

Word & Spirit Bible Study Notes on James

First Draft, Dec 2010

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James 1:1-4

¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.
²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Greetings

In his opening sentence, our author doesn't identify himself as specifically as we would like, since there were a number of people called James in the early church. However, it is most likely that this is James the half-brother of Jesus. This makes it all the more remarkable the way he does describe himself. He doesn't say "I'm a celebrity - I'm Jesus' brother". He doesn't even mention that he is a key leader of the church in Jerusalem. No, he humbly introduces himself as a servant - literally a "slave" of God and Jesus. Also notice that he respectfully refers to Jesus as the "Lord Jesus Christ", recognising that he now relates to Jesus as both his master and saviour.

Rejoicing in Trials

After that very brief introduction, this letter gets straight down to business. And verse 2 hits us with what quite frankly seems to be a ridiculous command. Imagine saying to someone who has just lost their job and house "brilliant, you should be delighted"! It almost sounds insulting, and certainly unrealistic.

But James' point is anything but glib. He's not saying "always look on the bright side of life". No, there is a genuine reason to be joyful. The point is not that we say "I am thrilled that this calamity has befallen me", but rather the source of joy is the recognition of what will result in our lives as we endure the trial.

Result of Trials

The first result that James highlights is *steadfastness*. Trials make us strong. We know this is true with physical exercise. It is only by keeping going through the pain barrier and resisting the urge to give up that we become stronger and healthier. Trials are a test. Will we respond with bitterness, despondency, worry or compromise? Or will we respond with faith, endurance, integrity and thankfulness?

And this is part of a bigger purpose. God is actively working on us in order to *perfect* and *complete* us. Though we are born again, we are far from the finished article. There are many rough edges to be knocked off, many ungodly attitudes and habits to be disposed of, and many Christ-like virtues to be cultivated. It is only as we experience trials, that deeply embedded sinful behaviours are rooted out and dealt with.

What specific type of trial does James have in mind? Is it temptation? Is it persecution (as is likely the reason behind the "dispersion" of the recipients of this letter)? Is it people sinning against us? Is it sickness or poverty? We don't have to choose. James describes them as trials of "various kinds". In other words, *whatever* the nature of the difficulties we face, God is able to use them as part of his

process of perfecting us. And if that doesn't make us feel joyful, it is probably because we have not realised how much we still need to be perfected. We will only rejoice in trials if we passionately desire to be more like Christ.

James 1:5-8

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Asking for Wisdom

All of a sudden, James jumps from discussing the joyful endurance of trials to talking about asking God for wisdom. At first these topics may not seem connected, but look again at the opening words of verse 2. James has asked us to have a different way of *thinking* about our trials. For this to happen, our minds need to be aligned with God's truth, with his perspective. In other words, we need wisdom.

The good news is that wisdom is freely available. All we have to do is ask. God actually wants to give his wisdom to us. And I don't think James necessarily means that we will get a miraculous download of wisdom whereby we wake up one morning with exact knowledge of what to do in each and every situation. God often uses seemingly 'ordinary' means of giving us his wisdom, such as the advice of godly friends, or by helping us to understand the Scriptures. But however he does it, James wants us to know that God is generous with wisdom.

Asking the Wrong Way

But there is some bad news. Not everyone gets wisdom, even if they ask for it. The person who doesn't ask in faith won't get anything. This poses a problem. All of us have experienced an unanswered prayer at some point or another, and as such have got used to the idea of praying without being entirely sure that God will grant our request. Are we being asked to muster up a conviction that somehow this particular prayer is *guaranteed* to be answered?

Perhaps not. The type of faith the Bible calls us to is a trust in God's goodness and his promises. We don't need to trust in our own ability to predict exactly what God will do in the future. In any case, when we ask for wisdom, we can be sure we are asking in line with God's will, which gives us great confidence that he will be favourably disposed to answer our request.

So what type of doubting does James have in mind here? The nature of the doubt is illuminated by the phrase "double-minded man". Here is a person who is asking for wisdom, but he is not entirely sure he wants God's wisdom, since there is another way of life that is also appealing to him. He alternates between loving God and loving the world. He is in effect saying "please tell me what to do God, and if I like what you say, I'll do it." How ridiculous. The person who seeks God's wisdom must be committed to acting on it. Asking in faith means believing that God's will is good. We seek his direction because we intend to follow it.

James 1:9-12

⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. ¹²Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

The Brevity of Life

Life is short, James is telling us. And that is true whether you are rich or poor. True, some do live longer than others, but the inevitability of death catches up with all of us in the end. We are just as transitory as the flowers are.

But what a gloomy thought that is! Why is James burdening us with that now? His point seems to be that those who have God's wisdom will also have God's perspective on life. They are "single-minded" people, living for God alone. They do not evaluate themselves by the world's standards, which make much of being rich.

And those of us who are rich are often in danger of being "double-minded", trying to live both for God *and* for the temporary pleasures that this world has to offer. James warns that such an outlook is guaranteed to end in disappointment as the things we are looking to for pleasure are taken from us, or our ability to enjoy them is lost.

The Advantage of Poverty

But what conceivable advantage is there in being poor? What "exaltation" can James be thinking of? The answer comes in verse 12. Those who are poor have their eyes fixed on the eternal prize, the "crown of life" God has promised. And it is because of that eternal perspective that they keep going through trials. They love God with an undivided devotion, and therefore they don't give up when things get hard, and they aren't distracted by things of this world.

We see here why Jesus said that it is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is not that having money disqualifies you. It's just incredibly hard to keep your heart wholly devoted to Jesus, when the seductiveness of the empty promises of money are pulling you in the opposite direction.

James 1:13-15

¹³Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

The Source of Trials

Suppose you go through a really difficult period of your life, through what James calls a "trial", and you end up falling into sin as a result. You might be tempted to point the finger of blame at God. After all, James has said that God has a purpose in the various trials we face. But we must never accuse him of tempting us to sin. God's intention for trials is not to trip us up, but to train us up in godliness.

So if temptation doesn't come from God, where does it come from? And here there is a surprise in store. Because the Sunday School answer of "Satan" is not the answer James gives. Instead he asks us to look within.

The Danger of Desire

The truth is, we fall into sin by following desires that are already within us. Often the desires themselves are not necessarily for things that are wrong. But we are tempted to gratify those desires with the wrong things, or by doing things that God has forbidden. If, however, we have the wisdom that is freely on offer (v5), we will recognise that true happiness can only be found in living God's way, and seeking our satisfaction in knowing him.

James warns that sinful desires must be dealt with quickly, before they are allowed to grow. A brief lustful or proud thought may not seem like a big deal to us, but if they are left unchecked, we will soon find ourselves enslaved. From then on things quickly get worse as we hurt ourselves and others with our sinful behaviour, and most tragic of all, begin to die spiritually.

James 1:16-18

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Good Gifts

We have established so far that God doesn't send temptations our way, but he does use trials to help us progress to spiritual maturity. But James doesn't want us to have "trials" as our only expectation from God. God is the source of all good gifts. Everything that we legitimately enjoy in life should be understood as a gracious gift from a loving God.

God's very nature is to be giving. He is a generous God. And he never changes. Even if we are in the midst of a difficult trial, that should not cause us to doubt God's generous disposition towards us. He wants to do us good.

Why is God given the unusual name of "Father of lights" in these verses? Light was the first thing created ("let there be light"), so this is tantamount to calling God "Father of Creation". Also, we remember in the creation story that God called the light "good". Everything he made then was perfectly good, and everything God has made or has done ever since is also good.

First Fruits

What is James saying in verse 18? It seems odd to call us the "firstfruits of his creatures", since neither we, nor James' original readers are in any sense the first people God created. What James has in mind then is the new birth. We, as believers, are the firstfruits of the new creation. There is a whole new world God will eventually make, but already he has begun the process of breathing spiritual life into those who will inhabit the new creation. When we grasp this marvellous truth, the temporary trial that we are going through, however painful, will be put into proper perspective.

James 1:19-21

¹⁹Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Be Slow to Speak

“The reason God gave you two ears and only one mouth is because he wants you to listen twice as much as you speak”. So the saying goes. And the idea behind it is not far from what James is saying here. When we are under pressure, going through a “trial”, we are likely to say foolish things that we regret later. Better to learn to keep your mouth shut. Better to keep your anger under control.

But James goes a bit deeper than the popular proverb. The goal isn't merely to avoid putting your foot in it. The goal of the Christian life is *righteousness* - to be those who live out what we have become. It is as though we have two alternative paths to choose between when faced with a trial. We can get angry about it, or we can trust God in it. One is the path of wisdom that leads to righteousness. The other is the path of folly that leads to death.

Receive the Word

If we are to choose the path of wisdom two things need to happen. First is *repentance* - we are to put behind us the sinful and immoral lifestyle that characterises us those who do not know God. Second, is *faith* - we are to receive God's word humbly, not arguing against it, but believing it, agreeing with it and obeying it. As we receive it, God's word is “implanted” within us - he writes his laws on our hearts as Jeremiah puts it (Jer 31:33). It is this path of repentance and faith that leads to salvation.

James 1:22-25

²²But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Doers of the Word

Most of us look in the mirror before we leave the house in the morning, to check whether we need to wash our face, or comb our hair, or shave. But if we notice a problem and don't do anything about it, what was the point of looking in the first place?

James uses this illustration to help us understand what he means by being those who *receive* the word of God with humility (v21). It doesn't simply mean that we enjoy reading the Bible and listening to sermons. Because unless we let the word of God change us, then simply hearing it is pointless. We need to let it take root deep within us, adjusting our thinking in line with God's word in order that our behaviour might also be transformed.

The things we discover as we read the word are often not "one-off" actions to be done. They are often attitudes that should characterise our lives in an on-going basis. That is why James says that the doer of the word is someone who *perseveres*.

The Law of Liberty

Now there have been plenty of people throughout church history who have suspected poor old James of being a bit legalistic. Why is it all about *doing* stuff? Isn't the gospel all about *grace*? Why are we now being asked to obey the *law*?

James is using the word "law" here as a synonym for the "word of God", in much the same way that David does repeatedly in Psalm 119. God's law is described as being *perfect* - in other words, you can't argue with what God is asking you to do, since you couldn't possibly come up with a better way.

But God's law is also described as a law of *liberty*. Far from enslaving us to legalism, the life lived in obedience to God is the only truly free life. This is the life that is led by the Spirit. Finally, James wants us to know that this life of Spirit-led obedience is the path to *blessing*. Never believe the devil's lie that you are somehow missing out on life if you obey God's word. The exact opposite is true. Jesus himself modelled life to the full, which was also a life of obedience to the Father.

Note: By using the term "law" here, James does not expect Christians to be subject to all the stipulations of the law of Moses. He knows that Jesus fulfilled the law, and that for the Christian, obedience to the law essentially means life under the lordship of Christ. In using the phrase "the perfect law", James may well be referring to the Old Testament Scriptures interpreted in the light of the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

James 1:26-27

²⁶*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* ²⁷*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

Bad Religion

The word 'religion' gets pretty bad press these days. Not only do some vocal atheists hate religion and want to see it abolished, but many Christians are falling over themselves to insist that they are not "religious". But James is not against religion. He recognises that it can be a force for good or bad. There is worthless religion and pure religion. So the key question is not whether you will be religious or not, but what type of religion characterises your life?

Those with bad religion are described in two ways. First, *they lack self-control*, particularly in regard to speech. How utterly repugnant it is to see religious people, claiming to know God and follow Jesus, speaking in a way that is hateful, judgmental, spiteful, or proud. By contrast, the speech of followers of Jesus should be characterised by grace and truth.

Second, *they are self-deceived*¹. This is a great tragedy. In verse 22, James has said that those who only hear the word but don't put it into practice "deceive themselves". They imagine that simply doing spiritual things like attending church, reading their Bible and praying will make them right with God. They assume that if they know the right doctrines then they will be approved by God. This was the essence of the problem with the Pharisees of Jesus' time. They were extremely religious, but self-deceived.

Good Religion

So what does good religion look like? Well James defines it both positively and negatively². Positively, pure religion is manifest through *good works*, particularly in regards to caring for those most needy and destitute in society. In asking his readers to *visit* orphans and widows, rather than simply pray for or send money to, he calls for a hands-on approach. In our own day, this verse reminds us of the vital need for the people of God to be willing to get practically involved in the lives of those who are most helpless in society. Something has gone badly wrong when the church is only found reaching out to those who are rich, intelligent or influential.

Negatively, pure religion is demonstrated through *avoiding the pollution of worldliness*. This isn't done by escaping from the world – James has only just finished saying that we need to personally interact with those in need of God's love. But we should not be naive about the danger that as we spend time in the world, we will slowly pick up its attitudes, values and practices. To combat this, we need to re-educate our minds with the truth of God's word, and live accordingly, as James has just been urging us³.

¹ See also James 1:22 – those who are

² Sadly, many in the church seem to think we can choose one or the other of these options – social justice or personal holiness. James insists that true religion consists of both.

³ James 1:22-25

James 2:1-4

¹My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ²For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Rich and Poor Visitors

Whenever a visitor shows up at church, we are usually excited at the prospect of a new member or new convert. That is, assuming that they seem like they will be useful to us in some way. For example, they might be enthusiastic servers, or well-paid tithers, or have several children who will boost the numbers in the youth work. But what if they are disabled, heavily in debt, homeless, addicted, or depressed? How enthusiastic is our welcome then?

James gives an example, quite possibly of a real situation that he has witnessed, where a rich visitor⁴ is treated with great honour whilst a poor visitor is treated with disdain. Although no one actually speaks it out, the message to the poor man is loud and clear: "you are not welcome here". We need to be very aware of the way our welcome is perceived by those who come to worship with us. Do they (despite our best intentions) come away with the impression "this church is not the place for people like me"?

This principle extends beyond church meetings and into daily life. What messages do you send to the people you meet in your place of work? Do you show everyone that you value them and treat them with dignity? Do you greet the CEO with a smile and a "good morning", but ignore the cleaner?

Evil Judges

Now we might be tempted to let ourselves off lightly if we have been guilty of this sort of behaviour. After all, it's only natural. And it's not easy to work out how to welcome the smelly and slightly strange homeless person. But James will have none of it. This way of thinking is "evil" as far as he is concerned.

By treating the rich and poor in different ways, we have "discriminated" between them and "judged" one group to be more worthy of our acceptance than the other. And that judgment has been made according to superficial, worldly standards. And as James has already made clear earlier in the letter⁵, God's evaluation of the rich and the poor is quite the opposite to the world's.

⁴ Not everyone agrees on whether this rich person is a visitor or a new convert, or even whether it takes place in a church worship service or in a kind of Christian court where disputes between believers were settled. Whichever possibility is the correct one, the point that Christians should not show favouritism still stands.

⁵ James 1:9-10

James 2:5-9

⁵Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonoured the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called? ⁸If you really fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Chosen the Poor

James has argued that our tendency to show favouritism to the rich is unacceptable. Now he goes on to explain why. And the first reason is a little unsettling. He seems to be suggesting that God deliberately chooses those who are poor to come to faith and inherit the kingdom. Is he suggesting that rich people cannot be saved? And if so, what does that mean for those of us who live lives of relative affluence in the West?

Looking a little closer, we see that “the kingdom”, which is the rich inheritance that the poor receive is given to those who *love God*. In other words, it is not simply financial poverty that identifies those who are saved, but love for God. So the question arises, can a rich person love God? That might seem obvious to us. Of course they can. But Jesus warned that the rich person faces a conflict of interests⁶. There is a real danger that love for money can prevent them from entering the kingdom⁷.

James therefore does not rule out the possibility of rich Christians⁸, but he recognises that very few are willing to become true disciples of Jesus. Which is why, in his day, the church consisted predominantly of the poor. This raises challenging questions for us about the socio-economic makeup of our churches. Have we excluded the poor⁹?

Oppressed by the Rich

A second reason why James considers favouritism towards the rich to be shameful is the fact that there were many people in the church being cruelly oppressed by the rich. This made it all the more inappropriate for Christians to flatter the rich and treat them as having greater importance. The temptation to be accepted amongst the rich and famous can lead us to turn a blind eye to injustices that ought to be confronted.

The Royal Law

The final and most important reason not to show favouritism to the rich is that it is a violation of what James calls “the royal law”. This law, “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” is described

⁶ See Matt 6:24

⁷ See Mark 10:25

⁸ In fact, many think that James is using the phrase “poor in this world” to mean something like “poor in spirit” – i.e. spiritually humble, and not necessarily financially poor.

⁹ Even simple things like the need for a car to be able to get to the meetings can make our churches inaccessible to the poor.

as “royal” because Jesus, the true King¹⁰, highlighted it as being of special importance, second only to the command to love God¹¹. Partiality flows from a failure to love those who you consider less worthy of your attention. James wants us to know that as believers we should very much consider ourselves obligated to live according to this royal law of love, and to demonstrate that love in the way we treat those who are “poor”.

¹⁰ It is also possible that James was saying that this is the “king of all laws”

¹¹ See Mark 12:30-31

James 2:10-13

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Breaking the Law

You cannot pick and choose what parts of the law you would like to keep. And you cannot get let off breaking one part of the law because you kept another part. To use James’ rather dramatic example, it’s like someone found guilty of murdering his wife saying “but I didn’t cheat on her”!

How does this fit in to what James has been teaching about not showing favouritism to the rich? Well he is challenging us that we can’t decide that just because a command of Scripture doesn’t seem very important to us, that somehow we are let off the hook if we don’t bother keeping it.

Judged by the Law

But now James goes on to say something that might make us feel distinctly uncomfortable. Addressing Christians, he warns us that we are going to be judged under “the law of liberty”. Does this mean that salvation is by works after all?

A few things should be said. First, the law that James refers to is not the law of Moses, but what he calls the “law of liberty”¹². This is the New Covenant law, which God promised to write onto our hearts¹³, and empower us to obey by the Holy Spirit. Second, James immediately goes on to remind us that mercy is available. If we were to be judged by the law, *all* of us would be condemned. The gospel is the good news that there is forgiveness freely available, and that we are recipients of a righteousness that is not of our own making.

Finally, there does seem to be a strong strand of biblical teaching that indicates that believers will have to give an account for their lives¹⁴. Though our eternal destiny may not be at stake, this is a strong incentive for us to live in such a way that will not cause us to be ashamed as we stand before God.

Mercy or Judgement

The choice the gospel gives to us is blunt. Do you want justice from God, or grace? If you choose justice, then condemnation will be the outcome of your judgement. If you choose grace, then mercy will be the outcome.

Notice how James connects *receiving* mercy with *showing* mercy. This links very strongly to the teaching of Jesus. He taught us to pray “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”.

¹² See also James 1:25 and 2:8

¹³ Jer 31:33

¹⁴ For example, Rom 14:12

He said “blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”¹⁵. In other words, an essential characteristic of the believer is that he or she shows the same mercy he has received from God to others.

¹⁵ See also the parable in Matt 18:21-35

James 2:14-17

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Faith without Works

The way verse 14 is phrased would suggest that James has encountered some people who claimed to be saved because they had "faith" in Jesus, but their lives were not demonstrating any transformation, and good works were distinctly lacking. In particular, it would seem that these people didn't feel the need to offer any practical help to fellow Christians who were financially destitute.

James is outraged that such behaviour could pass for Christian, and makes it quite plain that he considers this kind of "faith" to be worthless for salvation. But in saying so, he leads us into a theological minefield. Those familiar with the teaching of the apostle Paul (who James possibly had yet to meet at this point) will know that he emphasises that it is faith, and not works that are necessary for salvation.

So is James contradicting Paul? Actually, he is not. James is not denying that faith saves. He is saying that only *genuine* faith saves. And one sure way to spot counterfeit faith (or "dead faith", as James calls it) is a person who shows no concern for the poor who are right in front of him in his own church¹⁶.

Words without Works

But these people may respond "But we do care, deeply. We regularly encourage these poor people and pray for them." But James will have none of it. Words are hollow if they are not backed up with actions. It is true that sometimes all we have to offer is words. But that was not the case here. These people with "dead faith" clearly had the financial means to provide food and clothing, yet they turned a blind eye to the need.

How do we apply this today? It is unlikely that our churches contain those who are so poor they can't clothe or feed themselves. Yet there will be people with financial needs, as well as other practical needs, maybe for help with housework or transportation. We too easily let ourselves off the hook with excuses about not having enough time or not being able to solve *every* problem. We can even blame the poor for not doing more to get out of their difficulty.

These verses challenge us to take a very close look at ourselves. What evidence is there that our faith is more than just words? When have we sacrificed our time or money to meet the practical needs of others in our church? Do we make excuses not to help, or turn a blind eye to appeals? Is our faith living or dead?

¹⁶ See the powerful and convicting parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31-46) for a similar line of teaching from Jesus on the ultimate salvation of those who offer no help to the poor and needy.

James 2:18-23

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder! ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"--and he was called a friend of God.

Demonic Faith

It seems that James anticipates some objections being raised to his teaching on faith and works. Maybe someone will have the bright idea that there are two ways to be saved: one involving doing works, and one involving faith. Of course, James will have none of it. Whilst he acknowledges that faith is indispensable, he wants to hammer home the point that "faith" without works is useless.

He picks a great example. If all that is required to be saved is to believe in the existence of one God, then the demons are saved. It is obviously an absurd suggestion. The type of faith that saves goes much deeper than a simple set of theological beliefs. It is a deep trust that is worked out in obedience.

Active Faith

To press his point home more forcefully, James considers one of the most famous examples in the whole Old Testament of a man of faith: Abraham. Now James is well aware of the verse in Genesis 15:6 which says that "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness". At first glance, it would seem that this contradicts rather than supports James's point. Is the life of Abraham evidence that works are irrelevant and all you need is faith?

Absolutely not. James has a very quick comeback to that objection. Which episode from Abraham's life most clearly demonstrates his faith? It was the story of when God asked him to offer up Isaac, and he was willing to obey. In other words, the only reason we know that Abraham had great faith, was that he put it into action. Had he not obeyed, we would not have said that he had faith. So James in no way wants to minimise the importance of faith and belief. But he will not allow for any definition of faith that does not manifest itself in acts of obedience. Abraham's faith was genuine, and we know this because he acted on it.

This section closes with a reminder that Abraham was called a "friend of God". He wasn't just a theologian, who had beliefs about God. Nor was he merely a servant, who did many things for God. He was a friend, who had a relationship with God. His faith was demonstrated in the way that he trusted his friend, and his obedience was motivated by a desire to please his friend.

James 2:24-26

²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Justified by Works

So James is drawing his argument to a close, and in doing so, manages to say something that sounds like a direct contradiction of Paul's teaching. Paul believed we are justified by faith, not works. In Rom 3:28 he says "we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law". Here, James seems to say the exact opposite.

But before we assume that James is a legalist, believing in earning your salvation, or that Paul is an antinomian, believing that a holy lifestyle is unimportant or unnecessary, we must ask whether they are using their words in the same way. When Paul says that we are "justified", he is usually talking about the new *status* we have been given: we are considered to be righteous before God. When James says that we are "justified" means that our claim to have faith is demonstrated to be genuine: we are vindicated. Similarly, when Paul talks about "works" he is mainly referring to keeping the commands of the law of Moses, but when James talks about "works" he is simply referring to putting your faith in action, particularly in showing love.

The example of Rahab clarifies things for us. Rahab obviously had no chance of being justified by the "works of the law". She was a pagan and a prostitute. But James wants us to see that her faith in the God of Israel was demonstrated to be genuine by the courageous actions she took to protect the spies. The point is not that she didn't have, or need faith, but that she proved that she had faith by her works.

Dead Faith

So James has finally finished making his point. There is a type of "faith" that isn't really faith at all. It consists of nothing more than orthodox beliefs and pious statements. James wants us to know beyond any shadow of doubt that if that "faith" doesn't produce any works, then it is not faith at all. It is useless faith. It is dead faith. And the point of this teaching is not for us to go round accusing others of having "dead faith", but to humbly examine our own lives. As someone once asked "if you were taken to court and accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

James 3:1-5

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

The Responsibility of the Teacher

James is undoubtedly an exceptional preacher, and no doubt greatly enjoyed teaching. But he wasn't just doing it because he was good at it, or found it fulfilling. He viewed it as a very serious responsibility. Teachers have a solemn obligation to speak the truth, as many of their listeners will simply believe what they are told without properly evaluating it. And teachers also have an obligation to live an exemplary lifestyle, because their students will copy how they behave. So James is not trying to put people off becoming teachers, but making them aware that this is not a task to be taken lightly.

Again in this passage we see that James had a clear expectation that every Christian will face a judgment. This will not be to determine whether or not we are saved: Jesus' death has already paid the price in full. But we are to give an account for what we have done. And this fact should cause us to consider carefully how we are living.

The Power of the Tongue

James does not however claim that you should only become a teacher if you are perfect. He freely admits that we all "stumble in many ways". But he goes on to argue that the hardest part of our body to control is the tongue, and a teacher with an out of control tongue is going to do more harm than good.

It is perhaps a surprising claim, but one that is justified. Of course there are plenty of people who never use foul or abusive language. But those are not the only sins of the tongue. Gossip, slander, boasting, distorting the truth, manipulating others, unkind words are also among the multitude of ways in which we can misuse the tongue. Which of us can claim to be not guilty of sin in the way we speak?

James uses three memorable analogies to illustrate the impact our speech can make. Just like a small rudder can set the course of a huge ship and a small bit can change the direction of a powerful horse, so just a few words can dramatically alter the direction of people's lives, whether in a good direction or bad. Just like a small bonfire can get out of control and set a whole forest ablaze, so an ill-chosen comment can spark a huge and destructive argument. Words are powerful, and God's people should be very careful to think before they speak.

James 3:6-12

⁶And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

The Evil Tongue

James has explained that the tongue is extremely powerful, able to change the whole course of our lives, and to spark off conflict. But what he says in verses 6-8 is designed to shock. Rather than saying that the tongue is neutral, able to be used for good or evil, he presents it in an entirely negative light. He calls it a “world of unrighteousness”, a “restless evil” and “full of poison”. He depicts it as set on fire by hell, and completely untameable¹⁷. It is almost as if he is suggesting that some Christians have let Satan take control of their tongues to use for his own evil purposes.

Is he over-reacting? If he is using exaggerated language, it is because he wants to make a very forceful point. We can be far too casual about our words, assuming they don't really matter. Uncontrolled speech is the cause of countless evils in the world, and utterly destructive in the church and the life of the believer. As a World War II poster put it, “Careless talk costs lives”.

Blessing and Cursing

But someone may respond to James, “I confess that sometimes I hurt others with my words, but I also say many good things. How then can you talk as though everything about the tongue is wrong?” But again James has anticipated that response. There is no such thing as a mixture of pure water and salt water. If you mix the two together it is simply salt water, and it is horrible to drink. Similarly a person who speaks a mixture of blessings and curses is simply speaking poison. Such a person's speech tastes repulsive to God.

Verse 9 gives us an idea of the particular problem James is addressing. Christians were effectively “cursing” one another, while at the same time worshiping God. They thought nothing of speaking evil of one another. Why is this such a problem? It is because those that they are speaking evil of are people made in the image of God. They are his creation, his possession, his delight. God cannot and will not turn a blind eye to us speaking evil of those he dearly loves. We are in effect saying to God “I love you but I hate your family”. He will not accept such “worship”.

These verses therefore challenge us to examine the way we speak when we are in private conversation with a few close friends. Often those are the times when we relax control and speak

¹⁷ Despite his bleak outlook in this section, there may be a hint of hope as James says that “no human being” can control the tongue. Maybe he is saying that though humans can't control the tongue, with the help of God it is possible.

cruel words about others. Taking control of our tongues is not easy, James freely admits that much. But he will not allow us to make excuses for ourselves. We must repent, and seek the filling of the Spirit in order that the words of our mouths are pleasing and acceptable in God's sight.

James 3:13-18

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Earthly Wisdom

Having considered the destructive power of the tongue, we now look at a positive use for the tongue: wisdom. But James warns us that not everything that claims to be wisdom really is. There is such a thing as *earthly wisdom*, which might initially seem impressive, but underneath there are serious problems. Earthly wisdom is seen when a person, perhaps desiring the recognition of being a teacher¹⁸, starts behaving in a selfish way, seeking their own honour. They become proud, argumentative and domineering. They are so jealous that they resent anyone else who rivals their position of honour. James says that this isn't merely unspiritual, but downright *demonic*.

Earthly wisdom has disastrous consequences. James tells us that it will ultimately tear a community apart, and result in all kinds of ungodly behaviour. Although many in our culture would consider 'ambition' to be a positive trait, this type of selfishness has no place in the life of the church. It tears down, rather than builds up.

Heavenly Wisdom

By contrast heavenly wisdom is characterised by *meekness*. Those who lead and teach in the church are to be completely humble, following the servant-hearted example of Jesus. Such people show their wisdom not by impressive words, but by the way they behave.

James goes on to list several characteristics of heavenly wisdom. First of all it is *pure*, never condoning or excusing sinful behaviour. Second, it is *peaceable*, not looking for an argument or to prove others wrong. Third, it is *gentle*, never crushing other people even when there is a need for rebuke or a difference of opinion. Fourth, it is *open to reason*. One sure sign of pride is being unteachable, particularly not wanting to learn from those who we might consider to be inferior. But the wise person doesn't feel the need to be always seen as right on every subject, and has the humility to learn from others.

Fifth, heavenly wisdom is *full of mercy*, not eager to punish those who have got things wrong. Sixth, it is full of *good fruits*. The positive results of the wise person's way of life are plain to see. Seventh, it is *impartial*. Rather than taking sides with friends, the wise person hears both sides of an argument. Eighth, it is *sincere*. With a wise person, what you see is what you get; there is no hypocrisy about them.

¹⁸ See James 3:1

The result of this type of wisdom is that it reaps a harvest – a harvest of *righteousness* and *peace*. A truly wise person will be an immense blessing to their church, and make a tangible difference to the holiness and unity of the community.

James 4:1-3

¹What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

The Reason You Fight

It would seem that there was some real disharmony amongst the Christians James is writing to. They have broken out in disagreements and arguments, possibly even taking each other to court. But what is the cause of such arguments? Most of the time, when we are asked why we don't get along with someone else, we respond by putting the blame on the other person. It's because of their unreasonable behaviour, their bad attitude, their hurtful words, their wrong beliefs.

But James will not let us absolve ourselves of responsibility so easily. He thinks that most of the time, quarrels and fights are actually down to selfish desires. When we want something unavailable to us, we resent those who do enjoy it. When someone else holds a position we desire for ourselves, we can be tempted to undermine their reputation in order that our own may be enhanced.

These "desires" and "passions" within us need to be brought under control, and submitted to the lordship of Christ. If left unchecked, they can result in tremendous spiritual damage being done to the local church.

The Reason You Don't Receive

When he speaks of these passions, James may be thinking again of those who desired to be teachers, or to hold positions of esteem within the community¹⁹. Yet they were not getting what they wanted. James gives two reasons for this.

First of all, there are those who rather than bringing their requests to God, take matters into their own hands. They do not have, because they do not ask. Their lack of prayer betrays their self-absorbed approach to life: they haven't even thought of bringing God into it.

But there are also those who did pray about it. They were so consumed with wanting position that they prayed about it continually. Their problem was that they had overlooked the fact that you can ask for something good with the wrong motives. Their motives were for their own glory. God is not likely to answer such prayers, for there are few things more damaging to a church than an egocentric leader.

So this passage gives us two simple principles for prayer. First, if you want something, ask God for it. Talk with him about the desires and ambitions you have. But second, be willing to let his Spirit examine your true motives. We can want the right things for the wrong reasons. We need God not just to change our behaviour, but to change our deepest desires and longings to be in line with his will.

¹⁹ Alternatively, James may simply be referring to a desire to be wealthy, to have more than others. In either case, God is unlikely to grant such selfish requests.

James 4:4-8a

⁴You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Friends of the World

We now get to the real heart of the problem in the churches that James is writing to. The reason there was such conflict and disharmony was that they were living as “friends with the world”. What he means is not that they care for the planet, or that they get on well with their pagan neighbours, but that they were essentially living according to the value system of a world that is alienated from God and in rebellion against him. In turning to Jesus we must necessarily turn our back on this world and its way of thinking.

This is why James calls them “adulterers”. They’re like a married woman deciding to go back to a former boyfriend. No husband would consider that acceptable, and God here is portrayed as a jealous husband, longing for the exclusive affection of his bride. Worldliness is spiritual adultery and idolatry. This doesn’t mean we can’t do anything that unbelievers do, or go anywhere that unbelievers go. It does mean that our hearts are set on a completely different treasure to what they are seeking.

Friends of God

James has been using harsh, even insulting, language as he rebukes them for their friendship with the world, but he doesn’t want to leave them without hope. And that hope is that God has an inexhaustible supply of *grace* available for us to draw on. How do we receive this grace? James suggests four ways.

First, *grace is given to the humble*. Pride was at the root of the divisions in the church community, and can so easily be allowed to take root in our hearts. If we don’t want God to oppose us, then we need to address our tendency to pride, and humble ourselves in order to receive grace.

Second, *grace is given to those who submit to God*. To do this, we need to be those who know what the will of God is, and determine to obey it no matter how hard it may seem. Submission is the natural outworking of humility. It is because of pride that we stubbornly insist on doing our own thing rather than obeying God.

Third, *grace is given to those who resist the devil*. God promises victory to those who are willing to take a stand against temptation. In our own strength, of course, we are no match for the devil, but God will empower anyone who decides to resist to not only stand up to him, but to send him away.

Finally, *grace is given to those who draw near to God*. The Christian life is not just about obedience and holiness; it is about relationship with God. So we don’t serve God in the hope that he will give

us the material blessings that we really want²⁰, but knowing him is our ultimate goal. He himself is the treasure. Only once we have grasped this will we live as friends of God rather than friends of the world.

²⁰ See James 4:3

James 4:8b-10

^{8b}Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Wash Yourself

We have here some of the gloomiest verses in the New Testament. A modern preacher who attempted to say this to his congregation would surely be accused of being overly negative. But James calls it as he sees it. His hearers need to repent of being “double-minded”, which is to say that they are trying to lead two contradictory lives. They cannot succeed in being Christians while at the same time being friends of the world.

They need to do two things. The first is to *wash*. Their sin has left them dirty and polluted. Of course the only way to be cleansed of sin is through the blood of Jesus. Because of his death on the cross we can be completely cleaned up, pure and spotless in God’s sight. Both our *hands* and *hearts* need to be washed, signifying that not just our behaviour, but our desires and attitudes all need to be put right.

But this cannot happen without the second thing that James calls his readers to do. They need to *weep*. In other words, they need to show genuine sorrow for their sin. His reference to laughter suggests that some of them were laughing off their sins, treating them casually as if they hardly mattered. They may be willing to *confess* their sin, but they have no intention of actually *repenting* of it. We need to realise that the sort of confession that God is looking for comes from a deep sorrow and regret that we have sinned against him, and a determined desire to live in obedience to him.

Humble Yourself

The gift of forgiveness for sin is a free gift of God’s grace. And yet it is inaccessible to the proud. Proud people seek to exalt themselves, and end up being brought low in judgement. Proud people refuse to admit or take their own sin seriously, and thereby cut themselves off from the source of cleansing. It is the height of folly to be proud before God, since he sees everything, and knows all about us. He is not impressed by our attempts to appear wise, powerful or important.

To humble ourselves means to agree with God’s assessment of us, and to submit to his will for us. It is to lay down any of our own ambitions for our lives and to seek only to know and please God. If we are willing to humble ourselves before God, we are promised that we will be exalted by him. This does not mean that we will get honour or recognition from other people. Often we will not. But that does not matter to the truly humble person in any case. What really matters is that as we draw near to God by humbling ourselves, he responds by drawing near to us.

James 4:11-12

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?

Don't Criticise

The church is a diverse community, made up of people of different ages, walks of life, personalities and cultural backgrounds. It is not surprising therefore that there are from time to time differences of opinion or difficulties getting on with one another. However, the way we handle these relationship issues in the church is to be completely different from the world.

The world's way is to simply moan and complain. To criticise, gossip, and slander others behind their backs. To belittle, mock, or verbally abuse to their face. All these are different ways in which we can "speak evil against one another". They have no place among the people of God.

Don't Judge

But why not? Surely we have a right to complain at those who wrong us? James explains that the root of the problem with speaking in this way is that we set ourselves up as judge over one another, declaring ourselves innocent and finding them guilty. In other words, we are acting as though we are God.

It is therefore the height of arrogance and pride (which James has been repeatedly warning against) to set ourselves up as the judge and lawmaker. We first need to recognise that our primary responsibility is for our own lives, and that we will have to give an account of ourselves before the One who has the power both to save and condemn.

Our role then is never to set ourselves up over one another as though we had the right to make rules for them and condemn them for breaking them, but to lovingly and humbly encourage each other to submit to the lordship of Christ in all things. We need to recommit ourselves, with God's help, to controlling our tongues, especially when we are tempted to speak negatively about those people we find difficult. The church is to be a community whose speech is characterised by love.

James 4:13-17

¹³Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"-- ¹⁴yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Who's Really in Control?

We've just learned that it is pride that lurks behind critical speech, and here we see another way that pride is manifest. It is an imagination that we are in control of our own futures, that we are masters of our own destiny. The example that James gives is of a person who has not just planned out *where* he will go next to do business, but confidently announces that he *will* make a profit. This is foolish talk. Not only is there no guarantee that business will be successful tomorrow, but there is no guarantee that you will even be alive tomorrow.

Our own mortality is often viewed as an unpleasant subject to be kept as far from our minds as possible at all times. But the believer does not hide from this truth. We know that whatever time we have left is given to us by God, and is given for the purpose of us doing his will. To speak as though we were in control of the future is the height of arrogance.

James asks us to use the phrase, "if the Lord wills" rather than speaking as if we can predict the future. Of course, this phrase could easily become a meaningless addition to the end of every sentence about our plans. The real point is that when we think about our future, our instinct is to ask God what he wishes for us, what he would have us do, where he would have us go, instead of forging ahead with our own ideas and insisting that God tag along and bless us.

Do the Right Thing

Verse 17 comes rather abruptly and its connection with what went before isn't immediately apparent. The principle is an important one. You need to act in accordance with the revelation you have received. Often we know what we ought to be doing but make excuses for ourselves. We say that no one else is doing it, or we say that it isn't all that important, or we say that God's grace means we don't need to be concerned about it. But James will not let us get away with such thinking. If you know that there is something that you should be doing, you simply need to get on and do it. Otherwise we are guilty of "sins of omission".

God has given us his word, he gives wisdom to those who ask, he has given us consciences, and he has placed us in church families where we can get good teaching and advice. Though there may be situations in our lives where the way forward seems unclear, most of the time we do know what we ought to be doing. Many of the things James has been teaching in this letter such as controlling your tongue, caring for the poor, or rejoicing in trials don't come naturally to us. We know they are the right thing to do, yet so often we don't do them. We need to be filled afresh with the Spirit in order that we might have both the desire and the power to put into practice what we know to be right.

James 5:1-6

¹Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

The Coming Judgment of the Rich

In this section, James issues a severe rebuke and warning to the rich. There is a day of judgment coming soon and it will not go well for them. He starts off by telling them two very important facts about their near future. The opportunity to repent is now, because a time is coming when it will be too late.

First, they will *lose everything they own*. Their savings will be taken from them, their fine clothing will decay. The point is simple: no matter how much money or things we accumulate in this life, one day it will all be taken.

Second, they will themselves be *condemned*. With vivid imagery he speaks of their flesh being eaten up, and them being like fattened lambs about to be slaughtered. These are surely references to the judgment of hell, which is described elsewhere as a “lake of fire” and a “second death”.

The Sins of the Rich

But we may want to raise an objection. Is merely being rich a sin? Why is James so sure that the rich will suffer judgment? James answers these questions by indicating which sins in particular the rich are guilty of.

First they were *defrauding labourers*. The rich were guilty of not paying wages fairly and on time, despite the fact that many workers would be dependent on a daily wage to feed themselves and their families. The rich thought they could get away with this injustice, but God sees and is angered. He has heard the cries of those who have been wronged and is ready to act.

While it is unlikely that as Christians we are directly involved in the exploitation of workers, we would do well to consider the conditions of the workers who supply the shops we buy from. Are we indirectly supporting the exploitation of the poor?

Second, they were *persecuting believers*. This seems to be the meaning of verse 6 – the rich were using their influence to swing court cases in their favour. The injustice of the situations even led to the death of some – which James plainly describes as murder. This makes it all the more shocking that some in the church were flattering the rich rather than denouncing their behaviour.

Third, they were *living self-indulgent lives*. The luxury they were living in was completely inexcusable when contrasted with the poverty of those around them. They had ample resources

that were just sitting around unused, while others lived in abject poverty. We must examine our own hearts and allow the Spirit to convict us in this area. We live in a consumeristic culture where it is unquestioningly assumed that everyone's goal in life should be to enjoy as much luxury as they are able. But for the Christian, this is not an acceptable goal, because it completely ignores the obligations of the "royal law" to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The key to understanding where the rich were going wrong is in verse three. They were "storing up treasure" in the last days. This calls to mind the teaching of Jesus who warned us against storing up treasure on earth²¹. The folly of the rich is that they live as though this life is all there is, as though it will go on forever and as though there is no judgment. None of those things are true. Instead of storing up earthly treasure at the expense of the poor, we should be storing up heavenly treasure by caring for the poor.

²¹ See Matt 6:19-21

James 5:7-9

⁷Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

The Lord is Coming

Many of the believers James is writing too are really going through some difficult times. Not only are they poor, but they are being oppressed and cheated by the rich. What they need to know is that *the Lord is coming*. This will help them to keep their present hardships in perspective.

The “coming of the Lord” is both good news for the Christian and bad news for the unrighteous. Those who had been cruelly oppressing the poor will come face to face with “the Judge”. They may have been able to use their wealth and influence to buy favourable verdicts in earthly courts, but in the court of heaven there are no miscarriages of justice. They will get the punishment due to them.

For believers, though, the coming of the Lord means that they will reap the rewards of their righteous behaviour. Like a farmer who has done the hard work of sowing seed and now has to wait for the harvest, so in living righteously, we can store up for ourselves a harvest in the age to come.

Wait Patiently

Christians are to be patient, not worrying if they seem to have an unfair deal in this life, but trusting that at the return of Jesus, all wrongs will be righted. But what are we to do in the meantime? Is it just a matter of sitting around waiting? Having told us that we need to *be patient*, James gives us two further instructions.

First, and positively, we are to *establish our hearts*, or to “stand firm”. We are to keep our hearts set firmly on God rather than letting them be seduced by the world, and succumbing to idolatry. An eternal perspective helps us to do this, as it reminds us that even the best and most pleasurable things this world has to offer will all be gone one day.

Second, and negatively, we are to *avoid grumbling*. Moaning and complaining comes naturally to us when we are enduring a difficult situation. When we are suffering we can often end up taking out our frustration on friends and family, or by speaking evil of others. We particularly need to beware of judging other believers, something James has already warned against. We should recognise that the true Judge is right at the door – he could return at any moment. And it would not be good to be found acting as though we were the judge.

James 5:10-12

¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. ¹²But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

Examples of Patience

Maybe the kind of patience in suffering that James is asking us to demonstrate seems like an unrealistic ideal. To offer some encouragement, he asks us to consider examples of those in the Old Testament. Many of the prophets suffered persecution for their faithfulness to God. Take Daniel and Jeremiah as examples. They both remained steadfast and faithful under great opposition, and God used them to accomplish his purposes, and speak his word. Though their lives were anything but easy, nevertheless they were "blessed" by God.

Another example would be Job. Job is different from the prophets in that the reason for his suffering was completely hidden from him. Without knowing why he was suffering, he still patiently endured it, refusing to grumble.

But James gives us more than just examples to inspire us. He reminds us of three foundational truths about God. First, *God has a purpose*. He always knows what he is doing, even if it makes no sense at all to us. Second, *he is compassionate*. He is not indifferent to our suffering. And third, *he is merciful*. He will not leave us in our misery indefinitely but will certainly bring whatever suffering we face to an end.

No Promises

Next James asks us to not make promises under oath, but instead simply and plainly speak the truth. Making promises is often foolish since circumstances change and we can entrap ourselves by our own words. Of course, there is a place for solemn vows to be made, such as in a wedding ceremony, but that is an example of a promise that is well thought out, and one which cannot be broken without committing sin. We should seek to be known as honest people who are reliable and trustworthy, people who do what they say they will.

Quite possibly, some of the poor Christians were under pressure to make promises about when they would repay loans. James strongly advises against making those kinds of promises, which can leave us legally liable. In any case, making unrealistic promises about the future falls into the trap that we have been warned about already in James 4:13. It is arrogant folly to imagine that we have control over our futures. Our lives are in the hands of God and any future plans we may have are dependent on his will.

James 5:13-16a

¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

Prayer and Praise

God belongs right at the centre of every part of our lives. He is not just for turning to when things get bad, nor is a relationship with him only for the good times in life. James here encourages us to go first to God in all seasons of life. When things are tough, bring it to God in prayer. When things are going well, respond with thankfulness and songs of praise.

These two practises of prayer and praise belong together, and should characterise our whole lives. We should be continually lifting up both our needs and the needs of others to God in prayer. We should also recognise that God is always worthy of praise, no matter how bleak our situation is. Since we have a hope that can never be taken from us, our joy too should be indestructible.

Prayer and Healing

There are specific instructions here for those who are sick. In those days, sickness was more than a mere inconvenience. It meant you couldn't work, couldn't earn money, and possibly couldn't eat. And with little money, you may not even be able to afford to get proper medical care. In short, those who were sick were in desperate need.

Of course, if you are sick, you will likely pray. But James wants us not just to pray alone but to involve the church community. In particular, the elders of the church²² should be available to pray for any who are sick. This shows the pastoral side of eldership in action. It's not just about leading and teaching, but caring for individuals.

They are to first *anoint with oil*, a symbolic action, perhaps demonstrating the need for the power of the Spirit to be poured out in order for healing to take place. They are second to *pray with faith*. We cannot force or manipulate God, but a lack of confidence in his compassion or power to heal dishonours him. We pray believing that he can and will act.

James seems to expect a 100% success rate for prayers of healing, which poses problems for us as we have all known cases of people being prayed for without receiving healing. There may be many different reasons for this, but ultimately, we are to show our love for those who are sick by persisting in prayer for their healing, and persisting in caring practically for them in the meantime.

²² It is worth pointing out that James clearly assumes a plurality of eldership involved in leading the church, rather than a single pastor.

Confession and Forgiveness

What James says about confession here suggests that in some cases, a person who is sick needs to confess some sin and repent of it. Obviously not all sickness is as a direct result of personal sin, but illness does give us pause to reflect on our lives and whether everything is being done in a God-honouring way. In addition, when we are sick, we do well to remember that the greatest gift we can receive is not health, which only lasts for a while, but forgiveness, which lasts forever.

The church then is to be the type of community where people are open and honest about their sins, willing to confess them to each other. And instead of responding in judgment, the church is to lovingly respond by forgiving and praying for that person. This might be why it is the elders who are to be called on – as leaders of the church, they demonstrate that the sick person is loved and accepted by the whole community.

James 5:16b-18

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

The Power of Prayer

James has just been telling us to pray for one another to be healed. Sometimes we shy away from doing this, because it seems too big to ask. We imagine that we are not important enough to make such a request to God. But James wants us to know that we have access to a tremendous power in prayer, and we should not be afraid to use it. More than that, we should have great confidence that when we pray, God will act.

What does “a righteous person” mean here? James may just be referring to every believer. We all have a right standing before God because of the cross. This gives us the privilege to come into God’s presence boldly and bring our requests to him with the confidence of a child asking their father for something.

But James also could be meaning that those who are living obedient lives will find that God is especially willing to grant their requests. James has already warned that there are factors in our lives that can hinder our prayers (such as being “double-minded”²³, or asking with selfish motives²⁴). This is why confession is an important part of our prayer life. When we come into God’s presence with our requests, we cannot attempt to hide areas of our lives from his gaze. Praying while refusing to confess sin is like saying “I want your will to be done here, but not there”.

The Example of Elijah

By lifting up Elijah as an example, James recognises that we may immediately feel so inferior to this great man of faith that we give up all hope of following his example. But we are reminded that Elijah was only a human being. He didn’t have any super powers.

What was different about him was his prayer life. He prayed *fervently*. This wasn’t just a casual one-off request. When he prayed for the rain to come, he sent his servant seven times to look for rain before it came²⁵, so he knew what it meant to persevere and to ask in faith. His prayer life was an outworking of a life wholly devoted to God. The deep longing of his heart was to see God’s name honoured in his nation.

Elijah was not a perfect man, but he was a righteous man. And he saw amazing answers to prayer. Dare we ask God to do amazing things, like healing sickness? Yes, since we have the same God as Elijah had, and since we have been given the gift of righteousness.

²³ James 1:6-7

²⁴ James 4:3

²⁵ 1 Kings 18:42-44

James 5:19-20

¹⁹My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Restore the Sinner

The letter of James ends, appropriately, on a note of compassion. James has already urged us to show compassion to those who are poor. Now he asks us to show the same kind of mercy to the backslider.

It can be hard to know what to do when a Christian wanders off from the faith. Do we take a hard line with them, issuing severe warnings and cutting off fellowship with them? Or maybe we go for a less confrontational approach, attempting to remain friends with them and to patiently wait for them to turn back towards God?

James doesn't actually specify the approach he thinks it is best, but he does want us to believe that the backslider really does need to be rescued. They are heading for judgment for their rebellion. In James's language, their souls are in danger of death.

Does that mean that backsliders can "lose their salvation"? Or does it mean that backsliders were never truly saved? Or maybe it means that backsliders will still be saved, but will suffer shame and disgrace on the final day? James doesn't answer any of these difficult questions for us here.

Instead, his focus is on the need to reach out to the one wandering from the truth. It should not be a matter of indifference to us. Genuine love for our friends will cause us to pray earnestly for them, and to take whatever steps are necessary to plead with them to return to the Lord. We will need plenty of wisdom and grace if we are to do this well, but failure to reach out to them is a failure of love.

So when we see a poor person, we are not merely to wish them well, but to take practical steps to help them. And when a church member drifts away from the Lord, we similarly are not to merely hope for their return, but to take practical steps to turn them back from the road to destruction. Only then can we truly say that we are people of "faith", people whose faith is demonstrated by a way of life that backs it up.