

# Stay Faithful

a study of James

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# How to use this guide

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Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

# A Bondservant of God

## James 1:1

Normally, when we start a new Bible study, the introduction to the book we are studying is contained in, well, the introduction. Doing this, though, creates several problems. First, it makes it virtually impossible to fit both the introduction and the first study into the same lesson, so something has to give. Second, I don't know about you, but I don't really read introductions to most books. If it was important, they would have called it chapter 1. And last, it treats the act of learning about the "geography" of the Bible (where the various books are, who wrote them, and why) as some unimportant precursor to "real" Bible study. So, in order to remedy these problems and to help us realize that knowing the background of a book is an essential component to any Bible Study, the introduction is the first lesson.

### Finding James in the Bible

The Bible is more than a book; it is a library of 66 different books, written over a couple thousand years, in multiple languages, by numerous authors, to multiple audiences. The first step in studying any book of the Bible is knowing where it is located.

Here is where James fits in the roadmap of the Bible:

- The Bible is broken into 2 groups: Old and New Testament
  - o The Old Testament is written in Hebrew and is about how God created a nation called Israel to be his chosen people. He chose them not because they were special, but because they weren't. They were as sinful, stubborn, and rebellious as any people group. He chose them so that He could teach them who He was, and so that they could be a lighthouse to the nations. He chose them, because it was part of His plan of redemption, a plan that culminates in the New Testament.
  - o The New Testament is written in Greek and is about two things: Jesus and the Church. The New Testament tells how a man named Jesus was born in Israel, how He taught and performed miracles, how He was crucified, how He was seen alive 3 days later, and how His followers saw that the resurrection of Jesus was the culmination of God's promise of Redemption.
  - o James is in the New Testament.
- The New Testament is broken down into 4 groups:
  - o Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – these books recount Jesus's birth, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. They are biographical, but they aren't biographies. Biographies try to tell the whole story of a person's life. The gospels focus on the ministry of Jesus and especially on the last week of His life.
  - o History: There is only one book in this category: Acts. Its full name is Acts of the Apostles. It is part two of Luke's Gospel. It tells the story of how the Church grew from a few scared followers of Jesus in Jerusalem to a multi-ethnic group spread all over the Roman empire.
  - o Letters: Also called Epistles. This is the largest group of books in the New Testament running from Romans all the way to Jude. More about this below.
  - o Revelation: Like Acts, there is only one book in this category. The reason is that there aren't many books like it. It is a type of literature we don't really have anymore called Apocalyptic. It is an often misunderstood book. It's a book of prophecy intended to give hope that God has a plan and is in

control no matter what the circumstance.

o James is a Letter.

- The Letters section of the New Testament

- o The Letters of the New Testament really are just that - Letters. They were written by specific authors to specific audiences to address specific circumstances.

- o The Letters of the New Testament are in 2 main groups:

- Letters by Paul, named after whom they were written to:

- Some written to Churches: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians

- Some written to People: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

- General Letters, named after those who wrote them:

- Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude

- Sometimes called the “Catholic Epistles.” Catholic is just a word that means general and refers to the fact that these letters are intended for a wider general audience.

- o James is one of the General Letters

Once you have found James in your Bible and know where it fits, it's time to ask specific questions about the book itself starting with “Who wrote it?” “To Whom was it written?” and “Why?”

The good news is that because James is a letter, much of the information is contained in the first verses. Ancient letters begin with the author, then list who the letter is intended for. A modern letter starts with the addressee (Dear So and So) and concludes with the author (Sincerely, me). The reason for the difference is simple: the envelope, which wasn't invented until the 1800s. We already know who wrote the letter and who it's for by looking on the envelope. But in the ancient world, letters were written on scrolls. If someone handed you one, you needed to know who was writing this to you as quickly as possible.

*James 1:1 says: James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.*

We might be tempted to skip over these simple verses that start the letter as mere formality or fluff. We might be eager to get to the “meat” of the book. But if we look closely at this introduction, we will learn more than we expect.

### **The Author: James a bondservant of God and Jesus v1**

The author calls himself James...but which one. James was a common name in the ancient Jewish world. Normally, people would specify which James they were by adding some other descriptor like where they were from, or who their father was. This James simply calls himself a bondservant of God and Jesus.

Some might be initially tempted to think this is James, the brother of John, who together were two of the original 12 disciples of Jesus. But Acts 12:1-2 tells us that James was killed in AD 45; too early to have written this letter. It might be surprising to some, but the author is most probably the brother (or technically half-brother) of Jesus. Here is what the New Testament tells us about him:

He is the brother of Christ – Though some Christian traditions dispute that Mary and Joseph had any

children themselves; the gospels reveal that they did. Matthew 13:55 (also Mark 6:3) shows people in Jesus's hometown refusing to believe that Jesus is anybody special. They say: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?"

He initially didn't believe – The gospels all report that Jesus was doubted by the members of His own family, who at times thought He was crazy. John 7:5 reports: "not even His brothers believed in Him."

Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection – James came to believe Jesus was the Messiah because Jesus appeared to him. What happened during the appearance is not recorded. But the meeting is mentioned in Paul's list of proofs for the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (see italics) – "For I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas and to the twelve. After that, He appeared to over five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also."

He became the leader of the Early Church – Paul, while recounting his conversion, describes James as being involved in the early church. Galatians 1:18-19 – "Then three years later, I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother." Paul also mentions that he wasn't just a member but a leader. Galatians 2:9 "James and Cephas and John, who are reputed to be pillars."

He was martyred in 61/62 AD on command of the High Priest – This piece of information comes from the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote a history of the Jewish people around the time that the gospels were being written. Josephus tell us: "Ananus...assembled the Sanhedrin of judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned." (Jewish Antiquities 20.9.200)

### **The Audience: To the 12 tribes v1**

To the twelve tribes – It is easy to read 12 tribes and think that this means that he is writing to Jews. But the author is a follower of Jesus and he is also writing to fellow followers of Jesus. In James 2:1, he mentions that his readers have "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." That means James is using the term "the twelve tribes" to refer to Christians. For some reason, this is a startling fact to many. But it's important to remember that Jesus didn't come to start a new religion. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. He came to fulfill the promise that God made to Israel. And one of those promises is that Israel would be a light to the nations. The Book of Acts is the story of the disciples realizing that following Jesus was the best way to be Jewish, and that because of what Jesus had done on the cross, anybody could come in and be a part of the people of God. That is why in Galatians 6:16 Paul calls all those who follow Jesus "the Israel of God." So, the twelve tribes do not refer just to those who are of Jewish descent but rather to all, whether Jew or Gentile, who follow the God of Israel who is revealed most perfectly through His son Jesus.

### **The Purpose – Dispersed Abroad v1**

Early Christians suffered persecution at the hands of the Jews who rejected Jesus. Remember that before Paul became an apostle, he was a Pharisee determined to hunt out and kill followers of Jesus. Because of these and other pressures, many believers left Jerusalem looking for safer places to live. Such scattering because of hard times is referred to as a "diaspora." Because many of these Christians had come from Jerusalem, and James was the head of the Jerusalem church, it would be natural for him to write a letter to members of his congregation. The purpose of the letter is to help people handle hard times. In the midst of

hard times, people begin believing wrong things about themselves, their circumstances, other people, and God. They are tempted to do things they might not normally do in order to fit in and get by in a dangerous world. James writes this letter to help people understand how to live as true and faithful followers of Jesus during dangerous times.

### **A Bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ v1**

There is profound humility contained in the phrase that James uses to describe himself. By the time he writes this letter, he was a person of tremendous influence and power in the Church. He was also related by blood to the very person at the center of this emerging faith. He could have appealed to his authority and said something like, "James, the brother of Jesus." We know other people referred to him like that. But he doesn't. He calls himself simply "servant." The word he uses in the Greek is "doulos" which is more accurately translated as "slave." He is playing the part given to him by God. Whatever authority or power he has, he has because He is serving the one true Lord of everything.

In doing so, James is showing himself to be a true follower of Jesus, doing what Jesus Himself did. In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul tells the Philippians:

"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus didn't consider His position as something to be exploited, rather He humbled Himself, became a servant, and was obedient to God. Because of this God exalted Him. The same is true of James. James didn't consider his relationship with Jesus as something to be exploited. He sees himself as a servant, being obedient to what God has for him to do. We should pattern our lives after this example.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What are the major themes of the Old and New Testament?
2. What are the major groups that the New Testament breaks down into?
3. Who wrote James? To whom did he write it?
4. How are we like the people James writes to who have been scattered? How are we sometimes tempted to make bad choices when trying to fit or get by in a hostile culture?
5. What can we learn about humility from James simply calling himself "a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ?"

## Rejoicing in Trials

### James 1:2-8

JRR Tolkien was a Christian professor who taught the Anglo-Saxon Language at Oxford. He was also one of the people instrumental in the conversion of CS Lewis. But that is not what most people remember him for. His literary trilogy entitled *The Lord of the Rings* is regarded by many as some of the best of the 20th century. At the center of these stories is a quirky little people called hobbits. The idea of hobbits supposedly came to Tolkien one day while he was grading exams in his office at Oxford. It was a warm, lazy afternoon and Tolkien found himself drifting off and doodling in the margins of his student's work. At one point, he looked down and discovered he had scribbled, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." He asked himself, "What's a hobbit?" and the result was a series of books with these diminutive heroes as their central characters. The essential nature of hobbits is that they are homebodies. They like food, fellowship, and the easy life. They like things regular and predictable. The worst way a hobbit can describe something is to call it "uncomfortable." So it is surprising that a particular hobbit is selected to go on a series of adventures in which he discovers that there is more to life and to hobbits than just being comfortable.

The reason I bring this up is because we are all Hobbits in one shape or another. We enjoy the easy life, are quickly annoyed, and hate to be uncomfortable. So when life gets hard, we, like good little hobbits, look for the path of least resistance. We retreat or surrender or blend in with the hopes of avoiding inconveniences or challenges.

That was the situation facing James's readers. They were in difficult situations. They had probably fled their homelands looking for peace and were most likely finding it difficult to fit in where they had found themselves. Many of them were probably wondering what to do. Some were maybe even starting to doubt their faith because of the hardship or compromised their beliefs in order to make life easier for themselves.

We have all been there. We have all found ourselves saying things like "Why is this happening to me?" or "Wouldn't it be easier if...?" We have wondered why some calamity great or small befell us. Sometimes we phrase the questions, "Why did God let this happen to me?" Sometimes we are so desperate that we will do anything to be out of the situation. We want it to be over; we want to be out if it. Such suffering can cause us to doubt God: doubt He cares about us, doubt He is in control. It can lead us to try to manage as best as we can. It might even tempt us to do things we might not normally do.

James doesn't mince any words. He doesn't beat around the bush or build up to his main point. He starts off with a direct challenge not to give up. His advice is to do something unexpected, something that goes against our hobbit natures.

#### **A Commandment to Consider v2**

- Consider it All Joy – We are called to be joyful, not necessarily happy. Joy is something different. It is the deep-down assurance that everything is okay no matter what the circumstances because God is in control and has a plan. At a funeral, before we or a friend goes in for surgery, when we have lost all our money, or are facing an uncertain future, we need not and even should not necessarily be giddy or happy. But we can choose to trust God and not our own fears or emotions.
- My Brothers – Sometimes, the overlooked words contain important truth. There is something profound to the fact that James begins his letter by calling his readers, "my brothers." Hopefully it goes without saying that James is addressing both men and women alike. It's a term not just of friendship but of kinship and family devotion. James is saying hard things to his audience. It is important for him to show them that he isn't cruel or unfeeling. He isn't lecturing or condescending. He uses the language of family and the language of equality. He is talking to fellow children of God; to his brothers. He knows what he is saying is

hard. It is probably hard for him as well. And he wants his readers to know that he is in the same boat.

- **When You Encounter Various Trials** – Trials here aren't necessarily temptations to sin. Trials have the capacity to turn into temptations. James will deal with how this happens later in this chapter. The exact definition of "trials" can be hard to pin down. They are things that cause us to wonder if we are on the right path, doubt ourselves, worry that we are stuck and that only bad can come of this. More importantly, they are things that shake our faith in God. It might shake our faith in His power (maybe He can't help), or His love (maybe He doesn't want to help), or His existence (maybe He isn't even there); hard situations where things aren't going as planned and we are wondering what to do next. Truth be told, it's a word that is hard to write a definition for, but we all know what it means. We have been there far too often. James uses several words to illustrate the exact nature of trials to help us gain a biblical perspective on them:
  - o **Encounter** – The joy we are called to have doesn't come from the trial. The word James uses that is translated "encounter" literally means "to fall into." Though it may seem like trials are a never-ending and therefore normal part of life, it is important to realize that from God's perspective, they constitute something abnormal, something you fall into, something that will one day be over.
  - o **Various** – various is another word with a cool meaning. The word literally means, "multicolored." In fact, it's the word that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe Joseph's Coat of Many Colors. The idea is that trials come in all sorts of intensities and varieties. One wonders if the list of topics James will address in the rest of the book provide a clue into the nature of the trials we can expect to experience. He will go on to write about widows, orphan, poverty, favoritism, slander, business, and sickness, to name a few. But we shouldn't expect to have the same trials as other people or expect all our trials to be of the same quality or intensity.

#### **A Reason to Rejoice v3-4**

- **Testing Produces Endurance v3** – Like a coach uses training, God uses trials to develop us into the types of people God has created us to be. God didn't create us to be spiritual couch potatoes, so He won't allow us to remain spiritually weak, lazy, sluggish people. He is developing in us characteristics He knows we need for the race He has set for us to run. God has a plan for our lives. It's a plan for His glory and for our good but it requires some spiritual muscle. God uses trials in our life to strengthen us. This is why we rejoice not in the trials, but in the reason God sends them.
- **The Goal is Perfection v4** –A boot camp drill instructor might seem mean, harsh, demanding or cruel, but everything he does is out of a desire to make sure his people have everything they need to survive the war they are about to be sent into. In the same way, God is using trials to develop endurance/perseverance in us so that we will be ready for the assignments He has for us. The words James uses are "perfect" and "complete." Though the words perfect and complete sound redundant, James uses both intentionally.
  - o **Complete** – that we may possess all the things we need.
  - o **Perfect** – that we may possess them in the best possible form they can exist in us.

#### **The Hope of Help v5-6**

- **The Need: "If any of you lacks wisdom"** – I went to a life-sized maze at an amusement park. It was the size of two football fields and had walls 8 feet high. Some people could zip right through the maze; others took a while. Sometimes, after taking several wrong turns, people would become disoriented. The maze builders equipped the maze with two things to assist discouraged, lost, participants: escape doors (so that people who were panicking could easily leave the maze whenever they wanted), and lookout posts (so that people could rise above the maze, get their bearings, and gain some perspective before diving back in). That maze is a lot like life. We easily get lost and confused. When we turn to God, we often ask Him to provide us an escape door. Rarely does God give this. The trial is here because He knows it will help turn us into who He created us to be. But God does give us lookout posts. He gives us moments when we can rise above the situation and see things from His perspective. The biblical word for that is "wisdom." We seek a way out; what we really need is wisdom to see the way forward.

- The Source: “Let Him ask of God” – This verse is often taken out of context to imply God can at random give us the ability to be like Solomon. He may very well do so, but that is not the purpose of this verse. This verse relates to those that preceded it. The wisdom being offered is insight into God’s plan and vision from God’s perspective. James is saying, “Consider it all joy when you are under trials. But if you are unable to see that God is using trials to make you into the person He created you to be, ask God to give you the ability to see things from His perspective.” James goes on to tell us two things that are important about God and His wisdom.
  - o God Gives Generously – God isn’t a miser sitting on His store of wisdom, begrudgingly giving out to people who beg hard enough or long enough. He gives generously, which means He is eager to give it out, and promises to give it in abundance.
  - o God Gives Without Reproach – Reproach is to blame or shame a person. Have you ever asked for money from someone, but when they gave it to you, they made you feel like garbage for asking? Maybe they gave you a lecture about working harder or being a better money manager. The good news is God doesn’t act that way with His wisdom. He isn’t frustrated that you are asking AGAIN. He isn’t tired of always giving it to you. He doesn’t wish you could get by on your own. He wants to give you the ability to see things from His perspective.
- The Requirement: “Let him ask in faith without any doubting” v6-8 – Only one stipulation is placed on whether God will give you His wisdom: You have to really want it. When James uses the phrase “let him ask in faith,” he is talking about a specific kind of doubt – doubt whether you really want God to give you the wisdom. Remember, most of us in the midst of trials don’t want wisdom; we want a way out. James is saying that God doesn’t give His wisdom as an option to be considered. He gives it out to people who are committed to His plan.

A person who doubts is wavering between the escape hatch and the lookout post. Such a person doesn’t know if he really believes that God knows what He is doing, and isn’t sure that God can be trusted in hard times. James describes the doubting man as “surf of the sea, “double-minded” (literally “Two-souled”) and unstable in all his ways. He does so not to shame or humiliate us. But to further expose our need. Before you can trust God to give you wisdom, you have to trust God. All of us at one time or another match James’s description of the doubting man. We aren’t supposed to shrug our shoulders, turn around, and leave empty-handed. We are supposed to realize that we are drifting, recognize our need of an anchor for our soul, and renew our trust in the One who offers it to us.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the difference between being happy about trials, and being joyful in trials?
2. How can a trial turn into a temptation?
3. Have you ever seen God use a trial to grow you up and build spiritual muscle?
4. Have you ever wanted God to get you out of a trial but realized that He wanted to get you through it? How can we learn to seek His perspective instead of the escape hatch?
5. Why do you think God requires that we do not doubt before He gives us His wisdom?

# Responding Poorly to Trials

## James 1:9-15

Most people know the Marine Corp motto: Semper Fi, short for Semper Fidelis, which is a Latin phrase meaning “Always faithful.” Not so many people know Semper Paratus, which is the motto of the Coast Guard. It means “Always prepared.” The two go hand in hand. In order to stay faithful to your mission, you need to be prepared for what could happen. It’s true in the military and in life. So after James encourages his readers to stay faithful in the midst of trials, he shows them common pitfalls to avoid.

This is important because James is written to people under stress. They are running from persecution. Many are eager to avoid future difficulty. Avoiding unnecessary trials is not necessarily a wrong thing to desire. But we shouldn’t go to such lengths to avoid difficulty that we end up doing wrong or compromising what we stand for. The previous lesson was encouragement to Stay Faithful in the midst of trials. We should expect trials and should embrace them as sent by God to build us into who He created us to be. We used the ideas of Escape Hatch and Lookout Post as alternate choices to run to in the midst of trials. We are eager for the escape hatch; to be removed from the trial. But God desires to show us things from His perspective so that we can learn to trust Him and endure.

If the last lesson was all about Semper Fi, this lesson is about Semper Paratus. Having told us the ideal way in which we all should handle trials, James presents a couple of bad alternatives that we sometimes gravitate towards in the midst of trials. He is trying to draw our attention to some common escape hatches that people run towards.

Supposedly, in 1519, when Cortez reached the New World, he burned his ships in order to remove from his men the temptation to retreat. Here, James presents three “ships” that need to be burned, three escape hatches that need to be blocked, if we are to stay faithful to the path God has placed in front of us.

### **Bad Choice #1: Comparison “To the brother in humble circumstances” v9**

One bad reaction we all have to trials is to compare our situation to people whose lot in life seems to be easier, better, or more desirable. James focuses on wealth, or lack thereof. Most people think most of their problems would be solved with access to “just a little bit more” money. The truth is, though, anything can be a point of comparison with someone else. We pick something we don’t like about our current situation and compare it to what is going right in someone else’s situation. It can be wealth, success, health, whatever.

The thing about clichés is that there is normally truth in them. When we use them flippantly, thoughtlessly, or insincerely, we rob them of their positive effect. This goes with the following phrase that I have seen plastered on coffee mugs, posters, etc. See it enough, you become numb to it. But maybe we see it a lot because we are trying to convince ourselves that it is true...but just can’t seem to do it. The phrase: “Comparison is the thief of joy.”

The answer to comparison is to realize that the thing you are focused on doesn’t determine your value. In this context, it is wealth. James says to people who don’t currently possess what they wish they did: “Recognize that your worth is not determined by wealth, or ease of life, or pleasure.” Therefore, a brother who is poor should consider himself rich because he realizes that he has what really matters.

In another often misquoted and misunderstood passage, Paul gives the Philippians a roadmap to handling times when we are tempted to compare. Philippians 4:12-13 says, “I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

- Learn the Secret v12: Paul says that each situation has unique blessings that he has learned to discover. He has learned that being poor has opportunities that being rich doesn't. He also says that having abundance also has some advantages which, I am sure, none of us would deny. He isn't saying that being poor is better than being rich. He is saying that instead of comparing the two, he focuses on the situation he happens to be in and chooses to look for the unique blessings that are contained in it, which he would miss out on or lose when his circumstances change.
- Lean for strength v13: He then writes the famous verse. But this isn't a verse about attempting risky things. This verse is about enduring hard things by relying on Jesus to give you strength. Trials are hard. Comparison makes them harder. Trying to find blessing in difficult times is not easy. But Jesus doesn't leave us alone. We can depend on Him to give us strength when ours fails.

### **Bad Reaction #1: Control "and the rich man"**

After addressing the impoverished brother who compares, James moves to addressing the rich man as well. You might think that the point of his admonition is renouncing greed. But it's not. Greed is universally described in the Bible as a bad thing. It is normally a symptom of a bigger problem: control. We are worried that we will never have enough, so we try to hoard as much as we possibly can in the hopes of insulating ourselves from future trials. James encourages those who have abundance to recognize that wealth means nothing as well. The bigger message is that whatever you are seeking as a means of controlling things in your life will ultimately prove to be fruitless. It is often money, but we use a lot of other things to try to impose our control on our lives. We use diet, schedule, cleaning, discipline, among others, to try to structure and manage things within the realm of our existence. We become joyless people who behave tyrannically towards the people in our lives, when we take all these good things to an extreme or hope in them as a means of insulating ourselves from trial.

The solution isn't to try harder to control but to change your perspective.

- The Elusiveness of Enough: The starting point of changing your perspective is to realize that "enough" is a hard word to pin down. We say things like "If only we could have enough, we would be able to do..." "We don't want to be greedy, we just need to get over this next hill." The problem is that "enough" is a mirage. We think we are almost there, but we aren't. The Ancient Romans had a proverb: Fortune gives a lot to many, enough to no one. Even wealthy people don't think they have "enough." The same is true of the other dimensions of life we try to control. Your house will never be clean "enough." There will always be something left to clean or organize. Your kids will never be well-behaved "enough." You will always find something to correct. Your meals will never be healthy "enough." There will always be another thing you think needs to be added or removed from your diet for optimal health. You will never be fit and in-shape "enough." There will always be fat to burn and muscle to build. You can spot someone who is seeking to use these things to control their life because they end up taking things to a dangerous extreme that they themselves don't see. Why, because they don't realize they will never arrive at "enough."
- The Purpose of Prosperity: In Luke 12:15-21, Jesus told a parable about a rich man who misunderstood the purpose of his wealth. His barns are full, so he resolves to build even bigger barns so that he will have enough to finally enjoy his life. Jesus calls him a fool and says "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Being "rich toward God" means seeing wealth not as a means to insulate yourself from future trials, but as a way to be a conduit of God's blessing to others. God has given you whatever you possess both as a blessing TO you and a blessing THROUGH you to others. Remember Philippians 4:12 above. One blessing of having abundance is the joy of giving to those in need. One blessing of having need is the joy of learning to depend on God.
- The Role of Reliance: Relying on riches is an uncertain circumstance. They come and go. The rich man needs to analyze his own life and consider that his riches will fade away. When this happens,

what will he have that will endure? How will he handle when circumstances change? As Jesus says in Luke 12:15, in the introduction of the parable above, “not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” If you aren’t your money, what are you really? You can change the word abundance to any of the other things, and ask the same questions “not even when one has a clean house, a muscular physique, a healthy diet, does his life consist of his house, body, food, etc.” Enough will never be enough. You have to find something besides control to cope with the difficulties of life. The only thing that will work is learning to rely on God. As Paul told the Philippians a few verses later in: “And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:19)”

### **Bad Reaction #3: Quitting “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial”**

Sometimes we revert to bad strategies when trials hit. Sometimes we compare, sometimes we try to control, other times we just feel like quitting. We feel like it’s not worth it to keep going. No good can come of it, so we just stop. Sometimes it’s because of bad company we are keeping. Psalm 1 starts off with such a description: “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!” Notice the progression: walk, stand, sit. But sometimes, it’s not external influences that encourage us to quit, but our own exhaustion or discouragement. How do we keep from quitting? James provides a couple of clues:

- Focus on Continuing: “the man who perseveres” – I heard a guy who had been married for 60 years gives his recipe for being married for so long. It was one thing: “don’t get divorced.” It seems silly but it’s actually profound. The secret to not quitting is to just...keep...going. Quitting is a decision. Decide that you won’t quit. James says, Blessed is the man who perseveres...” Some translations say “endures.” Both words focus on just making it through. Sometimes simply surviving is the victory. Don’t focus on whether you can run a hundred miles. Focus on what you think the distance is and you will get discouraged. You might not be able to run far, but you can take one more step. Focus on taking the next step and keep putting one foot in front of the other. That is what perseverance is. That is what we are encouraged to focus on.
- Focus on the Culmination: “The Crown of Life” – In the ancient world, Olympic champions weren’t given medals. They were given crowns made from laurel tree leaves. So when James says that God gives a crown of life to those who persevere, he isn’t referring to a royal crown but to these crowns of victory. Also, a better translation of “crown of life” would be “the crown, which is life.” In the same way that a doctor doesn’t bestow health as an external reward on those who follow his strict commands about diet, exercise and life, God doesn’t give eternal life as an external, arbitrary gift. Our perseverance in dedication to God’s will results in our efforts being crowned in life; eternal life, the good life, the life God has for those who love Him. The natural end of a life dedicated to persevering under the trials God sends us, is that we will become the people God created us to be. So James tells us that instead of doubting God’s plan and trying to find the “good life” apart from God, we should focus on the culmination of the road we are on. It might be a hard road now, but it is a road that ends in the only life that will bring true, lasting, happiness.
- Focus of God: “to those that love Him” – So many times we treat the blessing of God like we would a present we receive from a person we don’t like. We want the thing but wish to leave and enjoy it by ourselves apart from the person that gave it to us. Sometimes we imagine heaven this way: as a place where all our dreams come true. That is both a true statement and a misleading one. In heaven, we will realize that everything we have longed for in this life will find its fulfillment in the light of God’s presence. But we shouldn’t think that it is a place of selfish indulgence. Heaven is nothing other than being with God. As CS Lewis wrote, “God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.” That is why Jesus told his followers in John 15 to abide in Him. Seek God and you will find yourself and all the happiness you were looking for. Again, as CS Lewis wrote, “Aim at Heaven and you will get Earth ‘thrown in’: aim at Earth and you will get neither.”

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What are some ways that we compare our lives to other people? What damage does it do? How can we learn not to compare?
2. What are some ways that we try to control various aspects of our lives? How can we learn to let go and trust God?
3. What does it mean to be “rich towards God?”
4. Have you ever felt like giving up? What are ways we can keep ourselves motivated to persevere in the midst of trials?
5. What does it mean that God will give a “crown of life” to the one that perseveres?

# Seeing Sin and God Rightly

## James 1:13-18

Most students hate tests. The anxiety, the pressure, the feeling of inadequacy. It can literally make students sick. But I remember something profound that a professor said to me one time as he started handing out tests: “Tests aren’t punitive; they are diagnostic.” What he meant was that he wasn’t giving the test to us to punish us. He was giving us the test so that he could understand what we had absorbed of what he had taught us. Tests reveal what is inside us.

I remember another wise saying from that professor, this time before a quiz, “If you fail, I will do all I can to help you learn the material. If you cheat, I will do all I can to remove you from this college.” The second phrase might sound severe, but it was designed to encourage students to learn to lean on him when they struggle instead of taking wrong roads. Sometimes, we want to hide what is inside us. We want to do better on the test than we deserve, so we look for ways of circumventing the process of teaching, learning, and assessment. We cheat.

God uses trials in our lives the same way that professors use tests. Not to trip us up, but to reveal our true character. Not because He doesn’t already know it, but because He wants us to realize it. Often, in trials, we look for a way out, or around the trials. We are offered sinful alternatives as shortcuts around, or easy paths through the trials. When we take the sinful path, sometimes, we seek to justify ourselves by protesting that it was God who set us up for failure. God tempted us. If He hadn’t done that, we would have been fine.

Such thinking is foolish. When a student gets caught cheating, it would be unreasonable for him to protest that it was the professor’s fault because it was the professor who gave the test. There is a difference between trial and temptation. The trial is a test, training, an opportunity for our true character to be revealed or developed. Temptation is when we see a sinful alternative to the trial and begin wondering if we should take it. The trial comes from God. The temptation comes from our sinful self.

This is where James takes his discussion of trials. He has already encouraged his readers to allow trials to develop their character. He now deals with how to see God in this midst of trials. He shows how trials turn into temptations. He doesn’t want us to blame God but learn how to lean on Him when we struggle. The solution James offers is for us to see sin for what it is, and to see God for who He is.

### **Seeing Sin for What It Is v14-15**

“If God created everything, then did God create sin?” It might sound like a paradoxical question asked by a skeptic, designed to stump someone. But it is actually a great question. Understanding the origin of sin, gives us insight into God, ourselves, and the world.

The short answer is: Yes, God created everything. No, He didn’t create sin. The reason: sin isn’t a thing. Sin is a distortion. Sin occurs when a good thing God created is twisted or used in wrong ways. The idea that good and evil are equal forces in the universe is flat out wrong. Sin is a shadow. Good can exist without evil. Evil can’t exist on its own. It can only take a good thing and corrupt it. So where does sin come from? It comes from using the freedom that God gave us to use things, in ways they weren’t intended. A knife is a great example of this. In the hands of a criminal, it can cause great harm. In the hands of a doctor, it can do great good. It is not the knife that has changed, but the intent of the person using it.

Sin is deceptive. It twists the good things God created. In just a few verses, James shows us how sin insinuates itself in our lives and works to turn trial into temptation.

Distortion of Desire: From Desire to Lust – Stone cutters don’t need much to split rock. A small crack is enough. Once a crack is found, all you need is a wedge with a thin end the same width of the crack. Once the

thin end of the wedge fits in the crack, you can use a hammer to drive it deeper and deeper in until a piece of rock has been broken off. Gaping chasms or holes aren't needed - just a crack. Sin is like that. It looks for cracks in our façade. And the opening is desire. During a trial, we usually see some other thing we would rather have than this trial. Instead of financial problems, financial security. Instead of hardship, rest. We see what we would rather have and focus on that. Desire becomes lust when we become consumed by the thing we desire, dwell on it, and are convinced that it is our deliverance.

Drawn to Disobey: From Lust to Sin – The next step in the evolution of sin is from desire to disobedience. It is important to realize that the lust described above is a temptation but that temptations aren't sin. Temptations are invitations to sin. Temptations offer shortcuts to what you are seeking. They offer to show you how to bypass trials.

In Mathew 4:8-9, Satan tempts Jesus this way: "Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.""

Satan didn't offer Jesus anything that wasn't already His or going to be given to Him one day. He offered Him a shortcut. Satan offered to give Jesus the power to rule without the need for the Cross. He offered Jesus a shortcut. Fortunately, Jesus didn't take the shortcut, and neither should we. Lust gives birth to sin when we decide that we would do anything to get the thing we desire. When we would cheat and steal to get out of financial problems. When we would neglect our duties and responsibilities to achieve freedom and rest.

Designed for Death: From Sin to Death – Sin is a liar. It promises all the happiness and joy that God does, but at a lower price. The problem is that the cost is higher than you realize, and sin can't give what it claims. There is a famous quote sometimes attributed to Billy Graham that says, "Sin will take you farther than you wanted to go, make you stay longer than you wanted to stay, and make you pay more than you wanted to pay." Paul said it best in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." Sin promises joy but pays out death. God doesn't have to impose external punishments on sin. Sin produces death in our lives. The natural culmination of sin is death.

### **Seeing God for Who He is**

Just as important as seeing Sin for what it is, we need to see God for who He is, if we are to survive trials and keep them from turning into temptations, sin, and death.

God is Good v13 "God cannot be tempted by evil" – We could also phrase this attribute by saying God is Holy. It is true. Holy, pure, unaffected by evil. But sometimes, we wrongly think that Holiness means that God therefore is standoffish with us because we are so filthy in our sin. We must never forget that God is Holy, but His Holiness doesn't mean He is some kind of theological germaphobe. God sent Jesus into this sinful world as proof that He doesn't stand off from us but rather is willing to get dirty in order to deliver us. Holiness and Goodness mean that sin has no effect on God. He isn't some fragile, delicate, flower that will wither at one spot of sin. He is more like a superhero impervious to any attack.

God is Giving v17 "every perfect gift is from above" – God isn't just good, He is giving. He is the source of every good thing we have. Many times, we blame God for the bad stuff and take full credit for the good. In reality, we are responsible for the bad things that happen to us and the good stuff is a blessing of God, which we take credit for. James wants us to change our perspective. God isn't angry and cruel. He isn't looking to trip you up and punish. He is good, and He likes to give good things to His children. As Jesus said in Matthew 7:11, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" Even in the midst of temptations, God gives us good things. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul says: "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." While we are being led away from God by our broken desires, God stays faithful to us and continues to give a way out of the

temptation.

God is Gracious v18 “He brought us forth...so that we would be...first fruits.” – God is good. God loves giving good things to His children. The thing God loves to give most is grace. Grace is one of those words that can never be defined too much. Grace simply means, “Getting a good thing you don’t deserve.” We don’t deserve His goodness. But He gives it anyway. He desires us to be like Him, unable to be affected by sin. He knows we struggle; that is why He sends us trials, to perfect us. He knows we can’t do it on our own, so He gives grace to help. All we have to do is go get it.

All of this is summarized Hebrews 4:15-16: “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” God knows what we are going through. He sent Jesus who got through all of life without sinning, which means that He knows how strong sin is. Now He is eager to give us what we need to make it through life as well. We can go with confidence to His throne because He loves to give good gifts to His children. Chief among them are Mercy; not getting the bad things our sin deserves, and grace to help us when we are most in need of it.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever felt tempted to blame God for the trials you are in?
2. What is the difference between trials and temptations? Between temptation and sin?
3. How do trials turn into temptations? How does temptation progress to sin?
4. How does sin lie to us and trap us?
5. Which attribute of God do you sometimes forget? How can we remember who God is and rely on Him when trials turn to temptations?

# Spotting True and False Religion

## James 1:19-27

Religion. What goes through your head when you hear that word? To most people, it has a negative connotation and conveys the idea of people artificially going through religious motions out of a sense of obligation or in order to appease an angry, distant, and difficult deity. We hate it so much that we often try to find new words to use as a substitute so that we can talk meaningfully about our religious life. Our desire is to be able to talk about the difference between a genuine transformational experience of God and cold, lifeless “religion.” Sometimes we try substituting words like “spiritual” or say things like “I don’t believe in religion. Religion is about rules. I believe in relationship.”

It’s true; Christianity is more than the performance of certain rituals or following rules. Christianity is an invitation to a relationship with God through Jesus. But we would be neglecting the words of Jesus Himself, if we thought that being in a relationship with Jesus didn’t mean learning to follow Jesus’s instructions about how to live our lives. In John 14:15, Jesus tells His disciples, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” A relationship with God doesn’t exclude following the rules He gave us; it means following them out of love not out of fear.

The word “religion” or “religious” doesn’t occur very often in the New Testament. The term has always been easily misunderstood. Most often in the New Testament, we are called to follow Jesus and be His disciples, which simply means students. We are told to learn from Jesus and follow those who are following Jesus. Interestingly, James doesn’t use the term too frequently. He also doesn’t take time to tell people to change their vocabulary. Instead, he differentiates between real and false religion: religion where people have deceived themselves and religion which is “pure and undefiled...in the sight of our God and Father.”

Maybe we should follow James’s lead and focus less on making sure our vocabulary is correct and more on making sure we are living lives that are pleasing in the sight of God.

### Signs of False Religion

James is building up to his statement of the kind of religion that is pleasing to God. But before he tells us what it is, he shows us the kinds of things that are often mistaken for real religion but are simply counterfeits of the real thing.

- Being Angry: “Be slow to anger” v19-20 – Look around you. The world is full of people being angry. Most of them feel justified in acting out in anger because they claim their anger is directed at evil things. The world is full of injustice and evil. It is natural to want things to be otherwise and even appropriate to do all that we can to right wrongs. But we aren’t allowed to indulge our anger. Anger is an attribute of false religion. Why? James tells us: “The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” There may be a lot of things that God uses to help people be righteous, but our anger is not one of them. False religion is found among people who are always angry at some other group of people and use religion to justify it. “God hates whomever.... And therefore so do we” has no place in real religion.
- Being “Real”: “putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness ” v21 – In response to people who are “holier than thou” and pretend to have it all together but really don’t, there is a type of person who thinks that genuine religion means to show people who we really are - warts and all. We do it under the badge of “being genuine” or “keeping it real.” We say things like “I’m not perfect, just forgiven.” We try to show the world that we are just as broken as the rest of them. And it’s true; the church isn’t full of people who are more special than the rest. The church isn’t a social club but a hospital for sick souls. We should be showing each other who we really are. But would you go to a hospital where the people were not being healed? We shouldn’t hide our brokenness, but we

shouldn't parade it around as a badge of honor either. False religion says God loves you just the way you are, so don't change. Real religion tells us that God loves us and wants us to have life that comes from seeking the righteousness He gives us through Jesus. Real religion means that there are things we need to leave behind.

- Being "Superior": "in humility receive the word implanted" v21 – Arrogance is another sign of false religion. Thinking you have it all figured out is a sure sign that you don't. In 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, Paul says "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him." That is why James says to receive the word in humility. The only way you can ever receive the word that will save you is in humility. Humility means realizing you don't have it all figured out. Humility means realizing you need help. A person with false religion has all the answers. He wags a finger at you at says, "Let me tell you what your problem is." A person with real religion looks outside of himself for answers. He applies the word first and foremost to himself. He says like Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."
- Being "All-Talk": "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" v22-25 – A lot of people like to talk about religion, but fewer people want to do it. One sneaky type of false religion masquerades as taking religion seriously. This kind of false religion loves acquiring Bible facts, but the knowledge never translates into changed behavior. James will talk more extensively in the next chapter about how correct belief is supposed to change your life. In James 2:19 he says emphatically, "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder." Education is good. Learning as much as you can about your faith is a great thing. But knowledge doesn't save. Demons know very clearly who God is. Knowledge is only good if it changes your life.

### **Signs of Real Religion v26-27**

After shutting down false notions of what religion is, James gives a very succinct statement of the kind of life that is pleasing to God. These aren't the only things that we are to do as marks of true religion. Rather, the examples James gives typify categories of things Christians should be doing.

This isn't trying to earn salvation. We can't earn our salvation, nor should we try. The things James lists aren't things Christians do in order to be pleasing to God. They do them in response to what God has done. They are the fruit that grows when we seek God and God starts working in our lives. Real religion means seeking God and seeking to please God with our lives. James gives us a picture of what this looks like.

- Self-control: "bridle his tongue" v26 – James says a person's religion is worthless and he has deceived himself if he doesn't bridle his own tongue. Controlling speech is such an important topic that James will spend much of the following chapter discussing it. It is perhaps the chief example of the fact that Christians need to strive to exercise self-control. Who you are when no one else is around is who you really are. Paul says in Galatians 5:23 that self-control is one of the fruits of the spirit in our lives. We aren't supposed to be slaves to our various appetites. Paul says in Romans 6:12-13, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." How do we begin to do this? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27, "I discipline my body and make it my slave." God wants us to exercise self-control because he wants us to use our bodies for good not for evil.
- Service: "visit orphans and widows in their distress" v27 – The two groups mentioned were the most helpless of society; those who had no children or no parents to help them in times of trouble. Again the focus isn't on these two groups specifically. They function as examples of the type of service we are to engage in. We are to help others in a way that we do not expect them to repay us. Our service isn't so that we can indebt people to us, or so that we can gain praise, but so that we can

obey Christ's commands of "Love your neighbor as yourself." In Matthew 20:28, Jesus says, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." As His followers we should seek to live similar lives.

- Sanctity: "keep oneself unstained by the world" v27 – This isn't about avoiding certain people. Jesus ate and drank with all sorts of people. Christians aren't supposed to hide from the world. We should be in the world but not of the world. This means resisting the sinful categories of a fallen world. We are not supposed to allow the values of the world to creep into our lives. 1 John 2:15-16 says, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world." One of the chief dangers Christians have always faced is temptation to love the things of this world. We seek the things the world seeks then wonder why we look no different than the world. In Colossians 1:13, Paul says that God "rescued us from the dominion of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." Real religion seeks to live out our new identity of freedom from this world, not our old identity of bondage to it.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Who are the people we feel justified in hating? How do we attempt to justify our anger?
2. How can learning Bible facts and increasing our theological knowledge become false religion?
3. Why is self-control so hard? How do we attempt to justify our lack of self-control? What does it mean "to discipline" our bodies and make them our slaves? How can we do that?
4. What does a life of service look like? How do we sometimes corrupt service and make it a selfish act? Who are the most vulnerable people in our society?
5. How do the world's categories creep into the church? What are ways we can keep ourselves unstained?"

# Rejecting Worldliness

## James 2:1-13

Sometimes we forget that the chapter divisions in the books of the Bible weren't chosen by the author. They were added centuries later. They can be a useful guide to navigate through the books, find our spots, and remember references. But they can also break the flow of the author's thought and divide things in ways that were never intended. I think something like that has happened at the beginning of James 2. We read James 2:1, which refers to "personal favoritism" and we conclude that this is what the next section is about. And it is, but it's also part of a larger discussion. It's a continuation of what James was previously talking about. Chapter 1 concluded with an exhortation to be more than just a hearer of the word and to consider what "real religion" looked like. The final command in chapter one was: "keep oneself unstained by the world."

This isn't a call to reject the world and withdraw into a safe little Christian subculture. We are called to be beacons of hope and life in a world plagued with despair and darkness. John 3:16 reminds us that God loves this world and gets involved in it. What we are called to reject is worldliness. As 1 John 2:15-16 says, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world."

But how do we do that? How we keep ourselves unstained by the world? If we can't retreat from the world, how do we keep influence from flowing the wrong way? We think we are impacting and effecting culture, but it's the other way around. You can't put a brisket in a smoker for 18 hours and not expect it to come out tasting smoky and delicious. You can't put a roast in the crockpot and not have it tasting like liquid it was sitting and soaking in for several hours. Likewise, it is very hard to live in any culture and not be flavored by it. What does it say about us that American Christians frequently look, act, and identify with other Americans more than with Christians from other countries? It means the culture is flavoring us too much. If we are to reverse this trend, we must analyze the world we live in and be intentional about what we allow into our lives. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus told his disciples: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves."

James, in this section, calls on followers of Jesus to reject three aspects of the world's way of doing things. Three things that find their way into the church. Three things that if we are careful about, we will be better able to live as followers of Jesus together as his body. Those three things are: the world's categories, the world's compromise, and the world's condemnation.

### **Rejecting the World's Categories – v. 1-7**

Have you ever watched people go crazy over some trendy toy around Christmas time? I remember when Beanie Babies were a big deal. People collected them, and some paid thousands of dollars, or risked their lives at Black Friday sales to get their hands on them. Where are they now? People are often duped into thinking that things are valuable when they aren't.

This applies to people, too. The first thing James tells us to reject is the categories the world tells us to divide people into. The example he gives is about giving special treatment to a rich man and marginalizing a poor man. It is important to realize that this is just an example. The world values wealth, so if you have it, you are seen as valuable. But James isn't just trying to show us the problem with the rich/poor category. He wants us to realize that the way the world sees things is wrong.

But what are the world's categories? How do we figure out what to reject. James gives two clues to help us in determining categories we need to reject:

Face Receivers – The word that gets translated as “favoritism” or “partiality” is a word that literally means “receiving the face.” It means to judge a person based on how they appear to you. When we judge according to appearances, we adopt worldly categories. We think we know who someone is by looking at their appearance. But we don’t know the whole story. We don’t know where a person came from, and more importantly, we don’t know a person’s heart.

God doesn’t judge us by our outward appearance. In 1 Samuel 16, God sends Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint the next king of Israel. He sees one of Jesse’s older sons who looks like the perfect king, but God tells Samuel that his standards are different than man’s. 1 Samuel 16:7 says “But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’”

Paul says the same thing in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 says, “but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.”

God doesn’t judge people by appearances. Neither should we. We should strive to see people the way God does: as individually unique, valuable, and loved.

Judges with Evil Motives – The second clue to understanding worldly categories is the phrase in verse 4: “become judges with evil motives.” It’s not just judging others by their appearance that is the problem. James says that the world’s categories are revealed by the evil motives behind our judgments of others. Well, what constitutes evil motives? The largest categories of evil motives are selfish motives. God’s plan is for us to love people and use things. But often, we love things and use people. To use human beings as if they were things is one of the chief attributes of sin.

That is why honoring the rich man is wrong. Not because people shouldn’t treat others with respect. When we think we can benefit from someone or gain something from being nice, we treat people with honor. But when we don’t think we have anything to gain, we disrespect and cast them aside.

Many times, we justify our selfish motives by saying that it is a mutually beneficiary relationship. But James wants us to realize that Christians are to treat people not based on what they can for us but on what we can do for them. Service, not selfishness, is supposed to be the goal. That is why James tells us at the end of the previous chapter that real religion means visiting “orphans and widows,” two people groups in the ancient world who had the most need and the least to offer.

That is why James begins verse 8 by mentioning “fulfilling the royal law.” The royal law is the one command on which everything else depends. Jesus tells us that the royal law is to love God and love others. In Mathew 22:37-40, Jesus says, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

We need to be careful not just of what we do, but why. Sometimes we have selfish motives behind our reasons for doing things. Serving God means rejecting the worldliness behind our evil reasons for judging people.

### **Rejecting the World’s Compromise – vv. 8-11**

The next intrusion of the world that James tries to combat is compromise. James was worried that people would think, “Oh well, so I show partiality. At least I do not do any of those other bad sins.” James is trying to get them to realize that any sin in our lives is not good. Though the external consequences may be different, in respect to our own soul, sin is sin. It all does damage. We must get rid of the mentality that says that we are justified in living in one particular sin, whether it be gossip, anger, hatred, etc., because we feel like we are living right in other areas.

We justify our sins by saying that the ones we tolerate are less dangerous than the ones we condemn. The problem is that none of us think our own sin is dangerous. It is everyone else's sin that we focus on. Everyone thinks that they are "basically a good person." We put ourselves on a sort of sliding scale of sinners and say things like "I may not be Mother Theresa, but I'm not Hitler either."

James isn't trying to burden believers with condemnation. In fact, that is the next thing he is going to deal with rejecting. He is trying to get us to stop compromising with sin. Most of us don't take sin seriously. We know God doesn't like it, but we try to play a dangerous game where we try to figure out how much sin we can get in our life without angering God. It's the soul equivalent of how veterinarians treat dogs with heartworm. The treatment for heartworm is the poison arsenic. How much arsenic do you give a dog with heartworms? Well, enough to kill the heartworms, but not so much that you kill the dog.

But this is nonsense. We will stop compromising when we see sin for what it is: poison to our soul. We wouldn't let our children drink a certain poison because it happens to be the least dangerous poison under the sun. All poison is harmful. The same goes for sin. God hates sin, all sin, because it does damage to us. We need to stop playing games and compromising with sin.

### **Rejecting the World's Condemnation – vv. 12-13**

It would be easy to misunderstand the previous section as being full of condemnation. If you aren't perfect, you are nothing. But he isn't saying that. The last section was intended to convince us to reject compromise and take our own sin seriously. Often the only sin many of us are interested in taking seriously is other people's. Somebody once said, "We all expect ourselves to be saved by grace and everyone else to be saved by works." What he meant was we all treat our own sin like it's no big deal and everyone else like everything little thing is worth condemning them.

To counter this tendency, James concludes this section with a reminder of one more attribute of the world that we need to reject: condemnation.

Condemnation is a word that is often misunderstood. If we are going to reject it, we had better know what it is we are supposed to be rejecting. Romans 8:1 says, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ." Some think that this means Christians should never feel bad about past or present sin. That is not the case at all. In John 16:8, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit "will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, but doesn't condemn. There is a big difference between conviction and condemnation. Conviction says "You made a mistake." Condemnation says "You are a mistake."

James isn't saying that sin doesn't matter, or that we should condone the sin we see. But we are supposed to resist the urge to condemn. We are supposed to hate the sin, love the sinner. Often we use the horribleness of the sin as a reason to hate and exclude the sinner. We need to remember that we were shown mercy and therefore need to show mercy as well.

James concludes by saying that we will be judged by the standard we use on others. This repeats something Jesus himself said. In Matthew 7:1-3, Jesus says, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you."

The last phrase of this passage is probably the most important. If we get nothing else, we should get this: Mercy triumphs over judgment. Mercy = not getting a bad thing we do deserve. Judgment = getting the just punishment for what we have done. The promise of Jesus is that through him God's mercy triumphs over judgment. We should strive to live out this truth. As we have been shown mercy, we should show mercy to others.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What categories do we divide people into? What does favoritism look like in our world?
2. How can we discern when we are judging people with evil motives? What are some evil motives we use to judge others?
3. What excuses do we give for compromising with sin? What are some “respectable sins” that we often tolerate in the church?
4. How can we take sin seriously while still rejecting condemnation?
5. What does “mercy triumphs over judgment” mean?

## Faith and Works

### James 2:14-26

There is a famous comedy sketch by a British group that involves a man trying to return a parrot to a pet store. The customer wants his money back because the parrot was dead before the man bought it. The store owner proceeds to provide what he thinks are reasonable explanations, not for why he sold a dead parrot but for why the parrot is actually alive. Every proof the customer gives to the parrot's death, the owner responds with a counterargument trying to show the parrot is alive despite all evidence. Some of the explanations given include: he's resting, he's stunned, he's tired and shagged out following a prolonged squawk.

It's humorous in a comedy sketch to watch people argue something is alive despite all evidence to the contrary. But we do the same sometimes with our faith. We pretend that all that matters is our sincerity or a previous commitment made years ago. When someone points out the absence of any sign of life with regards to a person's faith, people sometimes get offended and cry out "who are you to judge what is in a person's heart?"

But the truest sign of what is in someone's heart isn't what comes out of their mouth but what comes out of their lives. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 7:20-21 "you shall know them by their fruits. Not everyone who *SAYS* to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who *DOES* the will of My Father who is in heaven. (Italics added for emphasis)" It is true that we don't know what is going on in a person's heart. Because of that, we are told not to be judges condemning others. But Jesus does tell us to be fruit inspectors, looking for proof of what kind of a tree a person is by looking at what kind of fruit it produces.

Jesus gives us an example of doing this in Revelation 3:1. He tells the Church at Sardis: "I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." Proof of who someone really is, is not their reputation, nor their words, but their deeds.

That is what James has been driving at for the last chapter or so. At the end of chapter 1, He called us to be more than just hearers of the word. People who only hear "delude themselves" (James 1:22). They think they know who they are, but they don't. He then told us real relationship with God is demonstrated by our speech, our service, and our setting ourselves apart from the world. After starting chapter 2 by showing us what rejecting worldliness looks like, James now once again returns to challenging us to think deeply about what it means to say we have faith.

This section of James starts with a scandalous statement: "if someone says he has faith but he has no works, can that faith save him?" It is often controversial because of the supposed tension between faith and works. The main verse that is easy to take out of context is v.24: "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." This verse seems to teach that faith is something you earn through good works.

The first step in resolving this (or any) scriptural problem is to look at a larger context. We shouldn't treat Bible verses like pearls that we can admire individually and string them on a necklace. They are more like links in a chain; they connect to things before and after. The easiest way to misunderstand any verse is to read it outside of its context. Conversely, the starting place for understanding any verse is to put it back in its context.

The rest of scripture clearly teaches that salvation is something that cannot be earned. The clearest statement comes in Ephesians 2:8-9 where Paul writes: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

It is important to realize that James isn't saying works are required to EARN salvation. Works are required as EVIDENCE of salvation. It's a simple case of cause and effect. James isn't saying the cause of our works produces the effect of saving us. He is saying that the cause of us being saved has the effect of producing good works in us. If the effect isn't present, maybe the cause isn't either. Hard words but necessary for us to hear.

Our society encourages us to treat religion like it's something individual people do with their spare time. We live in a world that thinks of faith as something private, or personal. What it ends up becoming is something people treat as a hobby. We list it on our profile pages alongside favorite sports, and favorite food. I like baseball, tacos, and Jesus. James challenges us to think about faith not as something private but something that is lived out loud, something that has a radical impact on us and the world around us.

### **Faith is More Than Nice Words – v.15-17**

James paints a picture of someone's words not matching up with their actions. If someone says they help the poor but all they do is wish them well, do they really help the poor? To discover the truth about what someone claims we look to the person's actions.

James isn't saying words, ideas, or sentiments are unimportant. Words do matter. One of the worst lies that we tell children was "stick and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." We live in a society that frequently doesn't take words seriously. The ancients did, though. They knew that words had real power to do good and evil. That is why they took blessing and cursing seriously.

The right words can be a good indicator of the state of our soul. Jesus said that way we say are an indicator of what's inside. In Luke 6:46, He says, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart."

But faith that stops here is futile. Faith is more than simply saying right sounding words.

### **Faith is More Than Right Beliefs – vv.18-20**

The next misunderstanding of faith is that it involves having correct beliefs. James gives a vivid example of the pointlessness of belief not put into action. He says that even the demons believe in God. They even have correct knowledge of who God is. Demons are good monotheists. But that belief does them no good.

Again, like in the previous section, James isn't saying having correct belief is a bad thing. In the same way that we don't take words seriously enough, sometimes we don't take having correct belief serious enough. Maybe because we have heard stories about events in the past or have encountered people in the present who are always labeling people "heretics" and condemning them based on some small detail of theology that we have never heard about. A comedian once quipped that a lot of religious persecution boils down to someone saying, "See that guy over there that believes 99% the same things as me...I'm gonna kill him." We focus on minor differences instead of major common ground. Such action makes having correct belief the whole of faith. If you don't have it exactly right, they you have it all wrong.

Correct belief isn't the whole of faith, but it is fuel on which faith runs. The more you know about God, the better you will be able to serve Him and live your life. That is why Christianity has always proclaimed truth and corrected error. Paul says in Romans 10:14 "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" In Acts 17:17, Paul tells the Athenians, "what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you."

Correct belief is a stop along the road of Biblical maturity, but it is not the destination. Stopping here leaves one with a faith that is still futile.

### **Faith is Belief in Action – vv. 21-26**

Faith includes everything previously discussed. But unless it produces works, it is not real faith. But why? Why can't saying or believing the right things be enough? Because action is proof that the words and beliefs have penetrated deeply into your soul.

You live out what you believe. It's just that what you believe might be different from what you say you believe. The things you do are the surest indicator of what you truly believe. If you are unwilling to live according to what you say you believe, then there is a good chance that you don't really believe it.

What you count on and are willing to base your life on is what you really believe. That is why one of the best definitions of faith is simply "trust." If you are worried you are using the word "faith" correctly, just replace it with the word "trust" and see if it still makes sense.

So what does it mean to "live out what you believe?" What are the good works that we will end up doing if our faith is alive in us? James uses two examples of people who showed they had faith by living it out: Abraham and Rahab. The two examples James gives show us what faith in action looks like:

### **Faith Submits to God: Abraham & Isaac – vv. 21-24**

In Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his long-awaited son Isaac. No doubt Abraham didn't understand, but he acted on what he knew God had commanded him to do, even when it didn't make sense. In doing so, Abraham demonstrated his faith by showing he relied on God instead of himself.

So many times, we treat the Good News of scripture like it's just good advice. We take what God says under advisement. If it seems good, and reasonable, and safe, and profitable, then we decide to do it. Abraham shows us that faith submits...even when it doesn't understand....even when it doesn't have all the answers... even when you don't see why. Abraham shows us that when you trust, you are willing to submit.

### **Faith Risks for God: Rahab & the Spies – vv. 25-26**

The second example James gives of faith in action is Rahab. In Joshua 2, we are told that Rahab was a harlot in Jericho who hid the Hebrews who came to spy out the land. She didn't know much about God but she demonstrated how firmly she believed that the God of Israel was the true and powerful God when she hid the spies sent into Jericho and sent them out of the city by a safer route.

The story of Rahab shows us that faith takes risks for God. Life is full of dangers. It can seem to be more difficult for people trying to live for God in a world hostile to what they believe. It always seems easier to just blend in and go with the flow. Rahab reminds us that real faith risks things for God because it knows that the safest place to be is in the center of God's will.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the tension between faith and works? What is James talking about and how is it different than telling people they have to earn their salvation by doing good works?
2. How is faith more than correct belief? How can we make correct belief important without making it the end goal?
3. What does Abraham's life show us about faith that submits? How do we sometimes resist submitting to God?
4. What does Rahab's story show us about faith being willing to risk? How do we sometimes try to avoid risking for God?

## Speech Problems

### James 3:1-12

Trials have a way of making our faith go underground. We look for safe spaces to hunker down and survive. The problem is that when we start to hide our faith and attempt to blend in, we end up compromising in areas where our faith conflicts with our culture. James writes his letter to encourage Christians to stay faithful in the midst of trials and to live out what they believe. At the end of chapter 1, he closed with an exhortation to be doers of the word and not just hearers who delude themselves. One aspect of being a doer of the word that James highlights is to be careful with what we say. James 1:26 says, “If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless.” James equates not being able to control your speech with deceiving yourself.

Here in chapter 3, James develops this idea more fully in order to help us address this problem. This is an issue we either downplay or avoid talking about. But truth be told, we all often had bad cases of “foot in mouth” disease. Open mouth, insert foot, chew vigorously. Sometimes we don’t know the situation, sometimes we say careless things, sometimes we are misunderstood. We excuse ourselves by saying that others are overreacting, or that we didn’t mean it, or we try to take things back. But in reality, we are often hurt by other people’s words as much as we pretend that our words don’t hurt other people.

Like ringing a bell, or dropping a plate, words once spoken are hard to reverse. The ancients knew this; they had a deep and developed sense of the power of words. They knew words were powerful and seem to have a life of their own. They saw both the good and bad side of this. They really believed in the power of blessing and cursing. Everyone has the power to send words out into the world to do real good or real harm.

Powerful speech is a part of the image of God on us. Some think that it’s the most important part of us. One of the chief attributes of God is that He speaks. Think of Genesis 1. How does God create the world? He speaks it into existence. He says words, and things happen. Think of how Jesus is described in John 1. He is the Word of God to us.

Because God is perfect and holy and loving, what He says brings life. Because we are created in God’s image, our words have power as well. Because we are fallen and broken, what we say is a bit of a mixed bag of life and death. James isn’t trying to get us all to shut up. He wants us to see the great power of words and realize what they reveal about their speaker and submit even our tongue to the lordship of Jesus.

James starts his discussion on speech with a reminder of the seriousness of words. We live in a world that constantly bombards us with words. We see them everywhere. We hear them constantly. They are so ubiquitous that we often devalue them. We say things like “talk is cheap.” But James reminds us that though it is easy to fill the air with words, we need to realize that speaking is actually serious business.

James frames his exhortation in terms of teachers. He isn’t telling people not to become teachers. The church needs teachers. He is telling people to take talking seriously. When we communicate, especially when we communicate the truths of God, we are engaged in a serious business with real consequences.

In Matthew 12:36, Jesus told his followers, “But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.” The purpose of this reminder is for us to take talking seriously and avoid careless, idle, empty speech. I heard a wise old man once say, “Never talk...unless what you have to say is more important than silence.” That might be extreme, but it is at least a corrective to the tendency many people have of filling silence with their nervous and thoughtless rambling.

### **Your Tongue is a Rudder: Words are powerful – vv. 2-5**

James goes on to say that words are more than serious, they are powerful. James, speaking hyperbolically, says that we all stumble, but if someone is able to bridle his tongue, that person is as good as perfect. James is saying that the origin and beginning of most of our sin is our mouths. With it we start huge problems and with it we can avoid them.

He gives 2 examples of how small things guide the paths of larger things. A bit weighs a fraction of the horse's weight and is a relatively small piece of equipment. Put it in the horse's mouth and you can lead it wherever you want to go. Also, a rudder is very small compared to the rest of the ship. But if you control the rudder, you can guide the ship wherever you want.

The tongue is like that. It's small but powerful. Focus on controlling it and you will end up steering the rest of your life in a new direction as well.

### **Your Tongue is a Fire: Words are dangerous – vv. 6-8**

James started by getting us to take words seriously. He then reminded us that words are powerful. He now moves to the core of his exhortation: words are dangerous. Though James speaks of the tongue like it is a part of the body distinct from us and out of our control, we must not be lulled into thinking that there is nothing we can do about it. The tongue is a symbol of our own sinfulness. The extent to which you have trouble controlling your tongue is the extent to which there is sin that needs to be dealt with in your life.

Think of the ways we excuse our flippant speech or even the ways in which we are undisciplined or thoughtless about what we say. "It's no big deal" or "I'm sorry; I just have a short fuse." Look at the words James uses to describe the tongue: the very world of iniquity, defiles the entire body, sets your life on fire, is set on fire by hell, restless evil, and full of deadly poison. If James had just used the adjectives and made you guess at what he was describing, would you have said "the tongue?" The fact that most of us wouldn't shows how real the problem is. We have made peace with and excused and disregarded something that is a primary conduit of evil into our lives and through us into the world.

### **Your Tongue is a Well: Words are Revealing – vv. 9-12**

The last step in James's exhortation regarding speech is regarding the revelatory power of words.

James warns against playing games. Many people have two vocabularies, the one they use for God and church and another they use for other people. They will bless God and with the same mouth will curse their fellow man.

What you say reveals what is in your heart. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." What comes out of your mouth is an indicator of what is inside you. If you are carrying a cup of coffee and something bumps you, coffee spills out over the edge. We like to pretend that words said in the heat of the moment or under duress aren't indicators of who we really are. But perhaps they are. Squeeze a tube of toothpaste, and what's inside comes out. Our words show us what is inside us. When life bumps us or squeezes us, what comes out is an indicator of what is inside.

As CS Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding."

We are great at putting on facades to hide what is really inside. Our words, especially the words we say under stress, reveal the true nature of our hearts.

## **APPLICATION:**

So what are we supposed to do about it? James isn't trying to crush us under a burden of performance-based righteousness. He isn't trying to guilt us into being good enough, or shame us into shrugging our shoulders and walking away saying "I guess my life is on fire, my soul is full of salt water, it's all my fault and there is nothing I can do about it."

I think there are some things that we can do in response to the challenge of this passage:

1. **Take the Test** – I think the first thing James wants us to do is to take the test and use our words to diagnose what is going on in our soul. We sometimes wonder what is wrong with our lives. Well, listen to the things that come out of your mouth. What do they indicate? Are you full of complaining or comparison or anger or jealousy or greed? What do you talk about most? Again, don't beat yourself up, or excuse; just diagnose. Use your words as symptoms of your heart problem. What do you see?
2. **Take it Seriously** – James spends most of his time trying to convince us that words have power. We need to heed his exhortation. Take seriously the power words have to bring life or death, to bless or curse. This isn't a call to scrutinize every word everyone says all the time to make sure they are speaking theologically or politically correct. It simply means to be intentional about the words we use and to practice choosing them carefully for the purpose of blessing others. In Ephesians 4:29, Paul writes, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear."
3. **Take Steps** - I think James also intends for us to take steps in trying to tame our tongues. The tongue indicates what is in the heart. But James also suggests that what we talk about has way of training our hearts as well. In Philippians 2:14, Paul says, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." He isn't saying that its only to grumble as long as you do it in your heart and not out loud. He is saying that if we will take steps to force ourselves to keep from grumbling with our lips, we will find ourselves complaining less in our hearts.
4. **Take it to God** – Perhaps the most overlooked verse in this passage is verse 8, "But no one can tame the tongue." It's dangerous, it produces death, it needs to be controlled. But you cannot do it. James isn't saying that we need to give up. He is trying to get us realize that we cannot do it on our own. We need divine help. We need to pray the words of Psalm 141:3 which says, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips." Learning to rely on God for strength and help is essential. Lean on yourself and you will fail. Lay it before His feet, and see if He doesn't help you reign in your tongue and start doing good with your words.

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do we sometimes excuse our inability to control our tongues? What justification do we give when we hurt people with our careless words?
2. What part of James's critique of our speech is hardest for you to hear? Why?
3. How does our society not take words seriously?
4. How can we use words to diagnose our heart?
5. How can we take our words seriously without falling into guilt or condemnation? How can we learn to take our speech problems to Jesus?

# Seeking Wisdom and Righteousness

## James 3:13-18

In the last election cycle, a term was developed that has since gained traction, the idea of “fake news.” Because of the internet, it is easy for anyone to gain an audience. It is easy to find websites that support just about anything. Everyone thinks that everyone they disagree with is fake news. Arguments, quarrels, condemnation, and anger prevail. In the midst of all the noise, how do you know which voice to listen to?

In the previous section, James started this discussion about controlling what we say by talking about teachers. Evidently, the early church had problems with people thinking they knew stuff when they didn't. People were always squabbling, complaining, and fighting with each other over minor things. Groups were trying to show that they were the correct group to follow and that they possessed the true wisdom. Paul records a similar problem in the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1-3. The church had broken into rival competing factions based on who their leader was.

It is good to know that this problem is nothing new. We live in a world where everyone thinks they are an expert. Everyone knows what everyone else should do. We are eager to give other people our opinions but we rarely are willing to listen. When we are the givers of wisdom, we don't understand why people don't readily accept our obviously correct assessment of things. When we receive other people's pontification, we are all too eager to tell them what they can do with their supposed wisdom.

How do you know who to listen to? What is the sign of true wisdom? How do we know when we are actually professing wise things instead of just adding to the noise? James responds by describing two kinds of wisdom.

### **The Starting Point of True Wisdom – v.13**

James is going to go into great detail about the difference between true and false wisdom. But he starts with giving the ultimate sign to help determine the difference. It's simple. It goes back to Jesus and it runs through all of James: “you will know them by their fruit.” Look at the kind of people the adherents to a particular set of “wisdom” looks and acts like. You will see whether their wisdom is real. James gives two specific tell-tale signs: behavior and attitude. Those who are wise demonstrate that they have attained true wisdom by not being so quarrelsome.

Quarrelsomeness only serves to demonstrate the absence of true wisdom. The mark of wisdom is good behavior and deeds done in gentleness.

- Wisdom produces Good Deeds – wisdom isn't just about ideas. Ideas lead to actions. Ideas have consequences. If a person espousing supposed wisdom doesn't demonstrate the result of good deed, walk away. It's not real.
- Wisdom produces a Gentle Spirit – Wisdom is supposed to change you. It's supposed to change your behavior, but it also supposed to change your heart. James tells us to look at what a person claiming to be wise does. He also says to look at “how” a person does his good deeds. Gentleness is the sign. We often look down on gentleness and exalt people who “get stuff done.” We think gentleness is weak or wishy-washy. Gentleness isn't weakness. A weak person doesn't have to be commanded to be gentle. Gentleness is a virtue when a person is strong and has the opportunity to use that strength to run over people. Gentleness is power under control. Gentleness is a sign of confidence in what one believes and a sign of love towards the one you are telling it to.

## **The Mark of False Wisdom – vv. 14-16**

If the wisdom you claim to have manifests itself in dividing people and causing quarrels, then you are not wise at all. The root of this false wisdom is pride. Many people, when they begin to increase in knowledge, become very prideful and arrogant about it. They consider those who do not know what they know or who do not hold the same views as them as ignorant or stupid. They think that this new knowledge privileges them to special treatment and when they do not get it they come jealous, bitter, and ambitious.

### **Attributes of False Wisdom:**

- **Earthly** – Earthly means it set on things this world values like success, wealth, privilege, and popularity. It bears the stamp of this world. We are told in Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Earthly wisdom follows the world’s pattern, it shaped by the world’s mold, is set on seeking the things the world seeks: pleasure, possession, and position. It has the appearance of wisdom, but it is false.
- **Natural** – False wisdom is also natural. The word literally means “devoid of the spirit.” It is the kind of action or attitude that comes naturally to sinful people. So many times our society tells us to “do what comes naturally.” What such thinking doesn’t take into consideration is that our desires and inclinations are broken by sin. What seems natural or normal to us is often the thing that produces death. No one chooses sin because they like evil. They choose sin because it seems good, it seems natural. But we are deceived. We should be deeply suspicious when the wisdom we are willing to accept happens to always agree with what we want to do.
- **Demonic** – We often equate “natural” with “normal,” so to make sure we don’t miss the point, James adds a further adjective to describe false wisdom that cuts right to the heart of the matter. It is demonic. Just like our tongue, which James told us is set on fire by hell, so too, this wisdom which seems so comfortable and natural on the earth has infernal origins. James says this not to condemn his enemies but to keep us from accepting an uneasy compromise with false wisdom. Sometimes we allow quarrelsome people in our midst because they “get stuff done.” James wants us to realize where such wisdom comes from and where it leads (“disorder and every evil thing,” v.16)

## **The Sign of Wisdom from Above – v. 17**

Turning from false wisdom, James tells us how to spot the real thing. Before he gives its attributes, notice what James calls it. Not true wisdom, but wisdom from above. True wisdom doesn’t originate in us. Man is a conduit for wisdom not its source. Real wisdom comes from God. James lists 8 attributes that are signs of this true wisdom which comes from above:

- **Pure** – True wisdom is free from moral or spiritual defect. Its motives are on the side of truth not on the side of personal advancement.
- **Peaceable** – True wisdom does not start quarrels but rather seeks to unite. It doesn’t beat people with the truth but rather seeks to use the truth to reconcile and restore people to each other and to God.
- **Gentle** – True wisdom is motivated by concern for the other person and therefore proceeds caringly. Like a doctor, the wise person does what he has to even if the other person does not like it, but he does so out of concern for the other person.
- **Reasonable** – True wisdom isn’t concerned about being right all the time. It will listen and be persuaded by convincing arguments.

- Full of mercy and good fruits – Truth can be hard to accept. We all have baggage. We all build walls. True wisdom cuts people slack and shows people mercy. It doesn't beat them up with their mistakes or ignorance.
- Unwavering – True wisdom does not change with the tide of public opinion. It is committed to the truth despite threats, bribes, condemnation, or persecution.
- Without hypocrisy – True wisdom treats everybody the same. It holds itself to the same standard as everyone else.

### **The Final Test of Wisdom: The Means Determines the End – v. 18**

James ends where he begins. You will know them by their fruit. James says the true goal of wisdom is righteousness. We aren't just trying to know things but to live better. That is what righteousness means: to live rightly, to live the way God intended, in right relationship with Him and with others and with the world. That is the goal. Any wisdom that doesn't aim at righteousness isn't real wisdom. The seeds of anger and quarrelling cannot grow into the fruit of righteousness and harmony. The end doesn't justify the means. We cannot achieve righteousness using means that are contrary to the end. If we are to achieve righteousness, we must proceed with peace and mercy.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Have you ever been bewildered by the conflicting voices you heard about some issue? How do you decide whom to listen to?
2. Have you ever known somebody who seemed to be saying true things but whose life produced quarrels and division?
3. What does it mean that false wisdom is earthly? natural? demonic? How can we resist such wisdom?
4. How do we sometimes miss true wisdom? How do we spot true wisdom?
5. How can we make sure we try to seek true wisdom? What does it mean that the goal of wisdom is righteousness?

# The Source of and Solution to Quarrels

## James 4:1-10

The book of James assumes things aren't going right. It is written to people who have most likely been forced to go on the run for what they believed. Now they just want to settle down and enjoy a quiet, peaceful existence. But trials, conflict, and difficulty have a way of finding you no matter what. So James writes his letter to help his readers "stay faithful" when it would be easier to become discouraged and give up, or blend in and go with the flow. He started by telling us to consider it all joy when we find ourselves in hardships because we know that in the midst of them, God is at work to make us into who He created us to be. He has encouraged us to resist temptation. He has shown us what real service to God looks like. He has challenged us to reject worldliness.

The last couple of lessons have been internal in nature, about life among believers. It started with talking about teachers and turned into a discussion about taming the tongue. He moved from words to wisdom and described what real wisdom, the kind of wisdom that comes from above, looks like. He now transitions to a tough internal topic: quarreling. If a trial is something that hits an individual or group from the outside, a quarrel is something that causes division among people previously united.

Have you ever tried to break up a fight? Maybe an argument among coworkers? Maybe between former friends? You come across two people at each other's throats. As you wade into the situation you realize that the actual thing that caused the specific argument you are dealing with seems so minor and insignificant that you can't figure out why everyone is so upset. Then someone brings you up to speed. This specific fight is a part of a larger unresolved conflict. It is a symptom of a much larger problem. Sometimes it's hard to trace how it all began. Sometimes the feeling "that" you don't like someone endures even after the reason "why" you don't like someone has been forgotten. And so life continues in a state of low-grade tension and animosity waiting for the next flashpoint.

The bad news is situations as described above are far too common. The good news is that because it is nothing new, other people have had to deal with the situation. In fact, that is where the book of James turns to next. James addresses the source of these quarrels and shows us how to deal with them. The words he uses for "quarrels and conflicts" actually mean "wars and battles." So when James says "quarrel" he doesn't just mean disagreements or arguments, but rather the constant friction of people at war with each other, ongoing unresolved tension between people and groups. This isn't about disagreeing with someone or even confronting someone. It is about addressing the unchangeable and immovable animosity that finds its way into people's relationships. Is there someone like that in your life? Someone you just don't like or get along with? Someone you resent or despise? I bet you have good reason for continuing to nurse your anger and perpetuating the quarrel. James calls all of us out and tells us to look at ourselves, not the other party. He calls us to address the source of quarrels within our own souls. He then shows us the way out of them.

### **The Source of Quarrels – v. 1b-6**

- **Evil Desire v. 1b-2a** "Is not the source your pleasures...You lust and do not have..."

- o The first thing James says causes fights is the brokenness of our own desires. We desire wrong things. We see things that others have and wish we had them. We are jealous of what others have and therefore try to take it away or to get it for ourselves. Or we become resentful of what others have because we feel like they don't deserve or appreciate it, but we do. We want, and when we can't have, we seek to make sure no one else can have it either. The evil comes from our desire not from the thing itself. When we see the good things that God has created and think that they can bring us happiness or fulfillment. In 1 John 2:16, John categorizes the typical things we wrongly desire into "the lust of the

flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life.” We often think our lives would be better if we had specific pleasures (lust of the flesh), or with acquiring certain possessions (lust of the eyes), or with an elevated position over other people (boastful pride of life). When we don’t have them, we get upset. When we see others with things we desire or feel like we deserve, we hate and quarrel.

- Wrong Motives v2b-3

- o Don’t Envy, Ask God – v. 3: “You do not have because you do not ask...”

- The Bible is full of bold statements regarding God and His willingness to bless His people. In Matthew 7:7. Jesus told his disciples, “Ask and it will be given to you.” In Philippians 4:6, Paul’s says, “Let your requests be made known to God.” There is nothing wrong with asking. So instead of settling down into jealousy and resentment directed towards our neighbors, James tells us to start by submitting our requests to God.

- o Don’t Get Angry at God, Analyze Yourself – “you do not receive, because...”

- Sometimes we think, “I asked God and He didn’t do what I asked; therefore I have a right be to upset at God or jealous of my neighbor.” But there is a difference between asking and telling. Asking God means submitting to his wisdom. James says that we do not receive because we ask with wrong motives. The full statement from Matthew 7 concludes with the statement that God knows how to “give what is good to those who ask Him” God knows how to give good gifts to His children so we can be sure that if we lack something it is because God does not want us to have it. It is pointless and even harmful to try to obtain something apart from God. Often times, God withholds good things from us because we want them for the wrong reasons. In the midst of rejection or refusal, we need to be willing to analyze our own motives and submit to the wisdom and love of God.

- Friendship With The World – vv. 4-5

- o Hate the World, But Love the World – James says that the source of our wrong motives is our friendship with the world, because friendship with the world is the same as hostility towards God. It is important to remember that the Bible uses the word “world” in two distinct ways. The “world” doesn’t mean the stuff God created. God loves that world and expects us to love it too. The “world” in a negative sense means all the ways sin has twisted the stuff God created. That is why the same author can say in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world” and in 1 John 2:15 write, “Do not love the world...”,

- o Friendship is Adultery – James refers to our friendship with the world as adultery. It might sound extreme or hyperbole, but it is pretty appropriate. The sinful world is dedicated to something different than God is. More than that, it is dedicated to something in direct opposition with what God is trying to do. God saves what sin breaks. To love the world is to love destroying things. When said that way, you see how it can be categorized as hostility towards God. If you are embracing the world’s attitude and approach to things, you are hurting God’s purposes.

## **The Solution to Quarrels – vv. 6-10**

James ends the previous section with some harsh words. He does so not to condemn us but to get us to take it seriously. We are at war with each other. Getting what you want or getting the other person to do what you want won’t solve the problem. What we need is to see the real source of our quarrels. So he speaks directly to the issue: our friendship with the world. He now turns to showing us the solution. He shows us what God does, and he calls us to take action as well.

- Realize What God Does – v.6 –

- o *He Doesn’t Give Up: “He jealously desires the spirit which He made ... in us...”* – This verse is difficult because James claims to be quoting scripture, but we don’t really know what scripture he is quoting.

No verses match this quote exactly. It's also complicated by being difficult to translate from Greek into English. Different versions have wildly different translations, but The New American Standard Bible comes closest with "He jealousy desires the spirit which He has made to dwell in us." The most likely solution is that James is paraphrasing an idea revealed in countless Old Testament passages that all refer to God's jealous love and tireless devotion to His people. The point is that even when we are faithless towards God, God stays faithful to us. He never gives up on us.

o *He Helps Us: v.6b* "He gives a greater grace..." –

God does more than just stay loyal to us. He gives us grace to help us overcome our sinful selves. Sometimes people like to say that James emphasizes works over faith, but that is not the case. James emphasizes that faith should produce works, but he never says that we have to do what God promises to do. Here is the proof. James tells us that God gives us grace greater than our sin, greater than our rebellion, greater than the world.

• Realize What He is Calling You to Do – vv.7-10 – God acts first. He also calls us to act in response to who He is and what He is doing. James, after telling us what God does to solve our quarrels, shows us what we are called to do as well.

o *Submit to God* – A wise person once said, "The difference between me and God is God doesn't think He's me." We tend to think we are all the center of our own little universes. The solution to quarrels starts when we realize God is God and we are not. So we submit to him...we accept that what He says goes. This is a hard thing to do unless you believe in the love of God. That is why James places this command after talk of God's devotion to us and his grace for us. We are called to submit to God IN RESPONSE to who God has shown himself to be. What follows this verse aren't extra things we do after we submit to God. They are more like a list of what submitting to God looks like.

o *Resist the Devil* – Submitting to God means taking a stand against sin. This verse promises that if we stand up to the devil, he will flee from us. Normally, though, we are content to have him around. Someone once said, "Temptation most often enters through a door intentionally left open." We don't pursue sin, but we pretend we aren't responsible when it shows up in a part of life that we have left exposed to it. Take a stand. Decide you don't want sin in your life. That is a big part of what is involved in submitting to God

o *Draw Near* – This is another way of saying the same thing. Drawing near to God means wanting Him more than Sin. That is what "and He will draw near to you" really means. It doesn't mean that God doesn't act until we do. It means God doesn't force Himself into our lives. He isn't going to override our freedom. But just like sin takes any opening we give it. God will come flooding into our lives if we will give Him the same opening. Don't wait for God to come to you. He will. But don't sit and wait.

o *Repent* – James tells us to do more than choosing God over Sin. He calls us to reject our previous way of doing things. Sometimes we treat sin like it's something God doesn't like, so we had better not do it, even though we don't see why it's such a big deal. James tells us that we will never truly draw near to God until we see sin the way He does. So many times we treat sin like it's a huge credit card bill we rang up and now can't pay, so we look to God to pay our bill, but we don't want him to change our spending habits. We have begun to see our sin rightly when we desire to be free not just from the penalty of our sin but also from its power and presence in our life, when we mourn our sin and desire to be cleansed/purified from it.

o *Humble Yourself* – Submitting to God requires us to humble ourselves before Him. To realize that He is God and that we are not. We do this not so we can be humiliated or punished, but so that we can find our proper place in His kingdom. He wants us to humble ourselves, to draw near to him, to seek His kingdom, so that He can exalt us when the time is right. This idea is repeated in 1 Peter 5:6-7, which says, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper

time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” God is wise and has a plan. If we will submit to Him, He will exalt us when the time is right. And along the way, we need not worry or become jealous when things don’t seem to be working out. We can cast all our worries and fears upon Him, because He loves us.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever found yourself envious of someone else and ended up quarrelling with them? How do we blame others for our anger or envy? How can we learn to analyze our motives?
2. What does friendship with the world mean? How do we end up friends with the world? How do we get out of it?
3. What does it mean that God “jealously desires the spirit He made to dwell in us?” What does it mean that God “gives a greater grace?”
4. What is the difference between acting in response to what God has done and acting because we think it is all up to us?
5. What does drawing near to God mean? Why do you think James makes a point to mention resisting the devil? What is the goal of humbling ourselves before God?

# Living Humbly Means Not Condemning

## James 4:11-12

The previous lesson focused on the quarrels that plague all human relationships. It focused on how quarrels are caused by thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. After giving a series of things we can do to avoid quarrels with others, James ended with encouraging his readers to “humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord.” This phrase provides a perfect summary of everything James was trying to get us to understand. But as you might expect, James is imminently practical and doesn’t leave it there. He doesn’t leave us to wonder what “being humble” means or give us room to think abstractly about “humility” while still fighting with our neighbors. He looks at two specific areas where humility is required and gives us practical things to do to live out humility.

Before we delve deeper into those areas, it would be worthy reminding ourselves what humility actually is. Sometimes we think that being humble means having a low or negative view of ourselves. But humility doesn’t mean “thinking badly about yourself” or “having a poor view of yourself.” The ways in which we misunderstand humility only underscore how terrible and deeply entrenched humility’s opposite is.

The opposite of humility is pride, arrogance, self-centeredness. In *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis describes pride as a “spiritual cancer” that “eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.” He goes on to say, “According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”

It’s crazy. The chief sin at the root of all other sins is something we often excuse or justify in our lives. James has ended his previous section by saying rejecting Pride and embracing humility before God will enable us to avoid the quarrels and strife that characterize most of our lives. He now shows us how humility is lived out in our relationship to others and to our plans.

This first step in living humbly before God is to reject condemnation of others. Condemnation of others is a way that we all like to play God. James reminds us that humility means letting God be God. That means renouncing all the ways in which we like to play God.

### **The Problem of Judgementalism**

Along with the quarrels that were occurring in many of the churches to whom James was writing, the people were taking it upon themselves to decide whether other Christians were living the way they were supposed to be. This was especially apparent between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jews thought the Gentiles were not obeying the Torah and therefore were condemning them as not really following God as they ought. Gentiles were responding with similar frustration over the Jewish Christians’ continued devotion to the old covenant. This was nothing new in the Christian church. Trying to figure out the relationship between the law and freedom took some working out. Paul deals with it in numerous places including Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8, and Colossians 3.

### **What “Law” Is He Talking About?**

People have wondered what law James is referring to here. Is he referring to the Old Testament ceremonial and dietary laws, or something more ethical in nature like the Ten Commandments, or even a list of the sayings of Jesus? The easiest answer is to let James speak for himself. James 2:8 says “If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.” So, the law that James is referring to is from a verse in the Old Testament which is repeated by Jesus as the thing which summarizes the whole purpose of the law.

## **Why Do You Love Yourself?**

We are called to love others, and to do so in a specific way, in the same way that you love yourself. Have you ever asked yourself “Why and How do you love yourself?” It seems like an important question to answer, otherwise you won’t be able to love others correctly. First, Why? Why do you love yourself? Not because you are a good person. Most of us know that we continue to fall into sin, even if we manage to keep that fact hidden from other people. We love ourselves not because of anything we have done but because of who we are. And how do we love ourselves? One of the chief things we do is to give ourselves a lot of slack. Someone once said that we all expect ourselves to be saved by grace and everyone else to be saved by works.

## **Why is Judgmentalism Bad?**

Some people may wonder why James is making a big deal about judgement. “Don’t right and wrong matter?” they ask. “Isn’t righteousness important?” “Shouldn’t we take sin seriously.” All of these the Bible answers with a clear “yes.” Before we move on, it’s important to clarify what judgment means and to make some distinctions.

- **Judging Others Means Condemning** – When the Bible talks about not judging, it doesn’t mean we should stop evaluating the ideas or actions of people. In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus utters his famous teaching that begins with “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.” What most people fail to realize is that this passage ends with Jesus saying, “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” Evidently, he is expecting his followers to be discerning about who we engage with, and when, and how. The only way this is possible is if we are making some sort of value judgements. What is being forbidden by these passages is condemnation. We aren’t supposed to think that we know the whole story or what is going on is someone’s heart or head. The first kind of judgement is more like assessing the situation and is an essential part of wisdom. The kind of judgment Jesus and James are decrying might more accurately be called judgmentalism and is actually condemnation.
- **Judging Others Means Judging God** – The reason James gives for not judging is both interesting and a little hard to understand. He says “He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law.” This statement might startle some people because those who feel most justified in being judgmental often do so because they are eager to defend and enforce the law of God. How does an enforcer of the law end up being someone who is actually judging the law? Because God hasn’t called you to be an enforcer, he doesn’t need you to do His job for him. He calls each of us to obey Him. Our relationship with others is supposed to be characterized by love. When we don’t treat other people with the love God calls us to show Him, what we are saying, whether we admit it or not, is that this law of God doesn’t apply to me. We are saying the law of God and God himself are weak and need defenders. We become a law unto ourselves and decide what is right and wrong for how we treat others. We have decided the law of God isn’t good enough. Do you see now how judging others turns out to be a judgement on God and His law? There is only one lawgiver and judge... and you aren’t Him, and neither am I. God has taken care of making the laws. He can take care of judgement as well. The only thing He asks of us is to love each other.

## **The Solution to Judgmentalism**

- **Let God be God** – Earlier, in James 1:20, we were told that “the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” When we try to do God’s job, we do a bad job. Our anger, even our righteous anger, doesn’t achieve the righteousness in ourselves or others that God requires. The same with our judgment. We need to let God be God. He doesn’t need any help. He doesn’t need anybody to fill the position of vice-God.

- Let Others Answer to God – Paul says in Romans 14:4 “Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” When we condemn others we are setting ourselves over them as their superior. We need to realize that every one of us answers to God first and directly. We need to give people the room to do business with God without interposing ourselves as an extra layer of “quality control” for God.
- You Do You – We like to condemn other people’s sin while leaving our own sin alone. Not just that, we prefer condemning sins that we see in others but which we ourselves aren’t tempted toward, while at the same time excusing the sin we still struggle with. We need to remember Jesus’s words on judgementalism in Matthew 7:3-5, “Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” Each of us has enough baggage of our own to keep ourselves busy for quite a while. We would do well to get to work. Working with God and dealing with the sin in our own lives is enough to keep any of us busy for quite some time.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the difference between judgement and judgementalism? How do we tell the difference? Why do we often get them confused?
2. How is judgmentalism a sign of lack of humility?
3. What does “love your neighbor as yourself” mean? Why do you love yourself?
4. How is “love your neighbor as yourself” the fulfillment of the law?
5. How is our judgment of others actually a judgement of God and His law?

# Living Humbly Means Not Boasting

## James 4:13-17

For the bulk of chapter 4, James has been addressing internal strife within the church. He boils the problem down to the arrogance and self-centeredness of us all and calls us to humble ourselves before God (v. 10). Then, lest we think this is a very spiritual and therefore internal exercise, he gives us practical examples of areas where humility is necessary. The first was in condemning others. Arrogance manifests itself in our assumption that we think we know what everyone else's problem is. It leads us to condemn them as helpless and hopeless. It's more than judgement, it's judgmentalism. The humility James calls us to tells us to submit to God rather than trying to play God. This kind of humility realizes that none of us has all the answers and each of us has enough problems to keep us busy for a lifetime. It tells us to love our neighbor and leave the judgement up to God.

There is another kind of arrogance that James deals with next. If the last lesson dealt with humility's ability to deal with the condemnation we dish out to other people, this lesson is about the importance of humility to address the control we think we possess over our life.

We live in a world that perpetuates the myth of the "self-made man." We tell people to believe in the power of their dreams and the value of hard work. While vision and hard work are key ingredients for a successful life, they aren't the whole story. We think that there is no limit to what you can accomplish if you try hard enough and manage all the variables. Such thinking is arrogance and foolishness. The New Testament calls it boasting and tells us that it is a sign of a person who doesn't understand where he stands as part of a much larger story, a story not being written by himself but by God.

### **Problem: Misplaced Confidence, vv. 13-14**

Boasting is a failure to realize just how fragile and uncertain life is. It is misplaced confidence. We all have a drive to feel secure. We often, though, look for that security in the wrong places. Sometimes we look for it in others, or in wealth (which James will address next). When those things let us down, we sometimes default to relying too heavily on ourselves. Sometimes it's a product of our success. We think that somehow we are solely responsible for all that we have accomplished. James implores his readers to realize that such boasting in our own abilities or in our future plans is a prime example of the pride that God opposes. It's a pride that's ultimately rooted in ignorance. The proud person is blind to two things. There are two variables that we cannot control, two things that aren't up to us as much as we think: what will happen tomorrow, and what is the nature of human life.

James 4:13 paints the picture of this proud, foolish person by the utter confidence he places in his plans: "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.'"

It seems like a simple enough statement that we all have made countless times. It doesn't seem risky, or foolish, or all that boastful. The following verse, James 4:14, reveals the mistake at the core of this statement. Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."

No matter how reasonable or conservative a plan may sound, the boastful man makes two mistakes:

- **The Mistake About the Future:** "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow" – Tomorrow is uncertain to us. We cannot know what will happen tomorrow. We shouldn't not plan; instead, we should plan but allow for the possibility that our plans will be circumvented, or changed, or interrupted by the plan of God. When we think that we alone determine the course and path of our life we fall into the boastful ditch.

- Mistake About the Self: “You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” – The proud man also mistakes his own importance and significance. We do have importance. We are significant to God. But that significance comes from God. On our own, we are nothing. This fact is presented powerfully by Psalm 8, especially verses 3-5, which celebrate the magnitude of God and the triviality of man in comparison.

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,  
 The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;  
 What is man that You take thought of him,  
 And the son of man that You care for him?  
 Yet You have made him a little lower than God,  
 And You crown him with glory and majesty!

Notice how man shrinks to insignificance when compared to the greatness of God. Notice also, verse 5, where man regains his significance, not because of who he is in his own right, but because of what God has done. On our own we are nothing. But God puts us in a place just below him. God crowns us with glory and majesty. It almost reads like James 4:10 – “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” We need to realize that we are small before God. Our lives are like a mist. And we only find meaning, purpose, and greatness when we find them in God.

**Solution: Living Humbly Before God, vv. 15-16**

The solution to the arrogant mistakes we make about ourselves and our futures that manifest themselves in boasting is to live humbly before God. That sounds like a churchy spiritual Sunday school answer with little real-world application. Luckily, James show us how to live it out. James 4:15 “Instead, you ought to say...” Here comes the change in our thinking that we should manifest with our mouth.

Submit to God’s Plan v. 15 “If the Lord wills...”

Living humbly starts with realizing God has a plan. James isn’t calling us to jettison our brain or to forgo our own planning. He is simply saying that we should do our planning with the understanding the God himself is involved in this world. This isn’t some flippant, religious good luck phrase we are supposed to say at the beginning of anything. We are supposed to be constantly factoring into our equations the idea that God has an opinion about what is happening and has the right to intervene.

In the same way that bad ideas about ourselves or the future can lead to arrogance on our part, so too, bad ideas about God can make it difficult to submit to God’s plan. With that in mind, here are some helpful truths from scripture that can correct bad ideas and help us eagerly embrace and trust God’s plan.

1. Realize Your Plans Won’t Change His: God’s plans aren’t derailed. God is sovereign, which means that His plan is what happens. This fact is powerfully presented in Revelation 3:7, where Jesus describes himself as the one “who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens.” When we oppose God’s plan, we find ourselves in the position Paul found himself on the Damascus road when Jesus told him in Acts 26:14, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”
2. Realize God’s Plan is Rooted in Love for You: 1 Peter 5:6-7 says, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him,

because He cares for you.” God has a mighty hand. God has a plan (a proper time for everything). God also has a great deal of love for you. He isn’t trying to use his strength to bully you, or his wisdom to shame you. He wants you to realize that He cares for you deeply.

3. Realize His Plan is Better Than Yours: God is stronger than you, so His plan will prevail. Good news is that His plan is better than yours. His plan is for His glory and our good. In fact, His plan is all about taking all the garbage of this world and turning it into gold. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” God’s plan is the undermining of all the evil of the world. It culminates in Revelation 21:4-5, which says, “‘He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”

Be Open to God’s Unexpected Interruptions v. 17 – Verse 17 sounds like a wonderful little nugget of wisdom. It is easy to see why many people wrench it out of context and use it as a general definition of what sin is. It would be a perfect plan, except for one word: “therefore.” “Therefore” connects what is about to be said with what has just been said. James’s discussion of knowing the right thing to do and not doing it relates to his discussion of God’s plan versus our plans. James is telling us that God’s plan has a way of intervening and interrupting our plans. We stubbornly kick against the way God is pushing us because we are trying to stick to the plan that we have adopted for ourselves. James is telling us to expect God’s plan to look differently than ours and when our plan gets interrupted by something we never conceived of for ourselves, it’s not just stubbornness to resist, it’s sin. James tells us to be aware of our tendency to want to stick to our plan, to not notice God’s call because it comes in a still, small voice, and we are distracted by the noise of our life. He wants us to be on the alert so that when the plan of God comes crashing unexpectedly into our lives we won’t be caught off guard or resist but eagerly get on board.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Why is it arrogance not to factor God’s will into the picture?
2. Have you had your life interrupted by something you never thought to plan for yourself?
3. Have you ever tried to stubbornly stick to one plan even though you felt God calling you in a different direction? Why?
4. How do our bad ideas about God keep us from fully trusting Him? How can we diagnose them and change them?
5. How can we maintain the balance of still planning for our future while staying open to God’s leading? How do we keep from being passive or arrogant?

# Living Humbly Means Not Loving Money

## James 5:1-6

Money is a sensitive subject, especially in the church. Raise the subject and tempers will flare. Sometimes the outrage is justified. Religion has been an easy front throughout history for wicked people to swindle desperate or gullible people out of money. But there is another source of outrage, too. Money very easily turns into a god for us. And when people start talking about our god, we become defensive.

The problem wouldn't be so bad if money weren't essential to our life. Not just that, money is a good thing. We need it as a means of acquiring other things. It becomes a bad thing when we make it the highest good. God is the only highest good. When we elevate something to that level, we end up relying on it instead of God. During the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:19-21,24, Jesus told his followers, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Like most sinful things, the problem isn't in the thing itself but in us. We take a good thing that God made and serve it instead of God, rely on it instead of God. In 1 Timothy 6:9-10, Paul warns of this possibility when he says, "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

So how do we walk the fine line between acquiring money and loving money? How do we accept the blessings of God and use them for His glory without loving it more than the God who gave it? How do we avoid being the rich man Jesus talks about in Luke 12, "who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God?"

That is where James turns next. Ever since James 4:10, where he tells us to humble ourselves before God, he has been showing us what living humbly looks like. He talked about how humility required us to abandon condemnation of our neighbors. He then moved on to talking about how humility is manifested in trusting God and not ourselves. He now turns to the love of money. Some people think that the rich in this passage are unbelievers who are victimizing people in the church. But that raises the issue of why James addresses people who aren't likely to ever read his letter. It is more reasonable to think that James is showing us what the love of money will do to you. It is something we are all tempted towards. So, his condemnation of the rich in this passage are best understood as a warning about what loving money will do to you and as a list of symptoms to help diagnosis when we start loving money more than God.

### **Loving Money Will Make You Hoard It, vv. 2-3**

The first symptom of loving money is hoarding. When people begin to acquire money, they first think it is a blessing, then they come to depend on it and feel like they deserve it. They see the money as for their own use and no one else's. Because when you start to love money, you begin to worry that you won't have enough. You feel you earned it and are entitled to it. But since you are loving it more than God, you are worried it might run out, so you try to hold onto as much of it as possible.

This is the situation in Luke 12. A rich man who has more than he needs:

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.

The rich man has full barns and doesn’t know what to do. He never even considered that God has given him more than he needs so that he can give to those who could use it. The man is so self-focused that he decides the best possible solution is to build bigger barns to hold all his wealth.

What is interesting is that you can love money without having a lot of it. Jesus is condemning both the rich man and the man who asks. In verse 15, He tells us to be on “guard against every form of greed.” The first broke man also thought money would be the solution to all his problems. Both he and the rich man were wrong. God wants us to depend on Him not on the blessings He bestows. Hoarding is a sign we love and are depending on our money more than God.

James 5:3 says that the rust on unused money will be a witness against you. We shouldn’t hold on to the things God has given us because we think we might need them one day, especially if we see a pressing need that we could participate in now. Perhaps God is trying to give us the blessing of being used by Him to answer someone else’s prayer. In 2 Corinthians 8:14-15, Paul says that this is precisely the reason God allows such inequalities, “at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack.” It gives those who have been blessed with a lot the joy of participating in the work of God to bless others. It also gives those who don’t have as much the joy of learning to cheerfully depend on God for all things.

#### **Loving Money Will Make You Cheat People, v. 4**

James goes on to point out a second characteristic of people who love money. Loving money will lead you to cheat people. James 5:4 says:

Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

People who are in love with their money will find ways of holding onto it at all costs. The example James gives is an employer withholding payment from the workers who labored in his fields. In ancient times, it was a requirement that workers be paid at the end of the day. Evidently some farmers withheld payment until the end of the harvest using a technicality of the law that the laborer shouldn’t be paid until the job was finished and the job wasn’t finished until the whole harvest had been brought in. James clearly has in mind Deuteronomy 24:14-15:

“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.”

Things might have changed with the advent of banks, and credit, and the bi-weekly pay period, but greed stays the same. People who love money do whatever they can do hold on to as much as they can. They look for ways out of fulfilling their financial obligations. They take advantage of others who are either vulnerable, or needy, or desperate, or naïve.

But James warns the greedy that God hears the cry of those who have been defrauded. He specifically calls God the Lord of Sabaoth. Sabaoth is often translated “hosts,” which is an archaic word that means “armies.” James is saying that when you take advantage of those who don’t have the power or strength or sense to fight back, you haven’t just wronged them, you have made an enemy the God who fights for the defenseless.

### **Loving Money Will Make You Self-indulgent, v. 5**

The third sign James gives that you love money is that you are living a self-indulgent life. James 5:5 says, “You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.”

“Fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” is an interesting phrase. It has two meanings. Perhaps the most obvious is the idea that their greed has made the rich person fattened like a calf, and God intends to judge them for their selfishness.

That is definitely part of the message that James intends, but there is more. This phrase also paints a powerful picture of what self-indulgence looks like. In the ancient world, before the advent of refrigeration, meat had to be salted or smoked in order to preserve it. It was traditional, therefore, on the “day of slaughter” to have the ancient equivalent of a barbeque and invite your neighbors to enjoy a feast of fresh meat. James is saying that these people have spent their life as if it was a “day of slaughter,” filling themselves with more than they needed and fattening themselves up instead of sharing with others.

Loving money will do that. 1 John 2:15-16 says “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” John says there are three things that characterize the sinful nature of the world. Two of them (the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes) are types of self-indulgence. To think that the point of life is to soak up all the experiences you can or acquire as many possessions you can is a self-indulgent way of living. James says that it is wrong.

God does bless us so that we can enjoy life. But to spend our lives focused on pleasures and possessions as the highest goal is to miss the point. Or to use James’s phrase, it is to fatten ourselves up enjoying life as if on a day of slaughter, only to discover that we are now the fattened calves and we are about to be slaughtered.

### **Application**

James’s condemnation of the rich is not intended to make us feel bad if we should happen to have money. It’s designed to show us the dangers of loving money. This is what we will become if we don’t heed his warnings. So how do we take the opposite road? Do we renounce whatever wealth we have? For some, if money is our god and it has become an obstacle to serving God, then perhaps God is calling you to do that like Jesus called the rich young ruler to do in Mark 10. But for most of us, if we want to see how to live humbly and trust God not money, all we need to do is to reverse or find the opposite of the three signs of loving money.

1. Trust God, Not Money – This is really the main point. Get this right and the rest will come naturally as the obvious response of a person who trusts God not money.
2. Be a Conduit of God’s Blessing – The opposite of hoarding is to give freely. This isn’t a call to be reckless with our money, but rather to be prayerful about what we should do with it. Perhaps God has given to you, because He wants to give through you, as Paul said in the 2 Corinthians 8 passage above. God gives more to some so they will have the joy of being a conduit of His provision to others.

God allows others to have less so that they will have the joy of seeing God provide. The trick is to trust God and not money. When we have an abundance, we can be generous because it wasn't our money to begin with. And when we experience lack, we can trust that God is able to supply all our needs.

3. Fulfill Your Obligations – Most people don't cheat others because they want to. They cheat others because they feel like they need to. They feel like they have no other choice. When we feel like everything is up to us and we don't have enough money, we have a tendency not to do what we promised or fulfill our obligations or pay our bills. Trusting God and not money means that we should strive to be people of integrity who try to fulfill our obligations rather than withholding money we owe to someone else because we feel like we might need it more. This perhaps gets us close to the touchiest of all money topics: tithing. We sometimes don't give to the church because we don't think we can "afford" it. But we are called to honor God from the first of what He blesses us with. Not doing so is the equivalent of cheating or robbing God. Malachi 3:8 says, "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings." We should prayerfully consider how to trust God by fulfilling our obligations to Him as well.
4. Enjoy Life...with Others...Before God – The opposite of self-indulgence isn't to be sour and joyless. Rather it is to be joyful in the right way. God created this world and it is good. We are supposed to enjoy life. But we aren't supposed to do so at the expense of other people or all by ourselves. The best way of enjoying life is to do it with gratefulness to God and in the company of your family and friends. There is a wonderful passage in Deuteronomy 14:24-26 that shows this. In the context of giving our offering to God, provision is made for those who live too far away from the sanctuary to bring their offering to it. Here is what it says, "If the distance is so great for you that you are not able to bring the tithe, since the place where the Lord your God chooses to set His name is too far away from you when the Lord your God blesses you, then you shall exchange it for money, and bind the money in your hand and go to the place which the Lord your God chooses. You may spend the money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household." That last line is worth repeating, and internalizing, and living by. It is the true answer to a life of selfish overindulgence: "eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household."

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the difference between having money and loving money? Why is loving money the opposite of humility?
2. How do we hoard? Why do we do it? How do we justify it? How might it reveal a lack of trust in God?
3. What are ways in which we try to weasel out of our obligations? How might this be a sign of loving money? How does this apply to tithing?
4. What is the difference between self-indulgence and enjoying something before the Lord?
5. Have you ever seen God miraculously provide for you or others? How can we learn to be a conduit of God's blessing to others?

# Living Humbly Means Waiting on God

## James 5:7-11

“What’s taking so long?” We have all said it countless times in a wide variety of situations. We are an impatient people. We don’t like waiting. Waiting, as one American singer/songwriter/philosopher once said, is the hardest part. We want what we want, and we want it now. Sometimes our impatience is a negative thing. We rush and rush until life is no fun. Other times, we are eager to get to some good thing ahead of us. Often our impatience is directed at God. We want the good things He promised us, or we want Him to intervene and stop some evil and we wonder what is taking so long.

“How long, O Lord?” is an expression found in numerous places throughout the Old and New Testaments (Psalm 6:3, 13:1, 35:17, 79:5, 80:4, 94:3; Habakkuk 1:2; Zechariah 1:12; Revelation 6:10). We wonder what God is up to. We wonder why he isn’t doing something now. Surely if God was going to intervene, now would be a great time. Sometimes when we become impatient with God or a situation, we are tempted to doubt God or to try to do His job for him.

But God’s timing is not like ours. So learning to wait on God is an essential aspect of following Him. Psalm 40 starts off with “I waited patiently for the Lord...” In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, Paul describes the faith of the new Christians he was writing to in this way, “and you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 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.” The three dimensions of following God: turn...serve...wait. It should be no wonder that James addresses this subject as well. Waiting on God is another dimension of living humbly. If we are going to let God be God, then we have to learn that He won’t do things like we want or expect Him to. So as James draws his book to a close, he gives in one of his last lessons a helpful guide for learning to wait on God.

### **Trust God’s Timing, v. 7 – “until it gets the early and late rains...”**

The first step in learning to wait on God is to trust His timing. Sometimes we think we know all the answers and see all the variables. We think God needs to speed up and catch up to us. Waiting on God doesn’t mean God is somehow late or running behind. It means we don’t know all the variables and don’t have all the answers. That is why waiting on God is an aspect of humility.

In 2 Peter 3:8-9, Peter writes “But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

God doesn’t reckon time like we do. He also doesn’t drag His feet in fulfilling His promises. In fact, Peter says God is actually waiting on us. He “is patient toward you.” One of these reason God waits is because He is at work in us to produce something that needs time to grow.

That is why James uses a farming metaphor. The produce can’t grow until it receives both the early and the late rains. The farmer can’t rush growth. It takes a while for them to get everything they need to grow to maturity. The same is true for God. He is doing something, it can’t be rushed, we have to learn to trust His timing.

Peter makes a similar point in 1 Peter 5:6, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.” The word translated here as “Proper time” is the Greek word “*kairos*.” The Greeks had two words for time: *chronos*, which means the sequence of time; and *kairos*, which means the right time for something. God knows the right time for stuff. He isn’t slow. He is wise, and he calls us to be humble and trust His timing.

### **Be on the Alert, v. 8 – Strengthen Your Heart**

James next encourages us to be ready at any moment for the Lord to return. He means both the second coming but also all those ways that God reemerges into our lives after a period of apparent absence. This isn't supposed to be about sitting around nervously anticipating someone to barge through the door. We also aren't supposed to live as if Jesus will never come back. We are supposed to be focused on doing what we are supposed to be doing, okay if he comes back now or a long time from now. In Matthew 14:42-51, Jesus told a series of parables about what this kind of waiting looks like:

“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason, you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that evil slave says in his heart, ‘My master is not coming for a long time,’ and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This applies to the final return of Jesus. It also applies to the intervention of God in our lives. Like a soldier left in charge of a frontier fort, we are supposed to be following the orders we were given until we receive new orders or our commander shows up. That requires us to be ready always.

Such an attitude requires us to realize that the road God puts us on is one that requires endurance. You don't run an endurance race by focusing on the distance. That is how you handle a sprint. If you thought the race you were running was a sprint and it turned into a marathon, you would be heartbroken. Endurance running requires you to simply focus on taking one more step, never quitting, and watching your form. Even big problems might not hurt you over a short distance. But over a long distance, tiny problems can become huge issues.

### **Don't Complain, v. 9 – Do Not lament Your Present Situation**

James tells us the next step in learning to wait on God is not to complain. Waiting on God always makes us wonder. It can leave us confused. We often become frustrated. We can be tempted to lament the path we are on, especially when we see someone else's road going smoother than ours. We look for something we can change. What ends up happening is that we look for someone to blame. James tells us waiting can lead to grumbling.

When we find ourselves tempted to complain or grumble, we can return to some of the lessons James has already been trying to teach us about speech and what it reveals. Most of all, we can focus on the good in every situation, focus on God reminding ourselves of His faithfulness, and focus on relying on Jesus instead of ourselves.

When we do that, our complaining will turn into praise as we live out Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” Remember, this passage doesn't mean I can do impossible things, it means I can endure any circumstance not because I have what it takes or know what to do, but because Jesus promises to give me his mercy and grace to help in every time of need.

### **Imitate Worthy Examples, vv. 10-11– Follow Those Who Know How to Persevere and Endure**

James then tells us that in order to wait well, we need to have good models and worthy examples to follow. Every time we are forced to wait on God, we start thinking we have been forgotten or abandoned. We wonder if we did something wrong. The life and example of people who have gone through similar things will help

us see the way forward by looking at how God remained faithful in other people's lives. James specifically mentions the prophets and Job, who serve as paradigms of suffering, patience, and endurance; people who felt the same things as we do when they were in the midst of hard times. But the difference is that we can read the end of their story, and we can see the way God worked things out for their good and His glory. Such examples can serve as powerful motivators to help us trust that God is able to bring our lives to fulfillment as well.

We will be able to run our race better if we are inspired by the races other people have run. "Since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)

### **Trusts God's Heart, v. 11 – The Lord is Full of Compassion and Mercy**

Earlier James told us that trusting God's timing was essential for learning to wait well. Now he tells us we also need to trust God's heart as well. A psychologist once told me that we all read our own insecurities into other people's silences. We also end up doing that with God. When we don't see God move in our lives, we can suddenly start to fill the void with our worst fears. With God it can often revolve around who God is or who we are. Perhaps we think God is mad at us, or that we have failed, or He has forgotten us. This is one of the reasons we need to have good theology, which is just a fancy way of saying have accurate thoughts about God, so that when hard times hit, we fill the void with the truth not our fears.

James says we need to remember that the Lord is "full of compassion and is merciful." These two truths are some of the first that we forget. God made us, he knows our weaknesses. Psalm 103:14 says, "For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust." And this knowledge moves God to love us and fill up what is lacking in us.

Hebrews 4:15-16 sums this up perfectly: "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." He knows our weaknesses and is strong to help. He loves giving us mercy to cover our failings and grace to fill up our weaknesses. And he loves us, so he invites us to come with confidence to get it from him.

### **Conclusion**

Waiting for anything is hard. Waiting for God is perhaps the hardest. How we wait will reveal a lot about who we are. Learning to wait on God is essential if we want to become who He created us to be. When God moves you into a period of waiting, remember that He isn't passive, nor has he forgotten you, nor is he angry at you. Keep yourself from complaining. Stay alert. Follow good examples. Above all, remember you can trust God's timing and His heart.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What does it mean to wait on God? What are some situations when you have found yourself waiting on God?
2. Why is it hard to wait on God? What are some bad ways of coping with waiting?
3. What does it mean to trust God's timing? Have you ever tried to get ahead of God and ultimately seen God show how His timing is best?
4. How can worthy examples help us endure better? Where do we find them and how?
5. What does it mean to trust God's heart?

# Living Humbly Means Praying Without Ceasing

## James 5:13-18

The whole book of James has been about encouraging followers of Jesus to stay faithful in the midst of hardships. When trials hit, we have a tendency to doubt ourselves, doubt God, and run for cover. James writes to keep us headed in the right direction, trusting in God and not ourselves. His goal is to ground us so completely in God that we realize what the Bible makes abundantly clear from cover to cover, “God is our refuge and strength.” Relying on Him, obeying Him, and having faith in Him are ways to find life and happiness.

James shows us things we should use to diagnose the state of our soul, like worldliness, our words, or our works. He concludes his book by fleshing out the statement “humble yourself in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” He has shown that living humbly before God means rejecting judgmentalism, submitting to God’s plan, not loving money, and learning to wait on Him.

He concludes both this section and his work with a final challenge that living humbly means to pray about everything. As Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.” The reason James ends with prayer is because after the section on “waiting on God” we can sometimes get the impression that God is far away or involved elsewhere. Waiting on God doesn’t mean the absence or disinterest of God, it means that the next step in God’s plan isn’t ready for you yet, but he is still with you and guiding you.

What does it mean to pray without ceasing? Simply put, it means to submit everything to God. No matter what, in every circumstance, run to God. As Psalm 62:8 says “Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us.” Learning to do this is difficult. When bad things hit, we blame ourselves or God. When good times happen, we want to take responsibility. But learning to pray in every instance is what we are called to learn to do, to live our lives constantly interacting with God, realizing that God isn’t some distance, detached, disinterested Lord, but personal, involved, and closer than you think.

**This whole passage is intended for us to realize that prayer is a powerful thing. Often times we think that since God knows what we are going to ask before we ask it, then what we pray does no good since God was going to do it anyway. But this is not the case. God hears, listens, and acts on our prayers.**

### **Prayer in Suffering, v. 13 – “Is anyone among you suffering?”**

Suffering can cause us to withdraw. We can feel victimized, betrayed, or blindsided. We might cry out, “God, why did you let this happen?” or “What good could possibly come of this?” Whatever it is, when we have an experience of extreme misfortune, James is saying that we should tell it to God. Tell him our anger, frustration, hurt, whatever. As Psalm 62:8 says, “Pour out your heart before Him.” Don’t feel like you have to act a certain way or say certain things. Tell Him exactly what you are feeling. Read the Psalms. They are full of all the things people have felt comfortable saying to God. When we pour out our hurt before God, humbly offering it to Him, we leave open the possibility of Him showing us that his love, grace, and mercy are already at work in ways we can’t see.

But humility is the key. Angrily ranting at God because you think you know what is best will never accomplish anything other than to make you more and more angry with God and others. It will lead us to turn suffering into a trial like the ones mentioned in James 1. But real lament, the outpouring of our grief, pain, and frustrating is an invitation and a call for God to do something. Many times, when we do so, we will see Him already at work.

Every one of us will find ourselves in times of hurt and suffering. Giving it to God in prayer will enable us to be, as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” The last pair of words in verse 8 is key: perplexed (confused, bewildered, shell-shocked, caught off guard) but not despairing (hopeless, giving up). We might be confused by what God is doing, but humbly pouring our hearts out to Him will keep us from despair.

### **Prayer in Joy, v. 13 – “Is anyone cheerful?”**

When things are bad we want to blame God and others. When things go well, we want to claim the credit. We think we alone are responsible for our victories. James reminds us that we ought also to pray when we are cheerful. When things are going well, we should be constantly pouring out our gratitude to God for blessings He gives.

Doing this draws us deeper into the humble life and allows us to realize that everything we have comes from God and to develop an attitude of cheerful dependence on Him. But failure to do so reignites the spark of pride in our lives and starts our lives headed in the wrong direction. In 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul tells us, “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?”

It is something we have to remind ourselves to do, because we are sinful and forgetful. That is why there are so many places in the scriptures that call us to bless God, praise God, and thank God for what He has done. One great example is Psalm 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, And all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits.”

### **Prayer in Sickness, vv. 14-15 – “Is anyone among you sick?”**

This next section is tricky. James talks about prayers for the sick. When people are struggling with sickness, people often ask questions like “Is God punishing me?” “What does anointing with oil do?” and “Does God really heal?” These questions are hard because the situations are complicated. But these questions are good starting points for understanding the relationship between sickness, God, and prayer.

- Does Sin Cause Sickness?

- o On one hand, some sickness is caused by sin. James suggests this in verse 15: “if he has committed sin...” Paul says something similar in 1 Corinthians 11:30 – some in the church had become sick because of their sin. “For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.”
- o On the other hand, not all sickness is because of sin. Jesus himself said this when confronted with this question in John 9:1-3. “As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”
- o The Biblical answer is “sometimes.” God uses pain and suffering to get our attention. In *Problem of Pain*, CS Lewis wrote, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” We stumble into error when we think we know why a person is sick. This was the mistake of Job’s counselors. They assumed that since he was sick, God was judging him.
- o What should we do then? This passage in James suggest us that if a person is visited by suffering and he wonders if it is because of sin, he should prayerfully examine himself. If he has committed sin, God is willing and eager to forgive. When dutiful self-examination reveals nothing, he should remember Job and trust God in the midst of suffering.

- Anointing with Oil?

- o Some people think that anointing with oil is a reference to the ancient use of oil as a medicine and therefore this statement is about the interrelationship of prayer and medical science. This position is probably embraced by people reacting to ideas from some extreme religious groups that reject medicine in favor of prayer. We shouldn't be scared or see a conflict about using both. But this reference to anointing probably isn't about medicinal uses. The chief reason is because the word James uses is "anointing," which is a religious word, rather than a medical word like "smear" or "apply."
- o So, what does it mean? I think it's a powerful symbol that has a couple meanings
  - Kings were anointed as a way of showing God's selection and favor. Anointing with oil is a way of reminding ourselves that God chooses us, loves us, and is for us.
  - Sometimes we make religion about spiritual things and therefore things we can't see. Anointing with oil, like baptism and the Lord's Supper, is a physical act that reminds us that God is concerned with all of us, body and soul. It is a way of submitting our body to God and acknowledging Him as Lord over it.
  - Ultimately, though, it's not magic. It's about submitting ourselves to God and opening the situation for God's power to intervene and have its way.
  - Do Healings Happen?
- o Jesus went around healing people. So, to say healings don't happen or can't happen is to go against the testimony of scripture. But sometimes we read verses like Psalm 103:3 which says, "Who heals all your diseases" and we wonder, "How come not everybody is healed?" How do we know when to expect healing?
- o This is another tricky subject, but it is important to realize the discussion we are having is about prayer in a larger context of living humbly before God. Asking God to heal us is something we are freely encouraged to pray for. We must always remember though to trust God and submit to His will. As Job says in Job 13:15, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless, I will argue my ways before Him." We are called to trust God in all circumstances, and we are also encouraged to ask Him to do miracles for us. When He doesn't, we are invited to submit to the wisdom, love, and care of a God who promises He knows best and who promises to never leave us nor forsake us.

### **Prayer in Confession, v. 16 – "Confess Your Sins to One Another"**

Sometimes Jesus doesn't answer our prayers for physical healing the way we want. One reason is because Jesus cares for our physical health, but he cares about our spiritual health more. Notice in verses 14-15, James says if we pray when we are sick, if we have sinned, those sins will be forgiven. James makes no guarantees regarding the effects of prayer on physical healing. He does tell us, though, that prayer brings forgiveness, which brings spiritual healing. The fact that many are disappointed with that underscores how much we desire to use prayer to get what we want rather than to humbly ourselves before God.

God often does heal our bodies. A chief reason He does so is to demonstrate that he has the power to heal our souls as well. Like in Mark 2, a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus by his four friends, seeing their faith, Jesus announces that the man's sins are forgiven. The Pharisees grumble that only God can forgive sins. I am sure the men were grumbling that they wanted physical healing for the man. Then Jesus does something amazing. He proves he has the power to do what we can't see (forgive sins) by showing he has the power to do what we can see (healing a man's paralysis). In Mark 2:10-11 Jesus says, "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" – He said to the paralytic, "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home."

No matter the physical results, prayer does bring spiritual healing. That is why James goes on to encourage us to confess our sins to one another, “so that you may be healed.” James isn’t calling us to air our dirty laundry in public. He is calling us to address the broken relationships we are a part of and to ask God to restore them. We sometimes feel hopeless regarding spiritual situations as much as physical. We feel defeated by sin. We feel frustrated by the brokenness it causes. Sin causes death. James encourages us to actively seek restoration by confessing our sins to those that we have wronged, praying for each other, and seeing our spiritual health as individuals and communities be restored.

### **Prayer Changes Things, vv. 17-18 – “Effective Prayer of a Righteous Man Can Accomplish Much”**

Sometimes we think prayer is the last resort of the powerless and ineffectual. Sometimes we are timid in expectations regarding prayer because we don’t want to be disappointed when God doesn’t do what we ask. Sometimes, we even say that the purpose of prayer isn’t to change God, or to change the situation, but the change us and conform us to God’s will in every circumstance. That is definitely part of what prayer is for. But James concludes his book with a powerful reminder that prayer changes things. He tells the story of Elijah whose prayer started and stopped the rain. The purpose of this story is to remind us that prayer is not the last resort of people who have no idea what to do next. It’s important to realize, though, that prayer doesn’t work. God works. Prayer is the way in which He invites us to be involved in what He is doing. That is why living humbly before God requires that we pray without ceasing.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Why do we sometimes run away from God when we are suffering? How can we learn to turn to God in our pain?
2. Why do we also sometimes seek to avoid God when things are good? How can we learn to be grateful?
3. What issues regarding praying for the sick does this passage raise for you? How do we determine if our sickness is being caused by sin?
4. How can we learn to both pray for physical healing and trust God in every circumstance? How can we learn to value spiritual healing as much as physical healing?
5. Do you really believe prayer changes things? How do we sometimes leave God an “out” or pray timid prayers because we don’t want to be disappointed in God? How is this a misunderstanding of what prayer is?