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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural citations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

## Resources Referred to Throughout This Study (referred to by author's last name)

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- "An Exposition, With Practical Observations, of the General Epistle of James" by Matthew **Henry** in Volume 6 of *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*
- "Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles" by John **Calvin** in Volume 22 of *Calvin's Commentaries* (1551)
- "Epistle of James" by Alexander **Maclaren** in *Maclaren's Expositions of Holy Scripture* (1959)
- "The Epistle of James" by Walter **Wessel** in *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (1973)
- "The Epistle of James" by James **Stevens** in the *Liberty Commentary on the New Testament* (1978)
- Be Mature: An Expository Study of the Epistle of James* by Warren **Wiersbe** (1978)
- "James" by Donald **Burdick** in Volume 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (1981)
- The Epistle of James* by Peter **Dauids** in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (1982)
- "James" by J. Ronald **Blue** in Volume 2 of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (1983)
- James* by Douglas **Moo** in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (1985)
- Faith That Works: Studies in the Epistle of James* by Homer **Kent** (1986)
- "Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John" by Simon **Kistemaker** in the *New Testament Commentary* (1986)
- James* by Ralph **Martin** in Volume 48 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (1988)
- James: Faith That Works* by R. Kent **Hughes** (1991)
- James* by D. Edmond **Hiebert** (1992)
- James* by Kurt **Richardson** in Volume 36 of *The New American Commentary* (1997)
- The Letter of James* by Douglas **Moo** in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (2000)
- "Greek Exegesis: James" class notes by Bruce **Compton** (2004)

# Lesson 1: Introduction to the Book of James

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## Introduction

The book of James is one of the eight New Testament books (Hebrews-Jude) that are commonly called the "General Epistles" ("epistle" meaning letter) because they were allegedly written to Christians in general, rather than to a particular church or churches or to a particular individual or individuals (as in the case of all thirteen of the "Pauline Epistles"). However, because so many of these epistles are in reality written to a specific audience, whether an individual (as in the case of 3 John), to a church (as in the case of 2 John), or to a collection of churches (as in the case of 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and 1 John), it is preferable to refer to them as "non-Pauline epistles," rather than "general epistles." According to Moo (2000, p. 7), "Most scholars agree ... that James addresses a specific church or, more likely, group of churches." As an epistle, James is abnormal in that it lacks personal greetings and the typical epistolary conclusion (Martin, p. xcvi).

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

## Who Wrote the Book? (Authorship)

The author of the book of James is James (1:1). The question is, "Which James?" There are four possibilities:

1. *James, the father of Judas (Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13).* Judas (not Iscariot, John 14:22; cf. Luke 6:16) was one of the original Twelve. He is also known as Thaddaeus (Matthew 10:3; compare the list of Matthew 10:2-4 with that of Acts 1:13).
2. *James, the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15, and Acts 1:13).* This James was one of the original Twelve. Calvin (p. 277) believed that this James was the author of the epistle.
3. *James, the son of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21, 10:2, Mark 1:19, 3:17, 10:35, and Luke 5:10).* This James was also one of the original Twelve. He and his brother, John (author of the Gospel and Epistles that bear his name, as well as Revelation), were nicknamed "the Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17; cf. Luke 9:51-56). James, John, and Peter comprised the "inner circle" among the Twelve (Matthew 17:1, Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33, Luke 8:51, and 9:28).
4. *James, the half-brother of Christ (Galatians 1:19).* This James was one of Christ's four half-brothers. He was most likely the oldest of the four, since he is listed first in both Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, the only two listings of the brothers in Scripture (Hiebert, p. 30).

Which of these men wrote the book bearing his name? Neither James, the father of Judas, nor James, the son of Alphaeus, are strong candidates due to their relative obscurity.<sup>1</sup> James, the son of Zebedee, is a stronger candidate, having been a prominent figure in the New Testament and one intimately acquainted with the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, he was martyred by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2) in A.D. 44, a date considered by most to be prior to the penning of the epistle of James. Most, therefore, believe the author of the book to have been James, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Internal evidence verifies the conclusion that the half-brother of Christ wrote the book. First, there are no qualifiers added to the name of the writer in 1:1, implying that the writer was so well known that no such qualifier was necessary.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, when the other three James are mentioned in the New Testament, there is always a qualifier of some kind. And, second, there are striking similarities between the words of James in Acts 15:13-21 and the corresponding letter he most likely crafted (Acts 15:23-29) and the letter of James.<sup>3</sup>

Who was this James? He was raised in the same home as the Lord Jesus Christ, yet did not believe in Him (John 7:5). Most likely, he became a believer when the resurrected Christ personally appeared to him (1 Corinthians 15:7; cf. Acts 1:14). James quickly rose to a position of prominence in the early church, becoming the head of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, and 21:18, and Galatians 2:12). Paul calls James one of the "pillars" (Galatians 2:9) of the early church, as well as an "apostle"<sup>4</sup> (Galatians 1:19).

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<sup>1</sup>Hiebert (pp. 27-28) states in regards to James, the son of Alphaeus: "The son of Alphaeus is not named in connection with a single incident in any of the gospels; his name is known to us only from the lists of the twelve. A man who made so little impression on the gospel narratives does not seem to be the strong and forceful personality reflected in our epistle of James."

<sup>2</sup>"The fact that the author felt no need to identify himself, either by his ecclesiastical position or his human relations (cf. Jude 1), suggests that he was so prominent that his readers would know at once who he was. The only James who was such a well-known leader in the early Christian community was James the Lord's brother" (Hiebert, p. 17). Moo (2000, p. 10) likewise states: "None of the other Jameses mentioned in the NT lived long enough or was prominent enough to write the letter we have before us without identifying himself any further than he does." W. G. Kümmel (quoted in Davids, p. 6) draws the same conclusion: "Indeed, in primitive Christianity there was only one James who was so well known and who assumed such a transcending position that his mere name would identify him sufficiently, James the brother of the Lord."

<sup>3</sup>Hiebert (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 3:41-42) concludes: "These and other similarities certainly are remarkable in view of the shortness of the passage in Acts from which they come. They cause us to feel that all the time we are in contact with the same mind."

<sup>4</sup>James was not an apostle in a primary sense, but in a secondary sense. Hiebert (p. 52) says that James was an apostle "in the wider sense of the term." John MacArthur (*The MacArthur Bible*

He gained such a reputation for piety that he came to be called “James the Just.” One early Jewish writer said that he spent so much time praying in the Temple that his knees became as hard as a camel’s (Hiebert, p. 32). According to church history, James was martyred in the 60s A.D., with conflicting details given regarding the specifics of his martyrdom.

Where was James located when he wrote his letter? Based on Acts 8:1 and Galatians 1:18-19, he was most likely in Jerusalem. “[Jerusalem] is the best possibility since in the Bible James is always placed in Jerusalem after his conversion” (Robert Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, p. 339). Consistent with such a suggestion is the Palestinian climactic conditions mentioned in 1:11 and 5:7 and the produce mentioned in 3:12 (Kistemaker, p. 19).

### **To Whom Was the Book Written? (Recipients)**

Clearly, the book of James was written to “the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” (1:1). “The twelve tribes” is a reference to the Jews. Thus, James’ audience is Jewish, as opposed to Gentile. Kistemaker (p. 29) call James the most Jewish of all the New Testament Epistles. See, for example, James’ use of the word for synagogue (translated “assembly”) in 2:2 and his reference to Abraham as “our father” in 2:21. Furthermore, these were not just any Jews, but believing Jews (James 1:2, 3, 16, 18, 19, 2:1, 5, 7, 14, 15, 3:1, 10, 12, 4:11, 5:7, 9, 10, 12, and 19). These believing Jews had been “dispersed abroad.” The Greek word is *diaspora* (from the Greek verb meaning to sow, scatter, or disperse; NIV: “scattered among the nations”; ESV: “in the Dispersion”), a technical term for those Jews no longer living in Palestine (see John 7:35). The reason James’ readers had been dispersed into regions outside of Palestine (ultimately to regions in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, Acts 11:19) was the persecution that began with the martyrdom of Stephen in the middle 30s A.D. Acts 8:1 states: “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered [Greek verb, *diaspeiro*] throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (cf. Acts 8:4 and 11:19).

### **When Was the Book Written? (Date)**

Most conservative interpreters place the writing of the epistle of James between A.D. 40 and A.D. 50.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, James was likely the first New Testament book to be written.

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*Handbook*, p. 471) calls James “an associate of the apostles.”

<sup>5</sup>Such scholars include Kent (p. 28): 40s A.D.; Wessel (p. 943): 44 A.D.; Kistemaker (p. 19), Stevens (p. 669), and Moo (2000, p. 26): middle of the fifth decade A.D.; Blue (p. 816): 45-48 A.D.; Burdick (p. 162): 45-50 A.D.; and Hiebert (p. 36): 46-49 A.D.

## Why Was the Book Written? (Occasion and Purpose)

What circumstance(s) prompted James to write what he wrote when he wrote it? Because there is no explicit statement within the book that definitively answers this question, it must be inferred from what is known about the writer, recipients, and contents of the epistle. Assuming that James was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem and that the dispersed individuals to whom he was writing to have been his former “parishioners”<sup>6</sup>, as well as taking into account the stern tone of the letter<sup>7</sup>, it may be surmised that one or several of these dispersed individuals had made it back to Jerusalem<sup>8</sup> and informed James of some specific areas wherein the group as a whole had been struggling. James, “as pastor *in absentia*” (Burdick, p. 163), writes a series of “sermons”<sup>9</sup> to advise and admonish his flock in order to help them overcome these struggles. “James ... is writing to rebuke and exhort former parishioners about certain specific problems in their Christian practice” (Moo, 2000, p. 27). He writes to exhort these believers (many, if not most, to whom he used to minister) to live like the believers they claimed to be, to persuade his previous parishioners to practice their profession in spite of pressures.<sup>10</sup> This profession-practice disjoint surfaced as James’ readers wrongly responded to various trials/testings (see 1:2f), the most prominent of which appeared to have been financial (see 1:9, 27, 2:1f, 15-16, and 5:4). Their faith was being put to the test, and they were failing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Even if James became the “pastor” of the church in Jerusalem after those to whom he is writing were scattered, he could still view them as his “flock,” since Jerusalem was their home, and he was the current head of the church there.

<sup>7</sup>The letter’s stern tone is seen in the fact that, proportionately, there are more imperatives (commands) in the book of James than in any other New Testament book (Moo, 2000, p. 1). The count of imperatives in the book’s 108 verses varies according to writer: Burdick (p. 161) says 46; Davids (p. 58) says 49; Hiebert (p. 40), Hughes (p. 16), Blue (p. 816), and Kistemaker (p. 5) say 54; Richardson (p. 24) says 59; and C. Leslie Mitton (cited in Kistemaker, p. 5) says 60. The epistle’s stern tone is noted by J. B. Mayor (*The Epistle of Saint James*, p. cxxxiii): “It is characteristic of the austere tone of the Epistle that it, alone of the Epistles of the New Testament, contains no attempt to conciliate the favour of the readers by direct words of praise.”

<sup>8</sup>“James would come into contact with representatives of these congregations as different members came to Jerusalem for business or to attend Jewish national feasts” (Hiebert, p. 34).

<sup>9</sup>“Presumably, the letter ... was read in the worship services as a sermon from Pastor James” (Kistemaker, p. 4). D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris (*Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 416) call the book “a homily, or series of homilies, put into a letter in order to address Christians at a distance from their ‘pastor.’” Kistemaker (p. 4) divides the book into two sermons, the first being chapters 1-2 and the second being chapters 3-5.

<sup>10</sup>“The general purpose of James was to exhort his readers to support with their lives what they said with their lips” (Robert Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, p. 339).

## What is the Book's Primary Thrust? (Theme)

The book of James has been called "the Proverbs of the New Testament" (*Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, p. 455) because it resembles Old Testament wisdom literature, of which Proverbs is the chief example. As such, James deals with numerous, seemingly unrelated topics. Consequently, interpreters throughout church history have had a difficult time identifying a single theme that ties the book together or a clearly discernable pattern of thought.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the best suggestion is that of Wiersbe (p. 13): *maturity* (see 1:4, 2:22, and 3:2). The problems that James addresses in the book are the result of spiritual immaturity.<sup>13</sup> One would expect this to be the case, as these Jewish Christians were virtually "on their own." They no longer had the direct guidance of the apostles, who remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; cf. Galatians 1:17-19). This guidance was extremely important, as the New Testament had not yet been written.

## What are Some of the Outstanding Characteristics of the Book?

1. *The time it took for it to be universally recognized as canonical.* For many centuries, the book of James was counted among the "antilegomena" (literally "spoken against") books, books whose authenticity was questioned. There are various reasons for this.<sup>14</sup> In time, however (about the 4th century A.D.), the book gained universal acceptance.

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<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, Hiebert (p. 37) develops the theme, "Tests of a Living Faith," as does Compton.

<sup>12</sup>"An analysis of this epistle is difficult because of the lack of any clearly defined thread of thought running through it" (Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 757). "A superficial glance at this epistle may easily leave the impression that every attempt to outline it must fail" (William Hendriksen, quoted in Hiebert, p. 36). "... [T]he letter has no obvious structure, nor even a clearly defined theme. Moral exhortations follow closely upon one another without connections and without much logical relationship" (Moo, 2000, p. 7). "It is so disconnected, as it stands, that it is the despair of the analyst" (A. M. Hunter, quoted in Hiebert, p. 37). "The letter of James, a series of loosely related homilies, resists clear structural demarcation" (D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 409). A. M. Hunter (cited in Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 3:56) calls the book of James an "ethical scrapbook."

<sup>13</sup>Douglas Moo (2000, p. 46) suggests that "spiritual 'wholeness'" is the "central concern of the letter."

<sup>14</sup>Moo (2000, p. 4; emphasis his) says that "James was not so much *rejected* as *neglected*." The primary reason the book of James was questioned was its alleged conflict with Paul over justification in 2:14-26.

2. *Its many allusions to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).* Davids (p. 16) says that the whole book of James “exudes the Sermon on the Mount.” Compare James 1:2 with Matthew 5:12; James 1:5 with Matthew 7:7; James 1:22-25 with Matthew 7:24-27; James 2:13 with Matthew 5:7 and 6:14-15; James 3:17 with Matthew 5:9; James 4:4 with Matthew 6:24; James 5:2-3 with Matthew 6:19; James 5:10 with Matthew 5:12; and James 5:12 with Matthew 5:33-37. This is an instance of James, the half-brother of Jesus, being influenced by his brother’s teaching.
3. *James’ frequent use of analogies from the physical realm.* See 1:6 (wave of the sea), 1:10-11 (flowering grass), 1:15 (conception ⇒ birth ⇒ development), 1:17 (shifting shadow), 1:18 (first fruits), 1:23-24 (mirror), 2:26 (physical death), 3:3 (horses’ bit), 3:4 (ship’s rudder), 3:5 (forest fire), 3:7 (tamed animals), 3:11 and 12b (spring), 3:12a (fig tree and vine), 4:14 (vapor), and 5:7 (farmer).
4. *Its alleged conflict with Paul over justification in James 2:14-26.* This is one of the most controversial sections in all of Scripture, as James appears to directly contradict Paul’s teaching in Romans regarding justification by faith, not by works (compare especially James 2:21 with Romans 4:2). Moo (2000, p. 18) calls the relationship between James’ teaching and Paul’s teaching on this point “one of the biggest theological issues in the letter and, indeed, one of the most significant theological tensions within the NT.” It was this section that caused Martin Luther, in the heat of his battle with the works-righteousness of Catholicism, to label the book of James “a right strawy epistle” (an allusion to 1 Corinthians 3:12), a claim that he later renounced. A reconciliation of these passages will be suggested in the coming exposition of 2:14-26.

## Lesson 2: James 1:2-12

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### Introduction

In this, the first major section of his epistle, James discusses the subject of trials<sup>15</sup>, a subject he discusses once again in one of the final sections of the book (5:7-11). James' readers were undergoing trying times. Besides being separated from some considerable spiritual lifelines (their pastor, James; the rest of the apostles; their local church in Jerusalem), they were apparently suffering financial deprivation (1:9, 27, 2:1f, 15-16, and 5:4) due to being taken advantage of by their wealthy, unbelieving employers (2:6b and 5:1-6).<sup>16</sup> In the larger section of 1:2-18, James exhorts his readers to have the right response to such trials. The right response involves: 1) having a proper (positive) perspective on them (verse 2); 2) enduring them (verse 4a); 3) asking God for the wisdom needed to view them properly and endure them completely (verse 5a); and 4) not charging God with being responsible for the temptations/enticements to sin that accompany them (verse 13a).

### 1:2

**Consider it all joy<sup>17</sup>, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,**

James begins his discussion of trials by commanding his readers to have a proper perspective on them—a radically positive one. The Greek noun translated “**trials**” can be translated either “temptation” (a solicitation to sin from within) or “trial” (a test from without).<sup>18</sup> The context demands the second (James commands his readers to consider

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<sup>15</sup>“By placing trials in this position of prominence in the letter, James suggests that the tough times the believers were facing were a key reason for his writing to them” (Moo, 2000, p. 52).

<sup>16</sup>James' readers would receive little or no sympathy from Gentiles, being Jews. Nor would they receive much sympathy from fellow Jews, being Christians. As Hughes (p. 17) explains: “Tragically these Jewish Christians were not taken in by their expatriate Jewish kinsmen, but rather were rejected and persecuted. Further, refused protection by the Jewish community, these Jewish Christians were exploited by the Gentiles. Homeless and disenfranchised, they were robbed of what possessions they had, hauled into court, and subjected to the Gentile elite. They had less standing than slaves. They became religious, social and economic pariahs.” “... [T]he readers seem to have been Jewish Christians who have left their homes in Palestine and are facing economic distress, including persecution, at the hands of wealthy landowners” (Moo, 2000, p. 10).

<sup>17</sup>James “stitches” 1:1 and 1:2 together with an apparent wordplay. “Greetings” in 1:1 is the Greek verb, *chairein*, while “joy” in 1:2 is the Greek noun, *charan*.

<sup>18</sup>More will be said on this point in the comments on 1:13. Whereas in 1:2-12, trials are in view, in 1:13-18 temptation is in view. The NASB rightly distinguishes between the two by translating the Greek noun and its cognate verb accordingly (so also the NIV and the ESV). The KJV, however,

them all joy here in verse 2 and to endure them in verses 4 and 12). The trials a believer faces are, indeed, "**various**" (cf. 1 Peter 1:6), whether physical, financial, social/relational, etc. Believers "**encounter**" such trials, meaning that they come unexpectedly (cf. the same verb, translated "fell among" in Luke 10:30). James commands his readers to consider it all joy "**when**" (not "if"; see John 16:33, Acts 14:22, 2 Timothy 3:12, and 1 Peter 4:12) trials come.<sup>19</sup> The Greek verb translated "**consider**" has the idea of thoughtful consideration, what Hiebert (p. 62) describes as "a mental evaluation adopted as the result of due deliberation." Our natural, knee-jerk reaction to trials is not one of joy. Trials are distressing (1 Peter 1:6) and sorrowful (Hebrews 12:11). Rather than viewing life from a worldly, earth-bound, temporal, horizontal, limited perspective, however, believers are to view life from a divine, heavenly, eternal, vertical, big picture perspective. Thus, rather than viewing trials with knee-jerk negativity, believers should view them positively, with "**all joy**." To emphasize this point, James 1) modifies "joy" with the adjective "all" (NIV: "pure joy") and 2) places "all joy" first in the sentence, for emphasis (the sentence in Greek literally reads: "all joy consider [it], brothers of me, when trials you encounter various"). The idea of responding joyfully to trials is not limited to James (see also Matthew 5:10-12//Luke 6:22-23<sup>20</sup>, Romans 5:3-5, 1 Peter 1:6-9, and 4:12-14). What does it mean to have joy in the midst of trials? "To have joy does not necessarily mean we will be hilarious and laughing about the trials we are experiencing, but it means we will have a deep-seated confidence that God knows what He is doing and that the results will be for His glory and our good" (Theodore Epps, quoted in Hiebert, p. 64).<sup>21</sup>

### 1:3

#### **knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.**

James gives the reason why (taking the Greek participle translated "knowing" as causal) believers can and should be joyful in the midst of trials: they know ("**knowing**") that the trying of their faith is beneficial—it produces endurance. "**Endurance**" is not passive resignation (the potential implication of the KJV's "patience"), but active

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does not, leading Hiebert (p. 63) to rightly call this fact "rather unfortunate and confusing."

<sup>19</sup>"Totally foreign to [James] was the curious modern notion that becoming a Christian will make life easier, that all problems will disappear, and that the prospect in this life for each believer is that he will live 'happily ever after'" (Kent, p. 33).

<sup>20</sup>This is the first of several allusions to the Sermon on the Mount in James (see #2 under "What are Some of the Outstanding Characteristics of the Book?" in Lesson 1).

<sup>21</sup>In this regard, one should distinguish between joy and happiness. Happiness is more superficial, joy more deep-rooted. Happiness is more of a feeling, joy more of a settled mindset. Happiness is based on favorable happenings/circumstances, while joy is rooted in conviction. While happiness comes and goes, joy remains, regardless of circumstances.

resistance. “It is not a passive attitude of quiet submission or resignation but rather a brave manliness that confronts the difficulties and contends against them” (Hiebert, p. 66). “It speaks of tenacity and stick-to-it-iveness. [William] Barclay explains that it is not the patience that passively endures; instead, it is the quality that enables a man to stand on his feet facing the storm” (Burdick, p. 168). The believer is to actively endure or persevere through trials.<sup>22</sup> The Greek noun translated “endurance” (*hupomone*) has the idea of staying, abiding, or remaining under (the Greek preposition, *hupo*, “under” + the Greek verb *meno*, “to stay, abide, remain”).<sup>23</sup> Rather than trying to escape from trials, the believer should endure them until they run their course. Rather than asking, “How can I get out of this trial?”, one should ask, “What can I get out of this trial?” Trials help the believer develop spiritual fortitude or stamina<sup>24</sup> (cf. Romans 5:3), to persevere in the faith/belief and in faithfulness/behavior.

## 1:4

**And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

James explicitly states what he has just implied, namely, that his readers should let trials run their course until God provides “the way of escape” (1 Corinthians 10:13).<sup>25</sup> In order for trials to produce their intended effect, the believer must let them do so.<sup>26</sup> What is the intended effect of trials? God sends trials our way to make us spiritually mature. The Greek adjective translated “**perfect**” in “so that you may be perfect” has the idea of complete, full-grown, or mature (so Hiebert, Burdick, Kistemaker, and NIV; cf. Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 3:15, Colossians 1:28, 4:12, Hebrews 5:14, and James 3:2). Davids (p. 70) describes it as “a full-blown character of stable righteousness.”

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<sup>22</sup>Martin (p. 16) describes this concept as “a persistent determination to win through to the end.”

<sup>23</sup>“The etymology of the Greek word points to the idea of ‘remaining under,’ and, in this case, etymology steers us in the right direction” (Moo, 2000, p. 55).

<sup>24</sup>Many interpreters give several excellent analogies at this point. Davids (p. 69) gives the analogy of a soldier who is made stronger by the trial of battle and the analogy of tempered metal that is made stronger by the fiery purification process. Moo (2000, p. 55) gives the analogy of a muscle: “Like a muscle that becomes strong when it faces resistance, so Christians learn to remain faithful to God over the long haul only when they face difficulty.” Hughes (p. 20) gives the analogy of a butterfly: “Free a butterfly from its chrysalis, and thus from the struggle of liberating itself, and you destroy its life, for it will never develop the strength to soar as it should.”

<sup>25</sup>“[Endurance] is that tenacity of spirit which holds up under pressure while awaiting God’s time for dismissal of the test or for His reward” (Hiebert, p. 66).

<sup>26</sup>“Endurance is a virtue which very few people experience fully. Too often we grasp relief from trouble so eagerly that we fail to receive the entire lesson that God intended for us” (Stevens, p. 671).

James reemphasizes this idea both positively ("**complete**") and negatively ("**lacking nothing**"). The believer who endures trials will become more spiritually mature, i.e., more godly/like God or Christlike (Galatians 4:19), what Davids (p. 70) calls "a fully rounded uprightness, an approach toward the character of God or an imitation of Christ."

## **1:5**

**But if any of you lacks<sup>27</sup> wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.**

Believers need wisdom<sup>28</sup> to view trials positively and endure them completely. Henry (p. 969) writes: "We should not pray so much for the removal of an affliction as for wisdom to make a right use of it." James tells his readers where they can find such wisdom. The conditional clause that introduces verse five ("**if any of you lacks wisdom**") reflects a Greek grammatical construction in which the conditional clause is assumed to be true. In other words, James assumes that his readers naturally lack the wisdom needed to view trials positively and endure them completely (the "if" could be translated "since"). Since they lack such wisdom, they need to go to the source of wisdom, God (Proverbs 2:6) ("**let him ask of God**"). Wisdom is readily available to those who ask, for God is eager to give it ("**who gives to all generously**"<sup>29</sup>). This positive affirmation is reaffirmed with its corresponding negative ("**and without reproach**"). God does not find fault with those who ask. Those who ask receive ("**and it will be given to him**"). James' teaching in this verse is the same as that found in Matthew 7:7-11//Luke 11:9-13.

## **1:6**

**But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.**

In order to receive the wisdom needed to view trials positively and endure them completely, one must ask for it (verse 5) in faith ("**But he must ask in faith,**" verse 6). That faith is a prerequisite to answered prayer is seen in such passages as Matthew 21:22//Mark 11:24 and Hebrews 11:6. Not only must one believe that God is able and

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<sup>27</sup>As he does with 1:1 and 1:2 (see footnote 17), so James "stitches" 1:4 and 1:5 together with an apparent wordplay. At the end of 1:4 he speaks of lacking nothing, while at the start of 1:5 he speaks of lacking wisdom.

<sup>28</sup>"Wisdom ... is the possession of the believer given by the Spirit that enables him to see history from the divine perspective" (Davids, p. 72). See comments on 1:2.

<sup>29</sup>"It is characteristic of the unbeliever to see God with a clenched fist; it is characteristic of the believer to see Him with an open hand" (John Blanchard, quoted in Hiebert, p. 70).

willing to do what He has promised to do (give wisdom to those who ask for it), but he must also trust God's wisdom in allowing the trial. As Kent (p. 39) explains: "There must be a trust that God's way is best, whatever it is. Arguing with God, complaining about circumstances, or hesitancy to be open to His answer are human attitudes that will prevent God from responding." Faith's antithesis is doubt ("without any doubting"). James likens the doubter to a wind-tossed wave of the sea<sup>30</sup> ("for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind"), a common Jewish metaphor for instability (cf. 1:8). Rather than having an unwavering faith (as Abraham usually did, Romans 4:20), such an individual has a waffling "faith."

### **1:7-8**

**For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.**

In 1:7, James explicitly states what he implied in the previous verse, namely, that a lack of faith precludes God from granting the wisdom needed to view trials positively and endure them completely ("For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord"). In context, the "anything" is anything asked for, wisdom in particular. A faithless person will not receive anything he asks for in prayer, let alone wisdom. In 1:8, James reiterates (cf. verse 6) the reason why such a man will not receive the wisdom asked for, using imagery similar to verse 6's wind-tossed wave: such a man is "double-minded" (cf. 4:8; literally: "two-souled"). As Moo (2000, p. 25) puts it, he suffers from "spiritual schizophrenia." He is like "Mr. Facing-both-ways" in John Bunyan's allegorical classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Somewhat like the man in Mark 9:24, he is a mix of belief and unbelief. Unlike the man of Mark 9:24, however, his unbelief predominates. Though he shows signs of faith by seeking God's help, he reveals his underlying unbelief by refusing to trust or rely upon God in the midst of the trial. This double-mindedness/instability characterizes his entire life ("unstable in all his ways"), not just his response to trials.

### **1:9**

**But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position;**

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<sup>30</sup>This is the first of James' analogies from the physical realm (see #3 under "What are Some of the Outstanding Characteristics of the Book?" in Lesson 1).

James seems to switch gears rather suddenly here in verse nine. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, apparently one of the "various" (verse 2) trials his readers were facing was poverty (the Greek adjective translated "**of humble circumstances**" can also be translated "poor"). James commands his poverty-stricken brethren to "**glory**"<sup>31</sup>, in spite of their economic status (cf. v. 2). Why? Because they understand that they possess true riches by virtue of their "**high position**," their relationship to Christ (see Jeremiah 9:23-24 and James 2:5; cf. Romans 8:17a and Ephesians 1:3). Hughes (p. 37) speaks of such individuals as spoken of here in verse nine as the "rich poor" and the "low high."

### **1:10**

**and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.**

James commands the rich believer<sup>32</sup> to also glory ("**and the rich man is to glory**"). Why? Because of his "**humiliation**." This could be a reference to financial misfortune. It could also be a reference to the reproach that came with being a believer, even though a wealthy one.<sup>33</sup> Either way, James' point seems to be that the wealthy believer can rejoice that he has been made to understand that his riches are, in the final analysis, worthless and that his true riches are in Christ. Compton writes: "James' point is that in the trials of life the rich brother is forced to recognize the frailty of his life and the uncertainty of his wealth and is forced to rely upon God who is utterly trustworthy and dependable, thus recognizing what is of true and lasting value." Like the "**flowering grass**" (i.e., the wildflower), he (and his riches) will pass away. Both the life of the rich (see the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21, as well as James 4:14) and his material riches (see Proverbs 23:5 and 1 Timothy 6:17) are fleeting.

### **1:11**

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<sup>31</sup>The Greek verb translated "glory" is placed first in the sentence, for emphasis. Literally, the verse reads: "let glory but the brother the humble in the height of him." Recall that a similar phenomenon took place in verse 2.

<sup>32</sup>There is considerable debate among commentators as to whether James is speaking of wealthy believers or wealthy unbelievers (as in 5:1-6) in this verse. While the arguments for the second are considerable (see Davids and Martin), the arguments for the first are, in the opinion of this writer, slightly more convincing (see Hiebert and Moo, 2000).

<sup>33</sup>"... [T]he rich believer is to boast not in his wealth or his elevated social position, but in his identification with Christ and his people, a matter of 'humiliation' in the eyes of the world" (Moo, 2000, p. 66). Accordingly, Hughes (p. 38) dubs such individuals the "poor rich."

**For the sun rises with a scorching wind<sup>34</sup> and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.**

To underscore the point of the previous verse, that the life (let alone the riches) of the rich man is fleeting, James further develops the wildflower simile here in verse 11 (this common Jewish simile is also found in Psalm 90:5-6, 103:15-16, Isaiah 40:6-8, and 1 Peter 1:24). As the wildflower comes and goes, so shall the rich man come and go while going about his business, i.e., unexpectedly (cf. 4:13-14).

## **1:12**

**Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him.**

James concludes this section on trials (1:2-12<sup>35</sup>) by returning to a direct discussion of them. With a beatitude (cf. Matthew 5:3-11//Luke 6:20-22) he calls a man who endures trials "**blessed**"<sup>36</sup> (cf. James 5:11), a truth that Hiebert (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 3:54) calls the central truth of this epistle. Why is such a man blessed for enduring trials? Because when he "**has been approved**" (i.e., has been proved and approved, tried and found true, tested and passed the test by completely enduring all the trials of life, persevering in the faith and in faithfulness), he will receive the crown of life. What is this "**crown of life**" (cf. Revelation 2:10)? Most interpreters agree that the crown is the life itself, in other words, the crown which is life (analogous to "the city of Ypsilanti," i.e., the city which is Ypsilanti). What kind of life is "**promised to those who love Him (the Lord)**"/believers (cf. Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 2:9, 2 Timothy 4:8, and James 2:5)? Eternal life. Those who persevere through every last trial of life will in the

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<sup>34</sup>There is some question as to whether "wind" is an accurate translation. Most translations speak of the burning heat of the sun (so KJV, NKJV, NIV, and ESV), not of the wind. If wind is an accurate translation, James likely has a "sirocco," a hot desert wind from the east, in mind (see Psalm 103:16, Isaiah 49:10, and Jonah 4:8), much like today's Santa Ana winds in southern California.

<sup>35</sup>1:2-3 and 1:12 serve as "bookends" to this section. In 1:2 and in 1:3, James uses the Greek noun, *hupomone* ("endurance"), while in 1:12 he uses its verbal cognate, *hupomeno* ("perseveres"). In 1:2, he uses the Greek noun, *peirasmos* ("trials"), as he does in 1:12 ("trial"). In 1:3, he uses the Greek noun, *dokimion* ("testing"), while in 1:12 he uses its adjectival cognate, *dokimon* ("approved"). In 1:2-3, he spoke of the penultimate (next-to-last) benefit of trials, while in 1:12 he speaks of the ultimate benefit.

<sup>36</sup>Just as joy and happiness should be distinguished (see footnote 21), so should "blessed" and "happy." As Moo (2000, pp. 69-70) states: "The tendency to translate with the word 'happy' ... is a misguided effort ... and should be resisted. A person who is 'blessed' may not be 'happy' at all. For our emotional state may and will vary with the circumstances of life."

end receive the reward of eternal life (in the fullest and final sense of the term; cf. Luke 18:30 and Romans 2:7).<sup>37</sup> Trials can be viewed positively (verse 2) and endured completely (verses 3-4) because of the ultimate benefit they produce, a gain so glorious that it cannot compare to the pain of trials (Romans 8:17-18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17).<sup>38</sup> “No pain, no gain, but, oh the gain—it’s glorious!” As in all things, believers can look to Jesus in this regard (see Hebrews 12:1-3).

## **Conclusion**

In James 1:2-12, James exhorts his readers to joyfully (verses 2 and 9-11) endure (verse 4) the trials of life (in their case, financial ones in particular), asking God to grant them the wisdom to do so (verses 5-8), knowing that doing so produces perseverance (verse 3), which ultimately leads to eternal life in its fullest and final sense (verse 12).

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<sup>37</sup>According to such passages as John 3:36, 5:24, and 1 John 5:11-12, the Christian receives the gift of eternal life at the moment of conversion. Thus, eternal life is a present possession. Therefore, when viewed as a future possession, it must be viewed in its full and final sense.

<sup>38</sup>Moo (2000, pp. 70-71) makes the following perceptive comments on this verse: “Clearly James’s overall purpose in this verse is to encourage believers to endure trials faithfully so that we might receive the reward that God has promised. Some Christians have difficulty with rewards, objecting that our obedience to Christ should be pure and disinterested, unmotivated by any such crass consideration as future reward. This objection is understandable, and it is certainly the case that far too many Christians bring a selfish and calculating ‘bottom line’ mentality into their service of the Lord, asking ‘What’s in it for me?’ at every step. But the contemplation of heaven’s rewards is found throughout the NT as a spur to faithfulness in difficult circumstances here on earth. Keeping our eyes on the prize can help motivate us to maintain spiritual integrity when faced with the temptations and sufferings of earthly life.”

## Lesson 3: James 1:13-18

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### Introduction

In the second major section of his epistle, James discusses the subject of temptation. One may wonder why James goes from discussing trials in 1:2-12 to discussing temptation in 1:13-18. The reason for this is quite simple: Though God allows trials to come our way to mature us, Satan uses them to tempt us to sin. As Hiebert (p. 60) states: “In human experience, the two aspects of testing and temptation may be closely related. That which is intended as a test may in fact become a temptation for the person tested because of his inner response to the situation.<sup>39</sup> Well aware of this close connection in actual experience, James deals with both aspects of *peirasmoi* [”trial” or ”temptation”] in this opening section [1:2-18] of his epistle.” As mentioned previously (see comments on 1:2, including footnote 18), the underlying Greek word behind ”trials” in 1:2, ”trial” in 1:12, ”tempted” (3x) in 1:13, ”tempt” in 1:13, and ”tempted” in 1:14 is the same<sup>40</sup>, thus showing the close connection between a trial and a temptation. Every trial is a temptation, and vice versa.<sup>41</sup> A trial is an act of God whereby He tries the believer’s faith/puts the believer’s faith to the test in order to reveal its authenticity and to strengthen it (cf. Acts 20:19, 1 Peter 1:6, 4:12, and Revelation 3:10). A temptation is an act of Satan whereby he entices the believer to sin (cf. 1 Timothy 6:9). Both acts can be described with the same Greek word because, as Hiebert (p. 60) states: “The noun *peirasmos* [”trial” or ”temptation”] denotes a testing being directed toward an end, to discover the nature or quality of the object or person tested. The verbal form *peirazo* [”try” or ”tempt”] denotes the action of putting something or someone to the test. Such a test may be applied with either a good or bad intention. In a good sense, the test may be applied in order to demonstrate the strength or good quality of the object tested. When the testing is applied with the evil aim that the object will be led to fail under testing, then the thought of temptation comes in.”

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<sup>39</sup>James Adamson (*The Epistle of James*, p. 80) uses the designation “trials-become-temptations,” as does Richardson (p. 80).

<sup>40</sup>This is yet another instance (cf. footnotes 17 and 27) of James “stitching.” He stitches 1:12 and 1:13 together by his use of *peirasmos* (“trial”) in 1:12 and *peirazo* (“tempted” 2x and “tempt”) and *apeirastos* (“cannot be tempted”) in 1:13.

<sup>41</sup>“John Adam states it well: ‘All trial,’ he says, ‘has in it an element of temptation. It presents certain openings and inducements to sin; it is fitted, whether it is designed or not, to act on the corrupt propensities of our nature, and draw us into forbidden courses. It would not bear the character and serve the purpose of trial were it otherwise. There would be nothing in it to withstand, to put us to the proof, to test our dispositions and principles. In like manner all temptation has in it an element of trial. It must be yielded to or resisted; we must fall or stand before it; and in either case it operates so as to manifest what we really are, whether we have grace or not; and if we have, in what degree of strength or purity. But still the two are to be clearly distinguished; and a thing is very different viewed as one or the other’” (Curtis Vaughan, *James*, p. 29).

## 1:13

**Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.**

Apparently, those to whom James is writing were erroneously blaming God for the temptations to sin that were accompanying the trials they were facing ("**I am being tempted by God**").<sup>42</sup> Blaming God for our sin is proverbial (Proverbs 19:3, NIV). Adam did this very thing in the Garden (Genesis 3:12). The imperative here in verse thirteen ("**Let no one say ...**") reflects a Greek grammatical construction calling for the cessation of an act already in progress (thus, "when tempted, stop saying . . ."). James gives two reasons why ("**for**") God cannot possibly be the source of temptation. First is God's *character*: "**God cannot be tempted by evil.**" God is holy, or perfectly pure. Thus, there is no evil within His nature to which temptation can make an appeal. God is allergic to evil (Habakkuk 1:13). He is untemptable. Thus, He cannot be the one who tempts men to do evil.<sup>43</sup> Second is God's *conduct*: He does not tempt anyone ("**and He Himself does not tempt anyone**"). Thus, James categorically denies that God is the source of the temptations facing his readers. God tests, but He does not tempt.

## 1:14

**But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.**

Having denied that God is the source of temptation (verse 13), James identifies the real source: human lust (verse 14; cf. 4:1). Unlike God, man's nature is thoroughly sinful (Jeremiah 17:9). Accordingly, temptation finds in man a source to which it can readily appeal. Man's lust (i.e., his sinful desires, categorized in 1 John 2:16 as the lust of the flesh/the inordinate desire for pleasure, the lust of the eyes/the inordinate desire for possessions, and the boastful pride of life/the inordinate desire for prestige) motivates him to seek sin<sup>44</sup> (the Greek verb translated "**carried away**" is a fishing term used to describe the drawing out of a fish from a place of safety) and entices him to sin (the Greek verb translated "**enticed**" is also a fishing term and is used to describe the

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<sup>42</sup>"The tendency to blame God for temptation, and hence excuse succumbing to it, was a familiar problem for a people who stressed the sovereignty of God" (Moo, 1985, p. 72).

<sup>43</sup>"What must be understood is that temptation is an impulse to sin, and since God is not susceptible to any such desire for evil he cannot be seen as desiring that it be brought about in man" (Sophie Laws, quoted in Moo, 2000, p. 74).

<sup>44</sup>"If we are to win this battle for holiness, we must recognize that the basic problem lies within us. It is our own evil desires that lead us into temptation. We may think we merely respond to outward temptations that are presented to us. But the truth is, our evil desires are constantly searching out temptations to satisfy their insatiable lusts" (Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, p. 66).

baiting of a fish with a lure). The only person who can be blamed for sin is self. God cannot be blamed (verse 13). Not even Satan can ultimately be blamed (“the devil made me do it”), as Eve blamed the serpent in the Garden (Genesis 3:13).

### **1:15**

**Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.**

Having established human lust as the true source of temptation (verse 14), James reveals lust's end result, using an obstetric analogy<sup>45</sup> (verse 15).<sup>46</sup> He begins by personifying lust as conceiving and giving birth to sin (“**Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin**”). Next, sin is personified as growing into adulthood (“**and when sin is accomplished**”), itself conceiving, and giving birth to death (“**it brings forth death**”). The natural result of sin is death (cf. Ezekiel 18:4, Romans 5:12, and 6:23). This includes physical death (separation of the material part of man from the immaterial part), spiritual death (separation of the sinner from God), and eternal death (permanent separation of the sinner from God in Hell).

### **1:16**

**Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.**

This verse serves as a “hinge” of sorts between verses 13-15 and 17-18. In it, James commands his fellow Jewish believers (“**my beloved brethren**”) to stop (as in verse 13, the Greek grammatical construction here in verse 16 calls for the cessation of an act already in progress) being deceived (“**Do not be deceived**”). James wants his readers to stop being deceived (by false teachers?; so Martin, p. 41) into thinking that God is the source of temptation.

### **1:17**

**Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.**

To further support his case that God is not the source of temptation, James points out what God is the source of: what is good and perfect (“**Every good thing given and**

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<sup>45</sup>“The details of the illustration must not be pressed too far. The author's intention is simply to trace the results of temptation when one yields to it. The order is evil desire, sin, death” (Burdick, p. 172).

<sup>46</sup>Hughes (p. 48) calls verse 14 the “source” of temptation and verse 15 the “course” of temptation.

**every perfect gift is from above**”), something temptation is not. James calls God **"the Father of lights."** The "lights" are most likely a reference to the sun, moon, and stars (see Psalm 136:7-9). God is the "Father" of these celestial bodies in that He created them on Day Four of the Creation week (Genesis 1:14-19). Based on the context, it may be that James intentionally used this name in order to draw attention to God's holy character (cf. 1 John 1:5). Once again, God is too pure to be the source of temptation. Rather than giving temptation, God gives good and perfect gifts. Contrary to what Satan insinuated in the Garden (Genesis 3:4-5), God does not withhold good from his children (see Matthew 7:11). God's goodness is invariable (**"with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow"**). Unlike the shifting shadows caused by the turning of the celestial bodies ("shifting shadow" is literally shadow of shifting," i.e., shadow caused by shifting), His character remains constant (see Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8). "God is good all the time."

## **1:18**

**In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.**

James concludes this section (1:13-18) by identifying the supreme gift God gives, salvation. He begins by asserting that salvation (describing it in obstetric terms, as in verse 15) is a gift in the truest sense of the term in that nothing can be done to earn it. It is of God's will, not man's, that a man is born again (**"In the exercise of His will He brought us forth"**; cf. John 1:13, Ephesians 1:5, 9, and 11). The means God uses (**"by"**) to bring about man's salvation is **"the word of truth"** (cf. Psalm 119:43, John 17:17, 2 Corinthians 6:7, and 2 Timothy 2:15), i.e., the gospel (cf. Ephesians 1:13 and Colossians 1:5). Other Scriptures that teach that the Word of God is the means of salvation include Romans 10:17, 1 Corinthians 4:15, and 1 Peter 1:23. The purpose (**"so that"**) of the salvation of James and his readers (**"we"**) was that they **"would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures."** The concept of first fruits was a familiar one to James and his readers. The first fruits were the first fruits of the harvest, the implication being that there would be more fruit to follow. In a spiritual sense, James and his readers, being some of the first church age believers, were the first fruits of the harvest of souls that has been taking place during the church age (cf. Romans 16:5, where "first convert" is the same Greek word translated "first fruit" here in James 1:18, and 1 Corinthians 16:15). Another interpretive option for "first fruits among His creatures" is that believers are the first fruits of the cosmic redemption spoken of in Romans 8:19-23.

## **Conclusion**

In James 1:13-18, James exhorts his readers to stop blaming God for the temptations that were accompanying the trials God had been sending their way (verse 13). Rather than God, the true source of temptation is human lust (verse 14). Rather than giving temptation, a bad thing (verse 15), God gives only good and perfect gifts (verse 17), the best of which is salvation (verse 18). James exhorts his readers not to be deceived into

thinking otherwise (verse 16).

## **Lesson 4: James 1:19-27**

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### **Introduction**

Having concluded the second major section of his epistle (1:13-18) by referring to God's Word, "the word of truth" (1:18), James pens the third major section (1:19-27), exhorting

his readers to respond properly to God's Word, which includes accepting It (1:19-21) and acting upon It (1:22-27).<sup>47</sup>

## **1:19**

***This you know, my beloved brethren.*<sup>48</sup> But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger;**

James commands his fellow Jewish believers ("**my beloved brethren**") to do three things. First, they must be "**quick to hear.**" Based on the context (the Word is prominent in the preceding verse, as well as in the succeeding verses), James is likely exhorting his readers to be more eager to listen to the Word of God (for them, the Old Testament) as it was publicly read and explained in their worship services (cf. verse 21's "receive the word," as well as Proverbs 23:12, Matthew 11:15//13:9//Mark 4:9//23, Mark 4:24//Luke 8:18, and Revelation 2:7//11//17//29//3:6//13//22; for the opposite, see Jeremiah 25:4). Second, James' readers must be "**slow to speak.**" Vocal restraint is encouraged in Proverbs 10:19, 17:28, 29:11, and 29:20.<sup>49</sup> Based on the context, it is likely that James is either 1) admonishing his readers to be less eager to vocally respond to the proclamation of the Word in their free-flowing, Jewish worship services and/or 2) admonishing his readers not to be so eager to be teachers of the Word (cf. 3:1). Third, James' readers must be "**slow to anger.**" Restraint of anger is encouraged in Proverbs 14:29, 16:32, and Ecclesiastes 7:9. Words and wrath are closely connected, with the first often leading to the second (see Proverbs 17:27 in the NIV). Perhaps the worship services of James' readers were hostile due to an unrestrained use of the tongue.

## **1:20**

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<sup>47</sup>“The theme of this paragraph is obvious: those who have experienced the new birth by means of God's word (v. 18) must ‘accept’ that word (v. 21) by doing it (vv. 22-27)” (Moo, 2000, p. 85).

<sup>48</sup>Two interpretive issues surround this opening statement of verse 19. First, does this statement go with the immediately preceding/verse 18 (so NASB) or the immediately succeeding/verse 19b (so NIV and ESV)? Remember, the original text did not have chapter and verse divisions. Second, is the verb an indicative/a statement of fact (so NASB text) or an imperative/a command (so ESV's "know this" and NIV's "take note of this")? In either mood (indicative or imperative), the Greek verb has the exact same form.

<sup>49</sup>“The ancient world understood this [being slow to speak], though many disregarded it. Zeno, the stoic philosopher said, ‘We have two ears and one mouth, therefore we should listen twice as much as we speak.’ The rabbis put it even better: ‘Men have two ears but one tongue, that they should hear more than they speak. The ears are always open, ever ready to receive instruction; but the tongue is surrounded with a double row of teeth to hedge it in, and keep it within proper bounds’” (Hughes, pp. 65-66).

## **for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.**

Richardson (p. 90) rightly asks: “Who is not convicted by this verse?” In this verse, James gives the reason why (“**for**”) his readers should be slow to anger (v. 19): human anger is incompatible with the righteous lifestyle that God requires of believers. Human anger/“**the anger of man**” (as opposed to divine<sup>50</sup> anger, which is a righteous anger<sup>51</sup>) produces unrighteousness (Proverbs 29:22), whereas peace produces righteousness (James 3:18).

## **1:21**

**Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.**

Having commanded his readers to rid themselves of the sin of anger (verses 19-20), James now commands them to rid themselves of all sin in order that they might be able to more readily receive the Word (notice the “**Therefore**” at the start of this verse, connecting it with verses 19-20). He begins by commanding them to “put[ting] aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness.” The Greek participle translated “**putting aside**” (*apothemi*, the Greek preposition, *apo*, “from” + the Greek verb, *tithemi*, “to put”) is used to describe the removal of clothes in Acts 7:58. The same verb is used in Colossians 3:8 (cf. Ephesians 4:31 for the same concept, but with a different Greek verb), where both sins of anger and sins of the tongue are commanded to be put aside (cf. Romans 13:12, Ephesians 4:22, 25, Hebrews 12:1, and 1 Peter 2:1, where the same verb is used in reference to other such vices that need to be laid aside). The picture James is drawing is one of removing the dirty clothes of sin (the adjectival form of the Greek noun translated “**filthiness**” here in verse 21 is used in 2:2 to describe the clothing worn by the poor man). James is commanding his readers to remove the moral filth that is so prevalent in their lives. The Greek word translated “remains” in “**all that remains of wickedness**” by the NASB is better translated “abundance” (so NIV’s “the evil that is so prevalent” and KJV’s legendary “superfluity of naughtiness”); this is how

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<sup>50</sup>By “divine” is not meant anger that only God expresses (see Mark 3:5), but anger that is characteristic of God/godly, the type of anger that a godly man can and should (when the occasion demands) express (see Ephesians 4:26).

<sup>51</sup>“Does James intend to prohibit all anger of any kind—even what we sometimes called ‘righteous anger’? Probably not. James falls into the wisdom genre at this point. And wisdom sayings are notorious for the use of apparently absolute assertions in order to make a general, ‘proverbial’ point. Qualification of that general truth is often found in other biblical contexts. So we can assume that James intends us to read his warning as a general truth that applies in most cases: human anger is not usually pleasing to God, leading as it does to all kinds of sin. That it can never be pleasing to God would be an interpretation that is insensitive to the style in which James writes at this point” (Moo, 2000, p. 84).

the word is translated elsewhere in Romans 5:17, 2 Corinthians 8:2, and 10:15). There was an abundance of sin in the lives of James' readers, much like a garden overgrown with weeds.<sup>52</sup> Why was it so crucial that James' readers put aside such sin? So they could "receive the Word implanted" (cf. Luke 8:13, Acts 8:14, 11:1, 17:11, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, and 2:13). Sin is a hindrance to receiving the Word ("This Book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this Book"). The Greek verb translated "**receive**" has the idea of eagerly embrace (cf. Luke 8:13, Acts 17:11, and 1 Thessalonians 1:6). Besides removing the dirty clothes of sin/uprooting the weeds of sin in the garden of one's heart/cleaning the wax of sin out of one's ears (footnote 52), a second prerequisite for receiving the Word is humility ("**in humility**"). Pride is another hindrance to receiving the Word. Teachability requires humility. The Word James' readers were to humbly receive was the "**implanted**" Word. The seed of the Word (1 Peter 1:23) was implanted into the garden of the hearts of James' readers at salvation (1:18). Thus, James is not commanding them to receive the Word in order to be saved (something that they had already done), but to receive the Word in order to grow spiritually. Thus, the pattern is: 1) receive the Word at salvation (1:18), 2) remove sin subsequent to salvation (1:19-21a), in order that 3) one might be able to more readily receive the Word subsequent to salvation (1:21b). This same pattern is found in 1 Peter 1:23-2:2: 1) 1:23-25, 2) 2:1, and 3) 2:2. James concludes this verse by asserting that this implanted Word is able to save the souls of his readers ("**which is able to save your souls**"). In what sense would the Word that had already saved James' readers (1:18) yet save them? Keeping in mind that the Bible speaks of salvation in terms of past (we have been saved from the penalty of sin), present (we are being saved from the power of sin), and future (we will be saved from the presence of sin), James is most likely referring to the ability of the Word to progressively sanctify the believer (Psalm 1:1-3, 119:9, 11, John 17:17, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 5:26, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, and 1 Peter 2:2), since the Greek verb translated "is able" is in the present tense. This ability is a powerful one, as the Greek word James uses is *dunamai* (cf. the same root word used in Romans 1:16 and 1 Corinthians 1:18).

## **1:22**

**But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.**<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Interestingly, the Greek noun translated "filthiness" was used to describe the removal of wax from the ears (Martin, p. 48). Thus, James' point may be: Remove the wax of sin from your ears so that you can clearly hear/receive the Word.

<sup>53</sup>Moo (2000) calls this verse "the best-known verse in the letter" (p. 89) and "arguably the most famous command in the NT" (p. 1).

How does one know if he has truly received the Word (verses 19-21)? By doing what It says (verses 22-27). Apparently, James' readers were deluding themselves into thinking that by merely hearing the Word they were receiving It.<sup>54</sup> Attending a Sunday School class, church service, or counseling session, reading the Bible, etc. are not ends in themselves, but are means to an end. Well has it been said that the ultimate goal of Bible study is not an informed intellect, but a transformed personality. However, one does have to hear before he can do.<sup>55</sup> The one who does not act upon what he hears is like a man who builds his house upon the sand, while the one who does act upon what he hears is like a man who builds his upon a rock (Matthew 7:24-27). According to Hiebert (p. 119), the Greek noun translated "hearers" was used to describe those who attended a lecture, but were not disciples of the lecturer (so also Richardson, p. 94). According to Romans 2:13, those who hear the Word, but do not do it show themselves to be unjustified.

## **1:23-24**

**For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.**

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<sup>54</sup>"Our churches are filled with spiritual sponges who soak up the information, sit, sour, and eventually stink!" (Roy Roberts, quoted in Hiebert, p. 119). "Too many Christians mark their Bibles, but their Bibles never mark them" (Wiersbe, p. 54). Hughes (p. 115; emphasis his) shares a parable told by Soren Kierkegaard: "It was Sunday morning, and all the ducks dutifully came to church, waddling through the doors and down the aisle into their pews where they comfortably squatted. When all were well-settled, and the hymns were sung, the duck minister waddled to his pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read: 'Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!' It was a marvelous, elevating duck scripture, and thus all the ducks quacked their assent with a hearty 'Amen!'—and then they plopped down from their pews and *waddled* home."

<sup>55</sup>"... James's concern with doing does not mean that he thinks hearing the word is unnecessary. It is not listening to the word that James opposes or diminishes, but *merely* listening. While apparently not a matter of concern in the letter, James would certainly endorse the need to pay careful attention to what the word says, studying it, meditating on it, and pondering its meaning and application. How else could one know what it commands us to do?" (Moo, 2000, pp. 88-89; emphasis his).

In verses 23 and 24, James uses an analogy to show just how foolish it is to be a hearer, but not a doer, of the Word. The one who is a hearer only is like one who looks in a mirror, departs, and then forgets what he saw, the point being that he does not make the necessary corrections. In other words, just as we would consider it foolish to look into a mirror just for the sake of looking (and not for the sake of correcting our physical appearance), so it is equally foolish to hear the Word just for the sake of hearing It (and not for the sake of correcting our spiritual appearance).<sup>56</sup> "Listening to truth is not an end in itself any more than gazing at one's face in a mirror is an end in itself" (Burdick, p. 175).

## **1:25**

**But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law of liberty*, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.**

In contrast to (“**But**”) the man who hears, but does not do, the Word (verses 23-24) is the man who both hears (“looks intently at the perfect law, the *law of liberty*”) and does (“abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer”) the Word (verse 25). The Word of God is able to perfect (“**the perfect law**”; cf. Psalm 19:7) and liberate<sup>57</sup> (“**the law of liberty**”; cf. James 2:12) those who hear and do It. Unlike the imperfect physical reflection given by the first century mirror<sup>58</sup>, the Word of God gives one a perfect reflection of what he is like spiritually. The look into the mirror of God’s Word (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18) that James calls for is no mere glance (as in verse 24, “looks”). The Greek verb translated “**looks intently**” is the same one used to describe Peter (Luke 24:12), John (John 20:5), and Mary Magdalene (John 20:11) stooping to peer into Jesus’ empty tomb.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the hearer only, who forgets what he sees (verse 24), the hearer and doer<sup>60</sup> does not, making the necessary corrections by doing what the

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<sup>56</sup>“The man whose look in the mirror reveals his tousled hair and stubbly chin but then fails to get busy with his comb and razor has received no benefit from the encounter. To James, the person who hears God’s Word but does not heed it is just as ludicrous” (Kent, p. 67).

<sup>57</sup>“Within the boundaries of the law of God man is free, for there he lives in the environment God designated for him. When he crosses the boundary, he becomes a slave to sin” (Kistemaker, p. 62). See John 8:32-34 in this regard. “*Law of liberty*” is not an oxymoron.

<sup>58</sup> First century mirrors were typically made of polished metal (such as silver or bronze). As such, they gave an imperfect reflection (see 1 Corinthians 13:12).

<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, Martin (p. 44) translates the verb: “peers intently.” “The word involves bending over for closer inspection. It pictures a person before a mirror noticing a blemish, then leaning forward to examine and attend to it” (Stevens, p. 673).

<sup>60</sup> The hearing and the doing correspond, in that the harder one attempts to hear, the more he will tend to do. Richardson (p. 97) writes: “Apply yourself to the Word so you may be able to apply the

Word tells him to (“**abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer**”). As a result, he is blessed (“**this man will be blessed in what he does**”). The blessing comes in the doing, not in the mere hearing (cf. Joshua 1:8, Psalm 19:11, 119:1-2, Luke 11:28, and John 13:17). This blessing is enjoyed both here and in the hereafter.

## **1:26**

**If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.**

In verses 26-27, James gives three examples of doing the Word (verses 22-25). First, doing the Word means taming one's tongue (verse 26). The tongue is a frequent topic in the epistle (see especially 3:1-12, as well as 1:19, 4:11, 5:9, and 12). James' readers considered themselves to be religious (“**If anyone thinks himself to be religious**”) due to their performance of religious rituals or rites (the Greek adjective translated "religious" is one that was used to describe external religious acts). Their habitual lack of vocal restraint (“**does not bridle his tongue**”; cf. 3:2-3), however, showed that they were not truly religious at all (“**this man's religion is worthless**”; cf. the dead, useless faith discussed in 2:14-26). Thus, they were deluding themselves (“**deceives his own heart**”; cf. verse 22). One's speech reveals what one truly is (Matthew 12:33-37). One's religion is measured by the ability not to speak, not by speaking ability.

## **1:27**

**Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

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Word to your life' is the proper motto here.”

Besides taming the tongue (verse 26), doing the Word also includes taking care of the needy in the congregation (verse 27a) and not being worldly (verse 27b). In contrast to the worthless religion of the one who is a hearer, but not a doer, of the Word (verse 26) is the pure/undefiled religion of the hearer and doer (verse 27). One who is truly religious has a genuine concern for the destitute within the congregation.<sup>61</sup> James specifically mentions orphans and widows because they were the two neediest groups in his day. The Greek verb translated "**visit**" does not mean to visit in the sense of make a social call; rather, it means to take action to alleviate the need of one who is needy (see, for example, Ruth 1:6; also compare the KJV rendering of Psalm 8:4b with the NASB and NIV renderings). A true believer will be characterized by a desire to help those in need (cf. James 2:15-16 and 1 John 3:17). One who is truly religious also keeps himself unsullied by the world. The "**world**" (cf. Romans 12:2, James 4:4, and 1 John 2:15-17) is the ungodly system of values and practices characteristic of unbelievers.<sup>62</sup> Though *in* the world (John 17:15 and 18), the believer is not to be *of* the world (John 17:14 and 16).

## **Conclusion**

In James 1:19-27, James exhorts his readers to properly respond to the Word. This includes receiving It (1:19-21) and doing It (1:22-27). To receive the Word, they must rid themselves of sin and be humble (1:21). Truly receiving the Word means not only hearing It (1:19), but moreover doing what It says (1:22-25). Doing the Word includes such things as taming one's tongue (1:26), taking care of the needy within the congregation (1:27a), and not being worldly (1:27b). To fail to habitually do such things is to show oneself to be unregenerate (1:26). To think otherwise is to delude oneself (1:22 and 26).

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## **Lesson 5: James 2:1-13**

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<sup>61</sup>Though this writer is of the opinion that the church has not been given a social mandate (thus, churches are not obligated to meet societal needs), he is also of the opinion that a church is at liberty to attempt to reach certain needy segments within its community (such as orphans) with the gospel by establishing accompanying institutions (such as orphanages). Based on such passages as Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 5:3-16, it is clear that the church has a mandate to meet the material needs of its own members, whether widowed, orphaned, etc. (provided the biological family cannot—see 1 Timothy 5:4, 8, and 16). Viewing the New Testament Epistles in a local church milieu, this writer sees the taking care of widows and orphans in James 1:27 as limited to widows and orphans within one's congregation.

<sup>62</sup>“The ‘world’ is a common biblical way of referring to the ungodly worldview and lifestyle that characterize human life in its estrangement from the creator” (Moo, 2000, p. 97).

## Introduction

In the previous section of the epistle (1:19-27), James stressed the need for his readers to do the Word (1:22-25). In this, the fourth major section of the epistle (2:1-13), he identifies a specific area in which his readers were failing to practice their profession (see 2:12's "so act").

### 2:1

**My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.**

James wastes no time getting to the heart of the problem, rebuking His fellow Jewish believers ("**My brethren**") for committing the sin of favoritism. The Greek noun translated "**personal favoritism**" literally means to receive the face (*prosopolempsia*, the Greek noun, *prosopon*, "face" + the Greek noun, *lempsis*, "receiving"). James' readers were basing their reception of others solely on their outward appearance.<sup>63</sup> James commands them to stop doing this (the imperative here in verse one, "**do not hold**" reflects a Greek grammatical construction that calls for the cessation of an act already in progress). As he did in the previous section, James is drawing attention to the inconsistency between his readers' creed ("**your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ**"; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:8's "Lord of glory"<sup>64</sup>) and their conduct. Their Lord does not show favoritism (Deuteronomy 10:17, Matthew 22:16, Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6, and Ephesians 6:9); neither should they.

### 2:2

**For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes,**

Having identified favoritism as the sin being committed by his readers (verse 1), James now gives an example of their doing so (verses 2-3) (the connection between verses one and two is linguistically made with the word, "**For**"). Two men visit one of their worship services ("if a man comes into your assembly ... and there also comes in ..."). The Greek noun translated "**assembly**" is *sunagoge*, which literally means

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<sup>63</sup>While the specific instance James addresses pertains to diverse wardrobes, other such areas might include skin color, attractiveness, age, etc.

<sup>64</sup>"Describing Jesus as *the Lord of glory* suggests particularly the heavenly sphere to which he has been exalted and from which he will come at the end of history to save and to judge (cf. Jas 5:9). This reminder is particularly appropriate in a situation where Christians are giving too much 'glory' to human beings" (Moo, 2000, p. 101). Martin (p. 74) calls "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" "one of the noblest titles accorded to the church's head in the New Testament."

“synagogue.”<sup>65</sup> Though it is possible that this is a synagogue in the technical sense of the term, it is more likely a reference to their meeting place in general (cf. 5:14's “church”); thus, the NASB's generic “assembly” (cf. KJV's “assembly” and NIV's “meeting”). The first visitor is a wealthy man, as evidenced by his outward appearance (“a man ... with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes”). The Greek adjective translated “**fine**” is *lampros*, which literally means “bright,” “shining,” or “radiant” (cf. the same Greek adjective, translated “shining” in Acts 10:30 and “bright” in Revelation 15:6). Such attire was standard fare in that time and place for those who were affluent. By contrast, the second visitor is a poor man (“and there also comes in a poor man”), likewise identified by his wardrobe (“in dirty clothes”).<sup>66</sup> The Greek adjective translated “**dirty**” is the adjectival form of the noun translated “filthiness” in 1:21.

## 2:3

**and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,”**

James continues his illustration (“**and**”) by describing the response of the congregation to the two visitors. Their response to the rich man is quite positive (“you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes”). The Greek verb translated “**pay special attention**” means to look upon favorably (see Luke 1:48, where the verb is translated “ha[ve] regard for”; cf. Luke 9:38). Their respect for the rich man reveals itself in the way he is treated when he walks in. He is offered a good seat (“and say, ‘You sit here in a good place’”). The good seats in the synagogue were up front (these guys obviously weren’t Baptists ☺) and reserved for the prestigious (see Matthew 23:6, Luke 11:43, and 20:46). Their response to the poor man, however, is just the opposite. He is told to “stand over there” (probably in the back) or, worse yet, to sit on the floor (“sit down by my footstool”), rather than being offered the seat of the one speaking to him.

## 2:4

**have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?**

In response to his readers’ partial treatment of the two visitors (verses 2-3), James asks a question whose answer is obvious (the question reflects a grammatical construction in which an affirmative answer is expected). Their actions revealed an underlying discriminatory attitude. Favoritism is “evil,” as James will also make clear in verse nine.

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<sup>65</sup> James' use of *sunagoge* is one indication of the epistle's early date of writing.

<sup>66</sup>“The image James conjures up is of the typical homeless person in our day, dressed in mismatched, stained, and smelly rags” (Moo, 2000, p. 103).

James' readers were acting in direct violation of Jesus' words in John 7:24: "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." Davids (p. 33) suggests a possible motive behind their partial treatment of the rich: "... [I]f a wealthy person entered the church or was a member, there would be every reason to court him. His money was seen as a means of survival" (cf. under "Introduction" in Lesson 2).

## 2:5

**Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?**

As he so often does in his epistle, James not only tells his readers what to do or what not to do, but also gives reasons why. In verses five through thirteen, James gives three reasons why his readers should not favor the rich over the poor (following Moo, 2000, p. 110): 1) It contradicts God's regard for the poor (verses 5-6a). While God honors the poor, they are dishonoring them<sup>67</sup>; 2) It makes no sense (verses 6b-7). They are honoring those (the rich) who dishonor God; and 3) It violates the law of love (verses 8-13). To dishonor the poor is not to love them. In contrast to the attitude of James' readers towards the poor is God's attitude towards them. Rather than dishonoring the poor, God has honored them by choosing many of them to be "rich in faith (cf. Luke 12:21's "rich toward God") and heirs of the kingdom (cf. Matthew 25:34, Luke 6:20b, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and Galatians 5:21) which He promised to those who love Him (cf. James 1:12)" (cf. 1:9). "God ... delights especially to shower his grace on those whom the world has discarded and on those who are most keenly aware of their own inadequacy" (Moo, 2000, p. 108). See especially 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 in this regard. "They should have realized that of the two visitors, the poor man was the more likely prospect as a convert" (Hiebert, p. 142).<sup>68</sup>

## 2:6

**But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?**

James begins verse six by explicitly stating what he had been implying, namely, that his readers were mistreating the poor ("**you have dishonored the poor man**"). In contrast to ("**But**") God's honoring them (verse 5), they were dishonoring them (verse 6a). Their treatment of the poor was inconsistent with God's treatment of the poor. Similarly, their treatment of the rich was inconsistent with the rich's treatment of them. James

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<sup>67</sup>"... [I]t is unbecoming and disgraceful to cast down those whom God exalts, and to treat reproachfully those whom he honours. As God honours the poor, then every one who repudiates them, reverses the order of God" (Calvin, p. 302). Believers need to see/think about the poor the way God does.

<sup>68</sup>While it is improbable for a rich man to be converted (see Matthew 19:23-24), it is not impossible (see Matthew 19:25-26). While 1 Corinthians 1:26 says "not many," it does not say "not any." See 1:10 and comments on.

concludes verse six by asking another question that anticipates an affirmative answer (“Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?”). The rich were oppressing them. The Greek verb translated “**oppress**” can mean to exploit. One of the ways (a few others are given in 5:4 [cf. Malachi 3:5] and 6) the rich were exploiting James’ readers was by taking them to court. The Greek verb translated “**drag**” has the idea of drag forcibly (cf. Acts 16:19 and 21:30). “Practices familiar in every age, such as forcing people to forfeit their land for late payment of mortgages, insisting on ruinous interest rates for any monetary help, and the like, are probably in view” (Moo, 2000, p. 109).

## **2:7**

**Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?**

James continues to point out the folly of his readers’ deference to the rich, once again with a question that demands an affirmative answer. Not only were the rich mistreating them, but, worse, they were also blaspheming the One (to blaspheme the name is to blaspheme the person behind the name) to whom they belonged (the Greek verb translated “**called**” conveys the idea of ownership; so Moo, 2000, p. 109 and the NIV). Thus, they were treating those who mistreated them (verse 6b) and God (verse 7) better than they were treating their fellow believers (verses 5-6a).

## **2:8**

**If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well.**

Beginning in verse eight, James gets to the heart of the matter. Their ill treatment of the poor was indicative of a lack of love for them. The royal law that James quotes is found in Leviticus 19:18. As seen by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), a neighbor is anyone in need one is in a position to help, including the poor (Proverbs 14:21). This law of love is called “royal” because “it is the supreme law to which all other laws governing human relationships are subordinate” (Burdick, p. 179). This same idea was taught by Christ (Matthew 22:39) and Paul (Romans 13:8-10 and Galatians 5:14). The remedy for favoritism is showing favor to all men, regardless of who they are (see 1 Peter 2:17). The rich and the poor are to be welcomed with equal enthusiasm (Hughes, p. 90). Reverse discrimination is forbidden (see Leviticus 19:15).

## **2:9**

**But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.**

Unfortunately, James' readers were not fulfilling the royal law (verse 8). Instead (“**But**”), they were showing favoritism, a fact that James repeats once again (cf. verses 1 and 4) here in verse nine. The conditional clause that introduces the verse (“**if you show partiality**”) reflects a Greek grammatical construction in which the conditional clause is assumed to be true. In other words, “[since] you show partiality.” James pulls no punches, calling favoritism sin (“**you are committing sin**”). Favoritism is a sin (cf. verse 4). Thus, those who engage in it are guilty of breaking God's law (“**and are convicted by the law as transgressors**”).

## **2:10**

**For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all.**

In verses ten and eleven, James shows just how serious the sin of favoritism is (just in case there would be those who would consider it a "minor" offence). Because the law is a unified whole, the one who (theoretically) breaks just one command of it (“**whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles<sup>69</sup> in one *point***”), such as the command not to show favoritism, is guilty of breaking all of it (“**he has become guilty of all**”; cf. Galatians 3:10). A man is still a lawbreaker, whether he breaks only one law (a necklace is broken even if only one link of the necklace is broken) or every law. As Davids (p. 117) has pointed out, when one breaks a law, he is often said to have broken the law.<sup>70</sup>

## **2:11**

**For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.**

James begins verse eleven by pointing out the reason for (“**For**”) the unity of the law—it comes from one Lawgiver. The God who commands one not to commit adultery (“**He who said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’**”; the seventh of the Ten Commandments) is the same God who commands one not to kill (“**also said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT MURDER’**”; the sixth of the Ten Commandments). James ends the verse by implying that showing favoritism (contained under the umbrella of murder, the ultimate manifestation of hatred, the lack of love; cf. Matthew 5:21-22 and 1 John 3:15) is a transgression of the law (“**Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit**

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<sup>69</sup>“Stumble” is one of the many words used in Scripture for sinning (cf. Romans 11:11, James 3:2, and 1 John 2:10).

<sup>70</sup>Rightly has it been said that God does not grade on a curve. God (and, therefore, perfection) is the standard, not a fellow sinner. Sin, therefore, is the failure to morally be like God. See especially Matthew 5:48 in this regard.

**murder, you have become a transgressor of the law”**), a point he previously made in verses eight and nine.

## **2:12**

**So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the law of liberty*.**

As a further incentive to forsake the sin of favoritism, James reminds his readers in verses twelve and thirteen that they will one day be judged for their words (“**So speak**”; cf. 3:1, 5:9, and 12) and actions (“**and so act**”). He commands them to act in light of the fact that they will be judged by the law of liberty (“**as those who are to be judged by *the law of liberty***”; on the meaning of “law of liberty,” see comments on 1:25). Since James' readers are church age believers, their judgment will come immediately after the rapture of the church at the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10-12, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, and 2 Corinthians 5:10). Because the Rapture is imminent, this judgment could take place at any time, a fact that James will allude to later in the epistle (in 5:8 and 9). Accordingly, the Greek participle translated “those who are to be judged” could be translated “those who are about to be judged” (so Kent, p. 84 and Stevens, p. 674).

## **2:13**

**For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.**

James concludes the fourth major section of his epistle by reminding his readers of the need to show mercy to others, something they failed to do to the poor man in verses two and three. The one who (habitually) shows no mercy (and, thus, shows himself to be unregenerate) will be shown no mercy on Judgment Day (“**For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy**”). This truth is found elsewhere in Scripture (in Matthew 6:15 and 18:23-35<sup>71</sup>). James' final assertion (“**mercy triumphs over judgment**”) can be and has been misunderstood. By asserting that mercy triumphs over judgment, James is not claiming that mercy is to be shown at the expense of true justice (Zechariah 7:9 refutes this misconception). Rather, he is claiming that the habitual practice of mercy is evidence of a truly regenerate heart (he more or less makes the same point, but in a more general way, in the section to follow, 2:14-26) and will, thus, serve as a buffer against condemnation on Judgment Day (Matthew 5:7 and

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<sup>71</sup>In the parable of Matthew 18:23-35, the forgiven, but unforgiving, servant was forgiven an extraordinary debt, but refused to forgive a fellow servant a puny debt. According to Hughes (p. 103), the extraordinary debt was equivalent to twenty million dollars, the puny debt to two thousand dollars (i.e., ten thousand times as much). Those who have been shown such mercy ought to be merciful.

6:14).<sup>72</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In James 2:1-13, James exhorts his readers to practice their profession by ceasing to show favoritism towards the rich. He commands them to stop showing favoritism (2:1), gives an example of their doing so (2:2-3), calls their doing so evil (2:4; cf. 2:9), and gives them several reasons why they should not do so (2:5-13). Showing favoritism is a serious matter because it breaks God's law (specifically, the law of love) (2:8-11) and because doing so makes one liable to God's judgment (2:12-13).

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<sup>72</sup>"Our merciful attitude and actions will count as evidence of the presence of Christ within us. And it is on the basis of this union with the One who perfectly fulfilled the law for us that we can have confidence for vindication at the judgment" (Moo, 1985, p. 99). "'The man who by a merciful character proves his having a vital faith in God's mercy, is through Christ safe' and can face the coming judgment with a 'blissful sense of safety'" (Hiebert, p. 153, citing Robert Johnstone).

## Lesson 6: James 2:14-26

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### Introduction

The fifth major section of the book of James (2:14-26) has been called "one of the most difficult, and certainly the most misunderstood, sections in the epistle. "It has been a theological battleground" (Hiebert, p. 158). Moo (2000, p. 118) calls it "the most theologically significant, as well as the most controversial, [paragraph] in the Letter of James." Martin (p. 77) calls it "the theological heart of the letter." It was this section that caused Martin Luther, in the heat of his battle with the works-righteousness of Catholicism<sup>73</sup>, to label the book of James "a right strawy epistle" (an allusion to 1 Corinthians 3:12), a claim that he later renounced. In spite of its difficulties, this section sets forth one of the most important theological truths in all of Scripture, namely, that genuine saving faith invariably produces good works.<sup>74</sup> While the previous section (2:1-13) made this point in a specific way through the virtue of mercifulness, this section makes it in a more general way (though it does use an illustration of mercifulness in verses 15 and 16).

### 2:14

**What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?**

James begins this fifth section by asking two rhetorical questions designed to convince his readers of a truth he will develop in the verses to follow, namely, that a workless faith is a worthless faith (Blue, p. 825). Such "faith" is of no use, soteriologically speaking ("What use is it ...?"). The second question ("Can that<sup>75</sup> faith save him?")

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<sup>73</sup> "... [Luther's] difficulties arose from a somewhat imbalanced perspective induced by his polemical context" (D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 418).

<sup>74</sup> Much of the controversy surrounding this section of the epistle revolves around the word, "works." What does James mean when he speaks of works? While the word, "works" usually refers to efforts on the part of the unbeliever to merit God's favor (see, for example, Ephesians 2:8-9), it can also stand for the divinely-energized efforts (Philippians 2:13) on the part of the believer in response to God's favor (see, for example, Ephesians 2:10). It is the second that James has in mind throughout this section.

<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, the KJV fails to translate the Greek definite article that precedes "faith" at this point, resulting in a potentially problematic statement: "Can faith save him?" The problem is resolved, however, with the translation of the definite article preceding "faith" (what is known as an article of previous reference). Thus, the verse literally reads: "Can the faith save him, meaning the workless faith referred to in the first half of the verse (see the NASB's and ESV's "that faith," as well as the NIV's "such faith")."

reflects a Greek grammatical construction in which a negative response is expected. A faith that does not produce works is not saving faith (cf. Matthew 7:16-21, 24-27, 13:3-8, 18-23, and Luke 3:8-9). One can profess faith (“**says he has faith**”) without actually possessing faith.

## **2:15**

**If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,**

In verses fifteen and sixteen, James illustrates the truth he has just set forth in verse fourteen.<sup>76</sup> A fellow believer (“**a brother or sister**”) is in dire need. He or she is insufficiently clothed (“**without clothing**”) and fed (“**in need of daily food**”). The Greek adjective translated “without clothing” has a semantic range that includes being in the buff, lacking an outer garment (as in John 21:7), or being poorly clothed (so the ESV rendering of this verse). The third is the best option here (so Martin, p. 76, who translates it “ill-clad”).

## **2:16**

**and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?**

The response of an alleged believer (“**one of you**”) to the need of the destitute believer is disturbing. He tells the needy believer good-bye, or “Have a nice day!” (Richardson, p. 130) (“**Go in peace**,” a common Jewish farewell, analogous to today’s, “Lord bless you”; see Judges 18:6, 1 Samuel 1:17, 20:42, 29:7, 2 Samuel 15:9, 2 Kings 5:19, Mark 5:34, Luke 7:50, 8:48, and Acts 16:36) and wishes that the need be met (“**be warmed and be filled**”<sup>77</sup>), but does nothing to actually meet the need (“**yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body**”). The conclusion is inescapable: “**what use is that?**” (cf. verse 14a). Mere words are useless to one in need of more than just words (cf. 1 John 3:17-18). See also Proverbs 3:27-28.

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<sup>76</sup>There is some debate among interpreters as to whether or not this incident actually took place (a similar debate takes place with the incident described in 2:2-3). Martin (pp. 84-85) strongly thinks it did. If so, it is another manifestation of the poverty plaguing James’ readers (see under “Introduction” in Lesson 2). That verses fourteen through sixteen should be taken together is seen by the “inclusio” James uses, verse fourteen starting and verse sixteen ending with “what use is it/that?”

<sup>77</sup>These verbs are either middle or passive in voice. If middle, then the “armchair philanthropist” (J. A. Motyer, quoted in Hiebert, p. 162) is wishing that the destitute believer meet the need himself. If passive, then he is wishing that someone else (God or another human being) meet the need.

## 2:17

**Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself.**

James drives home the point of the preceding illustration. Just as it is useless to wish someone in need well, but to do nothing about the need, so it is useless to say you have faith, but to not back up such a claim with good works (as the one in verse fourteen was doing). Such faith is not saving faith. It is dead faith (cf. 2:20 and 26, as well as 1:26). The believer who refuses to meet the needs of another believer needs to examine his own claim to faith (2 Corinthians 13:5 and 2 Peter 1:10). See especially 1 John 3:14-19 in this regard. See also Matthew 25:31-46

## 2:18<sup>78</sup>

**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.”**

James continues his argument by introducing an imaginary objector (“**someone**”) to what he has said to this point (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35). The extent of the objection is difficult to determine (the original Greek text did not have quotation marks). Unlike the NASB, most interpreters limit it to the first declaration made, “**You have faith and I have works**” (so NIV, ESV, and NKJV). This objection is difficult to interpret.<sup>79</sup> Regardless of to whom the personal pronouns might be referring, the point seems to be that a false dichotomy is being made by the objector between faith and works (the one person has just the one, while the other person has just the other). James replies by challenging the objector to demonstrate his workless faith (“**show me your faith without the works**”), an impossibility. For his part, James will demonstrate the authenticity of his faith by means of the works it produces (“**and I will show you my faith by my works**”).

## 2:19

**You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.**

James continues to demonstrate the folly of merely professing belief but not practicing it. Such an individual is no more saved than the demons. James begins verse nineteen by repeating a creed familiar to his Jewish audience, the *Shema*<sup>80</sup> (“**You believe that**

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<sup>78</sup>“Efforts to establish the precise force of [verse eighteen] have taxed the ingenuity of the commentators” (Hiebert, p. 164). Martin (p. 99) calls verse eighteen an “enigmatic text.” Martin Dibelius (quoted in Moo, 2000, pp. 126-127) calls verses eighteen and nineteen of James two “one of the most difficult New Testament passages in general.”

<sup>79</sup>Bruce Compton views the opening statement of the verse as an instance of “indirect discourse.” In other words, the objector says that you (an opponent of James) have faith and I (James) have works.

<sup>80</sup>The designation, “Shema” is based on the use of the Hebrew verb for hearing (*shema*) used in Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Hear, O Israel ....”).

**God is one**"; cf. Deuteronomy 6:4 and Mark 12:29), a creed that devout Jews to this day recite every morning and evening. James commends the imaginary objector<sup>81</sup> (introduced in verse 18) for believing this cardinal doctrine ("**You do well**"). James ends the verse with a bombshell. The demons also believe this cardinal doctrine ("**the demons also believe**"; cf. Mark 1:24, 3:11, and 5:7).<sup>82</sup> In fact, they believe it so much that they "shudder."<sup>83</sup> If faith is merely intellectual assent (as the objector is implying), then even the demons are believers. This, of course, is ludicrous. That's the point! Believing *that* is insufficient (even when the object of belief is none other than the *Shema*); one must also believe *in*. Saving faith is a whole-souled commitment (mind, emotion, and will). "It is a good thing to possess an accurate theology, but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possesses us" (C. L. Mitton, quoted in Moo, 2000, p. 130).

## 2:20

**But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?**

James is about at his wit's end with the imaginary objector. In spite of what James has already said, the objector requires more proof that a workless faith does not work (the NIV translates: "You foolish man, do you want evidence ...?")<sup>84</sup>. No wonder James calls him a "**foolish fellow**."<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, James supplies further evidence in the verses to follow.

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<sup>81</sup>That the imaginary objector is in view is seen by the fact that the pronoun, "you" in "you believe" and the verbs, "believe" and "do" are all singulars.

<sup>82</sup>"There is not a demon in the universe who is an atheist" (Hughes, p. 111). "[The demons] are among the most 'orthodox' of theologians" (Moo, 2000, p. 131).

<sup>83</sup>The reason the demons shudder may very well be because they understand that they will one day be finally condemned for their willful unbelief (see Matthew 8:29 and 25:41).

<sup>84</sup>Moo (2000, p. 132) points out a wordplay James makes in verse twenty: "The Greek word for ["]works"] is *erga*, whereas the word for 'useless' is *argos*, literally 'not-working' .... Faith that does not 'work,' James is saying, 'does not work' ...."

<sup>85</sup>Hughes (p. 116) quips: "James was obviously not a student of Dale Carnegie." Neither Paul (see 1 Corinthians 15:36 and Galatians 3:1), nor even the Lord Jesus Christ (see Matthew 23:17 and Luke 24:25), hesitated to use such a derogation. It is more of a moral deficiency than a mental one. According to Moo (2000, p. 132), "a stubborn, 'hard-hearted' ignorance is the general idea."

## 2:21

### **Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?**

James humors the imaginary objector by supplying him with further evidence that genuine saving faith produces good works, using the example of Abraham, the physical/racial father of the Jews (“**Abraham our father**”; cf. Matthew 3:8, John 8:53, and Romans 4:1) and the spiritual/religious father of believers (Romans 4:16, Galatians 3:7, and 29). The question here in verse twenty-one reflects a Greek grammatical construction in which an affirmative answer is expected. It is here at verse twenty-one that most of the controversy over this section of the epistle centers. James states here that Abraham was justified by works, an assertion that appears hopelessly in contradiction to the writings of Paul (see Romans 3:20, 28, 4:1-5, Galatians 2:16, 3:1-14, and Ephesians 2:8-9). Moo (2000, p. 18) calls the resultant tension “one of the most significant theological tensions within the NT.” Martin Luther (quoted in Martin, p. cv) once quipped that if anyone could resolve this tension, he would “put my doctor’s cap on him and let him call me a fool!” The alleged contradiction, however, is merely a superficial one.<sup>86</sup> As mentioned previously (see footnote 74), James is using “works” to refer to *post*-conversion, not *pre*-conversion, efforts.<sup>87</sup> Paul, on the other hand, is speaking of *pre*-conversion works. Furthermore, Paul and James are using the word, “justify” in a different sense. To Paul, justification is the judicial act whereby God declares the guilty sinner to be righteous in His sight on the basis of the atonement of Christ (a *declaration* of righteousness). To James, on the other hand, justification is synonymous with vindication (see Genesis 44:16, Matthew 11:19//Luke 7:35, Luke 7:29, 10:29, 16:15, and Romans 3:4).<sup>88</sup> In other words, the good, *post*-conversion works of

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<sup>86</sup>“Paul and James do not stand face to face fighting against each other, but back to back fighting opposite foes” (Spiros Zodhiates, quoted in Kistemaker, p. 87). “The teachings of James and Paul run parallel; they stand back to back, fighting error on both sides of the truth” (Hiebert, p. 36). In other words, Paul and James complement, rather than contradict, each another. The foe Paul fights in Romans and Galatians is the falsehood that salvation is by works, while the foe James fights in his epistle is the falsehood that works are unnecessary to salvation. Either error is spiritually lethal. Maclaren (p. 421) describes the difference between Paul and James as follows: “The one fixes his eye on the fruits, the other digs down to the root. To the one the flow of the river is the more prominent; to the other, the fountain from which it rises.”

<sup>87</sup>For James, works are not the cause of salvation, but the consequence of salvation. Or, as Victor Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, 1:441) puts it, works are not a merit for salvation, but a mark of salvation.

<sup>88</sup>Accordingly, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts* (p. 457) says Paul’s concern is *legalists*, James’ *libertines*; Paul’s emphasis being *justification with God by faith*, James’ *justification (vindication) before men by works*; Paul’s perspective being *faith as a gift*, James’ *faith as genuine*; and Paul’s result being *justified as an eternal position by believing in Christ*, James’ *justified in daily proof by behaving like Christ*.

Abraham vindicated the faith he already had, proving it to be authentic (a *demonstration* of righteousness).<sup>89</sup> See especially Genesis 22:12 in this regard. Abraham was justified (in Paul's sense of the term) by faith when he first believed (most likely in Genesis 12 when he first left his home, Ur in obedience to God's command; cf. Hebrews 11:8; cf. also Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23). He was also justified (in James' sense of the term) by works when he offered his son, Isaac in Genesis 22. That faith and works are not dichotomous is seen by the fact that the writer of Hebrews attributes Abraham's offering of Isaac to his faith (Hebrews 11:17-19), while here James attributes the same event to his works. Like James, Paul believed that genuine saving faith produces good works (see Romans 1:5 in the NIV, Galatians 5:6 in the NIV, Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 2:12, 1 Thessalonians 1:3 in the NIV, 2 Thessalonians 1:11 in the NIV, Titus 2:14, and 3:8).

## 2:22

**You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;**

James continues his response to the imaginary objector (the verb translated "**you see**" is in the singular) by once again emphasizing the interrelationship between faith and works. Abraham's faith "**was working with** (the Greek verb is *sunergeo*, the Greek preposition, *sun*, "together" + the Greek verb, *ergeo*, "to work") **his works.**" His faith and works went hand-in-hand. The one (faith) inevitably led to the other (works).<sup>90</sup> His works made his faith complete (the idea behind the Greek verb translated "**was perfected**"; see the NIV rendering).<sup>91</sup> Faith is incomplete without succeeding good works, much like a fruit-bearing tree is incomplete until it bears fruit.

## 2:23

**and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God.**

Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac "**fulfilled**" (i.e., "brought to ultimate significance," Moo, 2000, p. 138) the truth of Genesis 15:6, which James quotes here in verse twenty-three (hence, the NASB's ALL CAPS). Abraham was saved by faith, and his faith was

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<sup>89</sup>Accordingly, Martin (p. 76) translates: "... [O]ur father Abraham was proved righteous [as demonstrated] by his deeds ..."

<sup>90</sup>"... Abraham's faith was the source of his works and ... his works were an expression, the manifestation of his faith" (Bruce Compton, "James 2:21-24 and the Justification of Abraham," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, Fall 1997, p. 39).

<sup>91</sup>"... Abraham's faith was perfected in that it reached its intended goal and accomplished its intended purpose ...." (Compton, p. 39).

demonstrated by his good works, the offering of Isaac being the chief among them. Abraham is called God's friend also in 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8.

## **2:24**

**You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.**

In a verse that Moo (2000, p. 140) calls “the lightning rod in the theological controversy between James and Paul,” James concludes his appeal to Abraham by summarizing for the sake of his readers (the verb translated “**You see**” is in the plural) the truth he has used Abraham to illustrate, namely, that a man is justified by a work-producing faith (cf. verses 21 and 25). Moo (2000, p. 119) sees James using a literary device known as an “inclusio” in verses 20-26. If so, verses 20 and 26 serve as the bookends, verses 21-23 and verse 25 correspond to one another, and verse 24 is the heart of the passage.

## **2:25**

**In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?**

As if the example of Abraham was not proof enough for the imaginary objector, James adds the example of Rahab. Regardless of who one is, whether Jew (Abraham) or Gentile (Rahab); male (Abraham) or female (Rahab); patriarch (Abraham) or prostitute (Rahab), the truth that justification is by works holds true.<sup>92</sup> Like Abraham, Rahab had been saved by faith (see Joshua 2:11). Also like Abraham (verse 21), her faith evidenced itself in good works. James mentions two in particular: receiving the two Jewish spies (here called “messengers”) and sending them away from harm (see Joshua 2 and Hebrews 11:31).

## **2:26**

**For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.**

James concludes the fifth major section of his epistle by using a simile. Just as one would consider a body without its breath/spirit/life-giving impetus (see Genesis 2:7, 6:17, 7:15, Psalm 104:29, Luke 8:55, and John 19:30) to be dead, so also should one consider faith without works to be dead (cf. verses 17 and 20). As Davids (p. 122) puts it: “Works are not an ‘added extra’ any more than breath is an ‘added extra’ to a living body.” Martin Luther (quoted in Hiebert, p. 173) offers a similar analogy: “... [I]t is impossible to separate works from faith, as impossible to separate burning and shining from fire.”

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<sup>92</sup>“[James] designedly put together two persons so different in their character, in order more clearly to shew, that no one, whatever may have been his or her condition, nation, or class in society, has ever been counted righteous without good works” (Calvin, p. 316).

## **Conclusion**

In James 2:14-26, James forcefully argues against those who would call workless faith true saving faith. Such "faith" is useless (2:14-16, and 20) and dead (2:17 and 26). As many have said, it is faith alone that saves (*sola fides*), but the faith that saves is never alone.

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## **Lesson 7: James 3:1-12**

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### **Introduction**

In the previous section of his epistle (2:14-26), James stressed the absolute necessity of a faith that works. In this sixth section (3:1-12), he deals with one of the most important works of all, our speech.<sup>93</sup> James' readers were revealing their spiritual immaturity by their failure to control their tongues, a problem James alluded to earlier in the epistle (in 1:26).

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<sup>93</sup>"Proper speech is a work that true faith must exhibit" (Kent, p. 114).

### 3:1

**Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.**

James begins the sixth section of his epistle by commanding his readers to stop being many teachers (the imperative here reflects a Greek grammatical construction that calls for the cessation of an act already in progress). James could be referring to those who were official teachers in the church (Acts 13:1, 1 Corinthians 12:28-29, and Ephesians 4:11), but is more likely referring to the unofficial teachers in the Jewish synagogues (the official teachers were called rabbis). Virtually anyone could be one, even total strangers. Both Jesus (in Luke 4:16-22) and Paul (in Acts 13:14-15) availed themselves of this privilege. James is not denigrating teaching per se (he says "**many**," not "any"), but is exhorting his readers to stop being so eager to be teachers. Why? Because teachers (including James himself) will be judged more strictly than other believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ (the KJV's "condemnation" is too strong; the Greek word is itself neutral; the context does not allow for such a negative translation of the noun). See Matthew 12:36-37. The greater the influence, the greater the responsibility and accountability (Luke 12:48). One should think twice before seeking a teaching position.

### 3:2

**For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.**

James proceeds to explain why teaching is such an awesome responsibility. It is because teaching involves the use of the tongue, something that (as James will point out) is extremely difficult to control.<sup>94</sup> James begins verse two with an affirmation of the universality of sin (1 Kings 8:46, 2 Chronicles 6:36, Psalm 14:1-3, 53:3, 143:2, Proverbs 20:9, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:10-12, and 23). He says that we all "**stumble** (or sin; cf. Matthew 5:29-30//18:8-9, 13:41, 18:6//Luke 17:2, 1 Corinthians 8:13, James 2:10, and Revelation 2:14) **in many ways.**" One of the primary ways we sin is with our tongues (see Romans 3:13-14). James goes on to say that the one who does not habitually (the Greek verb translated "**stumble**" is in the present tense) sin with his tongue is a "**perfect**" (or mature; cf. comments on 1:4) man. The one who is able to control his tongue is able to control his entire being.<sup>95</sup> It has been said that control of the tongue is

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<sup>94</sup> "... [T]eachers, because their ministry involves speech, the hardest of all parts of the body to control, expose themselves to greater *danger* of judgment. Their constant use of the tongue means they can sin very easily, leading others astray at the same time" (Moo, 2000, pp. 149-150; emphasis his).

<sup>95</sup>"To guide the tongue, hold it in check, restrain it, is a task so difficult that he who has the grace to accomplish it has grace to accomplish anything" (Wolff, quoted in Hiebert, p 125). "The control of the tongue is evidence of extraordinary spiritual maturity ... It is so natural to gossip and criticize

the "final frontier" of spiritual maturity.

### **3:3**

**Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.**

To illustrate his final point in verse two, James uses the analogy of a horse here in verse three and the analogy a ship in verse four. The tongue is first likened to a horse's bit. It is control of the bit, a small piece of metal that puts pressure on the tender gums lining a horse's back jaw, that enables the rider to control the entire horse. Likewise, it is control of the tongue that enables the individual to control his entire being. "It is with men as with horses: control their mouth and you are masters of all their action" (James Ropes, cited in Wessel, p. 955).

### **3:4**

**Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, and are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.**

James next likens the tongue to a ship's rudder. It is control of the rudder that enables the pilot to control the entire ship. Likewise, it is control of the tongue that enables the individual to control his entire being.

### **3:5**

**So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!**

James begins verse five by concluding his discussion on the tongue's power to control. Like a horse's bit and a ship's rudder, the tongue is relatively small, yet its impact is very much disproportionate to its size. The tongue "**boasts of great things**," that is, its influence is great. Though small in size, the tongue is immense in impact,<sup>96</sup> especially now in an internet age. James concludes verse five by introducing another analogy, emphasizing the tongue's power to destroy if not properly controlled. The tongue is like a spark that sets an entire forest ablaze.<sup>97</sup>

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and slander that the person who can control his tongue can easily rule the rest of his body" (Hughes, p. 131).

<sup>96</sup> "The tongues of Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill bear eloquent testimony to the dark and bright sides of the tongue's power. The Fuhrer on one side of the channel harangued a vast multitude with his hypnotic cadences. On the other side, the prime minister's brilliant, measured utterances pulled a faltering nation together for its 'finest hour'" (Hughes, p. 138).

### 3:6

**And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.**

Continuing his emphasis on the tongue's destructive potential, James makes five assertions about the tongue's destructiveness here in verse six. First, the tongue is a “**fire**” (see Proverbs 16:27). How often have we been “burned” by the words of another!<sup>98</sup> Hughes (p. 138) says: “[T]hose who misuse the tongue are guilty of spiritual arson.” Second, the tongue is “**the very world of iniquity.**” It “contains and conveys all the world system’s wickedness” (Hughes, p. 138). “It embodies in itself the essence of all wickedness . . . . It can give utterance to every evil thought and motive and put every evil deed into words. It is a microcosm of evil among our members” (Hiebert, p. 195). Davids (p. 142) perceptively points out that “since speech is the hardest faculty to control it is there that one first observes ‘the world’ in a person’s heart.” Third, it “**defiles the entire body.**” “... [A] person is morally tarred with the brush of his tongue” (Davids, p. 143). What you say is indicative of who you are (see Matthew 12:33-35 and 15:10-20//Mark 7:14-23).<sup>99</sup> Fourth, it “**sets on fire the course of our life.**” Like the spark that sets the forest ablaze (see verse five), the tongue can destroy everything (or more accurately, everyone) in its path. Fifth, the tongue is “**set on fire by hell.**”<sup>100</sup> Satan himself is the source behind the destruction caused by an uncontrolled tongue. He is the one who fuels the fire.

### 3:7

**For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.**

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<sup>97</sup>A single spark allegedly started the great Chicago fire of 1871, which killed 300, destroyed 17,500 buildings, and caused \$400 million in damage (Wiersbe, p. 94).

<sup>98</sup>“We know from bitter experience that the childhood taunt, ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,’ reverses the truth of the matter. The wounds caused by sticks and stones heal; the wounds caused by words sometimes never heal” (Moo, 1985, p. 126).

<sup>99</sup>Moo (2000, p. 164) calls the tongue “a barometer of spirituality.” We could also call it a weather vane.

<sup>100</sup>The Greek word translated “hell” here is *geenna*. Gehenna was a continually-burning garbage dump just outside the walls south of Jerusalem. The fires that always raged there made it an apt metaphor for the lake of fire itself; hence, the translation, “hell.”

In verses seven and eight, James continues to point out the destructive power of the tongue by contrasting man's ability to tame something as great as the entire animal kingdom with his inability to tame something as small as his tongue. He declares here in verse seven that man has been able to tame (not in the sense of domesticate, but subjugate) every type of animal,<sup>101</sup> a responsibility he was given by God (see Genesis 1:26-28, 9:2, and Psalm 8:6-8).

### **3:8**

**But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.**

In contrast to man's ability to control the animal kingdom is his inability to control his tongue. James says that “**no one can tame the tongue.**” In and of himself, a man cannot bring his tongue into subjection; he needs God's help (see Psalm 141:3).<sup>102</sup> James proceeds to make two more assertions about the tongue's destructiveness. First, the tongue is “**a restless evil**” (the Greek word translated “**restless**” here is translated “unstable” in 1:8; its noun form is translated “disorder” in 3:16). Being powered by the generator of man's depraved nature, the tongue refuses to be subdued and is bent on evil. Martin (p. 117) suggests “the picture of a caged animal pacing back and forth and seeking an opportunity to escape.” Second, the tongue is “**full of deadly poison**” (cf. Psalm 140:3 and Romans 3:13). The tongue has power to kill (see Proverbs 18:21). Ever poison and/or murder someone with your tongue (cf. Matthew 5:21-22)?

### **3:9**

**With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;**

Beginning in verse nine, James gets to the heart of the matter: His readers were failing to control their tongues, revealing their spiritual immaturity. What was particularly appalling to James was the inconsistency they displayed. They were using their tongues one moment for a very noble purpose (blessing God, as in Luke 1:68, 2:28, 24:53, 2 Corinthians 1:3, Ephesians 1:3, and 1 Peter 1:3), but the next moment for a very ignoble

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<sup>101</sup>“We see this displayed in a circus performance where wild animals obey their trainer who merely cracks a whip, snaps his fingers, or clasps his hands” (Kistemaker, p. 112).

<sup>102</sup>“... [H]e does not say that no one can tame the tongue, but no one of men; so that when it is tamed we confess that this is brought about by the pity, the help, the grace of God” (Augustine, quoted in Hughes, p. 142).

purpose (cursing men; cf. 4:11).<sup>103</sup> The inconsistency is exacerbated by the fact that the fellow men they were cursing have been made in the image of the One they are blessing (see Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1, and 9:6).<sup>104</sup> Thus, to curse a fellow man is to curse (indirectly) the God who made that man in His own image.

### **3:10**

**from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.**

James continues to attack the inconsistency of his readers' speech. Out of the same mouth came two antithetical utterances. Being Jews, James' readers no doubt continued the Jewish practice of adding the phrase, "Blessed [be] He" whenever writing or speaking God's name. However, they were also in the habit of speaking evil of their brethren (see 4:11 and 5:9). James' response is quite clear: This should not be. A believer's speech should be consistently good.

### **3:11**

**Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?**

To further drive home his point, James uses the analogy of a spring, asking a question that expects a negative response. A spring does not produce both fresh water and bitter water (i.e., salt water). It's either one or the other. Just as there is consistency in a spring, so should there be consistency in one's speech. Our words should not be bitter one minute (see Psalm 64:3) and sweet the next (see Proverbs 16:21).

### **3:12**

**Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.**

James uses yet another analogy from nature to stress the need for consistency in speech, again asking a question that expects a negative response. Just as a fig tree cannot be producing olives or a grapevine figs, so a truly regenerate heart cannot be producing words characteristic of an unregenerate heart (see Matthew 7:15-20//Luke 6:43-45). James concludes the verse by returning to his spring analogy, explicitly stating what he had implied in verse eleven, namely, that the same spring cannot produce both salt water and fresh water.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>103</sup>This is what one has called "the tongue's ability to play the part of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (Hiebert, p. 200).

<sup>104</sup>James 3:9 implies that post-Fall man is still in the image of God. The Fall defaced, but did not erase, the image of God in man.

In James 3:1-12, James gives perhaps the most thorough treatment of the tongue found in Scripture. He begins by declaring that control of the tongue is a mark of spiritual maturity (3:2), proceeds to describe the tongue's power to both control (3:3-5a) and destroy (3:5b-8), and concludes by pointing out the inconsistent use of the tongue by his readers (3:9-12). The failure of James' readers to control their tongues was further evidence of their spiritual immaturity.

## Lesson 8: James 3:13-18

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### Introduction

In this seventh major section of his epistle, James deals with the subject of wisdom, both worldly and divine. Rather than embracing divine wisdom, his readers were embracing worldly wisdom, as evidenced by their attitudes and actions. This was yet another indication of their spiritual immaturity.

### 3:13

**Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.**

James begins his discussion of wisdom by challenging his readers to prove their wisdom by their deeds (as he challenged them to prove their faith by their deeds in 2:14-26, especially verse 18). The man in question is one who is "**wise**" and "**understanding**." Though the words, "knowledge," "understanding," and "wisdom" are often used interchangeably, they are different concepts. Knowledge may be viewed as the *possession* of facts, understanding the *comprehension* and *correlation* of facts, and wisdom the *application* of facts. In other words, knowledge and understanding are theoretical, wisdom practical. The theoretical and the practical, however, are not mutually exclusive (either/or). James puts them together ("**wise and understanding**").

Of the two, Scripture gives the practical the higher priority (Proverbs 4:7). The ultimate goal of education is applicability. Yet, the practical is dependent on the theoretical; you have to know why, what, and how to do before you can do. The truly wise man will prove his wisdom by his good works, which will be done in a gentle (or humble) manner. Humility and wisdom go hand-in-hand (Proverbs 11:2).

### 3:14

**But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant, and so lie against the truth.**

James' readers were, indeed, showing their wisdom by their deeds; however, their deeds revealed a wisdom of an altogether different sort, as he begins to point out here in verse fourteen. His readers were characterized by "**bitter jealousy and selfish ambition**" (the conditional clause that begins the verse reflects a Greek grammatical construction in which the condition is assumed to be true; so, *since* you have . . .). The Greek noun translated "**jealousy**" is *zelos*, meaning zeal. *Zelos* is a neutral term; it can be either positive (as in John 2:17, 2 Corinthians 9:2, and 11:2) or negative in connotation. Here, it is clearly a negative thing, being modified by the adjective, "**bitter**"<sup>105</sup>; thus, the translation "**jealousy**." Based on the context (they are taking pride

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<sup>105</sup> Both Hughes (p. 151) and Martin (p. 125) translate "harsh." The same word was used by James in 3:11 to describe salty water.

in this), it may very well be an improper religious zeal that is in view. If so, Hiebert's comments are fitting: "Religious zeal or 'enthusiasm' for God and truth is a commendable attitude, but the subtleties of sinful human nature can readily pervert it into bitter antagonism against those who do not express their adherence to God and His truth in the same way we do" (p. 206).<sup>106</sup> The Greek noun translated "**selfish ambition**" (found also in Romans 2:8, 2 Corinthians 12:20, Galatians 5:20, and Philippians 1:17) is an interesting one. It was used by the Greeks to describe a politician seeking office by unfair means (Richardson, p. 163). This self-seeking attitude on the part of James' readers is condemned by Paul in Philippians 2:3. James likewise condemns it in the latter half of this verse.<sup>107</sup> He commands his readers to stop (the Greek calls for the cessation of an act already in progress) being arrogant, thereby lying against the truth. They had no business taking pride in such attitudes because such attitudes are antithetical to the truth claims of Christianity.

### **3:15**

**This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.**

James proceeds to point out to his readers the source of the wisdom displayed by their attitudes. Rather than being heavenly, spiritual, and divine ("**from above**"), the wisdom they were displaying was earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Paul draws a sharp contrast between worldly wisdom (1:20 and 2:5-6) and divine wisdom (1:24 and 2:7) in 1 Corinthians chapters 1-2. Like unbelievers, James' readers were taking their cues from the world, the flesh, and the devil (see also Ephesians 2:1-3). Worldly wisdom is, first of all, "**earthly**." As such, "it views life from the limited viewpoint of this world rather than from heaven's vantage point" (Burdick, p. 191). It is earthbound (how Martin, p. 125 and Moo, 2000, p. 173 translate the word) and temporal in perspective, rather than heavenly and eternal (see 2 Corinthians 4:18, Philippians 3:19, and Colossians 3:2). Worldly wisdom is also "**natural**." The same Greek adjective is used by Paul in Jude 19 to describe the man without the Spirit, i.e., an unbeliever. Paul calls him a "natural" man in 1 Corinthians 2:14. Worldly wisdom is an unspiritual (how the NIV translates the word) wisdom; it is the wisdom of the unsaved man in his natural state. Finally, worldly wisdom is "**demonic**." Rather than being humble (verse 13), it is proud (verse 14), like Satan (see 1 Timothy 3:6; cf. Isaiah 14:13-14). It finds its true source in the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4), the one who deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden (see Genesis 3) and continues to deceive their descendants with a counterfeit wisdom. It is

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<sup>106</sup> Davids (p. 151) writes: "[T]he person sees himself as jealous for the truth, but God and others see the bitterness, rigidity, and personal pride which are far from the truth."

<sup>107</sup> Davids (p. 151) speaks of this as "'party spirit' in which the jealous or angry leader forms a group which emotionally or physically withdraws from the rest of the church. Certainly the charge such a group would make is that the parent body has rejected wisdom and truth and thus those committed to the truth must withdraw."

only when the Holy Spirit supernaturally illuminates the unregenerate mind that worldly wisdom gives way to divine wisdom (see 2 Timothy 3:15). The Holy Spirit continues to illuminate the believer's mind subsequent to salvation, giving him divine wisdom (see Ephesians 1:17).

### **3:16**

**For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.**

James concludes his treatment of worldly wisdom by pointing out its end result. Those who are "worldly wise" are marked by ungodly zeal and a self-seeking attitude (see comments on verse fourteen). The actions that result from such attitudes are "**disorder and every evil thing.**" Divine wisdom does not produce disorder (see 1 Corinthians 14:33); rather, worldly wisdom does. Self-centeredness and disorder go hand-in-hand (see 4:1-3); likewise, humility and unity (see Ephesians 4:2-3 and Philippians 2:1-8). Another effect of worldly wisdom is "**every evil thing.**" Like produces like. Worldly wisdom leads to worldly (i.e., ungodly) living, while divine wisdom leads to godly living.

### **3:17**

**But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.**

In stark contrast to worldly wisdom is divine wisdom, which James turns to in verses seventeen and eighteen. James gives seven characteristics of divine wisdom here in verse seventeen. Divine wisdom is, first of all, "**pure.**" This is a description of the essence or inner nature of divine wisdom, from which the remaining six flow in outward manifestation. God's wisdom, like God Himself, is holy in essence; it is untainted by evil. Second, divine wisdom is "**peaceable.**" A truly wise person is a peaceable person (see Proverbs 3:17). Christians are peacemakers (see Matthew 5:9).<sup>108</sup> Third, divine wisdom is "**gentle.**" The Greek adjective translated "**gentle**" (used of Christ in 2 Corinthians 10:1 and found also in Philippians 4:5, 1 Timothy 3:3, and Titus 3:2) has no true English equivalent. "Sweet reasonableness" (Matthew Arnold, quoted in Wiersbe, p. 111) is one way of translating it. The truly wise person is one with a sweet, reasonable spirit. Davids (p. 154) says it describes a person who "does not get angry, combative, or defensive even under provocation." Fourth, divine wisdom is "**reasonable,**" or submissive (NIV), deferential (Martin, p. 125) or willing to yield (KJV margin). The Greek adjective means obedient, compliant, or willing to give in. Moo (2000, p. 176) describes this trait as "a willing deference to others when unalterable

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<sup>108</sup>This is not an endorsement of a peace-at-all-costs stance (sometimes you have to go to war to restore peace). Though peace should be the believer's desire, he must never compromise truth for the sake of peace/unity. The words of Romans 12:18 are instructive.

theological or moral principles are not involved."<sup>109</sup> Fifth, divine wisdom is “**full of mercy and good fruits.**” A truly wise person is a merciful person (see James 2:13). Unlike the “every evil thing” produced by worldly wisdom (verse sixteen), divine wisdom produces “**good fruits.**” Once again, like produces like. “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). Sixth, divine wisdom is “**unwavering.**” Impartial is the idea. A truly wise person is an impartial person (see James 2:1-13). Finally, divine wisdom is “**without hypocrisy**” (the Greek word is *anupokritos*). A truly wise person is genuine. What you see is what you get. Worldly wisdom, on the other hand, is characterized by duplicity (see comments on verse fifteen).

### **3:18**

**And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**

From his list of characteristics of divine wisdom in verse seventeen, James returns to the second, peaceable, here in verse eighteen. The reason for this is his readers' failure to cultivate such an attitude (see 3:16 and 4:1-2). Using an agricultural metaphor, James teaches that the seed of righteousness is sown in a peaceful manner by peacemakers. His substitution of the fruit (“**righteousness**”) for the seed is not unusual. We do the same today (“I planted carrots this year.”). While worldly wisdom ultimately produces disorder and evil (verse sixteen), divine wisdom ultimately produces peace and good works (verse seventeen). Righteousness and peace go hand-in-hand, with the one producing the other (see Isaiah 32:17).<sup>110</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In James 3:13-18, James further attacks the spiritual immaturity of his readers, rebuking them for their embracing of worldly wisdom rather than divine wisdom. He challenges his readers to prove their wisdom by their works (verse 13); exposes their worldly wisdom, as evidenced by their attitudes (verse 14); points out the source behind such attitudes (verse 15); reminds them of the actions that result from such attitudes (verse 16); challenges them to cultivate godly attitudes instead (verse 17); and reminds them of the actions that result from such attitudes (verse 18). A spiritually mature believer is one whose life (both in thought and in deed) is governed by God's wisdom.

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<sup>109</sup> Hughes (p. 159) shares the following story to illustrate this characteristic: “On one occasion Abraham Lincoln, to please a certain politician, issued a command to transfer certain regiments. When Secretary of War Edwin Stanton received the order, he refused to carry it out, saying the President was a fool. When Lincoln was told of this, he replied, ‘If Stanton said I’m a fool, then I must be, for he is nearly always right. I’ll see for myself.’ As the two men talked, the President quickly realized that his decision was a serious mistake, and without hesitation he withdrew it.”

<sup>110</sup>“A crop of righteousness cannot be produced in the climate of bitterness and self-seeking. Righteousness will grow only in a climate of peace” (Burdick, p. 192).

## Lesson 9: James 4:1-6

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### Introduction

In the seventh major section of his epistle (3:13-18), James challenged his readers regarding their worldly wisdom, attitudes, and actions. In this eighth major section (4:1-6), James continues to challenge the worldly-wise attitudes and actions of his readers.

### 4:1

**What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?**

James begins this section of the epistle by expanding on verse sixteen of chapter three, where he made mention of the disorder that resulted from the worldly attitudes of his readers. The disorder among them consisted of "**quarrels and conflicts**." The Greek nouns behind these two words were used to describe national warfare, the first being a general term describing a state of warfare and the second being a specific term describing the individual battles of a war. James uses them in a metaphorical sense to describe the contentions that had been taking place among his readers. Though the early church was noted for its unity (see Acts 4:32), it quickly degenerated into disorder (see Acts 6:1, 1 Corinthians 1:11, 3:3-4, and Philippians 4:2).<sup>111</sup> James proceeds to give the reason why: Their outward contention toward one another was symptomatic of a battle raging within each one individually; the war without was because of the war within.<sup>112</sup> The root cause of their contention was their own sinful desires (see also Romans 7:23 and 1 Peter 2:11). The Greek word translated "**pleasures**" is *hedone*, from which we get our English word, "hedonism," the philosophy that views pleasure as the chief aim in life. Those whose lives are characterized by the selfish pursuit of personal pleasure are bound to be at odds with one another. Selfishness is a sure sign of spiritual immaturity.

### 4:2

**You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.**

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<sup>111</sup> Hughes (p. 166), through the use of a humorous illustration, makes the point that such disorder continues to plague the modern church, relating how a young father, after hearing a commotion in his backyard, "looked outside and saw his daughter and several playmates in a heated quarrel. When he intervened, his daughter called back, 'Dad, we're just playing church!'"

<sup>112</sup> "...[P]leasure-seeking Christians are walking civil wars" (Hughes, p. 168).

James builds on the previous verse by pointing out the futility of their selfish desires. In spite of their lusting (the Greek noun translated "**lust**" here is translated "covet" in Romans 7:7), they were not receiving what they were lusting after. They even went so far as murdering in order to obtain what they wanted (as Ahab did in order to get Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21). There is considerable debate among interpreters regarding the nature of the murder being committed by James' readers. Though there are some who believe literal homicide is in view, most believe James is speaking metaphorically, equating hatred with murder, as Christ did in Matthew 5:21-22 (see also 1 John 3:15).<sup>113</sup> James concludes verse two by telling his readers the real reason they had not been receiving what they wanted: They were not asking God! Rather than depending on God to meet their needs, they were relying on their own abilities to meet them. Their prayerlessness revealed a lack of faith in God's ability to provide (see Matthew 7:7-11, Hebrews 11:6, James 1:5-7, and 17). The correct way to have one's needs met is to ask God to meet them, not to sinfully try to meet them oneself, as James' readers were trying to do, albeit unsuccessfully.

### **4:3**

**You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.**

James hastens to add a caveat here at the beginning of verse three to what he has just said at the end of verse two. It is not enough simply to ask God to meet one's needs; one must make sure he is asking God to meet *legitimate* needs (needs, not "greeds") for *legitimate* reasons. Though some of James' readers were, indeed, asking God to meet their needs, they were doing so for selfish reasons: to use what God might give them in answer to their prayers solely for themselves. Much like the prodigal son (see Luke 15:14), they wanted to waste what they might receive upon themselves. God only answers prayers that are according to His will (see 1 John 5:14), that is, prayers for the right things and for the right reasons. "The purpose of prayer is not to get man's will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth" (Wiersbe, p. 121). See Matthew 6:9-10.

### **4:4**

**You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.**

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<sup>113</sup> "It seems inconceivable that Christians were involved in actual combat and murder without any mention of any governmental intervention" (Stevens, p. 678). "But we still must wonder whether James would have been content with the little that he says here had the believers to whom he is writing actually been killing one another" (Moo, 2000, p. 180) and "It strains credulity to suppose that James would pass so quickly over so serious a matter within the community" (Moo, 2000, p. 183).

In verse four, James "takes off the gloves" and hits his readers right between the eyes.<sup>114</sup> Their embracing of worldly wisdom, evidenced by their worldly attitudes and actions, was tantamount to spiritual adultery. Being Jews, James' readers could readily relate to the imagery being made. Israel was often viewed by God as an unfaithful wife (see Jeremiah 3:9, 20, and the book of Hosea). Similarly, the church is viewed as Christ's bride (see Romans 7:4, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:22-32, Revelation 19:7, and 21:9). Friendliness with the world (the ungodly system of values and practices characteristic of the unbeliever) makes one an enemy of God. No man can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24//Luke 16:13). Love for the world and love for God are mutually exclusive (1 John 2:15).

## 4:5

**Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"?**

Verse five has been called "one of the most puzzling in the entire epistle" and "among the most difficult passages in the New Testament" (Kistemaker, p. 135). One of the difficulties is the fact that it appears as though James is directly quoting from an Old Testament text. However, there is no Old Testament text that says what the latter half of this verse says. From whence the quotation? Though several possibilities have been suggested, it is likely that James is not citing a particular Old Testament passage, but is summarizing the truth expressed in several Old Testament passages (such as in Exodus 20:5 and 34:14). The even greater difficulty lies in interpreting the saying. Is the "**Spirit**" being referred to the human spirit (so KJV, NIV, and ESV) or the Holy Spirit (so NASB)? Whatever the spirit, should it be viewed as the subject of the main verb (so KJV), the object of the main verb (so NASB), or as the object of a preposition (so NIV and ESV)? Is the main verb (translated "**jealously desires**") speaking of a positive (so NASB, NIV, and ESV) or a negative (so KJV) desire? Finally, what is the exact rendering of the Greek prepositional phrase that the NASB translates "**jealously**"? According to the KJV, the saying should be interpreted to mean that the sin nature that resides within us is inclined to envy. This fits well with the overall context (especially verse 2). However, there is a second option<sup>115</sup>, which does not fit as well with the overall context, but does fit better with the immediately preceding context (of verse 4). This second option 1) views the spirit as the Holy Spirit (so NASB), 2) takes it to be the subject of the main verb (so KJV), 3) sees the main verb as being positive in force (so NASB, NIV, and ESV), and 4) translates the prepositional phrase adverbially (so NASB, NIV, and ESV). According to this second interpretation, the Holy Spirit jealously desires our allegiance

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<sup>114</sup> "After the many times that James has called his readers 'brothers' (1:2; 2:1, 14; 3:1, 10, 12) or even 'my dear brothers' (1:16, 19; 2:5), his address *you adulterous people* really catches our attention" (Moo, 2000, p. 186; emphasis his).

<sup>115</sup> Hiebert (p. 233) presents four different options.

(see NIV footnote: “the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously”; see also NKJV: “the Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”). This fits well with verse four.

## **4:6**

**But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.”**

In a verse that Hughes (p. 178) calls “one of the most comforting texts in all of Scripture,” James concludes this section of the epistle by reminding his readers that God's grace is greater than their shortcomings, great as they may be (see Romans 5:20). However, God's grace is given only to those who in humility avail themselves of it. God opposes the proud<sup>116</sup>, but gives grace to the humble (see also Psalm 138:6, Matthew 23:12//Luke 14:11//18:14, and Luke 1:51-52). James here is quoting from Proverbs 3:34. God delights in humility (see Psalm 34:18, 51:17, and Isaiah 66:2). Verse six is yet another allusion to the contention present among James' readers, as it is only by pride that contention comes (Proverbs 13:10). Humility, on the other hand, is the key to unity (see Philippians 2:1-8). James wants his readers to avail themselves of the grace of God, the only thing that can help them overcome their worldly-wise attitudes and actions.

## **Conclusion**

In the eighth major section of his epistle, James continues to expose the spiritual immaturity of his readers. Their lives are characterized by outward contention that is being fueled by inward contention (verse 1). Such contention is doing them absolutely no good (verse 2a), leaving them unsatisfied. Rather than selfishly striving to satisfy their personal desires, they need to be asking God to meet them (verse 2b). However, they must ask with the right motives (verse 3). Their contentious attitudes and actions reveal that they are committing spiritual adultery, having become friends of the world and, hence, enemies of God (verse 4). In spite of their unfaithfulness, the Holy Spirit that indwells them continues to jealously desire their fidelity (verse 5). Finally, God's grace is more than sufficient to help them overcome their failures, provided they humbly avail themselves of it (verse 6).

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<sup>116</sup> Henry (p. 989) says that the Greek verb translated “opposed” in “opposed to the proud” “signifies God’s setting himself as in battle array against them.”

## Lesson 10: James 4:7-12

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### Introduction

James concluded the eighth major section of his epistle (4:1-6) by quoting from Proverbs 3:34, providing a transition (notice that verse 7 begins with a “therefore”) into the ninth major section (4:7-12), in which James unleashes<sup>117</sup> a series of imperatives upon his readers, designed to turn them away from their worldly-wise attitudes and actions back to a right relationship with God.

### 4:7

**Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.**

As mentioned in the Introduction, verse seven serves as a transition between the previous major section and this one. In light of the fact that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (4:6), James commands his readers to submit to God.<sup>118</sup> Humility and submission go hand-in-hand. This principle is vividly displayed in the life of Saul (see 1 Samuel 9:20-21, 10:21-22, 13:8-14, 15:3, 7-9, 13-14, 18-23, but especially 15:17) and in the life of our Lord (see Matthew 26:39, Philippians 2:5-8, and Hebrews 5:8). See also 1 Peter 5:5. The Greek verb translated “submit” is *hupotasso*, which literally means to place under (from the Greek preposition, *hupo*, “under” + the Greek verb, *tasso*, “to place”). Submission is willingly placing oneself under the authority of another. It is an action, as well as an attitude.<sup>119</sup> A corollary of submission to God is resistance of Satan; to do one is to do the other. The Greek verb translated “resist” is *anthistemi*, which literally means to stand against (the Greek preposition, *anti*, “against” + the Greek verb, *histemi*, “to stand”). Like *hupotasso*, *anthistemi* is a military term. It is a defensive term, not an offensive one. Christians are never commanded to go on the offensive against Satan.<sup>120</sup> We are to resist his attacks (see also Ephesians 6:11 and 1 Peter 5:9), not counter-attack. Like Jesus (see Matthew 4:1f//Luke 4:1f), we resist Satan through the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17), God’s Word. When we do resist Satan’s attacks, he will flee from us, as he fled from Christ after unsuccessfully attacking Him in the wilderness (see Matthew 4:11//Luke 4:13). It is interesting to note that after having identified the source of worldly wisdom as the world, the flesh, and the devil in 3:15, James alludes to all three in the succeeding verses (the world in 4:4, the flesh in 4:1, and the devil in 4:7).

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<sup>117</sup>Richardson (p. 183) calls the series of imperatives James gives in verses 7-10 “stunning.”

<sup>118</sup>Hughes (p. 184) remarks that this command to submit to God “grates like fingernails across the chalkboard of contemporary culture.”

<sup>119</sup>The story is told of the child, whom when ordered by his father to sit, outwardly complied, yet replied, “I’m still standing up on the inside.” Such is not true submission.

<sup>120</sup>All of the armor listed in Ephesians 6:11-18 is for defense, including the “sword of the Spirit.”

## 4:8

**Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.**

James next commands his readers to “**draw near to God,**” seeing that they have wandered from Him (see 4:4). If they do, God will respond by once again drawing near to them (cf. Zechariah 1:3 and Malachi 3:7). An apt illustration is the story of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-32). How does one draw near to God? James gives the answer in the latter half of verse eight. One can draw near to God only after dealing with his sin. James uses two verbs familiar to his Jewish audience. The Greek verbs translated “**cleanse**” and “**purify**” were used to describe ceremonial washing. Under the Law, one had to physically wash himself before performing certain religious rites (see Exodus 30:17-21, John 11:55, Acts 21:24, and 26). The physical washing symbolized the spiritual cleansing that must be present before one could approach a holy God (see Psalm 24:3-4, Isaiah 1:16, Jeremiah 4:14, 2 Corinthians 6:17, 7:1, 1 Peter 1:22, and 1 John 3:3). James commands his readers to cleanse their hands (representative of their actions/deeds) and purify their hearts (representative of their attitudes/disposition). To help them realize the gravity of their condition, James calls his readers “**sinners**” and “**double-minded.**” The Greek noun translated “**sinners**” is a strong one, usually reserved for those guilty of committing the most heinous of sins (see Matthew 9:10 and Luke 7:39). To be “**double-minded**” (see 1:8) is to have divided affections, as James’ readers were having (see 4:4).

## 4:9

**Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.**

James continues to underscore the severity of his readers’ predicament. Radical measures needed to be taken in order to restore them to a right relationship with God. One thing that needed to change was their attitude toward their sin—they needed to be broken-hearted over it.<sup>121</sup> God delights in such an attitude towards sin (see Psalm 34:18, 51:17, Isaiah 57:15, and 66:2; cf. Ezra 10:6, Luke 22:62, Romans 7:24, and 1 Corinthians 5:2). The terminology James uses is strong. The Greek verb translated “**be miserable**” means to be wretched. One who realizes the miserable, wretched condition in which sin has left him should be more than ready to “**mourn and weep.**” True repentance is evidenced by sorrow over one’s sin (see 2 Corinthians 7:10). James’ words here are reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet, Joel (see Joel 2:12).

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<sup>121</sup>The sobriety commanded in verse nine should not be misconstrued as the normal attitude of the Christian. Though sobriety should be the attitude of the believer who is living in sin, the normal attitude of the believer should be one of joy (see Galatians 5:22, Philippians 4:4, and 1 Thessalonians 5:16).

## 4:10

**Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.**

James once again (cf. 4:6) returns to the theme of humility. His readers needed to humble themselves before the Lord in repentance. To do so would result in their being exalted (i.e., restored to favor).<sup>122</sup> Humiliation precedes exaltation. "The way up is down" (Blue, p. 831). This truth is taught in several places in Scripture (see Proverbs 15:33b, 18:12b, Matthew 18:4, 23:12, Luke 1:52, 14:11, 18:9-14, Philippians 2:5-11, James 1:9, 4:6, and 1 Peter 5:5-6).

## 4:11

**Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.**

Many interpreters see verses eleven and twelve as a separate section, finding it difficult to harmonize them with what goes before or after. The difficulty may be resolved, however, by viewing verses eleven and twelve as one specific area in which James' readers needed to humbly repent.<sup>123</sup> James commands them to stop (the Greek grammatical construction calls for the cessation of an act already in progress) speaking against one another (cf. 1 Peter 2:1). The Greek verb translated "**speak against**" is a broad one, encompassing all forms of evil speech.<sup>124</sup> Believers are to "speak no evil"

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<sup>122</sup> Peter Davids (cited in Hiebert, p. 240) writes: "The picture is that of someone prostrate before an oriental monarch, begging mercy. The monarch leans down from the throne and lifts the petitioner's face from the dust. The person rises with grateful joy, knowing he or she is forgiven."

<sup>123</sup> Richardson (p. 184) makes the following connection between verses 7-10, which speak of our vertical relationship with God, and verses 11-12, which speak of our horizontal relationship with others: "... [C]onflicts with one another are symptomatic of conflict with God. All conflict resolution should begin by a renewed submission to God ..."

<sup>124</sup>When it comes to evil speech, the primary issue is not the truthfulness or falsehood of what is said, but the *motive* behind it. In other words, *why* did you say what you said? If you said it to injure another (even if what you said was true), you are guilty of evil speaking. Hughes (p. 194; emphasis his) writes in this regard: "Most people think it is okay to convey negative information if it is *true*. We understand that lying is immoral. But is passing along damaging truth immoral? It seems almost a moral responsibility! By such reasoning, criticism behind another's back is thought to be all right as long as it is true. Likewise, denigrating gossip (of course it is never called gossip!) is okay if the information is true. Thus many believers use truth as a license to righteously diminish others' reputations." Furthermore, a secondary issue must be addressed, namely, the potential *result* of what is said. In other words, even if you say something that is true and do it with sincere motives, if what you say has the potential of harming another, it should not be said.

(see Ephesians 4:29), yet James' readers were doing this very thing towards one another (see also 1:26 and 3:1-12). It may very well be that the dissensions among them (see 3:16 and 4:1) were being fueled by this misuse of the tongue. James goes on to point out that their evil speaking towards one another was accompanied by wrongfully judging one another.<sup>125</sup> Could it be that their religious zeal (see comments on 3:14) was causing them to unfairly criticize/judge those who disagreed with them (cf. Romans 14:4 and 10)? James continues by accusing his readers of speaking against and judging the law itself.<sup>126</sup> To speak against others is to break the law and, in a sense, to speak against the law itself. Not only that, to break the law is in reality to place oneself above the law, as one sitting in judgment over it. As James points out at the conclusion of verse eleven, to do so makes one a judge of the law, rather than a doer of it.

## **4:12**

**There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?**

Having pointed out at the end of verse eleven that the one who breaks the law has in reality placed himself above the law, James hastens to add here at the start of verse twelve that there is "**one** (and only one) **Lawgiver**," God Himself.<sup>127</sup> Only God can rightfully be above the law, for He is the One who gave it. Furthermore, James points out that this one Lawgiver has the ability "**to save and to destroy**," both physically (see Deuteronomy 32:39, 1 Samuel 2:6, and 2 Kings 5:7) and spiritually (see Matthew 10:28, Mark 1:24//Luke 4:34, and Luke 12:4-5). This is a gentle reminder to his readers that God is the One calling the shots (cf. Romans 14:4), not man. Man's responsibility is to humbly submit to God's commands. Thus, the question: "**Who are you who judge your neighbor?**"

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<sup>125</sup>James' words here should not be taken as a prohibition against passing judgment of any kind. The Scriptures command us to make judgments (see John 7:24b and 1 Corinthians 5:3). What James is condemning is unrighteous judgment, which includes judging motives (see 1 Corinthians 4:1-5), hypocritical judgment (see Matthew 7:1-5//Luke 6:37-42), and judging solely on appearance (see John 7:24a).

<sup>126</sup>In what sense does James speak of the "law" here? Is it the Mosaic Law or something else? Due to the absence of the Greek definite article ("the") before "law," the Mosaic Law is probably not directly in view. Rather, the law being referred to is likely "the law of Christ" spoken of in 1 Corinthians 9:21 and Galatians 6:2, that is, the totality of commands laid upon the Christian throughout the New Testament. More specifically, it is the "royal law" of love for others (James 2:8). Those who love others will not speak against them (compare Leviticus 19:18b with Leviticus 19:16a).

<sup>127</sup>Note in verse 12 that God, and God alone, is the ultimate Lawgiver, Judge, and executor of the law ("the One who is able to save and to destroy"). He is the legislative, judicial, and executive branches all rolled into one. When we sinfully speak against and judge a brother, we are taking all three upon ourselves.

## **Conclusion**

In the ninth major section of his epistle, James calls upon his readers to humbly repent of their worldly-wise attitudes and actions (there are eleven imperatives in the section). He begins by calling for submission to God and resistance of Satan (4:7). He proceeds to charge them to draw near to God through a cleansing of their actions and a purifying of their attitudes (4:8), to have a broken-heartedness over their sin (4:9), and to humble themselves before God (4:10). Finally, he commands them to stop speaking against and judging one another, for doing so is to speak against and judge the law, as well as place oneself above the law (4:11), a prerogative that only God enjoys (4:12).

## Lesson 11: James 4:13-17

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### Introduction

In the seventh (3:13-18) and eighth (4:1-6) major sections of his epistle, James exposed the worldly wisdom of his readers, as evidenced by their ungodly attitudes and actions. In the ninth major section (4:7-12), he urged them to repent of such attitudes and actions. In this tenth major section (4:13-17), he attacks the worldly wisdom being displayed by a specific sub-group among his readers.

### 4:13

**Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit."**

James begins this section by grabbing his readers' attention through the use of a Greek attention-getting interjection, translated "**come now**" (the same interjection is also used in 5:1 and could be loosely translated, "listen up!"). His readers have once again been lulled into thinking like the world and need to be brought to their senses. The specific group James targets is businessmen, whom Wessel (p. 959) describes as "itinerant merchants ... Jews who carried on a lucrative trade throughout the Mediterranean world." As shall be seen, these businessmen had been infected by the worldly attitude of self-reliance. They were making plans as if God did not exist. They were living as though life-without-God-at-the-center is normal, the epitome of worldliness. They were "practical atheists."<sup>128</sup> Businessmen seem to be especially susceptible to this temptation (see also the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21). James articulates this self-reliant attitude on the part of his readers. Their plans included a commencement ("**today or tomorrow**"), a place ("**such and such a city**"), a duration ("**a year**"), an activity ("**engage in business**"), and an expected outcome ("**make a profit**").<sup>129</sup>

### 4:14

**Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.**

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<sup>128</sup>There is no such thing as a true atheist (theologically speaking). There are only practical atheists, those who live as if there is no God (Psalm 14:1). All men know intuitively that there is a God by virtue of creation (Romans 1:18-21) and the moral law within (Romans 2:14-15).

<sup>129</sup>James' words here should not be understood as a prohibition against proper planning. Christ Himself taught the virtue of such (see Luke 14:28-32). Nor should James' words be seen as a prohibition against pursuing profit (see Matthew 25:14f//Luke 19:11f).

James proceeds to point out the folly of making such detailed plans apart from God. While his readers had been planning as if they knew for certain what would happen in a year, James bluntly reminds them that they did not even know what would happen the next day.<sup>130</sup> This is reminiscent of the words of Proverbs 27:1. Not only that, there was no guarantee that they would even be around the next day to carry out such grandiose plans (remember the rich fool). Life is brief; it is like a vapor that vanishes just as suddenly as it appears (see also Job 7:7, 16, 14:1-2, Psalm 39:5, 102:3, 144:4, and Hosea 13:3).

#### **4:15**

**Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."**

Whereas worldly wisdom produces an attitude of self-reliance, divine wisdom produces an attitude of reliance upon God.<sup>131</sup> Our very lives are dependent upon God (see Job 34:14-15, Psalm 31:15a, and Acts 17:25). Thus, we must acknowledge Him when making any plans. It is only by God's will that anything comes to pass (see Isaiah 46:9-11 and Ephesians 1:11),<sup>132</sup> including man's plans.<sup>133</sup> Paul was quick to acknowledge this fact when making his plans (see Acts 18:21, Romans 1:10, 15:32, 1 Corinthians 4:19, and 16:7; cf. Philippians 2:19, 24, and Hebrews 6:3).<sup>134</sup> Hughes (p. 206) points out how more recent believers did so: "The Puritans loved it and filled their speech and correspondence with the Latin equivalent *Deo Volente*, 'God willing.' And the Methodists followed the same practice. In fact, godly Methodists regularly signed their letters with the initials D.V., and placards and circulars about coming events also had D.V."

#### **4:16**

**But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.**

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<sup>130</sup>"James roused the stupidity of those who disregarded God's providence, and claimed for themselves a whole year, though they had not a single moment in their own power" (Calvin, p. 340).

<sup>131</sup>A good way to measure the reality of your dependence upon God is the breadth (frequency) and depth (fervency) of your prayer life.

<sup>132</sup>Whether men recognize it or not, they 'will live and do this or that' only 'if it is the Lord's will'" (Burdick, p. 197).

<sup>133</sup>"Man proposes but God disposes" (Thomas à Kempis, quoted in Wiersbe, p. 132).

<sup>134</sup>The key is not the reciting of the actual words, "if the Lord will" (Paul made plans without saying so in Acts 19:21, Romans 15:28, and 1 Corinthians 16:5), but the attitude of the heart. However, reciting the words is a good discipline. As Hiebert (p. 254) states: "Believers do well to avoid the rote use of the expression, but it is proper for them on appropriate occasions thus to give verbal testimony to their dependence on God when dealing with the future."

James returns to his rebuke of the aforementioned businessmen by further castigating them for their worldly attitude. It was bad enough they were leaving God out of their plans. Now James indicates that they were taking pride in the fact that they were doing so (cf. 1 John 2:16's "the boastful pride of life," a further indication of the worldliness of his readers). The Greek prepositional phrase translated "**in your arrogance**" indicates the basis of their boasting, namely, their attitude displayed in verse thirteen. James does not mince his words: "**all such boasting is evil.**" It is totally antithetical to the humility called for previously (see 3:13, 4:6, and 4:10).

#### **4:17**

**Therefore, to one who knows *the right thing to do* and does not do it, to him it is sin.**

James concludes this section of the epistle by making reference to what some believe was a proverbial saying. In light of what James has just told them, his readers are now without excuse. If they did not already, they now know what they should be doing in regards to this matter. The greater the knowledge, the greater the responsibility (see Luke 12:47-48 and 2 Peter 2:20-21). If they continue to live in practical atheism, they will continue to be guilty of sin. To not do what is right is to commit a sin of *omission*<sup>135</sup> (as opposed to doing what is wrong, which is a sin of *commission*).

#### **Conclusion**

In the tenth major section of his epistle, James confronts the businessmen among his readers regarding their self-reliant attitudes. He articulates their atheistic thinking (4:13), shows the folly of it (4:14), challenges them to have a theistic mindset (4:15), rebukes them for boasting about their self reliance (4:16), and reminds them that to persist in such an attitude is to persist in sin (4:17).

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<sup>135</sup> Hughes (p. 46) humorously writes: "Regarding omission, I chuckle at the answer a little boy gave his Sunday school teacher: 'Omission? They're the sins we should have committed but didn't get around to.'"

## Lesson 12: James 5:1-6

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### Introduction

In this eleventh major section of his letter, James, much like an Old Testament prophet, pronounces judgment upon wealthy unbelievers.<sup>136</sup>

### 5:1

**Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.**

Using the same attention-getting interjection he used to begin the previous section (4:13-17; see comments on 4:13), James begins this section by commanding these wealthy unbelievers<sup>137</sup> to "**weep and howl**" because of the miseries that are coming upon them. The scene is clearly one of judgment. Weeping and howling are common Jewish responses to judgment (see Isaiah 13:6, 15:3, Jeremiah 25:34, Ezekiel 21:12, and Amos 8:3). The present tense ("**are coming**") signals that the process of judgment had already begun; the miseries were on their way.

### 5:2

**Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.**

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<sup>136</sup>James is using a rhetorical device known as *apostrophe*, in which he addresses a group other than his original audience. We have seen this earlier in the letter (see 2:18-23). Why address part of an epistle written to believers (2:1) to unbelievers? Calvin (p. 342) answers by pointing out that this section was in the final analysis written "to the faithful, that they, hearing of the miserable end of the rich, might not envy their fortune, and also that knowing that God would be the avenger of the wrongs they suffered, they might with a calm and resigned mind bear them."

<sup>137</sup>Already in the letter, James has alluded to saved rich men (see 1:10-11) and unsaved rich men (see 2:6-7). Most interpreters see those being addressed in this section as unbelievers for at least two reasons: 1) There is no call for repentance, only a pronouncement of impending doom and 2) Not only their riches, but also the rich men themselves, are destined to be destroyed.

Part of the judgment coming upon these wealthy unbelievers was the destruction of their riches.<sup>138</sup> Their riches are “**rotted**” (an allusion to food?) and their garments (another sign of wealth in the Orient) are “**moth-eaten**” (cf. Job 13:28 and Matthew 6:19-20//Luke 12:33). Both verbs in this verse (as well as the first verb in verse three) are in the perfect tense in the Greek. Normally, the Greek perfect tense describes an action that has already been completed. How could their riches have already been rotted and their garments already been moth-eaten if the misery had not yet arrived (remember, it is still coming)? Rather than true perfects, these are what are called “proleptic” or “prophetic” perfects, ones that describe an action that has yet to take place, but is so certain to happen it can be considered to have already taken place.<sup>139</sup>

### **5:3**

**Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!**

James mentions a third source of wealth that is destined to be destroyed, currency. Quizzically, James speaks of it as rusting, which neither gold nor silver does. Is James showing his ignorance? More than likely, he is speaking figuratively. On Judgment Day, their gold and silver will do them no good; it will be as worthless spiritually as it would be physically if it were to rust (cf. Matthew 6:19-20). James proceeds to point out that the destruction of their riches will serve as a witness against them personally on Judgment Day. Their misuse (not their mere possession) of riches would be indicative of their spiritual bankruptcy. Not only that, their riches would also consume their flesh like a fire would (the reference to fire is yet another allusion to judgment—see Psalm 11:6, 21:9, Isaiah 30:27, and 2 Peter 3:7). James is clearly using figurative language at this point. They themselves, not just their riches, would be destroyed on Judgment Day. James concludes verse three by pointing out one of the misuses of their riches. Rather than laying up treasure in heaven, they were laying up treasure on earth (Matthew 6:19-20). The verb translated “**stored up**” (also used in Matthew 6:19-20) has the idea of store away. In a negative sense, it means to hoard.<sup>140</sup> This is the idea here. Like the rich fool (see Luke 12:16-21), these men were hoarding their wealth, the equivalent of laying up treasure on earth (Luke 12:21). The hoarding of their wealth was all the more

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<sup>138</sup>As one interpreter states, this is a case of “riches to rags” (Blue, p. 832).

<sup>139</sup>Among other things, this verse is a subtle reminder of the uncertainty of riches (see also Proverbs 23:5 and 1 Timothy 6:17).

<sup>140</sup>While the Bible encourages saving (see Matthew 25:27 and 2 Corinthians 12:14), it discourages hoarding. The difference between the two lies in motive. Saving becomes hoarding when the motivation behind it is selfishness. “It is good to have riches in your hand provided they do not get into your heart” (Wiersbe, p. 149).

grave because it was being done “**in the last days.**”<sup>141</sup> As James will point out in the next section of the letter, the Second Coming, the event that will culminate the last days, thus hastening the Day of Judgment, was imminent (see 5:8-9).

## 5:4

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

Not only were these wealthy unbelievers hoarding their wealth, they were gaining some of it unethically. These men were landowners who failed to pay their employees for their work. The Old Testament warned against such a practice (see Leviticus 19:13, Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Jeremiah 22:13, and Malachi 3:5). The pay of the employees is personified as crying out (yes, money does talk), as did the blood of Abel in Genesis 4:10. The cry of the wages and the cries of the workers themselves have “**reached the ears** (an “anthropomorphism,” a description of God in human terms for the sake of human understanding) **of the Lord of Sabaoth**” (cf. Romans 9:29; do you recall the famous hymn that refers to God by this name?). “**Sabaoth**” is a transliteration of a Greek noun, which is itself a transliteration of a Hebrew noun meaning armies or hosts (see 1 Samuel 17:45). This is God's battle name. It emphasizes His omnipotence (accordingly, it is sometimes translated “Almighty”). Assuming his readers were among those being defrauded by these wealthy landowners, James' words here are quite comforting—the Almighty was fully aware of the injustice that had been perpetrated and would deal with it accordingly.

## 5:5

**You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.**

When they were not hoarding their wealth, these wealthy landowners were extravagantly using it on themselves. The Greek verb translated “**you have lived luxuriously**” has the idea of pampering oneself (like the rich man in Luke 16:19), while the verb translated “**led a life of wanton pleasure**” has the idea of wasteful self-indulgence (like the prodigal son in Luke 15:13). As a result of such extravagances, these men were fattening their hearts for a day of slaughter, much like cattle would nourish their bodies for the same.<sup>142</sup> The “**day of slaughter**” is yet another allusion to judgment (see Isaiah 34:1-8, Jeremiah 12:3, 25:34, 46:10, 50:27, and Ezekiel 21:15).

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<sup>141</sup>The “last days” is the period of time between the two advents/comings of Christ (see Hebrews 1:1-2 and 1 John 2:18).

<sup>142</sup>“Like ignorant cattle who are encouraged to eat well just before being led to the slaughterhouse, these men seem blissfully ignorant of impending judgment” (Kent, pp. 173-174).

Though they were pampering themselves in this life ("**on the earth**"), they would not be able to do so in the next.

## **5:6**

**You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.**

As if the aforementioned transgressions were not enough, these men were also guilty of murder. Is this a reference to actual homicide or is James speaking metaphorically (as in 4:2)? Most interpreters believe that James is speaking of actual murder here, though of an indirect sort. The Greek verb translated "**you have condemned**" is a legal term. Thus, it may be that these wealthy men were using their influence due to their affluence (through bribery?) to condemn the poor in court (as in 2:6), even to the point of capital punishment (what Martin, p. 181, calls "judicial murder"). Their crime is made all the more heinous by the fact that those whom they are condemning and killing are "**righteous**" (i.e., innocent) and non-resistant (perhaps in keeping with Matthew 5:39-40). The story of Naboth's vineyard (see 1 Kings 21:1-16) comes to mind.

## **Conclusion**

In the eleventh major section of his letter, James comforts his readers who were being mistreated by wealthy unbelievers by reminding them of the judgment that is sure to fall upon such godless men. He commands these wealthy unbelievers to weep and howl over the miseries that are coming upon them (5:1), identifies the miseries as the destruction of their riches (5:2-3a) and the destruction of the rich themselves (5:3a), and identifies the transgressions that warrant such judgment, which include hoarding their wealth (5:3b), withholding the wages of their employees (5:4), living extravagantly (5:5), and condemning and murdering innocent men (5:6).

## Lesson 13: James 5:7-12

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### Introduction

In the eleventh major section of his epistle (5:1-6), James condemned the unbelieving rich for the misuse of their wealth, part of which included the oppression of James' readers (5:4 and 6). In this twelfth major section, James turns his attention to these oppressed believers, exhorting them to patiently endure such mistreatment.

### 5:7

**Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains.**

Connecting this section with the preceding one (through the use of the word, “**therefore**”), James commands his readers to be patient. The Greek verb translated “**be patient**” is *makrothumeo*, from *makros*, meaning long, and *thumos*, meaning wrath or anger. The idea is to be long-tempered (as opposed to short-tempered). It is an “attitude of self-restraint that does not try to get even for a wrong that has been done” (Burdick, p. 201). Thus, James is encouraging his readers to resist the temptation to retaliate against the wealthy landowners who were mistreating them (see also 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and 2 Peter 3:9). As an added incentive to his readers, James mentions the coming of the Lord (as he does in verses eight and nine). When Christ returns (at the Rapture), their suffering will be over. As an example of patience, James mentions the farmer. A farmer must patiently wait for his crops to mature, a process that is dependent on the “**early and late rains**” (see Deuteronomy 11:13-14, Jeremiah 5:24, Hosea 6:3, and Joel 2:23; NIV: “autumn and spring rains”). The early rain fell in late October—early November, softening the hardened soil in preparation for planting. The late rain fell in late April—May, maturing the crop just prior to harvesting. Both rains were crucial.<sup>143</sup> Just as the farmer must patiently wait for his crop (while still actively tending to it), so must the believer patiently endure mistreatment (with an active response, not a passive resignation) until the Lord's return.

### 5:8

**You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.**

In addition to being patient, James commands his readers to “**strengthen**,” or fortify, their hearts (NIV: “stand firm”). James' readers needed to strengthen or fortify their resolve to endure mistreatment. As a motivation for patience and fortitude, James once again mentions the Second Coming. The Lord's coming had drawn near (the Greek

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<sup>143</sup>It was the timing, not the volume, of these rains that was so crucial. The bulk of the rain (75%) came in December-February (Martin, p. 190; also Moo, 2000, p. 222).

verb is in the perfect tense). Like the other New Testament authors, James believed in the imminency of the Lord's return. Thus, their mistreatment might come to an end at any moment.

## **5:9**

**Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.**

Verse nine is somewhat parenthetical. Before resuming his exhortation to patient endurance in verse ten, James takes time to rebuke his readers for improperly responding to their mistreatment. Though they had not been lashing out against their oppressors, they had been doing so towards one another (the Greek construction calls for the cessation of an act already in progress, i.e., "stop complaining"). This is an instance of "the human tendency—when subjected to oppression and injustice—to give way to vexation by unjustly lashing out against those near and dear" (Hiebert, p. 274). James' readers were guilty of complaining against one another. The Greek verb translated "**complain**" has the idea of an inner attitude of animosity (holding a grudge—so KJV), an attitude that usually expresses itself in one's speech (see James 4:11), another instance of the focus on the tongue in this letter (see also 1:19, 26, 3:1-12, 4:11-12, and 5:12). To do so leaves one open to God's judgment (see James 4:12). As an incentive to forsake such behavior, James once again refers to the imminent return of Christ, here pictured as a judge "**standing right at the door**" (cf. Matthew 24:33//Mark 13:29), waiting to enter the room at any moment (how well-behaved the student is when he realizes the teacher is about to enter the room). Again, the verb is in the perfect tense (he has stood at the door, i.e., he has been standing at the door and will continue to do so until the time for entrance comes). In the end times (which the Rapture will inaugurate), Christ will judge the works of every man, including those of James' readers (at the Judgment Seat of Christ, 2 Corinthians 5:10). No greater motivation could be given.

## **5:10**

**As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.**

James once again resumes his exhortation to patient endurance by appealing to the example of the Old Testament prophets. Though greatly afflicted,<sup>144</sup> the prophets patiently endured such mistreatment. James' readers should not be surprised by their mistreatment, seeing the prophets (even though they were God's spokesmen) were likewise mistreated (see Matthew 5:12). The prophets patiently endured, and so can they.

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<sup>144</sup>A prime example is Jeremiah, whose mistreatment included being placed in stocks (Jeremiah 20:2), being thrown in prison (Jeremiah 32:2), and being thrown into an abandoned well/cistern (Jeremiah 38:6). See also 1 Kings 19:10, 14, Matthew 23:29-36, Acts 7:52, and 1 Thessalonians 2:15.

## 5:11

**We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.**

Closely related to patience is endurance, a concept that James developed in the first major section of the letter (see 1:3-4 and 12). The difference between the two lies in their respective objects. Whereas patience is used to describe the forbearing of people, endurance is used to describe the forbearing of problems. Martin (p. 196) calls endurance "a rugged determination not to renounce one's faith and not to fall out of the race." James says that the one who endures mistreatment is "**blessed**" (see also Matthew 5:10-12 and James 1:12), a better rendering than the KJV's "happy." As Moo (1985, p. 171) explains: "'Happiness' normally suggests a subjective, emotional reaction; 'blessing' is the objective, unalterable approval and reward of God." James uses Job as an example of "**endurance**" (the Greek word is *hupomone*, from the Greek preposition, *hupo*, "under" + the Greek verb, *meno*, "to abide or remain"), not patience.<sup>145</sup> Because he endured (see Job 13:15 and 19:25-27), Job was blessed in the end (see Job 42:10-17). So, too, James' readers would one day be blessed (ultimately, in the end, James 1:12) if they endured misfortune. Such blessing is possible because the Lord is "**full of compassion**" and "**merciful**" (see also Psalm 103:8 and Ephesians 2:4).

## 5:12

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

Though many interpreters see verse twelve as an island (it does not seem to fit with either the preceding or the succeeding verses)<sup>146</sup>, it should be considered part of this section of the letter (due to the presence of the Greek connective translated "**but**"). Nevertheless, it is still very difficult to assimilate verse twelve with what has gone before. Whatever the connection, the meaning of the verse is quite clear: the use of oaths is to be avoided.<sup>147</sup> James attaches special significance to this particular

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<sup>145</sup>Job was anything but patient, questioning God (see Job 3:1, 3, 11, 7:11, 10:18, and 23:2) and lashing out at his friends (see Job 12:2, 13:4-5, and 16:2).

<sup>146</sup>Wessel (p. 962) writes: "It is doubtful whether this verse has any connection with what precedes."

<sup>147</sup>The use of oaths is not inherently wrong. After all, God Himself used them (see Deuteronomy 7:8, Luke 1:73, Acts 2:30, Hebrews 6:13, and 17). The Old Testament called for their use (see Exodus 22:10-11 and Jeremiah 12:16). Paul used them (see Romans 1:9, 2 Corinthians 1:23, Galatians 1:20, Philippians 1:8, and 1 Thessalonians 2:5). The problem comes with using them

command by introducing it with the prepositional phrase, "**above all**" (see also 1 Peter 4:8 and 3 John 2). The Jews prided themselves in their ability to make non-binding oaths. The *Mishnah* (the codification of the Jewish oral law) contained an elaborate system of oaths, both binding and non-binding. To be binding, an oath had to be spoken according to a prescribed formula. A crafty Jew could make a non-binding oath sound like a binding one, thereby being deceptive.<sup>148</sup> "The height of accomplishment was, while lying, to convince another you were telling the truth by bringing some person or eminent object into reference" (Hughes, p. 246). Such deception is unacceptable (see also Matthew 5:33-37 and 23:16-22). To avoid any confusion, James exhorts his readers to forgo the use of oaths altogether, as they were doing nothing but calling the character of the individual using them into question.<sup>149</sup> The deceptive use of oaths also subjects one to God's judgment.

## Conclusion

In the twelfth major section of his epistle (5:7-12), James exhorts his readers to patiently endure mistreatment at the hands of the wealthy landowners addressed in section eleven (5:1-6). He begins by exhorting them to be patient until the Lord's coming, much like the farmer is patient for the early and late rains so crucial to his crops (5:7). He also exhorts them to strengthen their hearts, again in light of the Lord's imminent coming (5:8). Next, he rebukes them for lashing out at each other, once again in light of the Lord's return (5:9). Next, he uses the prophets (5:10) and Job (5:11) as examples of patience and endurance. Finally, he exhorts his readers not to make frivolous oaths (5:12).

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falsely (Leviticus 19:12), as Peter did (see Matthew 26:72//Mark 14:71). Most agree that James is not absolutely prohibiting their use, such as when taking an oath in a court of law, but the practice of frivolously invoking the name of something or someone to verify the veracity of what one is saying (modern examples would include "cross my heart," "scout's honor," and "I swear to God"). Those who have interpreted James 5:12 to mean that taking an oath in a court of law is prohibited include the Essenes, Tertullian, Origen, Chrysostom, and the Anabaptists. Commenting on the courtroom oath, Hiebert (p. 285) states: "The fact that our courts find it necessary to place a witness under oath to tell the truth is an obvious confession that they recognize that people are congenital liars."

<sup>148</sup>An analogy would be the modern-day practice of crossing one's fingers behind one's back when making a promise.

<sup>149</sup>"The addition of a confirmatory oath to his statement is an acknowledgement that the individual is conscious that his word is weak and ordinarily unreliable" (Hiebert, p. 285). "To swear not at all is the best course and most profitable to life, well suited to a rational nature which has been taught to speak the truth so well on each occasion that its words are regarded as oaths; to swear truly is only, as people say, a 'second-best voyage,' for the mere fact of his swearing casts suspicion on the trustworthiness of the man" (Philo, cited in Mark Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 68). "Those who would frequently swear or resort to oaths imply that they cannot be trusted to speak the truth unless they speak under oath" (Rooker, pp. 70-71).

## Lesson 14: James 5:13-20

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### Introduction

In the thirteenth and final major section of his epistle, James gives his readers some admonitions regarding prayer<sup>150</sup> (verses 13-18) and restoration (verses 19-20).

### 5:13

**Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.**

James begins this final section with some admonitions on prayer. His first admonition is a general one: if someone is suffering, he should pray. James' readers were certainly suffering (see 1:2-12, 2:6, and 5:7-11). The Greek verb translated "**suffering**" is *kakopatheo*, from *kakos*, meaning bad, and *pathos*, meaning happening. The noun form is translated "suffering" in 5:10 (see also 2 Timothy 2:9 and 4:5). If something "bad" (from our finite, fallen perspective; see Romans 8:28) happens to us, we should pray (not wallow in self-pity or complain to others). Pray for what? Pray for deliverance from the suffering (2 Corinthians 12:8), as well as for the wisdom (see 1:5) needed to both enjoy (see 1:2-3) and endure (see 1:4) it. Conversely, if any one is cheerful, he should praise (a form of prayer). Both of these (prayer and praise) are commands; therefore, failure to do them is sin. The Greek verb translated "**sing praises**" is *psallo*, which means to sing a song of praise (what a psalm is).

### 5:14

**Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;**

James adds a third admonition regarding prayer, this time in relation to a sickness brought about by sin. Though some sicknesses are not the direct result of sin (see John 9:1-3), others are (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-30). The second seems to be the case here.<sup>151</sup> If anyone is "**sick**" (literally, without strength), he is to call for the elders (or pastors) of the church (an indication of repentance on his part?), who are to pray for (the

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<sup>150</sup> It should not be surprising that James would focus his readers' attention on prayer, as church history testifies to his prayer life. According to the testimony of Hegisippus (cited in Hughes, p. 16), James "used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people."

<sup>151</sup> The afflicted one takes the initiative; the elders are called; and sin and its consequences are prevalent in the succeeding verses (see verses 15-16 and 19-20).

recovery of) the sick one, after having anointed him with oil (olive oil) **“in the name (or authority) of the Lord.”**<sup>152</sup> There has been much debate as to the precise meaning and significance of this verse. Hiebert (p. 292) remarks that the passage of 5:13-18 “is beset with difficulty due to the fact that several points are susceptible to different interpretations.” For example, in this verse: Is the sickness physical or spiritual (the word translated “sick” literally means without strength)? Is the anointing literal or symbolic (of the Holy Spirit—see Acts 10:38)? If literal, is the anointing medicinal (see Luke 10:34) or ceremonial in its purpose? If ceremonial, is it sacramental or symbolic in its significance? If the sickness is physical and the anointing literal, must this procedure be followed today? In the opinion of this writer, the sickness is physical; the anointing is literal, ceremonial in purpose, and symbolic in significance (symbolizing consecration to God); and the procedure is not mandated.<sup>153</sup>

## **5:15**

**and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.**

Perhaps in an effort to focus his readers' attention on the prayer and not the anointing,<sup>154</sup> James emphasizes the prayer (but not the anointing) in verse fifteen. It is the prayer that restores (or heals<sup>155</sup>) the sick (another reason for suggesting that the anointing is optional). More specifically, it is the prayer **“offered in faith.”** What is such a prayer? It is a prayer that is prayed by one who believes in God's ability to answer (see Hebrews 11:6 and James 1:6-8) and is in accordance with God's will<sup>156</sup> and, thus, certain

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<sup>152</sup>The Roman Catholic Church developed the sacrament of Extreme Unction (“last rites”) based in large part on this verse.

<sup>153</sup>Christ never resorted to such means, and the disciples did so only once (see Mark 6:13). Furthermore, this is the only mention of such a practice in the Epistles. Henry (p. 999) speaks of this procedure being discontinued early in church history, in conjunction with the cessation of the miraculous gift of healing. Calvin (p. 356) likewise states: “That the gift of healing was temporary, all are constrained to allow, and events clearly prove: then the sign of it ought not to be deemed perpetual.”

<sup>154</sup>In verse fourteen, pray is the main verb, while anointing is a participle subordinate to it.

<sup>155</sup>Other instances where the Greek verb translated “restore” refers to physical healing include Matthew 9:21-22//Mark 5:28 and 34//Luke 8:48; Mark 5:23, 6:56, and 10:52//Luke 18:42; Luke 17:19; and Acts 4:9 and 14:9. Likewise, the Greek verb translated “raise up” is used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to physical healing (see Matthew 9:6-7//Mark 2:11-12; Mark 1:31; and Acts 3:7).

<sup>156</sup>“...[S]uch prayers must be grounded in the divinely revealed realities of the biblical ‘faith’” (Hiebert, p. 297). At that time, God was still directly revealing His will (through prophecy, etc.)

to be answered (see 1 John 5:14-15). James proceeds to assure the sick that he will not only be healed, but that he will also be forgiven of the sins that caused the sickness in the first place (he uses a conditional clause because not all sickness is the direct result of sin).

## 5:16

**Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.**

James adds a fourth admonition regarding prayer in verse sixteen. His readers were to confess their sins (the KJV's "faults" is too weak) to one another and pray for one another. To what extent should such confession take place? Should James' words here be taken as justification for "airing one's dirty laundry in public"? Probably not. Confession should be made only to those who have been impacted by the sin committed. Public sins should be confessed publicly; private sins privately.<sup>157</sup> The end result of such confessing and praying is healing. Based on the context, James seems to be once again referring to the healing of a sickness that was the direct result of sin, in this case a sin against one's brethren. As a further incentive to prayer, James concludes verse sixteen by reminding his readers that prayer is effective (the Greek verb used is *energeo*, from which we get our English word, energy).

## 5:17

**Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.**

As an example of a righteous man whose prayers were effective (end of verse 16), James points to Elijah. Elijah was no "super saint" (he had "**a nature like ours**"<sup>158</sup>; he

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regarding specific situations, such as the one described in this passage (thus giving certainty that the sickness was indeed directly caused by sin and certainty that God would heal if repentance took place). Since such revelation ceased with the completion of the canon of Scripture (1 Corinthians 13:8-10), it would be impossible today to infallibly know if a particular sickness was the direct result of sin and if God willed to heal it. If so, this would be further reason for not seeing this procedure as a present mandate.

<sup>157</sup>"Never confess sin beyond the circle of that sin's influence" (Wiersbe, p. 170). Likewise, W. T. Purkiser (cited in Hiebert, p. 299) counsels: "A sound principle is that the area of commission should be the area of confession." Curtis Vaughan (quoted in Kistemaker, p. 179) adds: "Confession of all our sins to all the brethren is not necessarily enjoined by James' statement. Confession is the 'vomit of the soul' and can, if too generally and too indiscriminately made, do more harm than good."

<sup>158</sup>The Greek adjective is *homoioopathes*, from *homoios*, meaning like or similar, and *pathos*, meaning passion (see also Acts 14:15).

put his tunic on “one sleeve at a time”), yet his prayers were resoundingly answered. Elijah prayed passionately (“**earnestly**”; cf. Luke 22:44, Romans 15:30, and Colossians 4:12) that it would not rain in accordance with God's revealed will (see 1 Kings 17:1), and it did not rain for three-and-a-half years (see also Luke 4:25).

## **5:18**

**Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.**

Elijah prayed again (see 1 Kings 18:42), this time for rain, again in accordance with God's revealed will<sup>159</sup> (see 1 Kings 18:1), and his prayers were once again answered (see 1 Kings 18:43-45). Just as Elijah's prayers were answered, so can ours.

## **5:19**

**My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back,**

James concludes the book by turning his attention to the subject of restoration. There does seem to be a direct correlation between the previous section (verses 13-18) and this one (verses 19-20). James has been calling for prayer for the healing of those who had been physically sick as a direct result of their sin. Prayer, however, is only part of the equation. Not only must one pray for a brother in sin, he must also actively seek to restore such a brother back to spiritual health (see also Matthew 18:15 and Galatians 6:1). We are our brother's keeper! The individual in question is one who has strayed from the truth (either on his own or because of the prompting of another). The responsibility of his fellow believers is to turn him back (KJV: “convert him”). Though conversion is most often used to describe the repentance of an unbeliever unto salvation, it can also be used to describe the repentance of one who is already saved (see Luke 22:32). This is the meaning here, as seen by the fact that James says, “**My brethren, if any among you ...**”

## **5:20**

**let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

James goes on to say that the one who brings about the repentance of a fellow brother shall “**save his soul from death**” and “**cover a multitude of sins.**” In what sense is his soul saved from death? Is James speaking of physical or spiritual death? Based on his use of “**soul**,” some suggest that James is speaking of the salvation of an unbelieving soul from spiritual and eternal death. Or, perhaps the saving of a believing soul from apostatizing (an ultimate impossibility for a believing soul, due in part to the divinely-

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<sup>159</sup> That James uses the example of Elijah, one who prayed according to the directly revealed will of God, may be further indication that the situation envisaged in the preceding verses is one in which it had been directly revealed that the sick saint was sick as the direct result of some sin and that it had been directly revealed that this repentant saint's healing was assured.

ordained means of restoration). The word "**soul**," however, can also be used to describe the physical life (see Matthew 2:20 and 6:25). Thus, it is quite possible (and based on the context, probable) that James is speaking of saving one from physical death. How? To cause a sinning believer to repent not only stops any sickness caused directly by his sin, but may also save his life (cf. 1:15, where death is consequence of sin), for to persist in sin leaves a believer open to God's chastisement, which may include death (see Acts 5:1-11, 1 Corinthians 5:5, and 11:30). Furthermore, to cause a sinning believer to repent precludes that believer from continuing in that particular sin. In this way, the restorer covers a multitude of sins.

## **Conclusion**

In the final major section of his letter, James exhorts his readers to pray for one another (5:13-18) and to restore one another (5:19-20). Prayer should be the believer's response to suffering (5:13a), while praise (a form of prayer) should be the response of a cheerful heart (5:13b). Confession and prayer are prerequisites to the healing of sickness caused by sin (5:14-16a). Prayer is effective, as evidenced by the example of Elijah (5:16b-18). Finally, a brother who has strayed into sin must be restored (5:19). Such restoration may very well prevent the premature death of the sinning brother, as well as preclude his persistence in such sin (5:20).