

james

[true religion]

a devotional

by john newton

James

[true religion]



#1 — A Servant's Heart

James 1:1

James was a fascinating fellow. The half-brother of Christ, James grew up under Jesus' "big brother" shadow and did not accept his half-brother's personhood or mission until sometime after Jesus' death and resurrection. His faith then shot up like a rocket and James soon became a leader of the church in Jerusalem. His name was mentioned alongside the apostles in the book of Acts (esp. Acts 15) and in Paul's writings. But James, in his introduction did not mention his family ties to the Savior. In fact, he identified himself with the position of a servant, both of God the Father and of the Lord Jesus, a man he knew intimately as a human. After all, don't you know your siblings well?

James' introduction reveals that he had a servant's heart. Church tradition reports that James of Nazareth was also called "James the Just" because of his great character and wisdom. James was humble and a man of prayer. In fact, he developed calluses on his knees, tradition reports, because he spent so much time on his knees in prayer! Now that's devotion!

Would you identify yourself as a servant first? Are you willing, like Paul, James, Peter and the other Saints, to declare your willing bondage to Jesus Christ and live that declaration accordingly? Do you have a servant's heart like James? If not, then it's never too late to start seeking one. Act in humility, spend time in prayer, and serve the Lord with gladness and devotion. For to do so is the path to a servant's heart.

Be God's.

Our Passage

1

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings."

James

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#2 — The Bright Side of Suffering

James 1:2-4, 12

Most of us don't usually associate the word "joy" with "trials." In fact, we tend to think of the two as polar opposites. If you are suffering, there is no joy. And when you are happy, you most likely aren't suffering. So why does James put the two together in a sentence, linking them to each other? How can we possibly be joyous -- all joy -- in the midst of suffering?

Notice what James does **not** say in verse 2. He does not say you are to count it all joy when you meet difficulty because you feel like it. In fact, you and I both know that we don't feel much joy when we suffer. James says we are to consider trials joyful because we KNOW that the testing of our faith produces endurance.

Trials strengthen our faith. They are like "faith exercises" that build up spiritual muscle. The only way for us to be spiritually fit is if we exercise our faith through various trials and sufferings. Not all trials have to be big. In fact, I pray for your sake that they are small. But even if they are big, they can still be considered good because you know that through them your faith can be strengthened. And we all know that it is those who train for the marathon that last until the end. Consider each trial, no matter its size, a training moment for your faith.

Later, in verse 12, James comes back to the subject of perseverance and trial. He says that our endurance will earn us the "crown of life," much like an Olympic athlete wins a gold medal. God has promised that we would receive it if we endure. This is another thing we know for certain and another reason for joy.

The apostle Peter wrote that our endurance also glorifies Jesus Christ, who was the ultimate example of righteous suffering. And it is to His image that we are being conformed (Eph. 4:13). Peter wrote: "For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer [for it] you patiently endure it, this [finds] favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you,

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"Consider it all joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:20-21)." When we face various trials with patience and endurance, we glorify God and find favor in His sight. This is another reason for joy.

There is a hymn, the tune to which goes back more than 130 years but the words are fairly new. It is called "Count It Joy" and was written by Susan Peterson and based on James 1. The words go:

"Count it joy, and never be discouraged,
When by trials your life is sorely pressed.
For you know that when your faith is tested,
Your endurance then develops best.
Perseverance must complete its working;
You will need to let it have its way.
When it's done, you'll be complete and perfect,
Having all you need to meet each day."

Be God's.

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#3 — A Prayer for Wisdom

James 1:5-7

Everyone I know wants to be wise. In fact, I have never run across a person who has said anything to the contrary. Why would someone want to be foolish and dumb? Sure, we all do dumb things, and some of us actually say dumb things, but do we really want to be dumb?

James writes that if we want to be wise, we should not first read a textbook or ask a philosopher. Those options will make one smarter, to be sure. But if we want to be wise, we should ask the wisest of the wise, God Almighty, who is more than willing to give us wisdom. Sometimes, I fear that we fail to understand that God is not just the Almighty maker of heaven and earth but also a loving, gracious Father, who loves to dote on His children. He wants to bless us. And He wants us to believe that He wants to bless us. Jesus, in His sermon on the mount, said that one of our great privileges as God's children is the petition of prayer (Matt. 7:7-11). Do you need something? Ask God. He is a loving Father who will not give us wrath when we ask for grace.

But just asking is not sufficient to merit God's action. Just as the author of Hebrews would later write, he who comes to God must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6). James said that the person who comes to God with doubt in mind is the most unstable of persons, like a wave of the ocean. Anyone who has lived by a lake or ocean knows what happens to the water when the winds start to blow. Waves form, and they are blown this way and that by the wind. James calls this person a "double minded" man. In Charlie Brown terms, this phrase means "wishy-washy." Their faith is unstable and they don't know how to trust the Lord for answers.

Our Passage

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"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

Our first application from this paragraph of James 1 deals with our unique prayer privilege as His children. If we want to be wise, the answer is as far away as the thoughts on our mind. Ask God for wisdom when facing a tough decision or a period of trial. God is not sitting behind a desk with a scale, weighing every prayer for its urgency. He's not the police department. God love you and I and wants to bless us with wisdom, grace, love, and so many other things. He is seeking our best, just as an earthly parent seeks the best of his or her child.

The second application also deals with prayer. Pray expecting result. There should be no "maybes" in the prayer lives of believers. Not all prayer requests come back with a green light, but our God is capable of answering any request and always seeks our best. So approach the throne of grace with confidence and wait in eager expectation.

Be God's.

James

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#4 — An Expensive Vanishing Act

James 1:9-11

There is great beauty in a picked flower. Take a rose, for example: a red rose. Place a red rose against a black background and the rose seems to radiate in its own light. Spray some light mist on the rose, then take a look. Now the rose not only radiates light but it also glistens like the stars in the heavens. Ay... there is little that is more beautiful than a picked flower.

But what happens when that flower wakes up morning after morning, resting in its vase, but taken away from its vine? Does it remain red and vibrant? Does it continue to radiate light? No, it does not. Even roses crushed in tear-stained diaries do not remain for long.

James compares the rich man and his wealth to such a flower. Flowers and plants come and go. We cannot hang onto them. It is not in our control. Neither are wealth and riches. James compares the humble man to the rich man. Think Mother Theresa and Donald Trump. The humble person glories in his or her low position because Jesus said the last shall be first and God shall exalt the humble (Matt. 20:16, Luke 14:11). So even though they do not have many physical possessions, they have everything that truly lasts. However, a rich man never knows when his next investment may go sour. He doesn't know when a thief may empty his foreign back accounts. His wealth is unstable, and if he puts his faith in his wealth, so is he.

So how does this truth affect the Christian of wealth -- the person God has blessed with money or influence? I think the answer is written in between the lines of James 1:9-11. The rich person should glory in the fact that his wealth is a gift from God and is of this earth -- it is mortal; it is fading. But his soul has been saved and his hope is in Christ, his Savior. The phrase "going about his business"

Our Passage

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"The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business."

(or, "in the midst of his pursuits") in verse 11 reveals the motive of the rich man. He is seeking wealth and not looking to give it away (see also James 4:13-15). A Christian who has been given wealth should first and foremost understand that his or her wealth is temporary but their soul is eternal. Seek to bless others with your wealth and rejoice in the fact that God has given you a gift that you did not deserve and use that gift to bring Him glory. For you never know when it might become an expensive vanishing act.

Be God's.

James [true religion]



#5 — God's Off the Hook

James 1:13-15

James had heard about a big problem in the early church. It seems that some people were blaming God for their temptations (and maybe sins!). "I certainly didn't bring this temptation upon myself," they must have thought, "therefore it must be God's doing." But James sets the record straight in verses 13-16.

The problem of temptation does not belong to God, neither does sin. God is "off the hook" when it comes to our personal faults. God cannot be tempted to sin, neither does He tempt us to sin. To see this first truth played out in reality, look no further than Satan's attempted tempting of Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4). How far did that effort get the Deceiver?

As for the second truth, why would a loving, just Father entice His beloved children to sin? It is clear from Scripture that God allows us to be tempted but also that He is not the one doing the tempting. In the Lord's prayer, for example, Jesus does not say, "Do not tempt us." Our Lord says, "Lead us not into temptation." God does not tempt.

That being said, how do we sin? James places our sin action into a multi-stepped process. First, we are enticed to sin from within ourselves. Our sin nature is strong and it remains with us even after we accept Christ as Lord. The difference between the before and after is that before we knew Him, we had no choice but to obey our sin nature. But now, after accepting Him, we can choose to follow God and obey Him. We can overcome our natural cravings, in other words.

Second, our own lusts then give birth to sin -- the intentional decision to follow our sin nature. Sin is sin when we let our own natural lusts become sin. It **IS**

Our Passage

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

possible to be tempted and not sin. Temptation and sin aren't the same thing. Hebrews says that Jesus was tempted in every way but was without sin (Heb. 4:15). We can be the same way through His power. Third, that sin leads to death in a spiritual sense. Of course, for those in Christ, we need not fear spiritual death. But those who sin without saving faith are doomed to spend eternity apart from God unless they repent and believe in Christ.

I think there is a warning in this passage that applies to both you and I. Do not be misled into thinking that God is tempting you and is, therefore, really guilty for your sin. God does not partake in evil and wants the best for His children. He loves us and wants us to overcome sin, not be dragged down by it. So trust in God when temptation comes calling (from inside and outside) and say "no" to its pull. Remember who you are in Christ Jesus and live for Him.

Be God's.

James

[true religion]



#6 — A World Without Blessing

James 1:16-18

Everyone has mood swings. Even the most stoic person on earth has those moments when he or she does not wish to get up from the couch, do the dishes, or say "hello" to the dog. We all experience a wide range of emotion, for this is how we were created to live. Some days we are happy and others we are sad. Rarely are we both at the same time.

James, in verses 13-16, combated the line of thinking that God is the source of our temptation and, thus, our sin. Sin is born not from the outside, the writer replies, but from the inside -- our hearts. Now, in verses 16b-18, James keeps his attention of the very nature of God and the failure of man. Every good gift comes from God, James writes. Every one. Nobody has received anything good from this world. Period. In verse 16, God is called the "Father of Lights" or "Father of the heavenly lights" to show that God is always in the light -- with Him there is no darkness.

The reality is that God does not partake in evil and He gives good gifts to His children, for He loves them. He loves us (Matt. 7:7-10). Not only does God not partake in evil, James writes that with God there is no swing of moods or passions. Does God get mad? You bet, but never mad outside of His control. We, on the other hand, often exceed our own self-discipline. But with God there is no shifting shadow, for the light -- the eternal light -- always shines.

You see, God saved us ("brought us forth") by His will through His truth. We are not accidental believers. We were chosen by Him through whatever means He chooses. And because we were chosen by His will, we are His "top dogs" or "trophies." We have a high place in His mind and He is proud of us, His workmanship (Ephesians 2:10). Why would God provide/give evil for His beloved? He does not want us to stumble on our way, therefore, we can trust Him and His word. And in any tough situation we know that we can turn to God Himself for aid, for He loves you and I and wants us to march forward with confidence in His grace. Trust Him.

Be God's.

Our Passage

1

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

James

[true religion]



#7 — The Things Time Brings

James 1:19-21

Of all of life's lessons, the one James delivers in these verses tops all, I believe. The ability to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger is most to be desired. It is the magnum opus of interpersonal relations -- the most valuable thing a person can learn in regards to personal conduct. Think about it. Would you want to hang around someone who never listens, speaks his or her mind, and gets miffed with ease? Someone who cuts you off mid-sentence and then won't yield the conversation floor back to you? Of course not!

Let's look at the opposite behavior, the path James recommends here. A person who is quick to listen and slow to speak is usually considered to be wise. They say little, so what they do say is thought of as important. Some of the most godly men and women I have ever known were masters of listening. They would keep their attention on you and wait until you had spoken your peace before responding. And when they spoke up in a circle of people, everyone stooped to listen to their every word.

A person who listens, speaks sparingly, and is not easily angered is probably living the righteous life that God desires. He or she has taken the word implanted, the gospel message, and let it germinate in their hearts and change them. The image James uses is of a seed planted in the ground. We have heard the truth from someone who taught it to us and now we need to nourish that seed, give it spiritual water, and let it grow within us. Grow in your faith. Cast off those things that hinder your growth and live the life God has in store for you. And learn to refrain from speaking unless you have something important to say. Listen to people when they speak to you. And show peace and grace when tempted to become angry. It may take some time, but the effort is well worth it!

Be God's.

Our Passage

1

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

James

[true religion]



#8 — The Man in the Mirror

James 1:22-25

James' letter often reads like a commentary on the words of Jesus. Just about every major thought in the letter is a reflection of something Jesus said or did. For example, James has already touched on elements of the Sermon on the Mount, such as prayer (asking God for wisdom), the fleeting nature of wealth, and temptation. Now, the half-brother of Jesus recalls another of his brother's teachings: be a doer of the word and not a hearer only.

Remember the wise and foolish builders? In Matthew 7, Jesus tells the parable of two builders. One man built his house on solid rock and the other on bottomland, probably near a stream or ravine. When rains came and floods grew, the man whose house was built on the sand suffered complete loss. The man on the rock, however, was saved. Jesus started the parable with these words: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." Sound familiar?

It is not enough to just listen to the Sunday sermon or small group lesson. Sure the preacher used pretty words and relevant illustrations, but you are responsible for the content you hear -- responsible to put it into practice. When you read Scripture your attitude should be the same way: don't just nod your head and say, "Yep. That Paul sure was right" while living out the opposite. That would be hypocrisy. We must live what we believe.

James uses a relevant illustration for this teaching. How many of us know what we look like? Do you know what you look like? How? Because you saw yourself in a mirror (or on camera, which is like a mirror). Listening to a sermon and returning the next Sunday without practicing that sermon is like forgetting what you look like in the mirror. It's worthless.

How do we learn anything? Practice. Be a doer of the word and not a hearer only.

Be God's.

Our Passage

1

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

James [true religion]



#9 — True Religion

James 1:26-27

We Christians tend to bristle at the word "religion." After all, Islam is a religion. So is Buddhism and Hinduism, Judaism and Mormonism. We think of religion as being a system of "do's" and "don'ts" that are intended to make one "holy" and closer to heaven. But, we argue, Christianity is a relationship between us and God the Father through Jesus Christ, right? It not a religion!

But it is, in a way. For with that special relationship through Christ (we are saved by grace through faith) there are expectations for godly living. There are expectations that how we treat the world should be a reflection of what we believe. And what we believe is what makes us the people we are. There is a system in place for how God's followers should act in this world and, whether you like it or not, there are commands we are bound to follow that lead to godliness. No one can look at the New Testament and say that "walk in the Spirit" is only a suggestion by Paul (Gal. 5). It is a command. When our Lord says, "when your enemy strikes you, turn the other cheek," He's not merely hypothesizing a potential course of action, is He? No. He is commanding.

And so we come to the end of James chapter one. Here, James spells out for us what pure religion is -- what OUR religion is. This is what is pleasing in God's sight:

1. To control your tongue and not show yourself a hypocrite
2. To look after the orphans and widows in their distress
3. To keep oneself from being polluted by this world

Notice that all three of these are actions. In the previous few verses James said that we should doers of the word and not just hearers. Now he is giving us an example of

Our Passage

1

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

what this looks like. First of all, we are to control ourselves, especially when we're in public and others are watching. Jesus said we are the light of the world, like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. We are to watch what we say and do so that people may know what we believe is true.

Second, we are to take care of those who are the most helpless -- the orphaned children and the widows. Someone in every church should know who these people are and every church should be taking care of them. Lastly, James writes that we are to keep ourselves unstained by this world. Watch yourself. It is very easy to be corrupted by this world without ever knowing it. As James wrote earlier about sin, it works from the inside out and we must learn how to control it from the inside out. Take care of your heart and be holy, for our God is holy.

So this is pure and true religion -- to do the will of Him who saved you and me. To obey His word and be His witness.

Be God's.

James

[true religion]



#10 — Picking Favorites

James 2:1-4

Too often in the church today we reward people with money with positions of power. I can think of some denominations where entire churches are run not by spiritual giants but by financial benefactors. When a wealthy Christian comes into the body, immediately the lights seem to go on in the minds of pastors, deacons, elders and other church leaders. They dream of paved parking lots, new sound systems, new kitchen equipment and other snazzy things. But should they?

James makes it a point here to talk about our bad habit of picking favorites. We like the well-dressed man or woman, the smooth talker, or the Bible-toting evangelist. We tend to place them at the head of the line and give them our undivided attention. But lost in the rush to exalt the man or woman of stature is the humble and lowly person that snuck in the back -- the person who is ashamed of their sin or last to heap praise upon themselves. The "poor in spirit," as Jesus called them.

Our tendency to lift up the rich or gifted and ignore the lowly is a sinful tendency. Our judging is not with spiritual eyes but human ones; with temporal intentions and not eternal ones. We totally ignore the teaching of our Savior, who said, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:13-14)." We should give our choice seats to the poor and minister to their needs. For God does not survey bank accounts when He chooses whom to bless. He looks at the heart. Do we?

Be God's.

Our Passage

2

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

James [true religion]



#11 — Defender of the Poor

James 2:5-7

Both Jesus and James spoke often of the poor-rich struggle that was happening in Jewish society around them. Any time you have a class system -- like Europe in the Middle Ages or England in the 18th Century -- there tends to be a variety of social ills that develop between the classes. Generally, the rich trample the poor under foot.

But it is important to note that wealth and following Christ are not in opposition to each other. Jesus did not call everyone to give away all they had to become Christians. Poverty is not a condition of salvation. However, if wealth came between a person and following Jesus, the wealth needed to go. James uses this poor-rich language to point out attitudes of the heart and not necessarily monetary value. Just like in chapter one, the rich man is seeking to add to his fortune while the poor man, already humbled, is seeking God and trusting Him alone.

In the second part of James 2:1-7, the author says that God has chosen the poor ones of the world for revealing His truth. If the believers in church meetings were treating the rich with favoritism at the expense of the poor, what are they saying about those whom God has chosen? Our God is the defender of the poor, the orphan and the widow. And He asks His Church to do the same. James concludes this paragraph by pointing out that the rich are more likely to sue believers over grievances and con them out of their hard-earned money. And by their actions they are slandering the name of God. So when it comes to the lesser verses the richer, side with the lesser for God does the same.

Be God's.

Our Passage

2

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

James [true religion]



#12 — The Royal Law

James 2:8-9

The previous seven verse if chapter two talked about the existence of favoritism in church, particularly of favoring the rich over the poor. James condemned this and today's verses continue this condemnation.

What does it mean to love my neighbor and how does this apply to a church context? This seems to be the central question that James deals with in verses 8 and 9. Loving one's neighbor means to treat them as well as or better than yourself. It means to give the poor man your seat in church (or a visitor your parking space) and making sure they are as comfortable as you are.

James refers to the "royal law" found in Scripture. Jesus referred to this same neighborly law as being the second greatest commandment and one of only two commandments that summarize the Law of Moses. The first and greatest command, of course, is to love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. To fail to take care of a "less-privileged" individual is to break the law. And as James will say one verse later, to break one law is to break the whole Law. Just one violation disqualifies an individual from salvation, according to the Law of Moses.

Our application once again is to not overlook people in church, particularly those who might be poor or struggling. To ignore them is a sin. To treat them any differently than you would treat yourself is a sin. And if we consciously choose to exalt one group over another we are not being moral individuals and not obedient to God's royal law, the law that states, "Love your neighbor as yourself." So make the extra effort to take the lesser parking space, the middle seats of a row, or whatever else you see as helpful for those less fortunate in the church.

Be God's.

Our Passage

2

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

James

[true religion]



#13 — All it Takes is One

James 2:10-11

All it takes is one sin --- just one -- to make a person a sinner. And few if any of us make it past the toddler stage without committing at least one sin. James said in verses 8 and 9 that if we were to treat a brother less than ourselves we would be committing a sin, and in verse 10 He reveals that the sin would make us sinners. We could be the best people in the world but if we stumble even once in only one area our goodness goes away into a sea of wretchedness (or something like that).

It's important at this point to take a look at the cultural background behind James' words. The Jews considered the whole Law of Moses to be one entity, just like we would consider a bunch of numbered pages to be a book. If you were to keep the Law of Moses, you had to keep it fully -- every command. Break one and you have broken the entire Law and fellowship with the community of faith. You cannot select which laws to keep and which ones to break and still consider yourself a moral person.

Such is the depth of sin.

James' point finds a parallel in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, particularly Matthew chapter 5. In that chapter, Jesus revealed to the people, Pharisees and scribes that sin is more than an action -- it is a motivation of the heart. Sound familiar? James has already shown his readers that sin begins not with an outside source but instead within the heart (1:13-15). Sin is as deep as we are, and no man can escape this life pure and unblemished. Paul said that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and David said that there was none righteous, none who even seek God on their own (Ps. 14:3). This is why we need a Savior.

If it were possible to become righteous through our own actions, we wouldn't need Jesus' sacrifice. But all it takes

Our Passage

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"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker."

is one sin -- just one -- to make us unholy and unworthy. And because sin is as deep as we are, we need help from the outside. Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, who paid our sin and offers salvation through faith in Him! As this Sunday morning unfolds, take some time to thank God for this wonderful salvation and rest secure in your faith in Him.

Be God's.

James

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#14 — Of Mercy and Judgment

James 2:12-13

James speaks often of the "law" but from the different contexts it is clear that he refers to two different laws. First, you have the "law that gives freedom." This is the same as the "law of Christ" that Paul refers to, namely the fact that we are no longer under bondage to the Law of Moses but instead are obligated in our freedom to follow Christ and obey Him. We have responsibilities under Christ to use our freedom not to show partiality or favoritism but instead to show mercy and grace.

The judgment that he refers to is not a judgment pertaining to salvation but instead the judgment seat of Christ, the bema. It is a rewards judgment that all believers must face. We will all be judged (or evaluated) by Christ for our deeds on earth (not our sins). What did we do under Christ with the freedom He gave us? Did we obey Him and love our brethren? Or did we continue to sin and put our brother or sister down?

However, there is good news for the faithful ones. Those who treated people fairly and equally within the Body of Christ (and, thus, showed mercy) will be shown the mercy of God. Their rewards will remain. However, those who were not fair on earth will have their rewards taken away. So our application for here on earth is to remember that even though we are free from the Law of Moses and its strict regulations, we are obligated under Christ to follow Him and obey His commands. Treat one another with fairness, especially in seeking to lift up the poor and oppressed. Let your mercy show to one another and it will be returned to you at the bema of Christ.

Be God's.

Our Passage

2

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

James

[true religion]



#15 — The Works of Faith

James 2:14-17

James transitions in chapter two from a discourse on favoritism and partiality in the church to a discussion of the role works plays in the life of faith. One thing that is very important for us to understand before we can properly interpret James' next few verses is the faith-salvation relationship. Scripture is very clear that a person is saved by faith alone in Christ alone apart from works (see Eph. 2:8-9). This is without question. That being said, Scripture will not contradict itself and James does not teach a different doctrine here. Follow with me now.

Our Passage

2

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

James says that faith without works is dead, that is, faith is a corpse or just a shell of what it ultimately should be. The Greek word for "dead" is *nekros*, which literally means a body or corpse. A body is still a body isn't it, alive or dead? So it is with faith. A person's faith is still faith, even if it is dormant and lifeless. And that faith in God has saved them. Let there be no doubt. The answer to James' rhetorical question, "Can such faith save him?" is "Yes."

But James' point in these verses is not about whether faith or works saves a person. His point is that a believer's faith should produce good works. Works is a result of faith. You could call it faith's evidence. What good is your claim to believe in Jesus Christ if you do not follow that faith with action? You are a hypocrite. Be a doer of the word and not a hearer only. James gives an example based on his previous statement that the poor have great value in God's sight and should be treated with honor and charity.

We can smile at the poor and even say, "I'll pray for you," but if no one helps them, they will remain poor and afflicted. Our call is to back up our faith with good deeds. This is vital if we are grow into the image of Christ and vital if we are to build the Church on earth. People

must see our faith in action in order to be drawn to it.

Keith Green, the late musician, songwriter and overall mystic wrote a scathing song about the Church back in the late 1970's to decry the great hypocrisy he saw. It's called "Asleep in the Light" and part of it goes:

Do you see, do you see, all the people sinking down,
Don't you care, don't you care, are you gonna let them drown,
How can you be so numb, not to care if they come,
You close your eyes and pretend the job's done.

Oh Bless me Lord, bless me Lord, you know it's all I ever hear,
No one aches, no one hurts, no one even sheds one tear,
But He cries, He weeps, He bleeds, and He cares for your needs,

And you just lay back and keep soaking it in, oh, can't you see it's such sin?
Cause He brings people to your door,
And you turn them away, as you smile and say,
"God bless you, be at peace," and all Heaven just weeps,
Cause Jesus came to your door, you've left Him out on the streets.
Open up, open up, and give yourself away,
You've seen the need, you hear the cry, so how can you delay,

God's calling and you're the one, but like Jonah you run,
He's told you to speak, but you keep holding it in,
Oh, can't you see it's such sin?
The world is sleeping in the dark,

That the church can't fight, cause it's asleep in the light,
How can you be so dead, when you've been so well fed,
Jesus rose from the grave, and you, you can't even get out of bed,
Oh, Jesus rose from the dead, come on, get out of your bed.

How can you be so numb, not to care if they come,
You close your eyes and pretend the job's done,
You close your eyes and pretend the job's done,
Don't close your eyes, don't pretend the job's done.
Come away, come away, come away with Me, My love,
Come away, from this mess, come away with Me, My love.

Be God's.

James

[true religion]



#16 — The Limit of Head Knowledge

James 2:18-20

NOTE: It is important in approaching James 2 to understand one very important thing: James does not believe that works can save us. We are saved by faith apart from works. But faith without works is lifeless and worthless for daily Christian life. This is the point James is making.

There are a lot of Christians in America who are spiritually smart. What I mean by "spiritually smart" is their minds are filled with the knowledge of God, His ways as revealed in Scripture, and many aspects of church life. They sit through sermons Sunday after Sunday, and attend Sunday school and Wednesday services. They know a lot, but can they see it in life around them? Have they gotten their hands dirty in the midst of service and ministry?

James starts off today's passage with a hypothetical question. The gist of it is: "You say you have faith in God that saves so you don't need to do good deeds, but I will show you the legitimacy of my faith by the deeds I do." Here is presented a very important lesson: Faith's evidence is works. Jesus said you would know a tree by its fruit (Luke 6:44). Apples do not grow on peach trees, or grapes on fig trees. We can often identify legitimate believers through observing their actions.

No person can grow in their faith by sitting in church and getting fat. Obesity is best combated by exercise, and the same truth applies to faith. Faith needs works in order to grow and mature. Beware of a person who says he believes but by his deeds denies it. James throws in another example of this by saying that even the demons have head knowledge about God. What separates true believers from demons is that believers act on their knowledge and produce good works. Demons do not.

Our Passage

2

"But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?"

What good does head knowledge do? Well, it is very important to know what you believe and be grounded in the truth of God's Word. But not even teachers have credibility if they never have experienced what they teach. Who wants a math teacher who has never solved an algebra problem? Or an English teacher who can't spell? Faith is useless without works. You must become a doer of the word and not a hearer only. Put your faith into practice and you will surely grow.

Be God's.

James [true religion]



#17 — Made Like Abe

James 2:21-26

We are plowing our way through James 2 and a lot of difficult concepts have been explored. In the chapter, James says plainly and clearly that faith without works is dead, literally, a corpse or shell. It still exists but has no animation or life. But we know from the rest of New Testament Scripture that even though faith without works is inactive, we are still saved by faith alone in Christ alone -- apart from works (Eph. 2:8-9). But dead faith is useless for spiritual growth.

Dr. Tom Constable, a former professor of mine at Dallas Seminary, said, "A Christian who has stopped living by faith day by day is similar to a person who has a non-functioning organ in his body. As the organ is dead, so the faith is dead, useless. Furthermore, his dead faith will contribute to his physical death, as a dead organ will shorten physical life." Our faith should bring with it a desire to do good works. Plain and simple.

James uses two final illustrations in exhorting his readers to start living out their faith. Both illustrations come from Old Testament characters. The first character is Abraham, father of the Jewish nation. The second is Rahab, a female ancestor of David. Of Abraham, James writes that he was justified by works and not faith alone. What does James mean? One clue, as shown by Dr. Constable, is that "(justified) always means to declare someone righteous, not to make someone righteous (cf. Ex. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32)." In other words, it is like a king giving a commendation or Medal of Honor. God saw Abraham's heart and his actions and declared Abe a righteous man. Did his faith save him? Absolutely. Read Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4 for verification.

We are declared to be just individuals by God whenever we act on our faith in obedience to God. This does not

Our Passage

2

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without [the] spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

mean we were unjust before we acted. God considered us righteous the moment we believed because of our faith in Jesus, the Righteous One (Rom. 3:21-22). Dr. Constable said, "Works declare us righteous in the sense that our works testify to onlookers that we have exercised saving faith. They are the external fruit that bears witness to the eternal life within." Are you bearing such testimony with your works? If not, are you willing to start today?

Be God's.

Now, on to chapter 3!

James [true religion]



#18 — A Teacher's Predicament

James 3:1-2

James begins chapter 3 with a warning that switches topic from faith-works to self-control. His first statement may strike the reader as odd: not many of us should become teachers. What? I thought being a teacher was a cool thing, a noble thing to aspire to? But all biblical warnings seem to contain a reason for their concern. This time, the reason concerns personal conduct and higher standards.

Teachers are held up to higher standards than their students, for they are the ones imparting knowledge and not usually the other way around. If the students knew more than the teachers, what good would teachers be? No, teachers are the ones who have the personal experience (or at least book learning experience) that the students want or need to learn about. In the church, this teacher-student separation has taken on spiritual significance. We look up to our pastors and Sunday school teachers. We want them to teach us, lead us and mentor us. Many of us consider our pastors to be spiritual giants, men of faith who impart the word of God to us every week.

But what happens when a pastor or Sunday school teacher falls? How are the students affected?

James repeats the common truth of life: we all stumble in many ways. Even pastors are going to sin. And many times this sin hurts a congregation deeper than death itself. Believe me, I know. My church experienced such a pain a few years ago. And James hits it like a sharpshooter. He continues with an exaggerated statement based on what he just said: if a man is perfect in what he says, he is able to exercise perfect self-control and never fall. But all fall down. Paul wrote in Romans 3:23 that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of

Our Passage

3

"Let not many of you become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."

God." Psalm 14 says there are none righteous, not even one. All have fallen away from God and none seek Him on their own.

Do you want to teach in your church? I'd say it is a noble thing to aspire to, but you have to examine yourself to see if you want to be held under the scrutiny that a teacher receives. Are you willing to be open and transparent with your students, to be patient and graceful with their questions or comments, and to live your life with as much holiness as you can muster? I pray so. If not, seek other ways to serve your church and thus build up the body of Christ.

Be God's.

James [true religion]



#19 — Small in Stature, Big in Bite

James 3:3-5

Isn't it amazing the power of words? With one word war can erupt and peace can resume. One ethnic group or religious order can be outraged by mere words, as we experienced with the Pope and Muslims last fall. You know, our tongues are such small things, barely one percent of our entire body. But with them we have the power to inflict great harm or express great love. The choice is ours.

James uses several practical illustrations of the size of our tongues and their awesome power. First of all, he talks about how a bit directs the path of a horse and then a rudder that directs a great ship. Have you ever seen a ship's rudder? It's that little thing on the back that directs the ship below the water's surface. It is small, much like our tongues, but without it a ship cannot steer. It's impossible. But with a rudder, the ship can go where it pleases.

So it is with our tongues. Though they are small, their power is immense. And learning to control them is key to both human relationships and our spiritual lives. Dr. Chuck Swindoll gave my Dallas Seminary group a great bit of advice when it comes to controlling the tongue. The advice was so great that I wish now I had written it down verbatim. But it went something like this: whenever you open your mouth to speak, run your words through a filter in your mind. Ask yourself: Are these words necessary? Are they useful or constructive? Are they destructive or hurtful? Then you can either let the words out or hold them back. The key is to think before you speak. Good advice, indeed. If only more of us would follow it!

Be God's.

Our Passage

3

"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts."

James

[true religion]



#20 — The Perils of the Tongue

James 3:5-6

In the previous verses, James explored the relationship of the tongue to the body -- how small our tongue is yet how important it is. It is like a ship's rudder, which is hidden below the water, just as our tongue is in our mouths, yet how vital it is to steering a ship. Or it is like a bit in a horse's mouth, which we use to turn the horse left or right or slow it down. Our tongues may be small, but they wield great power.

James continues exploring our speech in the next two verses, this time showing how destructive our tongues can be. All it takes is a spark to get a forest fire started. Something as small as a cigarette butt can lead to the loss of 100,000 acres of forest, many animal lives, homes and maybe even human life. I remember 15 years or more ago when a large chunk of Yellowstone National Park burned to the ground. Many animals lost their lives and the landscape was permanently changed.

So it is with our tongues. We can slander with our tongues, murder with our tongues, ignite an entire nation to murder with our tongues. Our mouths can define us, especially if they are filthy and bitter. "Old Joe over there was a bitter man with nothing good to say. Every other word he spoke needed censorship and I made sure my kids never went near him." James writes that our tongues can set the whole course of our lives on unholy fire. Ouch.

I've seen too many lives cut down by someone's unholy tongue to take James' words lightly. I've seen people abused -- sons and daughters, employees and business partners -- by a bad parent or boss. Building those people back up with encouragement and love can sometimes be the hardest thing to do. Words cut deep, like a forest fire scars a valley or mountainside.

Our Passage

3

"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

Be careful in the words you use. Never speak without running your words through a filter. Are they necessary? Are they constructive (helpful)? Or are they destructive? I'll leave you with the words of our Lord about the use of our mouths. He said in Matthew 12:34-36: "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken."

Be careful, my brethren. And be God's.

James

[true religion]



#21 — Taming the Tongue

James 3:7-8

When God created the world, He created a natural social order among His living creatures. Genesis 2 says that God gave to mankind the highest honor and dominion of His creatures, and our God-given role was to rule over the earth as His vice regents. In that chapter, we see Adam naming the animals and tending the Garden of Eden. The animals came to him -- he didn't have to seek them.

Ever since that day mankind has been able to tame the animals we see around us. Who would have thought we would be able to have cats, dogs, rabbits, mice, pigs, iguanas, etc. as house pets? Some people have made tigers and other large animals into pets, and many have horses, cows, goats and sheep as pets.

But James makes a point in verses 7 and 8 to say that animals are one thing -- our own bodies are another. No one can tame the tongue. It is not within our power to do. Without the Holy Spirit's enablement, we cannot control what we say and when we say it. Our tongues are free to lash out at whomever, whenever. Poison comes out of human mouths that do not have the Spirit's restraint. Evil is plotted and carried out.

But it does not have to be this way for the believer. Even though we cannot tame our own tongues on our own, we know that if we let the Spirit train us and help us, we can control our tongues. But it is only through His help that we can overcome our fleshly tendencies. Paul wrote to the believers in Colossae: "But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth," and, "Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person." (Col. 3:8, 4:6)

So learn to control your tongue through the Holy Spirit's power. Pray for Him to teach you how to exercise better self-control. And then practice it. Doing so is the only way to tame your tongue's might.

Be God's.

Our Passage

3

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

James

[true religion]



#22 — Double Tongued

James 3:9-12

As we have explored the dangers of the tongue one truth has stood out more than others -- our tongues may be small but they can do great damage. James began the chapter writing about teachers and how those who teach us are held to a higher standard than their students. And even the best of teachers is a fallible human, for there are no perfect men. He then moved into writing about the teacher's number one tool -- the tongue. It is small like a ship's rudder or horse's bit but can steer the course of our lives. The tongue may be small but it can also do great damage, like a spark can cause a great forest fire. Even worse, no man can tame or control the tongue on his or her own. Only with the Holy Spirit's help can we control our mouths and speak with grace instead of poison.

Our Passage

3

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

Now, James adds one more point about the tongue before moving on to the subject of wisdom. The tongue can show two sides sometimes, hiding under the cloak of hypocrisy. On Sunday mornings our tongues can praise the Lord and thank the preacher but before we get out of the parking lot it can spew forth all sorts of unholy utterances. We show people what we want them to see without one ounce of sincerity. This should not be. As our Lord said in Matthew 5:37, we should let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no." No mixed signals.

James gives several no-brainer examples to show the foolishness of being double-tongued. What happens when you mix a cup of fresh water with a cup of salt water? Does it remain fresh? No. The fresh water becomes salty. In the same way a spring cannot produce both kinds of water. Neither can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs. As Rich Mullins once put it, "It don't do."

Be careful how you speak, my brethren. Do not fall into the trap of putting on a "game face" on Sundays or Wednesday nights and changing your appearance at other times. People can easily see through our masks, so it's best to not even try. Be honest.

And be God's.

James [true religion]



#23 — Wisdom's Walk

James 3:13

James switches gears here in chapter 3 to focus on wisdom. Over the next few verses, the early church leader will contrast two kinds of wisdom: wisdom that finds its origin in the world and wisdom that comes from God. But he begins his discourse by pointing to a very important attribute of wisdom. Wisdom, James says, is shown not so much by our knowledge as by our actions.

This theme fits in with the rest of the letter. Don't forget that in chapter one, James urged his readers to be doers of the word and to stop settling for listening to sermons. In chapter two, he urged the Church to start showing their faith through their actions, for good deeds are faith's natural complement. Now, he urges believers to start showing their heavenly wisdom through their earthly actions.

It's interesting that James chooses to introduce the topic of wisdom with a question, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" The natural answer is, "I am!" I mean, who wouldn't respond this way except the humblest of men? But those of us who think we are wise may be deceiving ourselves. I believe wisdom is gained not through book learning alone but also through experience. This applies to both the intellectual and spiritual lives.

How does one know when to speak and when not to speak? Through past mistakes made with the tongue. We learn about patience and endurance through experience. And we learn about love. This experience gives us wisdom to grow on. And it constantly reminds us of how far we still have to go before we know it all (which, of course, we never will!). So if you want to be wise, learn to live what you have learned and always strive for more. And remember to fear God and obey Him, for this is the beginning of wisdom.

Be God's.

Our Passage

3

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

James [true religion]



#24 — Wisdom That Has Failed

James 3:13-16

There are two kinds of wisdom in this world: wisdom that is from God and wisdom that is not. Each type of wisdom has its characteristics. James talks about the latter kind of wisdom here -- the wisdom that is not from God. After exhorting his readers to start living out their wisdom with action, he helps them to identify whether or not they possess wisdom that is from God. He says that "if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts," you are not wise in God's eyes. For your wisdom is "earthly, unspiritual, of the devil." In other words, envy and selfishness do not come from God. They are trademarks of the unbelieving world we live in. For where you find envy and selfishness, there is "disorder and every evil practice."

Our Passage

3

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

When people tell us things that they consider to be wise, we need to run their advice through a filter. Is it envious in any way, seeking what is someone else's? Is it fame or fortune that you seek, a celebrity status? Will this advice lead you to desire what is not yours? If so, it is not good advice. Likewise, if the advice you receive is self-seeking and not God-seeking, reject it. Godly wisdom does not teach, "be all you can be" or "make your dreams come true." It is not Disneyworld, where you are told to "make a wish upon a star; makes no difference who you are; anything your heart desires will come to you." Godly wisdom does not teach us this.

The world we live in is full of chaos, disorder and anger. This is a direct result of its wisdom, which teaches us to lust after what is not ours and to seek our best interest over our brother's. See what this type of thinking leads to? Disorder, hatred and violence. The wisdom of our world has failed, my brethren. Don't go entertaining its advice.

Be God's.

James

[true religion]



#25 — The Wisdom of God

James 3:17-18

At last we come to a more kindly wisdom -- a wisdom that we want to not only see in our world but also to ourselves possess. In the previous verses, James pointed out to his readers that worldly wisdom is that teaching which tells you to be envious of other people and seek the very best for yourself at all costs. It is a type of thinking that puts us first and God second (or last). And this type of thinking has led to the current condition of the world around us -- chaotic, disorderly and violently sinful.

But there is an alternative and we who believe in Christ are taught to seek it. Wisdom that is good and beneficial is first of all "pure." The Greek word we translate as "pure" means "morally pure or innocent." Wisdom from God does not rely on the world to find its power and usefulness. It is unstained by the world and its goal is to make its people unstained as well.

This wisdom is also peace loving, or peaceful. God's wisdom teaches us how to be free from emotional worry and frustration and live in peace. It is also considerate and submissive. Take that, envy and selfishness! Godly wisdom does not have a "be all you can be" motto attached to it. Its motto is "help your brother or sister be all God wants them to be." Godly wisdom is also full of mercy and good fruit. It is an active wisdom that overlooks a brother's sins in the name of mercy and produces good works in our day-to-day lives. Finally, it is impartial and sincere. God's wisdom teaches us to be authentic people who can forgive our brother or sister for we have been forgiven by God for our trespasses.

Finally, James says that those who are wise with godly wisdom are peacemakers who sow peace and reap a righteous harvest. People who sow unrest and bitterness,

Our Passage

3

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

whether with their tongues or with their actions are bound to receive unrest and bitterness. it is their harvest. But people who are wise will instead sow the Gospel of Peace and see live impacted as a result.

As we come to the close of chapter 3, are you sowing peace or envy and selfishness? Are your ambitions and motives reflecting the wisdom from this world or the wisdom from God? If not, I urge you to pray to the Lord right away to confess your error and when you rise off your knees, commit yourself to stop listening to the world's wisdom and start to listen to God's wisdom, sown by His children, in the midst of this fallen age.

Be God's.

James

[true religion]



#26 — Addiction Gone Wild

James 4:1-3

James continues on the offensive in chapter 4. The church elder cannot stand to see or hear about believers acting inappropriately. These believers James writes to are, as my dad calls them, "bradults" -- literally, adult brats -- who have not grown up spiritually and still follow the sinful nature within them. Paul called them "carnal Christians" in First Corinthians. What exactly these believers were doing to tick James off is unknown. Whatever it was, the half-brother of our Lord called them to task and cut to the very depth of their sin -- the heart.

Believer is fighting believer because each one wants to get his or her own way. James writes that they fight not for righteousness and justice but instead for the selfish desires of their hearts. They want and don't receive, he writes; they fight (even kill!) and still cannot have what they desire. It sounds like they are addicted to something, like drugs or pleasure, and fight for it.

Even worse, they take their wants to the Lord in prayer but instead of asking that His will be done, they demand their own wills be done. Talk about prayers D.O.A. (dead on arrival!). They want to spend their expected blessings not on the advancement of the kingdom and benefit of their church but instead on themselves -- to scratch a temporal itch that will never be satisfied apart from God.

Wow. Quite a situation, eh? Sounds like something you might find in the inner city gangs or sex industries. But this is not in some expected location -- this was talking place in the Church of the living God! Addiction to the flesh corrupts the Church. And infighting does not glorify Him. Put aside your differences and don't push your own agendas. Seek to glorify God and build up your brother or sister, not nit-pick over your personal likes and dislikes. Learn a lesson from what you read in James 4. Do not imitate these people.

Be God's.

Our Passage

4

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

James

[true religion]



#27 — Believing the Lies

James 4:4-7

There is a tendency among some Christians today to totally withdraw from the world and try their best to avoid it. They see nothing but evil and ungodliness in the world and they believe that the best way to honor God is to live far from the world's reach. I understand their desire for purity but disagree with their actions. James here says that the world is the enemy of God and when we befriend the world's ways (not its people) we are turning our back on God. The people James is writing to have turned their back on God by following the world's wisdom (3:14-16) and seeking their own pleasures above the good of their brothers and sisters in Christ (4:1-3). This is wrong for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

However, Jesus left us in this world for a specific and very important reason. His words were: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (John 17:15-18)," and He said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)" Jesus left us in the world to bear witness of Him. We are to point the way to Jesus for the sake of those who are perishing in the midst of this world's system. So interacting with this world is very important for believers.

But the danger comes when we befriend the world's ways, a.k.a. start to believe and follow its values and philosophies. James writes that the Holy Spirit becomes envious when we try to fill our hearts and minds with junk that is not truth. Our God is a jealous God who will stand for no rival to His legitimate claim of ownership in our lives. As Jesus told His disciples, you cannot serve both

Our Passage

4

"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

God and mammon (money/wealth/this world).

Instead of seeking our own pleasure and envying others, we should humble ourselves before the Lord and before men. But James reminds us that even if we stumble and find ourselves entrapped by one of the world's lies, God still gives us His grace and asks that we fall on our knees before Him in humility.

James has said some harsh things over the past few verses and painted a dark picture of the church he writes to. But don't overlook his referral to grace here. No matter how far we fall, how many lies we believe, God's grace, just like His mercies, is new every morning. What He asks of us is to humble ourselves before Him, turn from our wayward ways, and stand firm on the grace He provides.

Be God's.

James

[true religion]



#28 — A Heart of Humility

James 4:7-10

Yesterday's verses mentioned the secret to getting our relationship right with God, that being repentance from our sin and continuance of following His precepts. That secret is humility. The believers James was writing to had slipped from following God because of their sin and were in need of confession (acknowledgment of guilt) and repentance (turning back to God).

They needed a dose of humility.

It takes a humbling of the heart for any believer to turn to God in our hour of need. We must admit that we are not capable of helping ourselves and only God can meet our need. Humility is the key. We must live out the belief that God is God and we are not -- we were created to glorify Him and share in a living relationship with Him.

James gives a series of commands over three verses, 7-10, which are all steps to restoring our relationship with God in humility:

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

In all of these we see humility. Submitting to God is an acknowledgment that He is our master, our sovereign ruler. Resisting the devil is possible only because we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts and are relying on His power. Drawing near to God happens when our hearts are submitting to Him and His response is to draw us close to Him. Washing our hands and purifying our hearts involves a conscious and deliberate effort to change our errant ways, both externally and

Our Passage

4

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

internally. Both are important. Grieving, mourning and wailing are signs of sorrow and repentance, which the humble display when their sinful actions come to the light. And, finally, we have a promise that God will lift us up if we fall down before Him. But we must first fall down in confession and repentance before we should expect this exaltation.

We must remember our place, brothers and sisters, and never seek to change God's created order. Let us be humble before Him and repent when we turn astray (which we all do from time to time). And the God who gives a greater grace (v. 6) will lift us up, back on our feet, and power us on in our day-to-day life.

Be God's.

James [true religion]



#29 — Who Can Judge?

James 4:11-12

Living in America, my friends and I are truly blessed. The United States is a country of laws, most of which are good for the people, and to break one of the laws could get a person into trouble. At the worst, we get a courtroom date, trial and jury. At the least, we are reprimanded by a police officer and told to watch our speed next time. In either case, there are legal roles that the citizens of America play -- some are the judges and others are those who are judged. Do nothing wrong and you have nothing to fear. But break a law and fear the justice of the legal system.

However, as a private citizen, I cannot pull someone over for speeding. Nor can I arrest someone and read them their rights. I cannot just pop into a judge's chair and start ruling legal cases -- no, there are judges for that purpose. Neither can I speak out against my brother and throw his name and reputation under the bus. That is called slander. It is illegal in a public forum. Lawsuits have been filed over slander, though the damage slander inflicts can often never be repaired.

I used to work as both a newspaper editor and radio broadcaster. In each communication field, there was a form of speech that we were warned to avoid. In newspaper, it was called "libel," which refers to the ruining of a person's name or reputation through the printed word. In radio, it was slander -- the spoken word. Both were dangerous and destructive. Both were to be avoided at all cost.

James writes to the believers to warn them about both slander and unlawful judging. When we judge another person, much worse a fellow believer, we are taking the place of the judge, the one who has the right to determine a person's innocence and guilt. Slander -- damaging a person's name or reputation -- is a sin against God. Only God holds the right to determine a person's innocence or guilt; only God is the rightful Judge. After all, it was God who established the law --whether moral or physical. It's His law, not ours. Therefore, let us leave the judging to Him.

Be God's.

Our Passage

4

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

James

[true religion]



#30 — My Life, My Control?

James 4:13-17

Let's face it -- people like to make plans. We look at our calendars and set vacation dates, schedule conferences, and mark appointments. We love to think that our lives are under our control -- that we can schedule something and make it happen just like we schedule it. But this is not the way it is. Our lives are not under our control, at least, not in the way we think it is. Ultimately, our lives are subject to God's will, to His desire for us.

Now, I'm not teaching, nor do I hold the view that we are robots subject God's electronic programming. I truly believe that we make choices that affect our lives, both for today and for tomorrow. We DO have free will in a lot of areas. This is the way God created things. But we do not have free will over our future. And James is teaching here that our attitudes towards planning -- our mindsets -- matter greatly. We do not know what will happen tomorrow, as our Lord said in Matthew 6. We just don't. Tomorrow is in God's hands. Always has been and always will be.

Instead of making plans certain in our minds and hearts, we should live with an attitude or mindset of "If the Lord wills, we will do this or that..." The truth is that any number of things out of our control can interrupt our plans and render them useless. But we don't like to behave this way -- we like to make potential things certain, an attitude that James calls a "boast and brag." We hate uncertainty but every tomorrow is uncertain. We cannot control tomorrow. We can only control certain parts of today (and very few parts at that!).

There is an old adage that says, "Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today." I used to hate this saying because it kept me from making excuses for procrastinating. But in light of what James has just said, we need to act upon good opportunities now rather than wait for a tomorrow that may never come. My life, my control? Not the way you think. All is in God's hands. Let us be faithful to rely upon Him.

Be God's.

Our Passage

4

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

James [true religion]



#31 — The Rich Employer's Heart

James 5:1-6

James holds back no punches when dealing with injustice in the church. His words are alive and full of color -- his eyes blazing in righteousness and his anger pointed and poignant. There were horrible things happening in the Church and James was determined to overlook none of it. The buck stopped here. This time, James is blasting the rich businessmen who were taking advantage of their employees and building up earthly riches in the process.

But James knew, as we do, that earthly things are neither permanent nor spiritually satisfying. Our Lord Jesus had said years before, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal (Matt 6:19)." Instead we are to store up treasures in heaven -- treasures that are eternal and of value. The reason? Our pursuit of riches shows that our heart is not with God. For "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (v. 21)."

Not only are some wealthy Christian businessmen hoarding money, they are stepping on people in order to do it. And their employees are crying out to the only one who can save them -- God. James writes that the cries of those who have been wronged have reached the ears of God Almighty and as we all know, our God is a swift defender of the poor and afflicted. Thus, those businessmen can expect the Lord to answer those cries and deliver punishment.

If you are an employer, know that the Lord is watching both your heart's motivation and your business practices. And if you are harming your employees in order to gain financial advantage, the Lord knows it and will be just to save those employees. If you are trying to honor God with your business, there's nothing to fear. Your motive is to be praised. In fact, Scripture teaches that the Lord's blessing is with the righteous. But, sadly, these believers James addressed were not seeking to honor God with their businesses. And they needed to know that the Lord heard and will surely act on behalf of those hurt in the process. Praise Him for His justice!

Be God's.

Our Passage

5

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



James [true religion]

#32 — A Lesson in Patience

James 5:7-9

If anyone knows what it means to be patient, it is a farmer. A successful farmer will have one big crop every year -- just one. For most of the year, his fields will be either bare or in the beginning stages of crop growth. But when the harvest moon rises, he strikes the sickle and reaps what he sowed the previous spring.

James uses this illustration to urge his readers to be patient when waiting for the Lord to return. There is no doubt that James had seen or heard first-hand about how Jesus had ascended into heaven and about how He had promised to return. Just because years have gone by and people are dying in the faith does not mean the Lord has forgotten about returning. In fact, we are now living in the end times, James writes, and Jesus' return may be any day now.

Peter echoed James' words in his second epistle. Listen to him: "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:8-9)." Peter then tells us that the Lord's return will come like a thief in the night, and the earth will be destroyed along with its system of values and philosophies. In light of this, Peter writes, we should live godly lives as we look forward to Jesus' return. James says the same when he writes, "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"

Jesus is coming back and we don't know when. So, instead of letting loose with our morals and seeking our personal gain, we should seek to be godly men and women who make an impact in the here and now. Remember that our decisions today can have an impact on eternity, whether personal reward, shame at the judgment seat of Christ, or the joy of seeing someone in heaven you have led to Christ. Be kingdom people and be patient. He will return. He has promised. So live for Him today.

Be God's

Our Passage

5

"Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"

James

[true religion]



#33 — Patience Personified

James 5:10-11

They were beaten and bruised, mocked and tortured, sawed in two and starved to death. And all for the sake of the name of our God. The prophets truly were patience personified, waiting in eager expectation for the Lord to deliver on His promises of deliverance and safety. And if you and I think we have it bad now, stressed and oppressed, we need only to flip the pages in our Bibles backward to see how the prophets handled such circumstances.

For an example, James mentions Job -- perhaps the leader of all oppressed and disheartened. Job was a godly man who was living the good life. He has a wife, children, flocks and herds (a BMW and gated mansion for his day) and was living in prosperity. But one day his life was turned upside down and he lost nearly everything. But in the end, after battling with man and God, Job was humbled and just and had his fortune restored.

Job's example serves to show us the compassion and mercy of our God. He is not a vengeful, wrathful, unmerciful God towards His children. No, He is a loving and compassionate father. His grace is new every morning and His countenance is always going to look favorably on those He loves -- you and I. Praise your Father for His compassion, for it will surely come -- if not now, then surely when your period of waiting ends.

Be God's.

Our Passage

5

"Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy."

James [true religion]



#34 — People of Our Word

James 5:12

Are you a person of your word? When you tell someone a truth, do they believe you right away? Or do they dig for truth after you tell you something?

There is an old adage that says a person is only as good as their word. I think this is why politicians are not considered to be very trustworthy -- they go back on their word many times. They make promises on the campaign trail in order to get elected, then once elected ditch the promises in order to pursue their predetermined agendas.

But this is not the way it should be for believers. James echoes the words of Jesus from Matthew 5:37, "Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no." We should not waffle or compromise our words. Let there be no doubt where you stand when you speak. Don't tell somebody one thing and then another person a different thing. Be consistent. Be a person of your word. We condemn ourselves when we are not faithful to our word. Many times we get into trouble. There's nothing like a little white lie to set your world on fire. We condemn ourselves by not being people of our word.

This principle is especially important to remember when it comes to engaging the lost for Christ. If your word cannot be trusted, why should people believe you about God and the Gospel? Imagine the powerful witness of being a person of your word; a person an unbeliever can come to for an honest opinion or for truthful advice. Reputations are priceless when you are a person of your word. So I encourage you to let your 'yes' and no's speak for themselves and pledge to become a more faithful person of your word. Doing so will lead to a more powerful witness.

Be God's.

Our Passage

5

"Above all, my brothers, do not swear — not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned."

James

[true religion]



#35 — Facing Life's Situations

James 5:13-16

The open parchment was getting smaller and smaller with each passing word. The author knew that he would have to end his letter soon, but he had so much more to say. Time to be brief: Be patient when troubled, he wrote, don't swear or break your word, sing when you're happy and pray when you're not. Let your church leaders know when you're sick so they can pray for you, and confess your sins to one another so you can be healed through their prayers.

With each passing line, James gets more and more urgent with his words. He begins today's selection by exploring three situations. First, if you are in trouble he suggests you pray. Sounds like a no-brainer. Many people pray when they're in trouble. "Dear God, I think I'm about to die. Help!" Or, "God, I know I haven't believed in you before, but if you only bail me out of this situation I'll..." But what separates this prayer from the prayers of desperate unbelievers is the faith of the prayer. As James reveals later in this paragraph, the prayer of a righteous man is very powerful and effective.

The second situation James mentions deals with the opposite. Are you happy and joyful? Try singing song or two. Have your prayers for deliverance been answered? Praise God in song. Our proper response to God's salvation should be to praise Him. There is no other proper response. Now, I know not everyone can sing on key, but why not, in your car, bring to mind that catchy praise song from Sunday and let it fly?

The third situation James addresses deals with illness and prayer. If anyone is sick, they (or their family) should take the initiative to call the elders of the church to pray over them. Consider this the pastoral visitation of the First Century. Anointing with oil is a traditional Jewish way of blessing. Kings were anointed with oil when they were chosen. James says that the prayers of righteous elders carry great weight with the Lord. If that person is ill because of his sin (which does happen), the person will be forgiven because of the prayers of the righteous.

Our Passage

5

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Many Christians bristle at the thought of confessing our sins to one another. I think this is largely because sinful humans have a hard time dealing with secret or sensitive information. Our first desire is to tell another person, who will then want to tell another, and so on. But being transparent and open with one another is the only way to be held accountable for our actions and, thus, live in godliness. We need each other to grow. If I don't know how you are struggling and you how I'm struggling how can we pray for one another and support each other? It becomes very difficult to do.

I know this is a breezy run through of some tough verses, but I want to keep the devotionals short. Beneath the surface, it does contain some nifty and important applications that would do you and I both well to follow.

Be God's.

James [true religion]



#36 — Praying Like Elijah

James 5:16-18

Elijah was a man just like us. Was he really? Let's think about it for a second: did Elijah have two feet? He had to; after all, he ran from northern Israel down to Sinai after his encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. I was born with two feet. Maybe you were too. I betcha we could both run as fast as Elijah did that day if we thought Jezebel was coming after us! Did Elijah have worries and fears like us? Elijah almost never stopped worrying about this or that. Reading 1 Kings 18-19 is like reading Elijah's last will and testament. He was always afraid of dying and ran for his life. At one point he was ready to give up on the whole prophet thing and asked the Lord to take his life (19:4).

Elijah had a tough life, though it was rewarding. In 1 Kings 17:1, Elijah prayed that God would withhold rain in the country of Israel. Unfortunately, God's answer meant that Elijah's well being would also be affected by the drought. The prophet had to spend a while beside a stagnant brook being fed by ravens, but at least his needs were met. Then, after God has conquered over Baal on Mt. Carmel, Elijah turned to the west and (praying silently apparently) the Lord caused a small cloud to develop with rain soon in tow. He then turned tail and ran for his life.

I relate to Elijah. He was a man who served God but never stopped being a man. He wasn't perfect just as I'm not perfect. But his prayers were righteous and God answered them with His power. You and I are like Elijah. We're human and we fail. But if we continually return to the Lord in faith He will hear our prayers and answer -- not always the way we want them to be answered, but at least they will be answered.

We can be as effective in prayer as Elijah, James writes. Take great comfort in knowing this.

Be God's.

Our Passage

5

"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

James [true religion]



#37 — An Abrupt Ending

James 5:19-20

James had finally run out of paper. No room for goodbyes, no doxology, just one final message on his mind. Brethren, blessed are you if you guide a wayward believer back to the faith, for your action has saved his or her life. But what does James mean when he writes, "save his soul from death" and "cover a multitude of sins"? I thought believers were already safe from eternal death and only the blood of Christ covers my sins? Let's explore for the answer.

Dr. Tom Constable, a former professor of mine at Dallas Seminary explained James' words in the following way: "The soul saved from death is that of the backslider to whom also belongs the multitude of sins. We should probably understand the "soul" to represent the whole person here as well as elsewhere in James' epistle (cf. 1:21). Death represents the temporal destruction of the person, not his or her eternal damnation (cf. 1 Cor. 15:30; 1 John 5:16). The repentance of the reclaimed sinning believer results in the forgiveness (covering) of his or her sins. This description of forgiveness harks back to Old Testament usage where the biblical writers described sin as covered when forgiven. His description does not contradict other New Testament revelation concerning forgiveness."

One of the things I discussed in chapter two of our study of James was the writer's terminology. James is writing from a different verbal playbook than the other New Testament writers and at a different time. I believe James' letter was one of the first New Testament epistles, written to Jewish Christians (1:1), and using Jewish terminology. He uses justified, for example, in chapter 2 not in reference to salvation but in reference to works. We are saved by faith but are declared a just person by our good deeds. Here, at the end, James again is writing

Our Passage

5

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

from a unique perspective as a Christian Jew and using Jewish terms.

When we lead a brother or sister in Christ back from backsliding, we are saving them from their own sinful ways and, thus, saving their life (here on earth). James' bottom line is that we do very well in guiding our wayward brethren back to the faith. We save them from Lord-knows-what anguish and maybe a premature death as a result of their sin. So if you see someone starting to compromise with this world, gently correct them and encourage them to keep walking with Christ and growing in their faith. Doing so may save their life.

Be God's.