

STUDY OF THE LETTER OF JAMES

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I. Background/Introduction

- A. As with all of scripture, indeed most historical writings, we can only fully understand what the author is saying if we know something about who the author is, to whom he is writing, and when it was written—taking the historical context into account. With James these considerations are particularly important because some commentators contend that what is written in James conflicts with what the Apostle Paul wrote in his epistles. As we will see, knowing something about the context, authorship, and audience will resolve most of these apparent conflicts.
- B. The author identifies himself simply as, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” There are no less than five people bearing the name “James” in the New Testament: i) James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot), with Judas being one of the twelve disciples; ii) James, the son of Alphaeus, one of the twelve; iii) James the Less, mentioned in Mark 15:40, and also in Matthew and John; iv) James, the brother of John, one of the twelve; and v) James, the brother of Jesus (see Mark 6: 3 and Matt. 13: 58) who became the Bishop of Jerusalem after the resurrection. As with many such issues about authorship in the New Testament, various people have argued that the author of this letter is someone other than James, the brother of Jesus. But the great bulk of scholars agree that the author was, in fact, James the brother of Jesus, and that has been the position of the church for centuries.
- C. What is amazing about James the brother of Jesus being the author of this letter is that scripture is quite clear that neither James nor Jesus’ other brothers or sisters believed in him during his ministry. You may recall when we studied the seventh chapter of John, Jesus’ brothers were trying to goad him into going to the Festival of Booths at a time when the Jewish leadership was trying to get rid of Jesus—even kill him if necessary. Other scriptures in the gospels make it clear his brothers and sisters did not believe he was the Son of God. So how did James go from being an unbeliever in Jesus to the leader of the church in Jerusalem and clearly one of the leaders in the early Christian church? The answer to this question comes from the Apostle Paul. In I Corinthians 15:7 Paul provides a list of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances and says specifically that Jesus appeared to James. Whatever doubts James harbored about Jesus previously, this resurrection appearance brought James face to face with the risen Lord. Just as Paul changed profoundly after Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, so did James. In short order he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem even though most of the 12 apostles were also there. No doubt James being the earthly brother of Jesus who initially did not believe in Jesus before his crucifixion, but did so after his resurrection, gave him credibility and a status to make him a natural choice to be the leader of the Jerusalem church.
- D. Although when this letter was written is not a critical issue, most scholars believe the letter was written in the late 40s, certainly no later than A.D. 50, although some would put a later date on it. With regard to whom it was written, that is easy to determine. The very first verse says it is written “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” This is language that would have been familiar to any Jew. Although Jews no longer lived in their tribes the way they did

earlier in the Old Testament times, the term “twelve tribes” was still used to refer to anyone of Jewish ancestry. And reference to “the Dispersion” means that the letter was a general letter to Jewish Christians wherever they may be at the time, as Jews had been scattered all over the world by this time. Indeed, there were far more Jews living *outside* of Judea and Galilee than there were in those Jewish areas.

- E. Finally, we might well ask *why* this letter was written. The reasons are somewhat similar to the reasons the letter to the Hebrews was written some 20 years after this letter. Christianity was still relatively new among the Jewish converts, and it was sometimes unclear to them how much of Jewish law was still binding on them. The response to that question is presented in this letter more practically than in Hebrews, which responds more theologically. This letter is concerned mainly with practical aspects of the Christian faith. It offers statements and maxims for everyday conduct. Many statements in this letter are similar to those in Jesus’ sermon on the mount, or with some of the wisdom literature from the Old Testament. In short, this letter discusses true religion, true faith, and true wisdom. Remember, the Jewish Christians were struggling because all Jews struggled to some extent if they were living in foreign lands. However, the Jewish Christians also struggled because they were usually ostracized by their fellow Jews. We will see this issue addressed at the very beginning of this letter.
- F. Some commentators over the centuries have criticized James for contradicting some of the teachings of Paul—particularly over the issue of faith versus works. Keep in mind that most of Paul’s letters had not yet been written when James’ letter was written, although Paul had already begun to teach, and undoubtedly the sermons and teachings of Paul had been discussed throughout the Christian world, although not always accurately, as Paul’s own letters mention. Clearly, the author is attempting to clarify what is true religion, true faith, and true wisdom.

II. James 1:1-8 Greeting/Testings/Wisdom

- A. The greeting is in verse 1. There are a few things to notice about the greeting. First, James does *not* identify himself as James, the brother of Jesus, which is something most people would do. After all, what could be more prestigious than being the physical brother of Jesus, especially to early Christians. Instead, he identifies himself as simply a slave (some translations say servant) of Christ. Identifying himself in this way implies humility, loyalty, and obedience, all of which are implicit in the teachings that follow.
- B. There is one other interesting thing about this greeting. Unlike the greetings in all of the other epistles in the New Testament, which usually include the words “grace and peace,” James’ letter simply says, “Greetings”—the Greek word being “Chairein.” This was the normal secular greeting, but it only appears in two other places in the New Testament. In Acts, chapter 23, the Roman officer wrote a letter to Felix to ensure the safe journey of Paul using this greeting—as would be expected in such a letter. The only other time such a greeting is used is the letter the church in Jerusalem wrote after the decision of the Council of Jerusalem to allow Gentiles into the church (Acts, ch. 15). James presided over that council and likely drafted the letter. Although we cannot be sure, he may have used the most general greeting because the letter was going out to the widest public audience,

perhaps including some Jews who had not yet committed to Christ throughout the Jewish Dispersion.

- C. In verses 2-4, James implicitly recognizes the difficult position the scattered Christians were in. Undoubtedly, some of the early Christian converts thought that becoming a Christian would lead to an easier life. Thus, they were confused when their challenges and trials increased rather than diminished. It is an issue many Christians face today. Somehow, they have come to believe that if we put our faith in Jesus, life's problems will disappear and all will be well. When the challenges of life continue to show up on a regular basis it sometimes causes the young (or not so young) Christian to lose his or her faith. What is needed is a change of perspective, and that is what James is offering in these verses.
- D. First, he refers to the "trials," which can be the ordinary challenges of life, or some special temptation unique to us, as "testing." When hardships, troubles, sorrows, or temptations arise, James says we should approach them with joy (not happiness), realizing that it is our faith and our character that is being tested. The word used for testing has a meaning somewhat similar to the idea of an athlete going through training to prepare himself for the race or competition ahead. The athlete goes through the testing or training to make himself a better athlete—hopefully the best athlete he can be. What James is saying is that these hardships, troubles, sorrows or temptations we face are testing our faith. If we endure in our faith without giving in, our character will develop more endurance—the ability to remain faithful—which will lead to maturity and completeness as a Christian. Thus, the hard times of life, if viewed with the proper mindset, can and should lead to a stronger faith and maturity.
- E. In verses 5-8, James follows up on what precedes these verses. The testings of life can lead to stronger faith and purer character, but it will take wisdom to understand how this plays out, and how we should respond to something that tests us. We often are unsure what lesson we are to take from an unpleasant experience or of a moral failure on our part. James' solution is what should be every Christian's immediate response but often isn't. He says we should ask God in faith for wisdom to see what we should learn from our testing. Keep in mind that the wisdom James is talking about is practical wisdom—how we are to live our lives on a daily basis. So we are not asking God in such cases for a full theological understanding of what is happening; we are asking for practical wisdom for us to be able to live in a manner pleasing to God while going through testing and learning from the testing event.
- F. James adds that when we ask God for such wisdom, we must do it without doubting. This may seem difficult to us because all of us have doubts of one kind or another as we attempt to live the Christian life. But what James is saying is that we must recognize that God gives generously to those who recognize him and seek to be obedient. If we sincerely ask him for wisdom to deal with and learn from the challenges and tests we face, we should have sufficient faith to believe God will grant us the wisdom we ask for. In fact, this is how we grow as Christians and develop Christian character. If we don't even have enough faith to believe this, our lives will not be God centered, and we will be blown about by the storms of life like a leaf on a lake in the middle of a thunderstorm because we never know whether we are hearing from God or not.

- G. While we must believe that God will always answer our prayer for wisdom, that doesn't mean he will always answer us immediately. Sometimes the lessons we were meant to learn only come into focus later, sometimes even after we have repeated our sin or our mistakes over and over. That is why we must be patient, trusting that God's wisdom will come on his timetable if not on ours.

III. James 1:9-11 Poverty and Riches

- A. In these verses it may initially appear that James has pivoted to a new topic. Actually, he has not. In the previous verses, he has addressed how we should view trials that come into our lives. In these verses, he gets specific about two trials in particular that may affect us. The first is poverty. Almost all would agree that poverty brings many trials to life; indeed, it may be fairly said that poverty itself is a trial because it impacts so many areas of our lives. What is shocking about these verses is that James considers wealth to be a trial as well.
- B. To some, this idea is confusing because at various places in scripture, wealth is presented as a gift from God as the result of a godly life. But when we examine these scriptures closely, what God condemns is not wealth itself, but trusting in wealth to save us from the trials of life. For example, in Job 31 where Job is trying to justify himself before God as not being guilty of anything that would justify the suffering he was experiencing, he acknowledges that too much rejoicing over or relying upon his wealth would be wrong. Likewise, Psalm 49 points out the folly of relying on riches, whereas Psalm 112 proclaims that for the righteous, "wealth and riches are in their houses." Thus, wealth, in and of itself, is not a trial of life but rather a blessing so long as we do not trust in the wealth as the answer to life's major issues. And we must recognize that for the rich man there will always be the temptation present to trust in one's wealth rather than trust in God. This is a problem the poor don't have, although many who are poor mistakenly believe all their problems in life would be solved if only they were rich.
- C. James is focusing on a new perspective on poverty and wealth that the believer—the Christian—should have. First, he says the lowly should boast in being raised up. Given the low estate of the poor in almost all cultures, including Jewish culture, he is reminding the Christians living in poverty that they have a new status granted to them—a new dignity—because Christ died for them just as he did for the wealthy. We all stand before God as sinners in need of the forgiveness that is available to all—rich and poor alike—because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, this idea of equality played out often in the early church where there were many slaves. Even though they held the most menial status in civil society, they were sometimes the leaders in the church. So, James is saying the poor should have self-respect as much as the rich should, and they should be treated with respect, because they both have life and dignity not because of earthly wealth but because of their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
- D. The problem for the wealthy was just the opposite. The rich often had an elevated and unjustified view of themselves because of their wealth. James is saying they should be "brought low." By this he means they should have humility and recognize that their wealth does not bring them God's approval or make them any more worthy in God's eyes. Only being an obedient, godly person trusting in Jesus Christ can do that.

- E. James then gives a good analogy to describe the situation of a wealthy person. In the desert portions of Israel it was common after a good rain, for grass and even flowers to sprout out of the desert soil, but within a day or two after the scorching sun reappears the grass and the flowers wither and are blown away. Using language reminiscent of Psalm 103 and Isaiah 40, James is saying that anyone who relies upon his wealth in the midst of our uncertain lives is trusting in the wrong thing. His wealth could be gone at any time, or he could die at any time, and his wealth won't save him.

IV. James 1:12-18 Trials and Temptations

- A. In verse 12, James continues his perspective on how to deal with trials. In this verse the trial referred to is a temptation, and he says we are blessed when we endure temptation and do not succumb to it. Again, he says the temptation is a test, and we should be joyful when testing comes because by withstanding the test we will receive our reward—the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him and obey him. My view of what he is saying is this: a football team trains specifically to play the game and hopefully receive the reward of being the victor. The team doesn't train just to go to practices. No team practices and trains without the goal of winning games in mind. By withstanding the temptation that comes our way, we have the opportunity to be the victor and in due course receive our reward, which is the crown of life. Obviously, having this mindset will not come to us easily. It will require prayer and discipline.
- B. In verses 13-16, he describes the nature of temptation and tells us where it comes from. He begins by pointing out that God cannot be tempted, and he does not tempt others, so we should not say we are being tempted by God. Now that does not mean that God does not *allow* temptations to come to us. The reason temptations come to us, as Jesus points out in the Sermon on the Mount, is that we are poor in spirit. We have a basic nature that is self-centered and more inclined to do or not do what we want rather than what God wants for us. And even after we have accepted Christ and vow to live a Christian life obedient to God, our basic nature raises its ugly head from time to time, and we are tempted toward sin.
- C. In verses 14 and 15, James points out that the origins of sin are within us, not from an external source. It is our own desires emanating from our self-centered souls that will be lured and enticed to grow, seeking opportunities to have our desires satisfied. This is why Jesus was so specific about our abiding in him. So long as we abide in Jesus, we will be much more likely to squelch improper desires as they arrive and never let them grow into maturity that will lead to sin. So, temptation is a temptation to us only because of what is in us. For example, if we have agreed to fast, but a juicy steak is put in front of us, we may be sorely tempted to ignore our fast and eat the steak. But if pickled dog food is put in front of us, there is no temptation to ignore the fast.
- D. The improper desire, when conceived, gives birth to sin. In the story of Adam and Eve, Genesis 3:6 tells us Eve, “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.”
- E. So, what is Satan's role in all of this? James does not address this issue. In the Genesis story, Satan recognized the desire by Eve—and apparently by Adam—for things that were a

desire to the eyes and good for food, and he tempted them where they were vulnerable. You have heard the old saying, “The devil made me do it.” That is a lie. The devil does not make us do anything. The devil just presents us with opportunities to satisfy improper desires that are already within us.

- F. In verse 15, James says that sin, “when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.” This is a concise description of the usual pattern of sin that leads to death. The first step is that we sin and are shocked by our sin; the second step is we sin again but are no longer shocked by it; the third step is we sin but no longer even view it as sin. This is the death that James is referring to. We no longer are able to tell the difference between what is sin and what is pleasing to God. Please note that at any point in this process that leads to death we can repent—at least until physical death overtakes us.
- G. In verse 16, James tells us not to be deceived about sin, and where it comes from. In the Genesis story, we see the pattern that mankind usually follows—blaming others, blaming Satan, even blaming God. When God confronted Adam, he blamed Eve; when God confronted Eve, she blamed the serpent. Mankind has always been expert in evasion. Another evasion mankind has used is to claim that our sin is God’s fault because he made us as we are. We only succumbed to that temptation because God made us this way. James is rebuking that view, and saying don’t be deceived; your sin originates within you, and you can only overcome temptations by recognizing that fact and relying upon Christ to change you from the inside out, so much so that you are like a new person—in other words, born again.
- H. In verses 17-18, James reminds us that every good gift is from God. Now that gift may come to us through someone else, but ultimately it is from God. And God is unchangeable. He is referred to as “the Father of Lights.” Lights, of course, can and do change, even creating shadows, but the One who created the lights never changes. This thought comes directly from the Jewish morning prayer which says, “Blessed be the Lord God who hath formed the lights.”
- I. James is also saying that this one who never changes is gracious, and his purposes are gracious. Furthermore, he created us for his own purposes and desires that we should be reborn into a new life, one in accord with his purposes and character—the first fruits of his creation.

V. James 1:19-27 Hearing and Doing the Word

- A. Remember that in the introduction to James we said that he focuses on wisdom, but it is a practical wisdom that he calls for—wisdom that shows us how to live in harmony with God. In verse 19, he admonishes the readers to be quick to listen but slow to speak. This advice is similar to that found in Proverbs 10:19, which advises us to be restrained in speaking—making one prudent—which also helps prevent transgressions. Again, this is practical wisdom that shows us how to live the Christian life.
- B. In verses 19-20, he also urges the readers to be slow to anger. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus likened anger to murder. He was not referring to momentary anger that we all have from time to time. He was talking about anger that we hold on to and refuse to release.

Paul said that we should not let the sun go down on our anger. James says we should be slow to anger because anger does not bring God's righteousness. This is because when we are angry with someone, we want not what is best for them, but what is harmful to them.

- C. In verse 21, he instructs the readers to get rid of anything in their lives that is sordid or wicked—such as vices or habits that detract from or interfere with a life lived consistent with God's will. Instead, he urges them to have a teachable spirit in humility, so that when they read or hear the word of God, they will receive it, thereby saving their souls. Having this teachable spirit will enable them to always search for what God wants rather than what they want.
- D. In verses 22-25, James contrasts the person who is a hearer of the word and one who is a doer of the word. What he is pointing out is that the law that was given in the Old Testament and the teaching by Jesus in the New Testament had the same goal—to change the way we live our lives. The word was not given just for us to get our theology right; the word is given to us so we can conduct our lives in a godly manner that is consistent with God's character. You may have heard a preacher say that just because someone has gone to church all their life that does not make the person a Christian. That is essentially what James is saying here. It is not enough to just hear and understand what scripture has to say; we have to incorporate it into our lives and live consistently with the word. Of course we won't do that perfectly, but we should do our best with God's help to live as the word instructs. If we do not, James says we are like someone who looks at his reflection in the mirror but then immediately forgets what he looks like when he walks away. There is no blessing in that, but there is a blessing in doing what the word says.
- E. Verses 26-27 follow up on this idea. James is saying we mislead ourselves if we think we are living as a Christian if we are not disciplined in our speech and loving in our relations with others. We must have God's values as the foundation of our lives, not the world's values.

VI. James 2:1-13 Warning Against Showing Partiality

- A. In this chapter, James continues his emphasis on living the Christian life and what that should and should not look like. He begins by posing a question to those who show partiality among members of the church; do you really believe in "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" He is not saying they have lost their salvation. He is pointing out that they are not behaving as Jesus commanded; instead, they are following the values of the secular culture.
- B. In verses 2 and 3, he gives a finite example of how they show partiality. The rich, or at least those who appear to be rich, are treated with deference and privilege while the poor are not treated this way. There were many opportunities in the early church for showing such partiality because the great majority of early Christians were poor. There was only one church at the time; Christianity had not yet devolved into many denominations, so all new Christians worshiped at the same church in a town or city. Because most of the congregation consisted of the poor, both slave and free, the newly converted rich person joining the church or visiting the church would stand out. The culture at the time had those who were rich displaying their wealth with fine clothes and rings more so than we find in our modern culture. Apparently, in at least some of the churches, the rich were given preferential treatment and seating. This is what James is addressing and condemning.

- C. We might well ask why this is such a big deal. What is really so bad about showing a little more respect to a wealthy man who may give more money to the church than all the poor people combined? The reason James is condemning this practice is that it conflicted directly with what Jesus taught—every person is entitled to respect because every person is God’s creation. The rich, powerful, and poor are all equal in God’s sight. Although the idea of equality is fundamental in our culture, it was not in Jewish or Gentile culture at the time. The church was the only place in the world at that time where social distinctions did not matter—or were not supposed to matter. No doubt there were awkward situations where a master may find himself sitting next to his slave, or listening to a sermon from his slave, or being administered holy communion by his slave—or someone else’s slave. In all other aspects of life, this would have been almost impossible, but in the church no one was to be a respecter of persons. All were entitled to respect, and all were to be treated with respect. To treat the rich with the kind of deference and privilege that James mentioned meant that the rules and values of the world were seeping into the church, and decisions were being made based on worldly values rather than on Christian values.
- D. In verses 5-7, James points out why the rich should not get preferential treatment. Jesus’ Ministry was received by the poor much more than by the rich, and the great majority of his followers were from the poorer classes. It wasn’t that Jesus regarded the wealthy any less than the poor; the wealthy, with some exceptions, preferred to rely upon their wealth rather than upon God. The rich young ruler is a good example (Luke 18:23). He asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life; when Jesus perceived that his money was his problem, he told him to give his wealth away and follow him. The young man couldn’t bring himself to do it, preferring his money over following Jesus.
- E. James points out that by showing partiality to the rich, they dishonor the poor, which is something Jesus never did. He also points out it is the rich who oppress the poor and haul them into court—probably to collect on debts. By showing such partiality they are not abiding by the words of Jesus and are, in effect, abusing the name Christian.
- F. In verses 8-9, he reminds them that the law requires them to love their neighbor as themselves, but by showing partiality they are violating that law, which is sin. This teaching is part of their Jewish faith, and the readers—who were predominately Jews—would be familiar with it. He goes further and reminds them—as Paul does in his letters—that if they violate any part of the law, they are guilty of violating all of the law. But as Christians they are now under a different law—the law of liberty. By this, he means that Christians are no longer governed by every jot and tittle of the law, but by a God-given love once they accept Christ into their hearts. And this God-given love calls for them to show mercy to others just as they have received from Christ. And as Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount, anyone who has refused to show mercy cannot expect to receive mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

VII. James 2:14-26 Faith Without Works is Dead

- A. In these verses we go to the heart of the alleged dispute between the writings of Paul and the writings of James. As we will see, this dispute is based primarily upon a misinterpretation of the writings of both Paul and James. And most of the dispute boils down to the meaning of certain words—primarily, “believe” and “faith.” Keep in mind that the letter to the Hebrews had not yet been written. Chapter 11 of Hebrews has an extensive description of faith as evidenced by the deeds of the people discussed.
- B. In both Romans 3 and Galatians 2 Paul says that one is justified (made innocent) in the eyes of God by faith, not by works of the law. What Paul was addressing is how was one to become acceptable to God. Could one earn his salvation by strict adherence to the law, as the Pharisees believed (and most other Jewish sects also), or does salvation come by faith? Paul concluded that salvation comes by faith, citing the example of Abraham, who believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. See Romans, chapter 4.
- C. Keep in mind that Romans was not written by Paul until around A.D. 57, whereas James’ letter was written in the late A.D. 40s. But Paul had been preaching his gospel of salvation by faith, and it was apparently misunderstood by some who took Paul to be saying that all one needed to do was believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died for our sins. That is a true statement only if we understand what Paul meant by “believe” or “have faith.” When he uses the word “believe” or “faith” he does not mean a simple intellectual acceptance of who Jesus is. He means that our lives must be consistent with that belief to the best of our ability, with God’s help. We can’t just say I believe in Jesus and then live as though we can ignore his commandments. In other words, we must make a confession of faith and live consistently with that faith. Indeed, in all his letters Paul emphasized how Christians are to live out their faith. But note that he never said that one will earn his salvation by how he lives; salvation comes by faith in Christ.
- D. In verses 14-18, James is speaking against someone who proclaims faith in the Lord but ignores Jesus’ commandment that we love one another. The Christian should show that love to the brothers and sisters by helping meet their physical needs, not to earn the favor of God, but live out their faith in the One who has already saved them by his death and resurrection.
- E. In verses 18-26 James addresses the issue of one claiming to have faith but has no works or deeds that evidence that faith. He says that simply believing that God is one—another way of saying that Jesus is the Son of God—is not enough. Even the demons of hell believe that. The kind of faith that Abraham was noted for was a faith that required him to act upon it, even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his only son. God challenged him to sacrifice Isaac but stopped him from carrying out the sacrifice when Abraham showed he was willing to be obedient.
- F. It is also clear that James believed faith is essential to salvation. He cites the same passage about Abraham that Paul does—“Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” He says that “faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by his works.” He follows up this point by pointing to Rahab the harlot who was saved by what she did because of her faith that God would save her as promised.

- G. In my opinion, the 11th chapter of Hebrews provides the best description of faith; it points out that it required faith by all of the heroes of the Old Testament listed there to do the deeds they did. Their deeds demonstrated their faith, and without their faith they could never have accomplished what they did.
- H. James concludes this portion of the letter by saying that faith without works is dead, just as a body without the spirit is dead. This is a sobering thought, and one which should challenge us once again to examine how we are living out the faith which we profess.

VIII. James 3:1-12 Taming the Tongue

- A. As we have discussed previously, James focuses in his letter on how we should live out our faith day by day. In the previous chapter he explained how faith must be combined with works if we are to be reconciled with God. Another way of saying this is that faith must be combined with obedience to God. We can't just say we believe in God and then live as though God does not exist. Our "works" are acts taken on our part in obedience to God and in response to his great love for us. In Jesus' teaching—particularly in the Sermon on the Mount—he explained how he expects us to live, and the character he expects us to have. In his last meeting with the disciples before his crucifixion Jesus reminded them that "if you love me you will keep my commandments." James is reminding us that our faith is manifested in how obedient we are to Christ's commands. In this chapter, James gives further examples of how we are to be obedient to the one in whom we have life-giving faith.
- B. In verse 1, he follows up on the main theme of his letter by warning those who would be teachers that they will be held to a higher standard. Why so? A new Christian may well find that he or she has been disobedient to Jesus' teaching without even recognizing it until later. New Christians—and sometimes life-long Christians—are often ignorant of Jesus' teaching and what he expects of us. However, one who teaches is responsible for knowing what Jesus taught, just as a judge is responsible for knowing the law. The higher standard expected of one who teaches, however, isn't limited to *knowing* what Jesus taught, but also to *living* what Jesus taught. So teachers will be judged by a higher standard with respect to what he has taught and to how he or she lives out what they have taught. This admonition isn't limited to someone who teaches in a formal class such as this. It also applies to anyone who tutors or acts as a mentor to a young Christian, including family members. This admonition isn't given to scare one off from becoming a teacher or mentor; it is simply reminding us that if we are to act as teachers or mentors, we have a higher duty to learn what Jesus taught and to live accordingly.
- C. In verses 2-6, James reminds us that we all make mistakes—including sins. We are all sinners. Many of the sins or mistakes we make are due to our speech—or as James puts it, to our tongue. James is using the word "tongue" as a metaphor for what is at the core of our souls and our spirit. What comes out in our speech—our tongue—provides a window into our souls. By our speech we can demean someone or lift that person up. We can proclaim truth or we can spread a lie. We can bring blessings or curses. As Jesus said in Matthew 15, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a body, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles. . . What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." There is much common sense in this idea. Each of us can recall times in our lives when something we said hurt someone else. What we said may have been intentional

or impulsive, but it came out because of what was inside us, through our tongue, our speech. James is advising us to exercise self discipline over our speech because it can affect our entire lives. He compares it to putting a bridle on a horse, which enables us to take the horse where we want it to go and avoid going where we don't want the horse to go.

- D. James also uses the example of the rudder on a ship. Although a rudder is small compared to the size of the ship, it controls the direction of the entire ship, no matter how big the ship is. In my Core Values book I likened one's core values to the rudder on a ship. And what the tongue reveals is what our true core values are. In the early days of World War II, the Germans built the largest, most powerful battleship in the world—the Bismarck—and it quickly sunk the most powerful ship the British Navy had. But when the Brits launched an attack by some antiquated aircraft from an aircraft carrier, one of planes launched a torpedo that damaged the rudder and steering gear on the Bismarck, leaving the ship without directional control and therefore vulnerable. It was sunk by the British navy the following morning. Without a functioning rudder, the greatest ship on the seas perished. What James is saying is that unless we get control over what we say, our tongues may take us where we don't want to go, with unhappy results.
- E. In verses 6-12, he compares the tongue to a fire. By this he is emphasizing what great damage a misspoken word can do. A WW II slogan was, "Loose lips sink ships." This slogan reminded everyone that even minor slips of the tongue could have disastrous results. James is saying that the consequences of something we say could quickly go from a small blaze to a forrest fire, destroying relationships, our reputations, or someone else's reputation.
- F. In verse 6, James says, "the tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell." This statement is hard to understand, but based on commentaries I have read it means that the tongue is the member of our bodies that expresses the worldly values or evil intentions of our soul; these thoughts and words originate in hell itself and are accepted by us as the result of our evil desires. Remember, James said in the previous chapter that sin comes from what is within us—our evil desires. We sin when we succumb to temptations that appeal to our selfish or evil desires. Here, he is saying that it is through the tongue—our speech—that we express our evil desires and carry out our sins. Furthermore, our sins add to the blaze of sins from others about us which together inflame the world.
- G. In verses 7-12, he points out that mankind has tamed virtually all types of animal life, but we have not succeeded in taming the tongue—which means we have not tamed the human heart, which is full of evil thoughts and priorities. Evidence of this is seen in Christians who through our speech issue both blessings and curses. It should not be so, and James urges us to control the tongue, which means we must change within, abide in Christ and put him at the center of our lives. Please note, however, we will not be able to do this in our own power, but only through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we earnestly try to abide in Jesus. In verses 11 and 12, he points out that what comes out of us depends on what is in us. If the love of God is within us, it will come out in our speech and in our conduct. If evil desires and intentions, anger and selfishness live within us, that is what will come out in our conduct and in our speech.

IX. James 3:13-18 Two Kinds of Wisdom

- A. In verse 13, we find echoes of James' warning at the beginning verses of this chapter to those who would be teachers. But now the warning is to those who are "wise and understanding among you," which would include pastors, teachers, leaders of the church, and perhaps others. He is saying that any wisdom such persons purport to have must be reflected in their lives, not just in their words. Their lives must be reflective of the wisdom of God, not the wisdom of this world. And even God's wisdom should be delivered with gentleness.
- B. In verses 14-16, James describes the wisdom of this world to distinguish it from God's wisdom. Earthly wisdom may reflect bitter envy and selfish ambition, even in religious organizations, including the church. We have seen this recently in the demise of a number of prominent ministries and of leaders of large churches, who somewhere along the way got more wrapped up in their own goals and ambitions than in serving God and being obedient to him. This usually involves a loss of humility, with the leader thinking the growth and success has been due to his own talents and charisma rather than the work of God. James warns those in leadership not to "be boastful and false to the truth."
- C. How are we to recognize earthly wisdom rather than godly wisdom? James says there will be envy and selfish ambition evidenced by disorder and wickedness of various kinds. That has certainly been the pattern in the church and ministry failures that have been in media headlines in recent years. Some of these failed leaders became no different from secular leaders. Their product was church growth, and they pursued it with selfish ambition that would match that of any hedge fund manager. The result was successful church growth—at least for a period of time—until the disclosure of moral failures among church leaders and disorder within the church or other ministry became public.
- D. James is warning leaders to seek godly wisdom rather than earthly wisdom, and in verses 17 and 18 he describes what godly wisdom—the wisdom from above—looks like. Godly wisdom is pure, not deviating from the word of God. It is peaceable, not leading to schism and turmoil. There may be disagreements among the church members but not to the extent they lead to animosity or estrangement. Love continues to abide. People deal with one another with gentleness, willing to yield to others, except in matters of principle, and with the presence of mercy. One of the great things about Christian mercy is that we Christians don't extend mercy just to those who have been treated unfairly; we are to extend mercy to those who are unmistakably guilty, just as God has extended mercy to us.
- E. He also says godly wisdom will lead to good fruits without any partiality or hypocrisy. We will treat others as we want others to treat us. We will be in a right relationship with God and with mankind if we do this. It will bring peace to our lives and contribute to peace within our culture. As Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God."

X. James 4:1-10 Friendship with the World

- A. In chapter 3, James wrote about wisdom, pointing out there is wisdom from above—God’s wisdom—and wisdom of the world, which puts our own priorities first and is self-centered. In this chapter he continues to focus on the source or origins of ungodly living. Some of the verses in this chapter are hard to understand. It may be helpful for us to address the nature of sin before we get into the specifics of this chapter. James has already spoken out about “the world,” and the opposition of the world to God’s kingdom. We need to understand the nature of that opposition.
- B. We often think of sin as that which is evil and is the opposite of everything that is good and righteous. But that is not quite accurate. In most instances what is sinful is not the opposite of what is good, but rather is the *corruption* of what is good, what God intended. For example, in chapter 1, James is critical of the wealthy, but wealth, in and of itself, is not sinful. Indeed, it can be a great source for good. What is sinful is putting our trust in money rather than in God. Putting our trust in wealth violates the first and second commandments—No other Gods before me, and no idols. Likewise, the commandment to not covet addresses the desire for people or things that are not wrong or evil in and of themselves, but it is the corruption of the normal God-given desire to want a good spouse or a variety of possessions that can bless our lives, but can also lead us away from God if we make obtaining them our first priority. Keep this idea of the nature of sin as we go through this chapter.
- C. In verses 1-3, James is addressing a basic question for his readers. Is your aim in life to submit to the will of God, or is your first priority to gratify your own desires for the pleasures of this world? There are many pleasures of this world, but let’s take two which seem to arise often when lives go astray: money and sex. As already mentioned, money is not inherently evil or sinful. What is sinful is the excessive desire for money—“the love of money” as Paul says in I Timothy, chapter 6. This is what Jesus saw in the rich young ruler in Matthew, chapter 19. He asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus quickly gleaned that the young man was more attached to his great wealth than he was to doing the will of God. When Jesus told him to sell what he had and give it to the poor and follow him, scripture tells us he went away grieving for he had great wealth. Likewise, sexual intercourse is a gift of God for married couples. But we humans have corrupted God’s intent by ignoring God’s limits and pursuing our own selfish desires.
- D. James says that our priorities in life get all messed up because we are more interested in satisfying our evil desires than we are in following God’s commandments. He says God will give us wisdom about appropriate desires if we ask him, but not if we ask for improper reasons.
- E. We should always keep in mind that the pursuit of a pleasure dominated life will have inevitable consequences. First, it will lead to conflicts with others. If most people are seeking money, power, prestige, more worldly possessions, and the gratification of bodily lusts, life inevitably becomes a competitive arena where conflicts and animosities will always be present. On the other hand, obedience to the will of God will draw people together because God calls us to love and serve one another, to be unselfish, whereas to always seek pleasure is to be an essentially selfish person.

- F. Second, the desire for pleasure often drives people to commit acts that shock even themselves. The steps in the process are simple. First, the person allows himself or herself to desire someone or something, which begins to dominate one's thoughts and becomes a *ruling passion*. The next step is that he or she begins to form imaginary plans and schemes to satisfy the desire. At first these imaginary plans may be viewed as innocent frivolity, but over time the plans are taken more seriously, and eventually may lead to the third step—allowing these imaginary plans to blossom into actions, even if the actions were unimaginable when the desire first appeared.
- G. The third consequence of following a pleasure dominated life is that the craving for pleasure will inevitably destroy one's prayer life. The prayer that God seeks from us is, "Thy will be done." The prayer of the person who is pleasure dominated—if the person prays at all—is, "My desires be satisfied." Again, the object of our desires is usually not inherently evil. What is wrong is putting our selfish desires at the center of our lives, rather than having God at the center of our lives.
- H. In verses 4-7, James continues to press his point that Christians must have their priorities in order. In verse 4, he says that those who have pursued their own desires are adulterers. Given the context of what he is discussing, he is not accusing them of physical adultery; he is using the word in a spiritual sense, similar to God telling the Israelites in the Old Testament that they have gone "awhoring after other gods." When they were disobedient and ignored God, he compared them to an unfaithful husband or wife. In these verses James is telling them (and us) that if we chose to be a friend of the world, we will be an enemy of God. This is not said out of hatred or contempt for the world, which God created and declared it good. He is referring to the world *apart from God*, the world that is not interested in God or what God has to say—the world that is self-centered and concerned only with going their own way and satisfying their own desires and priorities. Jesus directly addressed this dichotomy of the world and God's kingdom. He said in Matthew, chapter 6, "No man can serve two masters." We will either serve God and be obedient to him, or we will be self centered, following the desires and priorities of our culture—the world.
- I. James recognizes that putting God at the center of our lives will be very difficult for us. We do not just naturally want to be obedient to God. But God gives us the grace and desire to humble ourselves and yearn for him because God—as James says—is jealous for the spirit that he has given to dwell within us. Like a loving father, he wants what is best for us, which is to be in a loving relationship with him. Therefore, we should submit ourselves to God. As we do this, we will be strengthened to resist Satan and his temptations.
- J. He continues this line of thinking in verses 8-10, urging us to draw near to God, repent, and humble ourselves before the Lord. Our normal desire is to exalt ourselves, but James says that if we humble ourselves before the Lord, he will exalt us. In verse 9 James urges the readers to lament, mourn and weep, and let their laughter be turned into mourning and joy into dejection. He is not urging this as the normal state of the Christian life. He is urging his readers to turn from their self-centered lives to God-centered lives. Weeping and mourning will often accompany such a change. Once the change is made, however, we should have joy-filled lives because we will then be living in harmony with God, filled with his spirit.

XI. James 4:11-12 Warning Against Judging Others

- A. As you might expect, if we succeed in repenting and drawing near to God, we may, at least at times, become a little self-righteous about it. James quickly admonishes us not to think we are better than, or have the right to judge, any other person. If we judge our neighbor, we claim to know the law, for a judge is responsible for knowing the law, and we will be held all the more accountable for any violations of the law that we commit. Judging, James says in effect, is God's work, not ours. We have not been given any authority to judge anyone else. Now, that does not mean we are not to discern whether what someone else is doing is right or wrong, good or evil. We must do that, but discerning good and evil does not give us the authority to be judgmental. Jesus was very clear about this in the Sermon on the Mount. There is an entire chapter on being judgmental in my Core Values book, and why avoiding being judgmental does not mean we are not even to discern good and evil.

XII. James 4:13-17 Boasting About Tomorrow

- A. These verses seem rather strange to modern ears. We spend considerable time planning our own futures and urging our children to prepare for their futures. If we are honest, however, we must realize that our futures often turn out quite different from our plans for ourselves or our children. The idea James is expressing here is that our future is uncertain and not solely within our control. This idea is expressed in Proverbs 27:1, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." Jesus told the story of a rich but foolish man who made his plans for the future—building bigger barns—without considering that he may not be alive to realize his plans. Luke 12:16-21.
- B. James is reminding us that the future is not within our control, and for us to boast about all of the things we will do in the future is displaying a lack of humility; in fact it is pride and arrogance. He is not saying it is wrong to plan for the future, but it must always be done with humility and with the recognition that God may have other plans for us. Otherwise, we believe falsely that the future is ours to control. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So, we can make plans for the future, but always with the caveat that God may alter our plans in accord with his will. This is not something for us to fear, but rather to embrace. Viewed this way, it makes life more of an adventure as we discover with humility that although we don't control the future, we know who does, and we are more than satisfied to leave the future in his hands.
- C. James wraps up this chapter by saying all boasting is evil and should be avoided. He also says that anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin. We refer to such sins as "sins of omission," rather than "sins of commission." We usually think of sin as things that we have done that we should not have done because they violated prohibitions announced by God. However, God is equally offended by what we should have done, but failed to do. One of Jesus' commandments is that we love our neighbors as ourselves. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus portrays both a priest and a Levite as people who should have stopped to tend to the injured man but did not; only a despised Samaritan stopped to tend to the man, thereby honoring one's affirmative duty to love the neighbor as one loves himself. James is reminding us that as Christians we have an affirmative duty to love others. Simply avoiding sins of commission is not enough.

XIII. James 5:1-6 Warning to Rich Oppressors

- A. In these verses, James returns to the warnings he has given previously to the wealthy. Note, however, that it is not all of the wealthy to whom he is giving this warning, but to the wealthy who have oppressed those working for them, fraudulently refusing to pay the laborers their wages, and otherwise oppressing them. He is describing the behavior of the wealthy who indulged in pleasure-dominated lives, those whom he condemned earlier in the third chapter. He warns of the judgment to come for them, perhaps in this life, perhaps not until God's judgment comes in the next life.
- B. James apparently has two aims in these verses. First, he aims to show that earthly wealth will not ultimately lead to a God centered life. In fact, wealth is unimportant with respect to becoming righteous in the eyes of God, for God looks on the condition of the heart, not one's bank account. Second, he aims to show the detestable character of many of those who have great wealth. As we have discussed previously, wealth in and of itself is not evil or sinful. However, those with great wealth have a much greater temptation to rely upon their wealth and be consumed with their wealth than do the poor. How is the misuse of great wealth evidenced? James gives several vivid examples. He refers to several storehouses of their wealth. One is clothing. In those days, clothing was not just utilitarian; clothes could be quite valuable and hold their value over time. So they were not just a way to show wealth, but also a way to store wealth. Another storehouse was their gold and silver. But James warns the rich that moths will eat the clothes and their gold and silver will rust. Gold and silver do not actually rust, but he is saying their value will eventually be taken away in the judgment to come.
- C. Keep in mind that these warnings are being given to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," so these warnings are being given to fellow Jews, especially those who are a part of Christian churches wherever they are. Thus, we have to assume that the problem of the wealthy misusing their wealth or not being fair with their servants and employees was a problem in the early church—an infection in the surrounding cultures that had migrated into the church. In the previous chapters, James has declared that such behavior should not be found in the church. In this chapter, his warnings are stern and vivid concerning the judgment to come.
- D. It is unclear precisely who James is referring to in verse 6. It may well be a reference to Jesus who was condemned and crucified (murdered), who did not resist those who condemned him. Or he could be saying that in the oppression of the poor and the righteous, the selfish rich have crucified Christ again. The idea is that every wound imposed on Christ's people is a wound to him. I'm not sure I agree with that idea, but some commentators have made this argument. What is clear, however, is that the wealthy clearly will be punished for oppressing the poor, and oppression and favoritism have no place in the church. Throughout all of scripture—Old Testament and New—scripture speaks on behalf of the poor and the laboring class. The social concern of the Bible for the least of these is found in the words of the law, the words of the prophets, and the words of the Lord Jesus.

XIV. James 5:7-12 Patience in Suffering

- A. It is helpful in reading these verses to remember that the early church eagerly awaited the soon return of Jesus Christ. Jesus promised he would return, and apparently most of the Apostles though he would return during their lifetimes. With their anticipation that Jesus

would soon return, they could easily get impatient for his return, particularly with all of the problems the early church was facing. These problems included persecution at times by the Roman government, opposition from their Jewish brethren, and divisions and turmoil in the church at times, with problems like James has just discussed. Here, he is urging them to be patient while waiting upon the Lord's return. Just as a farmer must plant the crop then patiently await the early rains (Oct and Nov) and the late rains (April and May), to have a successful crop they must patiently wait. He advises them to strengthen their hearts, for the second coming of the Lord is near. The fact Jesus did not return during their lifetime does not mitigate the advice for us, for we also should be patient, knowing that the Lord will return on a date the Father determines. Our duty is to be ready whenever that day comes.

- B. While they are patiently waiting, James urges them to maintain their faith and not grumble against one another, which is a form of judging one another. He is repeating Jesus' commandment to judge not that you be not judged. He says the true judge is standing at the door, which is another reference to the anticipated soon return of Jesus. Keep in mind, however, that all of us will appear before our judge "soon"—as soon as we depart from this life.
- C. In verses 10 and 11, he holds up to them exemplars of suffering and patience—the prophets who spoke the word of the Lord. As we read in Hebrews, most of the prophets suffered patiently and were mistreated by the powers of their time. Those who showed endurance are honored by their patience and endurance in the face of adversity and persecution. Job, particularly is held up as an example of one who suffered patiently with endurance, and with whom the Lord showed mercy and compassion. Indeed, "The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning." (Job 42:12)
- D. In verse 12, James reminds them of Jesus' command not to swear by heaven, by earth or in any other manner. In Matt 5:33-34 and 37, Jesus addressed the issue of oaths. What he was really addressing was basic honesty. In the Jewish culture at the time, there were many oaths that one could make. Some of them were deemed to be binding on the person making them, but some were not. In essence, people offering oaths were playing a game of "Simon says," and the oath was only binding if one uttered the magic oath. Jesus would have none of this and instructed them not to make oaths at all. Simply say yes or no. This commandment is based on the third of the Ten Commandments, which we often think of as just prohibiting profanity. But it prohibits not only that but also lending the Lord's name to add solemnity to a promise one does not intend to keep. In effect, this commandment says, "Do not make the Lord a party to your lies, broken promises and misrepresentations." This is not a total prohibition on oaths, however. The vows we take are oaths, and Paul even took an oath (See Gal 1:20 and II Cor. 1:23), and we must take oaths before testifying in legal proceedings. These are not the kind of oaths Jesus and James are speaking against. For a more in-depth discussion of oaths, see chapter 13 of my book on Core Values.

XV. James 5:13-20 The Prayer of Faith

- A. In the concluding verses of James' letter, he emphasizes how we are to always be dependent upon God, looking to him for our salvation, for our well-being, and to him as the focus of our worship. If someone is suffering, he should go to the Father in prayer, relying in faith upon him to relieve our suffering and strengthen us. If we are doing

well and are cheerful, it is an opportunity for worship, offering songs of praise and thanksgiving. If we are sick, we should have the elders pray for us, anointing us with oil, having faith that we will be healed. And if we have sinned, forgiveness is available for us, and we should confess our sins to one another. The healing James refers to is both physical and spiritual, and prayer can bring about cures of both.

- B. In our study of the gospel of John we read repeatedly where Jesus said you must abide in me, for without me you can do nothing. James is describing in these verses what that looks like. It involves being highly focused on Jesus and always aware of his presence with us. When we are happy we should praise him; when we are needy we should pray to him; when we are sick, we should pray and have the elders pray for us; when we sin, we should promptly confess our sin. Jesus is not looking for occasional visitors; he wants disciples who abide in him all the time, and who are joyful because of our relationship with him.
- C. James reminds us that the sincere prayer of a righteous person is effective, and will achieve much. His example is Elijah, who prayed that no rain would fall for three and a half years, and none fell. But when he prayed again for rain, the rain came and the earth yielded its crop. Most of us do not believe that our prayers will be so effective. But Elijah was every bit as human as we are, and God honored his prayers. Prayer is our key to remaining close to the Lord and discovering his will for our lives.
- D. In the final two verses of this chapter, James recognizes that a brother or sister may wander from the truth of Jesus Christ. Keep in mind that the truth of Jesus Christ is not something for us to merely accept intellectually; it is something we must actually live out in our lives, committing ourselves totally to him. Here, James is acknowledging that some do indeed wander away, turning the focus of their lives from Jesus to the values of this world, or to our own selfish desires. Most of us have known someone who has done this. Paul mentions some who have wandered away in some of his letters. James is saying it is our duty as brothers and sisters to help bring back a wanderer to the truth. At times that may require a kind word; at other times it may involve tough love. Whatever it requires, we should do all we can to bring our brother or sister back to the Lord. James says that will cover a multitude of sins—apparently referring to the sins of our brother and sister, but also to our own.

XVI. Conclusion

- A. As you may recall, the book of Hebrews was highly theological in explaining to Jewish Christians why they should not abandon the gospel of Jesus Christ to go back into Judaism. James, on the other hand, presents practical aspects of the Christian life and paints a word picture of how we should actually live our lives day by day as we seek to abide in Christ. Many of his instructions seem to be taken directly from the Sermon on the Mount. His letter reminds us to be patient, persistent in the faith, and living as the Lord directs.

