is grieved at our departure from His ways, He expresses this with grace. James quotes from Proverb 3:34 to show God's situation: While He opposes the proud, He extends favor (mercy) to the humble. We can conclude that up to this point, James is urging us to be humble. Consider this in light of what we have found in 4:1-6. We fight among ourselves because we have conflicting desires that strive within us. We have conflicting desires because we are in relationship with God while trying to hold on to our old worldly priorities at the same time. This is grievous to God, but He responds with grace if we will adopt some modicum of humility, therefore let us be humble before God.

Resist the Devil!

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

James 4:7-10

Keep in mind the context of these verses, for they fall within a passage that began at 4:1 and that runs through 4:12. So far, James has talked about how we quarrel among ourselves because we have an internal conflict going on in our minds. Then he discussed how we create enmity with God by holding on to the ways of this world, and now he tells us how to "fix" the situation, to bring about a cease-fire in our own heads, stop fighting among ourselves and be reconciled to God. His solution isn't even complicated, not that we should be surprised with a simple solution...

Submit to God; resist the devil.

Simple!

If your first thought is something like, "How can I resist the devil," raise your hand. Ah yes, I thought so!

If it were impossible to resist the devil, would James tell us to do it? Look at what he said there: *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* The devil is a crafty old bird and a dangerous opponent, but he is neither all-powerful nor all-present nor all-knowing, and there is no way he can stand up to the One who lives within, the Holy Spirit. Now you might think I'm just a little crazy, but I think this verse is not only a simple solution to the problem, it is also a very encouraging and empowering solution.

Look at the next verse and notice what happens when we decide to come near to God... God comes near to us: See ya devil!

Then James goes on to a rather curious few lines about washing hands, purifying hearts, mourning and wailing, sort of an apocalyptic bit of phrasing. He also seems to address this to "sinners" and the "double-minded". Let's be clear on this, he isn't addressing this to the "lost" he's addressing this to you and me. Remember, the ones who are in relationship with Christ, but still holding onto the ways of this world...? (double-minded)

The image that pops into my mind as I read this is that of a father scolding his children for their naughty behavior while the children try not to laugh, so hilarious were their antics in their own little minds and the father is warning them to wipe those smiles off their faces!

The message of course, is that we need to knock off the nonsense that results in fighting, arguing and holding back from serving God, and in humble submission seek forgiveness, and not only are we forgiven, but we are lifted up into His likeness. This should be an obvious and easy fix, but I wonder... is there something that could possibly hold us back from this simple solution to the problem?

Judging Others

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

James 4:11-12

The last sentence makes this paragraph come to life for at first it might seem like James is headed in a different direction. He isn't speaking so much of slander and arguing here, he is speaking about judging others. Interesting isn't it, that this comes where it does as the end of the whole passage, a passage that began talking about how we fight with one another.

Yes, that's right, we started with fighting and quarrels and finish with an admonition not to judge...

In our day, many people like to complain about being "judged." "Don't you judge me!" they yell, while judging the other person a bigot of some sort. Very frequently, this is teamed up with another word: "tolerant" or more to the point, "intolerant." So we hear over and over that we must not judge therefore we must be tolerant of everything. Is James going politically correct on us?

Not a chance!

The contemporary politically correct view on 'judging' and 'tolerance' is entirely an earthly view, and what has James told us about such things just a few short verses back? James is not writing this letter to the non-Christian world, he has directed it to Christians *who are supposed to know better*. When he tells us not to judge others, he doesn't imply that any one of us who is doing wrong can turn the tables to justify wrong doing. Instead, he is telling us that we need to respect God's authority to judge.

For me to judge one of my brothers or sisters in Christ means that I have taken upon myself the authority to pass condemnation upon the other person, and that is a direct affront to God, who reserves all such decisions for Himself. Thus, when we heap condemnation on one another, we are the ones in the wrong.

Suppose I see a brother who is engaged in sin, do I help him by calling him names or saying bad things behind his back? How can that possibly restore him in his relationship with God or with others? If, on the other hand, I have invested time and effort into having a relationship of mutual trust and respect between us, I may be able to help him see his error and gently guide him back to where he should be... and perhaps in the future he will help me out when I am adrift: This is love in action. If I don't have that kind of relationship with him, I can probably find out who does... See the difference?

Take just a moment to consider the implications of this; go back and read the text from 4:1 and ask yourself why James put this last, where the "bottom line" is usually found. Who am I to judge my neighbor? All of those quarrels, being a friend of this world, not having prayer answered, grief and mourning... and they end up with who am I to judge others...

What is God telling you in these verses?

Priorities

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

James 4:13-17

The fourth chapter ends with a curious little section, one in which James points us squarely at our priority systems. He starts in verse 13 with a business example pointing to our big plans to do something. Yes, we have these plans and we're going to do such and such... but in truth, we don't even know what tomorrow will bring, how can we be so sure about all of those plans?

He makes it quite clear that our lives are short and that the time flies by and what are we doing?

Oh, we're making plans as though we were in charge of things, but we aren't really in charge, are we? We mustn't be so arrogant that we think we are more than we are, we mustn't be so arrogant that we think that the priorities of this world are really our guiding principles, for we will come to ruin on this path.

Instead, we should recognize that whatever our plans may be, God is the one who is in control, and that our plans are subject to His will. Yes, His will, not ours. That opens up a can of worms, don't you think? If our plans are subject to God's will and our plans are only about making money and a place in this world then how can we think our plans are anywhere within His will?

Remember Jesus telling His disciples, on three different occasions, that anything they asked for in His name would be granted to them? Do you also recall the context? Each of these times was in the midst of a section that was about doing God's will, so that anything we ask in Jesus' name to do God's will, God will grant. Keeping this in mind, doesn't it seem like James is really saying the same thing? Before you answer, let's have a look at the last verse: If we know what good we should be doing, but we don't do it, that is sin for us. If we know that we are to do His will in our lives and we don't, what is that?

I have no idea what God's special plan just for me is. To be perfectly candid with you, I don't know that He has a special plan just for me; who am I? But I do know what His plan is for all of us... don't you?

We are called to love one another, to share His love with others, to serve Him by serving others in a way that advances His purpose... in short, His will is that we each do our part to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Since we know this is what He wants of us, what does James call it when we know but don't do?

Chapter 5

The Love of... Stuff

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

James 5:1-6

As we begin the fifth chapter, it's easy to forget how the fourth chapter ended and think these verses are standing on their own as so many of these paragraphs have in this book, particularly if we have a modern translation with subheadings added, such as the NIV, where this paragraph has a subheading, and then verses 7 ff. have a different subheading. If we continue in that way, and many commentators approach this as a "stand alone" section, these verses won't make much sense unless we resort to a political understanding. I rather doubt that the politics of class envy are what James had in mind... if hadn't been invented yet!

In the previous section, covered in the previous post, James is teaching people about priorities and keeping our priorities on God's purpose and will, and avoiding the arrogant view that we are in charge, not God. Here, he is pronouncing God's coming judgment on those who oppress the poor for their own personal gain, and in the next section he urges us to be patient for the Lord's coming is near at hand, and further urging people not to judge one another... which was his point in 4:1-12. Taking this larger passage into account and remembering that James has mentioned the rich twice before in his letter while teaching us first, not to show favoritism and then not to love this world and its allures, can you see how context is really important here? This isn't "bag on the rich guy" as much as it is watch out for what's going on in our own minds...

So dear reader, are you rich?

No, of course not and neither am I. By the way, are you on your own computer as you read this... or are you on your smart phone... or your iPad or Kindle Fire? Is this your internet connection? Do you realize that compared to most of the world's population you are rich? Yeah, I'm not crazy about that thought either!

I can't think of a passage anywhere in the Word that says that material wealth is evil or bad, but there are a lot of passages that warn us about being caught up in wealth, or lording it over others, and certainly there are passages about being tight-fisted and failing to help to meet the needs of others.

If it can be said that this letter has an over-riding theme, it would have to do with putting our love into action, you know, that "love your neighbor" thing... well Jesus was serious about that! We don't need to be millionaires or super-rich to be tempted to love money and things, in fact if I were to be entirely honest, I would have to confess that I have met considerably more people of modest means who are lovers of money than I have rich people who are lovers of money. No,

I'm not kidding... think about it! How about old Uncle Joe who is always so ticked off at those who have more than he does... Doesn't he complain just a little too much?

Do you see it yet; have you gotten the point...?

It doesn't matter how much you have, if we love the things of this world whether it's money, possessions, power, position... whatever it may be, those things will be our undoing! There's a great line in one of the old prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer* that says, "In our time of prosperity, good Lord deliver us."

Yes, Lord, deliver us!

"Above all"

James 5:7-12

This passage opens with the words, "Be patient, then, brothers and sisters..." (James 5:7a) and to really lock our understanding of it up, we should look at the word "then." The Greek word here is *oun* which means "then, therefore, accordingly, consequently, these things being so". King James translates it "therefore" and both KJV and NIV have it right. You might wonder why I'm going to such lengths for "then" since I usually avoid this sort of discussion in these posts, and there is a solid reason. You may recall that in the last post, I spoke of keeping it in context and mentioned both the verses beginning at 4:1 and today's section in asserting an overall context, something very difficult to do in this letter as I pointed out at the beginning of our review of James. Verse 5:7 is where this is tied together in context, and atypically, it sets context *backwards* in the text by demonstrating that James is now summing up the prior lessons he has taught.

So, in light of all of this, James is telling us to be patient. In light of his discussion of favoritism, not loving the world, etc., we need to be patient until the Lord returns for this life here on earth isn't always easy and can lure us off the path of our faith. See it?

He uses an example of a farmer patiently waiting for his crops to grow before he can bring in the harvest (5:7b) He urges us not to grumble against one another, and equating "grumbling" with "judging" he warns that we will be judged if we do, for the Judge is near at hand. (5:9) In verse 10 he cites the prophets as an example of patient endurance, urging us to do likewise and in the next verse reminds his readers that they count those who have persevered as blessed, pointing out that the Lord used these people for great things, and reminding them of His mercy. Finally, in verse 12 he tells his readers that they must not swear:

Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned.

James 5:12

"Above all" why "above all"?

"Above all" is used by other New Testament writers to introduce their final point, and it would appear that James is doing the same here, where he is referring to taking oaths.

James is mirroring what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:33-37, where Jesus said almost the same thing James is saying here. Jesus was tracing the Law of Moses which also prohibited oaths that were sworn by God that what a person was saying was true. This is taking the name of the Lord in vain and profanes God. Swearing by something on the earth is idolatrous, so this is a "catch 22" situation: No swearing. As a consequence of this, US law allows one to "affirm" rather than "swear" a legal oath. In fact, Harry Truman "affirmed" rather than having sworn for his oath of office, the only president to do so to date.

The next and concluding section of the letter is a prayer, and we will see that in the next post.

James Closes His Letter

James 5:13-20

In concluding his letter, James speaks on prayer in the only passage in his letter that doesn't have a direct parallel in the Sermon on the Mount. Actually, this is one of the strongest statements concerning the power of prayer in the entire New Testament, and if you are like me, it's also one of the most challenging. Oh yes, it's all well and good to read about the power of prayer, but we live in a "sophisticated" time of knowledge and science, and we are likely to find some of James' comments quaint and folksy, but hardly 21st century! Yet, there it is, what are we going to do with it?

Verses 13-15 deal with trouble, happiness and sickness, and with trouble and sickness we are urged to pray, while in happiness we are told to praise. Verse 15 is challenging for us: "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven." How are we to understand this? If you have been with me for a long time, surely you have an idea of what is going here... don't you? Each of the books we have studied in the past tells us clearly to change our focus away from our earthly understanding and put it onto a heavenly understanding of things. Sickness is a physical affliction, and while that can be a very rough thing to deal with (persevere is a word that comes to mind) it is not the end game.

So often we have looked at things like this, and when the outcome, at least in physical terms, wasn't the one we expected or hoped for, we let someone convince us that we didn't have enough faith. Did it ever occur to anyone that our prayer wasn't within God's will for the person? I know this can be hard, yes I've been there too, but maybe God had a better plan for the sick person than leaving them here in this vale of tears.

Do we really believe that what we believe is really real?

If so, prayer isn't about getting what we want from God, it's about getting what God wants for others. Yes, that is a thought worth reflecting upon...

Notice that verse 16 begins with "therefore"

*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.
The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*

In verse 15, we saw that prayer would make the sick person "well". The word translated "well" is also the word that is used for salvation. Even more interesting, the verse ends by saying their sins will be forgiven: "Therefore..." verse 16. This should be a familiar pattern for setting context by now, what is James actually teaching? It would appear that the higher priority is on being healed from our sin, and oh yes, if the Lord wills it, from sickness too.

Verses 17 and 18 give us the example of Elijah as a great man of prayer, and then we come to 19-20:

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

James 5:19-20

Have you ever wandered off the path, maybe not even realizing it, and then you found yourself rather far afield of where you should have been in your faith? Well, I have! Whoever helps someone back from one of these wandering periods saves them from death and covers a multitude of sins. I hope you will take special note of two things:

1. This is the last verse in this passage, summing up its contents. With this in mind, when James is talking about healing sick persons through prayer, what is he really getting at?
2. This is also the ending of the letter, summing up its contents: What is the letter, and all of this moral instruction here for?

To complete our tour of James, we'll wrap this up in the next two posts tomorrow with some thoughts on the book's message and application for us today, see you there!

Summing Up

There are some misconceptions surrounding this book, and maybe that is why many modern-day teachers avoid it. Can Jesus be found in James? Well, let's see... didn't I write a "[Bonus Post](#)" on its connection with the Sermon on the Mount? Remember the chart? Every verse from James 1:2 through James 5:18 has a direct parallel in the Sermon on the Mount... and commentators say Jesus isn't in James... that only leaves three verse without a direct parallel!

Does James really stress works over faith? Now be careful before you say that he does, remember the parallel with the Sermon on the Mount! If you've followed these posts you have seen that James teaches that salvation comes by faith, and that as Christians we put that faith into action, which is exactly what Jesus taught. It is true that James hasn't used the "magic words" of certain teachers who came along centuries later, but the essence is the same, for there is no conflict between faith and works, unless you manufacture one yourself.

Here's What I Think...

James gives us a whole bunch of moral teachings and then places priority on our relationship with Christ through intercessory prayer for one another: Love in action. Jesus said that the whole Law and prophets were fulfilled in the command to love your neighbor as yourself; James demonstrated this principle in action. If you approach Scripture the way many theologians do, you are looking for proof texts to plug into your systematic theology chart, and you miss this treasure "hidden" in the book of James.

Some commentators have claimed that James is a legalistic book, are they right?

Personally, I don't think so, but I can see why they say it. There seems to be an impulse in some traditions to assert rules and even condemnation of others at every opportunity, and James gives these good folks a great deal of highly quotable material, as long as context isn't an issue for them... and context in James isn't as easy to identify as it is in other places. My real question relates not so much to James as it does to the impulse to make rules to hold others accountable to.

Here's another way of saying this: Why is it that some Christians read the Scriptures and see faith in terms of ordinances and violations while others see love and our response to love?

Obviously I'm not the first to ask this sort of question, and just as obviously I won't be the last to have a stab at it, if nothing else I hope to encourage you to give this a though or two. In the next post, I'll share mine...

Final Thoughts on James

Old Testament Israel lived under the Law of Moses, very much a transactional system of law, violations, punishment and atonement. The great priority of that system was found in avoiding violations to curry God's favor. Sacrifices were carried out continually to atone for these violations, but there was no permanent forgiveness, only the putting off of punishment; the concept of eternal life was not present in the Law. Then Jesus comes along and changes everything, so much so that the Jewish leaders refused to recognize Him as the Messiah and had Him put to death... and lo and behold, by doing so, He brought a superior sacrifice and established a superior covenant putting the cycle of law and violations to an end. With this, a new era was ushered in with that superior covenant in which sin could be taken away entirely and the gift of eternal life became effective.

Yet even in the early days of the church, there were those who attempted to bring the old system back into the picture, and Paul wrote the whole book of Galatians to combat them; a scathing rebuke is really what Galatians is, against the re-introduction of the Law into Christianity. A few centuries later when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire, it became a political necessity to force the Old Covenant into the church in order for Christianity to be a state religion, since the Law was the code of a theocracy and Christianity was not... and the battle began in earnest and is with us to this day between law and violation, and love and our response to it. Several of our Christian traditions are grounded in this legal approach to faith that should never have been there, and they see most things in terms of law and violation, resulting in what we would call today "legalism."

I have neither the time nor the inclination to write a 50,000 word post to fully explain and document all of this, nor do I suspect you would read such a post if I were to write it, so let's just cut to the chase: Do you define your identity in Christ in terms of Law or in terms of love and grace?

OK, perfect! Every one of you said love and grace... go ahead and admit it, I'm right.

That being the case, consider this one: Is the will of God for your life a list of do's or a list of don'ts?

OK, you may not agree with me on much, but you must grant me this: I am the only human being in history who has read every single comment posted on this blog, not to mention a fair number that weren't posted due to language. Since we agree that our identity in Christ is about love and grace, why do some send me lists of "don'ts"? (Aha, that's how he can tell!)

The Ways of this World

In the world we live in today, almost every time something happens, somebody proposes a new law. If you turn back the clock 150 years, states were passing laws banning sodomy, now they pass laws to ban opposition to sodomy. Back in the day, they banned abortion, now they ban protesting abortion. They passed laws against civil rights for some people, and then passed laws to help those people. Somebody commits a mass killing and we pass another law that bans murder, as if the 20 already on the books were one short. And each time, somewhere, someone backed one of these stupid laws and claimed they got it from the Bible!

Did Jesus say any of this "legal stuff?"

Not exactly. Here is Jesus teaching:

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22:37-40

As Christians, we live to a much higher standard than those living under the Law, for with us, it isn't simply a matter of avoiding violations, for we respond to His love by loving our neighbor. If we really love our neighbor, nobody needs to tell us not to steal from them; it would be

unthinkable! Nobody needs to tell me not to covet my neighbor's wife, for that would be unthinkable. This is a vastly greater deterrent to ungodly behavior than another law!

James gives us some practical examples of problem areas that we might easily fall into and sends us back to the Master's feet in prayer, both for ourselves and for one another. He tells us to be patient, to hang in there and take our problems, once identified to our Lord. This isn't a list of "don'ts" it is the rule of love. If I harm my brother, I harm myself, and even worse I damage my relationship with my Lord whom I love above all else. Who needs a rule book?

Finally, please don't accuse me of trying to condone sin, for when you do, I'll know that you (sadly) still don't get it.