

Lessons on James

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Cover: 12th Century copy of the Book of James. Minuscule 85 (Gregory-Aland) – source.

Dedication

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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Introduction

The book of James has been accepted as a part of the canonical literature since the earliest days of the church. There has been some doubt, however, over precisely which James wrote this book. The issue turns upon the perpetual virginity of Mary. If you believe in that, then you hold that this was written by James son of Alphaeus. All the rest of us believe it was written by James, the brother of Jesus.

The purpose of the book is quite clear: it is the wisdom literature of the New Testament. It occupies a place parallel to that of the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Indeed, the letter was not written for the church in general but for the Jewish people who had been dispersed from Jerusalem. The best efforts of history indicate that this was written just before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. It is a book to be taken in small bites.

Trials

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

(James 1:1-4 NASB)

To Test Your Faith

Understanding this section will require us to know the difference between trial and temptation. Let's take the trials first:

- ✚ There are physical trials – the common ordinary suffering of the Christian. It's a time when we ask, "why me, God?"
- ✚ Sometimes these trials actually occurred to others but we must share them. If you've ever had an invalid in the house, you know what I mean. You ask, "why her, God?"
- ✚ It does occasionally happen that these trials come to the church and we ask, "why us, God?"

Reaction

Trials in life rarely bounce off of us. We are going to react to them; the question is how? It seems strange the James would tell us to consider these as all joy. How could he possibly say such a thing?

- ✚ Please remember that our reaction is not the emotional one, but the logical one. This is something that you purpose to do. If your reaction is entirely emotional, and continues to be that way, then you do not have your emotions under control.
- ✚ How do we do that? The old saints would've answered with one word: contemplation. We are to think about our situation, and analyze it in the light of the Scriptures. Indeed, Aquinas tells us that the contemplation of the truth is one of the highest joys of the human mind. Evidently the modern Christian has some way to go to get to this point.
- ✚ So we need a method. That method begins with prayer, and ends with accepting the Lord's consolation. Have you ever considered that your trials drive you closer to God? And that that just might be a good thing?

Result

The result of these trials is described in this translation as endurance. It is a word which is almost untranslatable; patience, fortitude, power, toughness — these are all synonyms for a word that means patience. It is an active patience. Perhaps it is best described by its results:

- ✚ Maturity comes first. In our day we think of maturity as something to be despised; it is much preferable to be young. But those of us who have reached a certain state of antiquity know that maturity brings its own advantages. We have been there and done that, and experience helps.
- ✚ The second aspect is completeness. Remember the whole armor of God? Our weaknesses are gradually plated over with God's armor.
- ✚ There is also an aspect of perfection here. To say that something is perfect is to imply that it has a purpose. Thus, we have a clue that God is perfecting us for a purpose known to him, at least. Often enough, however, God doesn't share this knowledge with the person being perfected.

Wisdom

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, *being* a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

(James 1:5-8 NASB)

How God Gives

You know much about the character of a person if you know how they give. It really doesn't matter what amount they're giving, it's the style. Are they a skinflint?

- ✚ God gives generously. Indeed, he is the model of the cheerful giver that he loves so much. The arch-example of this is the cross.
- ✚ More than that, he gives to all. This is not something for the selected few, or those who are in on the mystic secret.
- ✚ Perhaps the most important characteristic of God's giving is that he does it without finding fault. If you've ever had a gift delivered with a lecture, you know why that's a blessing.

Requirement: Faith

It might seem strange that God requires faith before he gives wisdom. But there is a very good and specific reason for this: first of all, he wants your commitment. This is not a man at a convention giving out free samples. He wants you to be committed to him; more than that, to use his wisdom you will absolutely require faith.

How is that? Remember, God's wisdom is not like the wisdom of the world. For example, he just told you to react to trials and suffering with joy. Does that sound something like the advice you would get from Oprah Winfrey? It's not the world's vision, it's God's vision that must be implemented. And you're going to need faith to implement it.

Contrary Wisdom

Here's an example of what we are talking about:

But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man *is to glory* in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him.

(James 1:9-12 NASB)

The poor get to boast in their poverty? Let's look at it this way: on a football team, which players get hit the hardest? The ones on the field, or the ones on the bench? The answer is obvious. It is the way of this world that the rich have fewer trials and therefore lesser reward. They also have the problem of money; the temptation is to rely on money — something the poor really don't have the chance to do. Moreover, if you are poor it's easy to consider the lilies of the field; if you are rich, the tendency is to hire a gardener to weed them out.

Temptation

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

(James 1:13-17 NASB)

Words

This section goes a little easier if you have some definitions of some of the Greek translations.

- ✚ The word for "tempted" means exactly that. It is a different word from the word used for trials.
- ✚ The phrase that God cannot be tempted has a particular tense in the Greek. It implies that it is logically impossible for God to be tempted; the thing simply doesn't fit reality. It does not mean that it is forbidden, but impossible.
- ✚ The phrase, "no variation" is an astronomical term involving what we now called parallax. In the Greek's understanding of astronomy it would mean that God was like a fixed star.

The Nature of Temptation

Perhaps this is best understood as a process:

- ✚ It starts with our own lust. We need to understand that the problem begins within us. It is not something that God applies from the outside. If we do not have the lust, we do not have the sin. Unfortunately, lusts of all types are in abundant supply in the human being.
- ✚ The problem is not in the distance of the lust itself. It is in the giving in. To put it more directly, the problem is not temptation but what you do about it.
- ✚ The result of this is death, spiritually.

We can best understand the fact that God does not tempt anyone by understanding how we tempt others. When we tempt others, we look within ourselves for the kinds of things that tempt us. It's rather simple really; we are comfortable doing the temptation with the lust that we understand. In short, we seek a common weak spot. God has no weak spots.

God's Gifts

The gifts that God gives us reflect his eternal character. Specifically:

- ✚ They are intrinsically good. It is not possible for God to give us something which is evil. It is possible for him to permit it to come to us.
- ✚ They are perfect — this meaning in the sense of being complete and fitted for a purpose. This of course implies that God has a purpose for the Christian.
- ✚ They are eternally the same; God is eternal and does not change. So if he gave such gifts to the early church he will give the same to us.

Summary

So then, Christian, I commend to you the idea that you should rejoice in your trials. It means you're on the football field and not on the bench. But also that you should seek wisdom, asking God for it, so that at the very least you'll know the difference between the trial and the temptation. Then perhaps you can learn to accept the trial and avoid the temptation.

The Tongue - James 1:18-27

Anger

In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. *This* you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

(James 1:18-21 NASB)

Basis of Morality

In reviewing my previous series on the book of James I noticed that verse 18 was placed in the previous lesson. It occurs to me that this was not perhaps the proper placement. That verse tells us why the other verses take effect. To be specific:

- ✚ It is God who has brought us forth — and therefore we are his representatives. It is proper, therefore, to inquire how his representatives should behave.
- ✚ He did so by the word of truth. That could mean the Scriptures; it could mean Jesus himself. Either meaning is acceptable, and both of them convey the thought that God's action is of the highest importance to us. We are ambassadors of the truth.
- ✚ More than that: we are first fruits. What does that mean? Obviously it means we are the earliest fruits of God's design. More than that, the ancient Israelite would have considered firstfruits to be the best of the harvest; we are therefore the best God has to offer. And for those of us who have ever seen the first fruit available in season, we know it's the most expensive fruit. Consider therefore how precious we must be to God.

Anger Itself

As ambassadors, we are ones to speak for God. Therefore it is fitting that James should then bring up the subject of anger. He does so by giving us the preventive steps — if you will, anger management.

- ✚ We must be quick to hear. Put another way, always listening for the other guy's point of view. Consider the other point of view carefully; see if you can find some good in it. The content of an agreement is good, but the method by which you reach that agreement should be good also.
- ✚ In parallel to that we should be slow to speak. I submit it to you: much of your trouble came when you opened your big fat mouth too soon.
- ✚ Finally, we should be slow to anger. Do you see this implies that anger is not just an emotional reaction, but a state of the will? We can decide to get angry or not; it's not just something that happens.

Of course, James doesn't bring up the subject of righteous anger. So it might ask, "does man's anger ever serve God's purposes?" Please note that the question implies that you want righteousness. Often enough we are angry we don't. The question is resolved easily by looking at the actions of Jesus Christ. He did display the wrath of God — but only at those who were desecrating the temple. It was the over-righteous legalists who got the brunt of Christ's anger. Likewise, he passed over any number of other sins without the slightest bit of wrath. Prostitution, adultery, financial skulduggery — all these things did not get even the slightest rise in temperature out of Jesus Christ.

Put Aside

James tells us to put aside filthiness in wickedness. In the King James version, there is an interesting word: "superfluity." James is implying that we have plenty to put aside. So the question is how do we put aside filthiness and wickedness? His first answer involves humility — which is the right way to receive the Word. Pride is always the barrier to Christian growth Christ wants to implant the word of God in us and we should let him. How is this implanting done?

- ✚ It is done by the Holy Spirit, guiding our lives on a day-to-day basis. We are taught not quench the Spirit, and I submit that quenching it involves pride itself. In effect, you're telling the Holy Spirit that you know better than God does.
- ✚ It is done by the process of renewing your mind. This is deep to the point of mysticism, but it works. You don't just change your mind, you renew it.
- ✚ Finally, there is a role for the word "habit." If you form the habit of constant prayer and daily Scripture reading, you enable the Holy Spirit to do his work.

Hearing and Doing

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

(James 1:22-25 NASB)

The Concept of Integrity

Philosophically speaking, the word integrity varies with the environment in which it is found. A ship may have integrity, and therefore not sink. A mathematical theorem can have integrity, and therefore be true in the mathematical domain in which it was proven. But in all these areas, the word integrity shows us its meaning. It comes from the word integer. It means, fundamentally, that something is completely unified and is one. It is this "oneness" which is the core of the definition. Interestingly, the postmodern world believes that integrity is not possible with regard to moral endeavors. That's because there is no such thing as an absolute morality in their view. If there is no domain in which integrity can be defined, integrity — by definition — has no meaning.

For the Christian however, there is a rule of practice: the imitation of Christ. We may recall the Christ is God, and as the Scripture teaches us, God is one. God has the ultimate in moral integrity. If we are his imitators than our moral integrity should be flawless as well.

How Do I Do This

James tells us very directly how we achieve such integrity. The first thing you do is, "prove yourselves." To put it simply, you subject yourself to the test of integrity. Do your actions match your words and your thoughts? It's a simple test, and it may miss some of the more complicated situations in life — but it's a good first start.

Having passed that test, you now are asked to "look intently" at the perfect law. That law is found in the Scriptures of course. It's not just a nodding acquaintance that is required, but the serious

study of the word of God which is required. In that regard we should distinguish between the old law and the new law. A simple distinction can be made which is most useful: the old law curbs the hand, while the new law curbs the will. Match your will against what the Scripture commands, and you will see if you pass the test.

Results

James now makes the astonishing claim that a man who does these things will be blessed by God. He's not very specific about the blessing, so we may safely assume that it does not necessarily mean a financial blessing. I mention this because many people today have been taken in by the "prosperity gospel" movement. But the truth is really simple, as Hudson Taylor put it, "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack for God supply." There are times when this is proven in exquisite detail.

True Religion

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.

(James 1:26-27 NASB)

The Tongue

Several years ago Walter Matthau made a movie titled, "*Hopscotch*." In that movie he played an intelligence agent who was being put out to pasture — and didn't like it. His antagonist was played by Ned Beatty. The writers had a problem: both these men work for the same agency. They have the same motivations and the same experiences. How do we portray to the audience that one of them is evil and the other is good? The writers had a simple solution: Beatty's character swore constantly. Matthau's character did not swear at all. The effect was as desired.

We know it quite well: a person whose tongue is out of control is going to have serious problems. If you don't have your tongue under control, and you think you are mature Christian, then you have a problem with self-deception. It is that simple.

Orphans and Widows

This phrase was commonly used to represent those in need. The ancient Jew would have evaluated such actions based on two standards:

- ✚ The first is the kindness of the deed. We all know that good deeds done grudgingly benefit the giver and the recipient much less than they should.
- ✚ The second, of course, is the degree of trial for the person suffering.

Interestingly, James would probably have had no real concept of the charities we have today. It would be a rare (but not unknown) thing for a congregation to collect money to send elsewhere. More commonly, all the recipients would know all the givers. And the point can be made to the recipients that they are serving the givers by providing an opportunity for charity. As one wise woman put it to me once, "how can they learn to give if you will not receive?"

Unstained by the World

James references this in passing, but we need to know what he's talking about. If you are a Christian you are "in the world but not of the world." Christianity forces you to choose sides. In the plain truth is that this world system is governed by Satan and serves his purposes. We are pilgrims passing through; it is very important that we don't settle down and join the system.

This is done by the radical transformation of the mind. Your entire world view changes when you become a Christian. You begin to see with "forever eyes." When you do, you realize that you have to keep yourself away from the things of this world. Whether that is sexual sin, financial sin, arrogance or too much to drink – you need to recognize it and reject it. As the apostle John put it,

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

(1 John 2:15-17 NASB)

Our physical surroundings are of this world; we can't help that. But we can pick whose side we are on. What we can't do is sit on the fence between them. If you choose the side of Christ, there will be a very practical side of things that you should be doing to grow into a more Christ-like human being. We just have to make up our minds to do them.

Law of Liberty - James 2:1 – 13

Upon Making Distinctions

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of personal favoritism*. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

(James 2:1-4 NASB)

Kinds and Types

If you ask the average Christian whether or not his church makes distinctions between one Christian and another, he'll tell you that that it does not. A few years ago, this lesson would've cited race as an example of the kinds of distinction the church does make. But let me suggest that we are not done making distinctions between one Christian and another:

- ✚ Appearance. It may seem a subtle distinction, but it is still quite true that those who are charming in face and figure are more likely to be welcomed. It takes a conscious effort to eliminate such a subtle but prevalent distinction. If you think not, imagine someone coming in who weighed 300 pounds and was 5 foot four. Are you likely to talk to them?
- ✚ Politics. In the author's church, politics tend to be rather conservative. Ronald Reagan is revered rather than reviled. Would a liberal be comfortable in our presence?
- ✚ Respectability. It's a curious thing; an alcoholic is welcome on Friday nights at Celebrate Recovery. Perhaps we have it just so that such a person will feel welcomed. But give some consideration to the reception a prostitute would receive at our church.

In this passage James tells us that our Lord prohibits such distinctions from making a difference. How we do this varies with time; why we do it does not.

Our Glorious Lord

James gives us the reason why we are not to make such distinctions. He tells us it is "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." It's interesting to note that the word used for glory in this passage is also used in the Septuagint for the Shekinah glory of God. To a Jew of this time this would be a very serious matter. It is simply that such distinctions are contrary (and trivial) compared to the glory of God. The point is somewhat subtle, but perhaps I can use an old joke to make it clear.

Winston Churchill tells a story of a sailor. The sailor is walking by a canal one day when he notices a small boy splashing about in the canal, drowning. Thinking quickly, he leaps into the canal and rescues the young boy. About two weeks later he is walking by the canal again, with a lady comes up to him. "Are you the man who rescued my son from the canal about two weeks ago?" The sailor modestly allows as to how he is indeed the rescuer. "Good. Where's his hat?"

So perhaps you see it: it is our task give glory to Christ. Fussing about with picayune distinctions does not bring glory to Christ.

Judges with Evil Motives

The Christian is taught to, "judge not". The specific circumstances of when to judge and when not to judge relate most commonly the judgment of ourselves versus judgment of others. In attempting to decide whether or not we judge between two people, we must first remember the unity of the church. Is such judgment likely to serve and enhance the union of the church? Note that this is not a judgment for uniformity, but unity. For example, we might in Christian love intervene in a brother's life to prevent him (for example) from beating his wife. To do this we must judge him in some sense. But we do so for the benefit of the unity of the church and the glory of Christ. If we do it looking down our noses, then we've done it the wrong way. Restore the sinner gently, in prayer, with love for the glory of Christ.

How do you do that? The rule is simple: the imitation of Christ. You must ask yourself how Christ would deal with this situation. You cannot imagine that Christ would allow him to continue beating his wife. But there is also no precedent for outraged anger; Christ reserved that for the hypocrites. Think of the gentleness with which Christ dealt with the woman taken in adultery.

Rich and Poor

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin *and* are convicted by the law as transgressors.

(James 2:5-9 NASB)

All the World Is a Stage

Let's suppose you are going to a play. In this play you see knights in armor, a queen and a king. You don't really think that they recruited a live king. You know it's an actor. You might not know what the plot is, but you know that the author has one in mind. The play will proceed just as he wrote it (we hope). This is what is referred to as "suspension of disbelief." Your brain goes along with the playwright and assumes that we are watching a live king.

In Christian thought there is something similar – a "suspension of belief." When you see someone who is rich, remember that riches in this world are temporary. You don't really know that that person is rich. "Call no man happy until he dies." You do not know what God has in store for them. Permit me a brief example: my wife's father went bankrupt at the age of 95. None of us expected this, since he had been wealthy for many years. Similarly, we don't know what reward God will give those who are rich in this world when they arrive at the next. All the world is a stage, and we are just watching the actors go through their parts, ourselves included. We don't know the details of the plot, but we know that in the end the good guys win.

Temporal Versus Eternal

It is useful in Christianity to make a distinction between things which live in time and those things which are eternal. The temporary things of this world seem very large to us now, but they are

nothing compared to eternity. As a result, we are taught as a working principle that things temporal should become destined for the use of things eternal. "He is no fool if he would choose to give the things he cannot keep to buy the things he'll never lose." So it is that the rich are taught to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and share, not because money is evil but in this way they lay up for themselves riches in heaven. The point is, use what you have here to build what you want there.

There are some things which are both temporal and eternal. The most important category of these things is people. The human being is designed to live forever. Therefore, in our relations with each other we should see each other as eternal beings. For this reason, then, we want to be slow to anger and quick to forgive. If you like to hold a grudge, remember that you may have to do so through eternity — which is quite a bit longer than you had mind, I suspect.

Golden Rule

James refers to it as the "royal law." The immediate reaction we have is that this relates to Christ's authority as King of Kings. Interestingly, the meaning in the Greek is not nearly so clear. Apparently, James means several things by this expression:

- ✚ This phrase can be interpreted as "a law fit to guide a king." This might be very applicable if we remember that we are to reign with Christ.
- ✚ It can also mean a law that a king would choose. In other words, it is fitting for a king to pick this law and make it the law of his kingdom.
- ✚ It can also mean that it is the king of laws.

Law of Liberty

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, "DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY," also said, "DO NOT COMMIT MURDER." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the* law of liberty. For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:10-13 NASB)

Law in the Early, Jewish Church

The early church in Jerusalem was confronted very quickly with the problem of instructions for the Gentile Christians. The question was, does a Gentile have to become a Jew first before he can become a Christian? They correctly found that the answer was no. But, that left them with the problem: just what should the Gentile Christian do?

This might not seem like much of a dilemma to you. But remember: to the Jew there is no such thing as a collection of laws, only "the law". You'd either kept the whole thing, or you are a complete sinner. This seemed to the Jewish Christian to be insurmountable. But within the Old Testament law there obviously lurks a principle. "Do not kill" is rather absolute; the animal sacrifices at the Temple are of a different magnitude. So it is that the early church felt its way towards what James called, "the law of liberty."

Curb the Mind

The distinction is worked out rather gradually over the first 30 or 40 years of the church. Paul refers to the law as a "schoolmaster." The idea is that we were instructed by the Old Testament law, but now we've graduated. So whatever law replaces the Old Testament law must be therefore superior. One way in which it must be superior concerns legalism. If you spend your life looking for loopholes in God's law, something is wrong. But the law of liberty fixes this: the Old Testament law curbs the hand. The New Testament law curbs the mind.

How can this distinction be maintained? After all, the Jews had 1500 years of experience in trying to keep the old law. They failed, frequently. If you now substitute a law of the mind, would that not produce even worse behavior? Now you see the reason for the giving of the Holy Spirit. If we are to curb the mind and will of the Christian, we will need the mind and will of God. That's why the Holy Spirit indwells the Christian.

Judgment and Mercy

James now gives us an example of that new law. It concerns the yardstick principle: the idea that you are carrying about with you a yardstick for measuring other people. That yardstick is the one you use to measure yourself. God is just; therefore, he wants you to have only one yardstick. You're not supposed to have one for you and one for everybody else.

So what kind of yardstick do we have for ourselves? I don't know about you, but my yardstick holds that I should have a lot of mercy, I'm the life of the party and a wonderful friend be around with, and generally speaking just dancing my way into heaven. God, understanding my weaknesses, allows me to continue with this yardstick, making gentle corrections as we go. But the righteous God will insist that I have but one yardstick. He tells me to be fair; use the same yardstick both on yourself and others. This has the delightful effect of having a whole bunch of people around me who are wonderful friends, the life of the party, deserving of mercy. Even in mercy, God is just.

It is a reminder to us: blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. If we want God's mercy triumph over God's judgment for us, we must permit our mercy to triumph over our judgment for others.

Faith and Works - James 2:14-25

Readers of a certain antiquity will recall the comic strip *Peanuts*. In particular, you will recall a series of cartoons involving the Great Pumpkin. Poor Linus; he was convinced that the Great Pumpkin would arrive in the most sincere pumpkin patch. It did not matter what you believed; just as long as you were sincere. Today's Scripture talks about that:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself. But someone may *well* say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

(James 2:14-26 NASB)

It doesn't matter what you do

It doesn't matter what you do as long as your belief system is right. Most of us would not subscribe to this position, if it were put so explicitly. It's something however that we often wind up doing because we don't think about it. It is, of course, completely true that the Christian performs that which are not acts of service to mankind. In particular:

- ✚ An act of devotion¹. This is an act which brings glory to God from the devoted Christian. The world may view it as something extravagant, of little use in the world as a whole, and rather hard to understand. Worship is like that.
- ✚ Similarly, an act of praise may seem somewhat strange. What practical good does it do to sing hymns? There is an argument that there is such a good, but the world itself is not going to see it that way.
- ✚ Acts of charity, however, are universally seen as being significant indicators of what a person believes. Human beings reason that you would not perform an act of charity unless you are motivated by love – or pride. One way or the other, an act of charity is reconciled with your beliefs. So it does matter what you believe, but it also matters what you do.

That's why James asks us here, "what use is that?" If the situation calls for an act of charity, and you don't provide, what should the average human being conclude about that? That being the case, we can now take a look at some of the excuses and supposed reasons we have for doing nothing.

¹ See, for example, John 12:1-8."

"God will provide"

This is a fairly common one. It also we, personally, don't happen to have the time or money or will to provide, but we have certain faith that God will do so. The fact that he might want to do so through us seems to be somewhat elusive. In fact, there is excellent reason for avoiding this excuse:

- ✦ This is a form of testing God — which is forbidden.²
- ✦ The truth is that God will provide. There are some spectacular examples of this in the Bible.³ But it is also true that God expects us to be willing to provide.
- ✦ We don't often see it this way, but God's method is to work through us. We are to work as if everything depended on us, and to pray as if everything depended upon him.⁴

"Not Right Now"

My wife and I usually carry gift cards to a local fast food restaurant. We do this so that we will be ready to give. Often, Christians are not ready to give. This should not be

- ✦ This is a form of laziness. You know you should be charitable, but to do so means that you'll have to take the time and trouble to go and purchase some gift cards — before you need them. It is simple prudence to be prepared to give; it is laziness to omit such prudence.
- ✦ Such lack of readiness causes hardness of heart.⁵ We get used to not giving away anything, and it soon becomes habit.
- ✦ Most deadly of all, assuring yourself that you will do it later runs the risk that later will not come. You do not know the day or hour of your Lord's return — but you do know that you should be ready.⁶

"I'm a specialist"

Some of us get the idea that we're perfectly prepared to be charitable, but only to certain selected few people. We specialize in a particular type of charity, so to speak. Are we specialized in doing something, or doing nothing? Remember the story of the starfish.

It Doesn't Matter What You Believe

Sincerity As Excuse

Most of us are pretty well aware that our sincerity about what we believe is not really a good excuse for believing stupid things. In fact, this is usually a simple cover for hypocrisy. But there are some sincerely believed items which we should look at. First, have you ever had someone tell you that they sincerely believe that the Bible would have said something had it been written a little later? It's just that Paul did know about online pornography, you see (pun intended). In fact this is not hypocrisy, but blasphemy. It is quite literally taking the Lord's name in vain, saying that he would have pronounced thus and such had he but lived a little later.

² Matthew 4: 5-7

³ Genesis 22:1-14

⁴ Philippians 2:12-13

⁵ Hebrews 3:13

⁶ Matthew 24:48-51

This is not usually used to permit something, but deny it. It is a cover for legalism. As you most likely know, legalism is a form of mental laziness; it substitutes rules and regulations for the understanding of the spirit. Curiously, we have come to accept the idea that legalism is just fine as long as we are sincere about it.

Heresy and Error

There is a serious question behind this, however. There are any number of different positions held by serious Christians in one or another denomination which conflict with positions held by other denominations. Let's take an example: how often should you serve communion? The author's church serves it every week, citing the example given in the book of Acts. Other churches do it as seldom as once a year. Does this make them heretics? Or are they simply mistaken?

If you're going to answer this question, you will soon have to ask what's important in the faith and what is not. What is essential? We can look to the history of the church for this answer. How so? Simple; we look at all the things that have been called heresies so far and see whether common characteristics are. They generally fall into one of two categories:

- ✚ Items concerning the atonement.
- ✚ Items concerning either the divinity or humanity of Jesus.

These are the things that genuinely divide the church. The rest we may simply write off as simple errors. How did I get this dividing line? Simple enough; heresy is that which divides the church. How often you serve communion can be settled by a compromise at a committee meeting. Whether or not Jesus is fully divine will split the church — and has.

Why is this important? We're trying to determine whether or not it matters what you believe; when it does and when it doesn't.

Do Good Moslems Go to Heaven?

Here's an example of a question that does need an answer, and the answer is important. It also shows us the connection between whether or not our doctrine is correct (and what we do about it) and very important results. If Christianity is true, Moslems go to hell. If you believe that to be the case does your example matter? Does the small bit of charity you perform in the sight of a Moslem make a difference? Does your attitude about the major issues of the day (for example, the role of women in society) make a difference? Does what you believe make a difference?

Intellect and the Will

We Are What We Train to Be

Presuming that you now agree that your beliefs are important and should be correct as far as possible, there comes the question of how do we achieve this goal. The first step is in training the mind. This is fairly obvious; it's the reason we have sermons. The problem with it of course is that there is always less transfer of will than you think. In short, sermons are easily forgotten unless put in practice. It is also true however that well-trained Christians have an impact far beyond their numbers; ask any

Catholic about the Jesuits. It's a part of Christian maturity; we train up a child in the way in which we should go. It applies to new Christian adults as well.

We Are What We Practice

Of course, we need to put what we have learned into practice. Paul put it to Timothy this way:

You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

(2 Timothy 3:14-15 NASB)

(You might take a look at the next two verses as well, to see the context in which he said it.) This is the spiritual equivalent of physical exercise; by analogy, the church (and its classrooms) is the gymnasium of the spirit. Practice completes training. But the Christian has an additional resource of great power.

We Are What the Spirit Makes Us

One of the functions of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the things of God.⁷ This is how it is the questions can often surprise the world with what they can do. In the 19th century, in Great Britain, the smart money was on the establishment to retain slavery. After all, the Bible doesn't say you're supposed to abolish it. So the Christians will probably have nothing to say about it. But by the power of the Spirit, there arose John Newton, his story of the slave trader reformed by the Holy Spirit, and his writing of the great hymn, Amazing Grace.

Here is the genuine difference of the Christian. Therefore do not quench the Holy Spirit, but rather pray that you might accept as much as possible of his power, knowledge and wisdom.

It is the secret of the Christian life: the imitation of Christ. It is not particularly complicated; often enough it is not particularly difficult. But the world — and its ruler — will always oppose this.

⁷ 1st Corinthians 2:11-16

Learning to Teach - James 3:1-12

Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *Yet* it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison. With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh.

(James 3:1-12 NASB)

Being Not Too Many Teachers

It might seem strange that James wishes to reduce the number of teachers. But he is dealing with a known and specific problem in the church of its time. Many of the Jewish Christians felt themselves quite superior to the Gentile Christians, because they understood the Old Testament law. They therefore took up teaching the Gentiles without the gift of the Spirit. Further, there was a definite difference between the way Jewish Christians were taught and Gentile Christians were taught. Jewish Christians learned by the rabbinical method, which involves a great deal of memorization. The student was expected copy the writings of the Rabbi and thus provide his own textbook. In Greek society copying was done by professional copiers. Greeks were also accustomed to the Socratic method of teaching, which involved a good deal of question and answer between the teacher and the students. As a result, there was some difficulty in the church caused by all of these Jewish teachers. James is correcting that difficulty. Of course, he wants only the best teachers to survive the cut. He therefore stresses the difficulty of being a teacher.

How Do We Recruit Teachers?

As it happens, at this writing our church is in the process of recruiting a large number of small group leaders to increase the build community aspect of our church. I leave it as an exercise to the student as to whether or not we are approaching this the right way; but the first thing we must realize is that the Scripture clearly specifies the teachers are given the gift of teaching by the Holy Spirit:

And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues.

(1 Corinthians 12:28 NASB)

As you can tell, the standard for being a teacher is it must be a perfect man. What's interesting in here is this: the word format that James uses is actually the word for husband. The word for perfect, however, tells us what we need to know. It means to be perfected for a purpose. This implies that there is a purpose in view, and that the teacher meets it. This gift is clearly shown to be distinct from other

spiritual gifts. This does not mean that if you have that spiritual gift you are already a perfect teacher; it means you have the gift that you could be a good teacher. The Holy Spirit expects you to do your own studying.

Character of the Ideal Teacher

It's interesting that James uses the first person plural pronoun — "we" — in describing teachers. It's clear that he knows that judgment is stricter for him. This is important because we are all still sinners; please don't get the idea that perfect means sinless. It doesn't. It means perfectly fit for a purpose. James does focus on the use of the tongue as a measure of the teacher.

- ✚ One reason is fairly obvious: teachers use their tongues in the process of teaching. If you don't know what you're talking about, or you don't how to say it, or you add to what you should say with whatever comes to your mind then the tongue is being misused.
- ✚ The other reason is fairly clear too. If you have control of your speech it is generally recognized that you have good self-control. If you don't, then your self-control is lacking. So the tongue is not only a useful implement for the teacher it is also a measure of the man.⁸

The Tongue

The Power of the Tongue

One reason why teachers get into difficulty with what they say is that they under estimate the power of their own tongue. How many times have you heard someone walking out to the despairing tones of the teacher saying, "All I said was..."? We have a tendency to insist that our words be taken literally, while we read into other people's words all sorts of intent. This is neither fair nor fruitful.

Sometimes, however, the teacher says something rather the shock people. Our reaction is, "he said what?" It's something that should be avoided as much as possible, but it turns out it seems rather pleasant at the time.

The tongue does have its proper use: persuasion to righteousness. If there is a question a teacher should ask himself before he walks into the classroom, it is this: "what do I want the students to change in their life to become more righteous?" It's very difficult to know when you have arrived if you don't know where you're going.

Danger of the Tongue

Most of us recognize the danger of what it is we say as being a problem with the tongue. But it may not be so obvious to us that what we don't say — or, more likely, what they really heard — is the real danger. People tend to draw conclusions from what you say. If you do not allow for this fact your students may be leaving the classroom with some other idea that the one you started with. But they'll be thinking that's what you said. This is not good on a number of levels.

⁸ I leave to the reader the problem of whether or not women should be allowed to teach. If you decide that they should, I see no reason why the same standard would not apply.

In fact the most obscure part of the danger of the tongue is "what I should have said." Getting it right the first time is the great defense against misunderstanding. One of my master teachers told me that if I ever had a choice as to which lecture to attend, I should always attend the second one. I asked why, and he explained that the first one is rather experimental: it's where you make mistakes. The second is when you fix your mistakes, and from then on out you're bored.

Difficulty in Taming the Tongue

For those who are not eloquent, it may seem an obscure problem as to why your tongue chewing such difficulty. It is not necessarily a loose connection in the wiring of the brain. In fact, this drives right to the core of the nature of sin. Out of the heart the tongue speaks. The issue of whether or not your tongue is under control is simply an issue of your fight with sin. If this is not clear to you, I suggest that you read the entire book of Romans. Paul lays it out very nicely there.

There is another reason, however. It stems from the fact that all but the brightest of us think entirely in words. If you can't say it in English, you can't think it. This is why the liberals and American society tend to attempt to redefine words. A good example is marriage. Christians approve of marriage, and have for 2000 years. So we just change the word marriage to include homosexual unions, we automatically get the approval of the church for our homosexual unions. If you can't say it, you can't think it. If you've ever become proficient enough in a foreign language that you can think in it, you have the experience of knowing that there are some things that can't be taught in English — but are perfectly clear in, say, French. Bible teachers have the same problem when they read things that are clear in the Greek and obscure in the English. You know that St. Paul was thinking of something, but you might not be able to put it into words. A sense of due humility is required.

One last thought: the tongue is the thermometer of your spiritual life. You can fake the thermometer for a while, but if you are really whole the thermometer will read correctly. Your tongue will give a true picture of who you are.

How Then Should We Speak?

Permit me to borrow a verse from next week's lesson:

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

(James 3:17 NASB)

Pure

If you're going to be a teacher, this is a first requirement. It means that there is no hidden agenda in your teaching, that you're not trying to slip one by your students. With the students that this particular instructor has, there is no danger of this. Slipping a hidden agenda past them would be somewhat like slipping a roast past a Great Dane. But there is a more subtle problem with this. If their respect for you is great enough, and your tenure long enough, you may be tempted to slip your opinion by as being something clearly proclaimed by the Bible. Don't do this. State that is your opinion, tell them why you have concluded this. They should be intelligent enough to tell the difference, and open-minded

enough to listening to what you have to say and consider it carefully. Honesty is the best policy — just because it is.

Peaceable, Gentle and Reasonable

The word used for peaceable in this verse is related to "calm." The idea is that your speech should tend to create peace, not conflict. Do remember that inquiry is not the same thing as conflict. It is entirely possible to disagree without being disagreeable. That's the sense we're trying to get here; it is speech which tends to solve a problem rather than create one.

The word used here for gentle is also translated "moderate." It carries with it the sense of being not too rigid or too exacting. The idea is that there is a certain amount of flexibility in it. It is well known what must be insisted upon and what might be considered optional or opinion. It's usually a good idea to know this before you deliver the lesson — otherwise you will find out when it's too late.

The word used for reason means something which is useful for persuasion. A teacher must remember that he does not have the privilege of "laying down the law." He must persuade. So his words should be persuasive, and tending to persuade rather than intimidate. If you are talented enough, sometimes persuasion sounds like intimidation. You must be aware of this and avoid it as much as you can.

Full of Mercy and Good Fruits

The test of a teacher's life is not in his instruction but in his living. The word here used for mercy is the same one which James uses earlier in cautioning against telling someone to be warm and not providing anything. It means something of practical help. In short, a teacher's life should regularly feature the common aspects of Christian charity. These will often enough be directed towards his students; sometimes he will have the privilege of organizing the class to deliver such fruits to one of the members of the class. This is a form of instruction which should not be neglected. The good fruits in question are related to righteousness and all the other acts of a solid mature Christian.

Unwavering without Hypocrisy

It comes down to this: that you really believe and practice what it is you teach. You do it consistently, not just to happen to match a particular lesson.

Permit me to share with you an observation. If your life regularly features the practice of what you believe and teach, the work you do to prepare a lesson is greatly decreased. It is no secret that the teacher must be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. In my particular instance, this does not include blinding flashes from heaven. Rather, things just sort of occurred to me — things that haven't occurred to me before. But to get this leading from the Holy Spirit you must not quench the Spirit. If your life matches your teaching, the Spirit will inform you. If it doesn't, you're wasting your breath.

Wisdom and the Law - James 3:13-4:12

Wisdom Described

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and *so* lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

(James 3:13-18 NASB)

Wisdom Personified

It comes as a surprise to many readers of the Scriptures that wisdom, as a concept, is described as a person. In particular, she is described as being female. We see her as having specific functions, such as:

- ✚ (Proverbs 1) — being female implies that she is both subordinate to God (who is always described as male) and that she is a created person. Her function is shown to be speaking to the naïve, the scoffer and the fool. In a very personal reaction, she laughs at those who do not accept her.
- ✚ (Proverbs 2) — she is to be sought as if she were silver. Those who seek you find that she brings discernment from the fear of the Lord.
- ✚ (Proverbs 3) — she brings blessings: long life and peace. In this chapter it is also stated that the Lord founded the earth "by wisdom." So there is something intrinsically bound up in the universe with wisdom.
- ✚ (Proverbs 8) — by her kings reign; rulers decree justice. She is said to be the first of God's works.⁹ She is portrayed as being a master workman, rejoicing with God at the creation. What this says about the creation, I leave to the reader.
- ✚ (Proverbs 9) — perhaps this chapter will give a somewhat of a clue about wisdom. Here she is said to have carved out her house with the seven pillars. The significance of seven pillars is not particularly obvious to this particular teacher. But it made a great title for Lawrence of Arabia. Perhaps it may be said that like the church wisdom is subordinate to but greatly desires her Lord.

Wisdom Shown or Lacking

There is a difference between being wise and being smart. How do you know when you genuinely have wisdom, rather than just learning or native intelligence? One way to find this out is to look for good behavior and gentleness. The gentle spirit, behaving well, is a sign of wisdom.

What happens when you don't have that? Why is wisdom lacking in so many?

- ✚ It is caused by jealousy and selfish ambition — in short, "me first."
- ✚ You see it — in yourself or in someone else — by arrogance and by lies. Lies may even if there be those that are spoken, or those that are lived.

⁹ The word processed in verse 22 can also be translated created.

- ✦ James describes this as being earthly. That is to say, being under the control of this world ruler, Satan. If your view of life is that everything must be done in this world, and the next world is of no importance, you can be sure that your attitude is earthly.
- ✦ Sometimes this spreads to a group of Christians, even to an entire church congregation. You see this by the disorder in that congregation, and the evil nature of its members.

Nature of Heavenly Wisdom

So, just what does the opposite wisdom look like? James gives us a pretty good description here:

- ✦ First, it is pure. The wise man has no hidden agenda; what you see is what you get. It works for computers, and amazingly enough it works for human beings too.
- ✦ As you might recall from our last lesson, it is peaceable, gentle and reasonable. Just the kind of person you like to get along with.
- ✦ Life for the wise is not an untroubled paradise. They're going to need to be full of mercy, as they will encounter sin quite frequently. It's great to be merciful, but do understand that mercy comes from the position of one who has been sinned against. This merciful attitude should also show up in the fruit of your life.
- ✦ Of course, this means the wise are prohibited from engaging in hypocrisy; they must be unwavering for the truth.
- ✦ They are to be a righteous sort of folk — as shown in their peace. As we shall see later, righteousness does not thump on the Bible. Righteousness is best propagated in peace; those who spread righteousness must therefore do it in peace.

Quarrels and Humility

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; *so* you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; *so* you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

(James 4:1-10 NASB)

James now takes up the subject of why we have quarrels and conflicts. He identifies this as due to our pleasures making war. If you think about it, this makes sense. Often enough your desire for something conflicts with the desire for something else. If you've ever had to care for small children, you know that what they want varies by the minute. Some adults never grow past this, and therefore are constantly at war with themselves as to just exactly what it is they want this very minute. If they think they're good Christians, they will go to God in prayer about it.

That, of course, brings up the question of, "why doesn't God answer my prayers?" Well there are two possible answers to this:

- ✦ One reason is that you simply don't ask. The main reason that you don't ask is of course that you are ashamed to ask. All you had to do is take a look at your prayers and you realize you're asking for something you should be asking for. Did you honestly think that God is going to break up someone else's marriage so you can marry the residue?
- ✦ Some of us get past that. We do ask. We should be ashamed of ourselves for asking, because our motives are clearly not pure. What this says about her sense of shame is something we don't want publicized.

Friendship with the World

There is a fundamental decision each Christian must make: which side are you really on? If you think that this world is the complete answer, you are neglecting the kingdom of Christ. May I suggest to you that you consider the following items?

- ✦ Consider first the lilies of the field. Do you honestly think God is not capable of providing your needs?
- ✦ Perhaps even more stridently, Christ consistently offers us the option of saving our lives or losing them. Apparently, the decision to live the Christian life is more important than being a life-and-death decision. We can't do it half way.
- ✦ Which brings up the question: just how much good doesn't do for one of us to focus on this world and its goods? Is it really smart to throw away your eternal life just so you can have a better, more financially profitable life in this world?
- ✦ It would be very convenient if that question popped up in your mind as a yes no, black and white decision. It doesn't. It comes up gradually, as the worries and desires of this world choke out the spiritual life. This is what we need to be aware of.

Ultimately, there is a judgment to come. You will stand before the Lord God Almighty and give an account concerning all the things he gave you and what you did with them. I am merely suggesting that you had best have a pretty good answer for that occasion.

Draw near to God

It's a simple paradigm: the closer you are to God, the further you are away from the world. So if you're going to be successful at this, you need to know how to draw near to God. One of the keys to any successful personal relationship is having a clear understanding of who the other person is. That clear understanding is called, "humility." If you know who he is, then you will know that he tolerates no sin in his presence. For that he has provided repentance as a route back home. Even at the lowest levels — such as the Pharisee and the tax collector — it is still true that if you humble yourself, he will lift you up. He modeled that for us as servant leadership.

Judge the Law

Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge *of it*. There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

(James 4:11-12 NASB)

The Dilemma

There is a definite dilemma in the question of judgment. It is simply this: if you see evil, should you speak out against it — and run the risk of being considered judgmental? Or should you say, "judge

not" and be quiet? To understand the correct answer (which is rather subtle) we need to look at one thing first. It is the context in which this remark is made. James is speaking to the Jews, in particular those Jews who have decided that they are learned enough to teach the Gentile Christians what to do.

Notice something please: what James is doing is correcting an abuse. Let me give you an example. Suppose you're trying to teach someone how to drive, and your teaching method consists entirely of sentences that start with the word, "don't." As in, don't hit that pedestrian, don't drive on the wrong side of the road, don't do 190 miles an hour down the freeway, etc. All of those things are good things in the way of prohibitions, but no collection of them can be said to be training in how to drive a car. It's easy to correct an abuse; you identify it and prohibit it. It's hard to train someone in the right way.

That's why the early church very often held that this particular passage applying to slander. Calvin was of the same opinion. That means we're dealing with something that was at least partly false. It also meant you were dealing with one of the great items of Satan: accusation. Satan is our accuser before God; therefore we are taught not to accuse our brethren. It seems the job is already occupied. Since this deals with Satan, it involves the sin of pride — through which he fell. I leave this to the reader as a possible interpretation — but with a little more to say.

Warnings

Let's review the warnings that we are given with regard to judgment:

- ✚ First, whatever standards we use for judgment will be used on us.¹⁰
- ✚ We must beware of judgment is a form of hypocrisy.¹¹
- ✚ The weaker brother problem — as explained in Romans 14. In particular, I would draw your attention to the 13th verse. We are told not to be the stumbling block in front of our brothers because of our judgmental attitude. Recall that we are dealing with the weaker brother, the one with a more complex set of rules and regulations. This is an extraordinary leap away from judgment.
- ✚ Finally, there is the matter of waiting for the Lord to judge.¹² It is very presumptuous for us to judge, when we know the Lord will do so likewise.

As you can see, we have a fairly significant set of limitations on our own judgment.

What Should We Do

It is also very clear that we are not to remain idle and do nothing in such a situation. In particular, I would draw your attention to three particular instructions which relate to this problem of judgment:

- ✚ First, we still have an active role to play in our brothers sins. As James will tell us in the next chapter,¹³ we are to take an active part in covering the sins of our brothers. Our purpose is to restore them to fellowship with God, not to condemn them. It's all the difference between taking the sick to the hospital, and shooting a lame horse.

¹⁰ Matthew 7:1-2

¹¹ Romans 2:1-4

¹² 1st Corinthians 4:1-5

¹³ James 5:19-20

✚ In so doing, we are to speak to our brother in all kindness and gentleness — remembering that we are sinners too.¹⁴

✚ And at all times we must avoid the trap of being those who hear the law and reason upon it, but don't do anything about it. We are to be doers of the law if we are to help at all.¹⁵

I must tell you that this is rather difficult. One of the things that has been most cheering to me is the concept of waiting for the Lord to judge. I am one of those people who likes to fix things — to get things straightened out. It is comforting to hear that there are things I cannot fix and cannot straighten out in the church, and so therefore God will take care of it. In the meanwhile, walk the talk.

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:31 – 32

¹⁵ Romans 2:12-13

The Sin of Omission - James 4:13-5:6

The Mist That Is Man

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, *you ought* to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

(James 4:13-16 NASB)

God and the Universe

The Christian of our time lives in a universe rather different than his ancestors. The Christian today is seldom taught about creation, and almost never encountered the concept that God is the sustainer of the universe. We may look at this in the Scripture:

For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

(Colossians 1:16-17 NASB)

It is clearly taught here that it was through Christ that the universe was created. More than that, it is taught that Christ is the sustainer of the universe. Consider what that means when we begin to make our plans. Is it even reasonable to plan without God? I submit to you that this is the height of folly. The sustainer of all things knows who you are and knows what you are planning to do. Therefore, to plan without him — the omnipotent one — is rather foolish. But we do it all the time.

Indeed, the point was so obvious to our ancestors that they questioned the existence of free will. We need not get into Calvinism at this point, but I think we have gone to its opposite extreme. We make our plans without the slightest thought for what God would want. This is sin.

The Sin of Presumption

That's the name of the particular sin in question — presumption. It means that we make our plans without considering what God wants or what God will do. For those who claim that Jesus Christ is their Lord, this is obviously sinful behavior. Why would we do such a thing?

- ✚ One reason is that we simply forget.
- ✚ Another reason is that we think we can handle everything ourselves; no God required. A lot of our business plans are made this way.
- ✚ A third reason is that we don't want God to know what we're thinking of doing. This is like hiding an elephant.

Instead, any planning should be done with God in mind, invoking his aid. The key to this is the phrase, "if God is willing." If your plans are within the will of God, or at least you ask God that your plans may be his will, then you should be able to count upon his aid. This, of course, presumes you know what God's will is. This is one reason why you are commanded to study the Scriptures. This way, you will have a clear conception of whether or not God approves of your plans — and make appropriate adjustments accordingly.

The Sin of Arrogance

I have chosen to use the word arrogance rather than pride to describe this. Arrogance seems in our modern times the most identifiable form of pride. We brag about our past, and we boast about what we are doing and what we are going to do. Often enough, that boasting ought to give away the problem. I am reminded of the old story of the company president who wandered the aisles asking his employees, "what is 2+2?" He gets varying answers, but the punch line comes in sales. "Right now it's five boss, but in next year's plan we're gonna make it seven."

James tells us that this is evil. The word in the Greek means something that is hurtful — in particular, something that is hurtful to the individual who does it. One literal translation puts it, "sin to him it is." It's not just the effects on the rest of the world, but the effects on the individual who is doing the boasting that makes this sin.

Omission

Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.
(James 4:17 NASB)

Therefore

James now brings to us the sin of omission — when you do the right thing to do and you didn't do it. He begins this passage however with the word, "therefore." That means this is a conclusion. So why is this a sin?

- ✚ First, it causes arrogance, which is in itself a sin.
- ✚ It presumes that God will not see nor will he care about what we do. This misrepresents his character; in short, it's lying about the God we know.
- ✚ It is opposed to love, which the Scripture assures us does not boast.

The Concept of Duty

The concept of duty is not much taught these days. So permit me please to introduce you to the concept:

- ✚ Duty is, simply put, a moral obligation on the part of the Christian.
- ✚ There are two general types: those which are obligations to God, and those which are obligations to men.
- ✚ There are certain specific types of moral obligations, such as obedience to the law or to your parents.

One of the great advantages of the concept of duty is that it enables people to do things quickly, without thinking. If you know what you're supposed to do beforehand, you don't have to reason it out. This can be very advantageous if time is short.

Virtue, in Duty

One of the reasons the concept is so predominant in the military is exactly that time is usually very, very short. But even in civilian life this has its uses. For example, it is relatively common for a business to have a set policy on how to handle particular situations. You do things according to the policy, things go right. Christians have much the same aspect. If you have a duty known to all Christians, not only do you have a clear guidance but you also have support available. Every other

Christian realizes which are duty is, and is obliged to assist you as they well might be able to. A further advantage is this: you don't need to be Albert Einstein to figure this out. Duty can be made plain even to the dumbest questions.

So what happens if you don't do your duty? That is called "a sin of omission." James now gives us an example of that.

Example: the Rich

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, *and* which has been withheld by you, cries out *against you*; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous *man*; he does not resist you.

(James 5:1-6 NASB)

Duty of the Rich

Perhaps comes as a surprise to you, but there is a specific duty of the rich person who is a Christian. Paul summarizes it very succinctly in his first letter to Timothy:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. *Instruct them* to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

(1 Timothy 6:17-19 NASB)

Now you have it. We may break this into three points:

- ✚ Don't be arrogant. We have seen that arrogance is indeed a sin; unfortunately for the rich, they are the most susceptible to it. Being rich is not an unmixed blessing.
- ✚ Trust in God, not in your money. God permitted you to become rich; but still he is the giver of all things. Remember that.
- ✚ Be rich in good deeds. You have the money, be generous with it. If you see your brother in need, be willing to share. He is no fool if he would choose to give the things he cannot keep to buy what he can never lose.

The Indictment

It's interesting how James at this point tears into the rich. He evidently has some specific set of rich people in mind, but we have no historical record of who they might be. That said, we might look today and see if there is anything similar.

- ✚ The first accusation is that of depriving the worker of his pay. The Greek in this sentence means to hold back wages by fraud. We don't have to look far for this one. It is a common place in that that a Mexican migrant is given a day laborer job — and at the end of the day is not paid for it. He is told that he can go to the police if he likes; of course, this might mean being deported. What ever you think of illegal immigration, is not the laborer worthy of his hire?

- ✚ The second aspect concerns your lifestyle. If you live for pleasure, you live your life for yourself, not for Jesus Christ.
- ✚ The third charge is that of condemning and killing the righteous. Obviously, this is most significant. Most of us would not recognize any such charge against ourselves. But consider that most of our goods are now made in countries overseas – which often have little to no safety protection for workers. Is this a matter of which the Christian should concern himself with?

Some interpreters see that last accusation as referring to Christ. This is a possibility, but it behooves us to examine the Scriptures with a light to improving ourselves.

Last Days

The real problem for the rich seems to be this: they did all this in the last days. The early church was quite convinced that the return of Christ to be quite soon, which of course shows they didn't know any more about it than we do. But the truth is Christ could return at any time. Let me ask you: what if he find you in your heart? What if he finds you living in luxury and pleasure while your Christian brother starves? Do you really think he will simply overlook that?

While You're Waiting - James 5:7 – 20

Preface

It must be acknowledged that the subject of the second coming of Christ is not much taught in our home church these days. It is now fashionable to consider this to be something which is not immediately relevant to the Christian's life. Therefore, it may be safely ignored. But perhaps we might venture to bring forward three points which may explain why James put such emphasis on it:

- ✚ First, the early church universally considered the return of Christ to be imminent. It is a subject of every major writer in the New Testament. It was considered not only to be imminent, but extremely important — particularly with regard to what you should do between now and his return.
- ✚ It is also universally stated that his return will be swift and unexpected.
- ✚ Finally, he will return in power to judge the living and the dead. When he does so, it is too late to repent.

So you see that it's simply a matter of heaven and hell; nothing more important than that.

Patience

James 5:7-12 NASB Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. (8) You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. (9) Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right At the door. (10) As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (11) We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and *is* merciful. (12) But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.

The Farmer Waits

As any grandparent knows, human beings are not born with a great deal of patience. It is a learned skill. The most difficult type of waiting in patience is that to which you have no sign of what is to come. Consider this simple farmer here: how is it that he can wait patiently? Is it not because he has experience with agriculture, and therefore knows what is going to happen? Indeed, he will see signs along the way of what is coming up from the ground. To be more specific:

- ✚ The farmer waits in reasonable hope. A logical man knows that the corn is going to grow; the fact that it is not yet grown is not particularly discouraging. Similarly with the Christian, we see signs along the way of the maturity in our Christian faith.
- ✚ The farmer waits for results. If I might suggest, he knows that those results are first real and not wishful thinking. He also knows that those results are the right ones; if you plant wheat, you get wheat. Finally — to make three R's out of the thing — the results will be rich. Seed grain typically reproduces itself on the order of 30 to a hundredfold. Likewise, in our Christian lives, we see results as we go along which are real. If we do it right, they are righteous. And those who have achieved maturity in Christ knows the riches of his blessings.
- ✚ What is the result we came for? Simply this: to hear our Lord say, "well done, good and faithful servant."

(I am indebted to C. H. Spurgeon for the three points above.)

Don't Complain

It does seem unreasonable to be told not to complain. We do seem to get a lot of fun out of it. But James points out the drawbacks here:

- ✚ First, it leads to judgment. It's very difficult to complain about someone without being judgmental, eventually. And if you judge, you will be judged.
- ✚ Worse, in doing this you steal from Christ in his authority of judgment. And just which judge is coming soon?

It is just possible that being told not to do something lacks a certain bit of education. The usual response is, "just what is it that you wanted me to do, then?" The answer from James is: imitate those found in the Old Testament who exhibited patience in the suffering. He cites the arch example: Job.

Do Not Swear

To understand what James is talking about, we need to review the matter of the oath. An oath simply is a formal declaration in which you invoke the aid of Almighty God. In so doing, you declare yourself willing to accept punishment at God's hands if you fail to deliver. The ancient human being took this most seriously; much effort was given to devising oaths which were not in fact binding, but sure sounded like it. You might remember Christ's complaint to the Pharisees about swearing by the Temple or swearing by the gold on the Temple. This is not a good habit to get into. Here's why:

- ✚ You might be making promises you can't keep. And you're asking God to be your insurance policy that they will happen. He might take exception to this practice and discipline you for it.
- ✚ Worse, you might be issuing a condemnation which obliges God to act on your behalf — which you have no right to do. This type of oath usually starts with the phrase, "God damn." Did you know that was an oath?

The secret to avoiding this is simple: be so honest that people trust your yes to be yes and your no to be no. Then you don't need an oath.

Praise and Prayer

James 5:13-18 NASB Is anyone among you suffering? *Then* he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. (14) Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; (15) and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. (16) Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. (17) Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. (18) Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

Response to Suffering

It seems intuitively obvious to the casual observer that the natural response to suffering is prayer. After all, you believe that the Lord God Almighty is capable of changing things — and you have something you want to be changed. Of course, in the process you will be giving policy advice to God. This is not particularly wise. But there are certain items you should pray for, which are given as examples in the Scripture:

- ✦ You can pray for rescue — as David often did, evidenced in the Psalms. It's perfectly okay to ask God to get you out of this mess. The problem comes when you tell him how.
- ✦ You can also pray for strength. If you're suffering as Job did, you're going to need it. God knows that; just let him deliver it in his own way.
- ✦ You should always pray that you know that he is God.

Why should you pray that last one? Consider the example of Manasseh, one of the worst Kings Israel ever had. His evil practices got him deported — and then he repented:

2 Chronicles 33:12-13 NASB (12) When he was in distress, he entreated the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. (13) When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD *was* God.

I hope you see the point; sometimes your suffering is to bring you back to God.

Singing Praise

The modern worship service treats singing as a way to warm up the audience for the main act — the preacher. Because of this, our worship services often resemble a rock concert. But this is not the real use of singing praise. Several hundred years ago Athanasius wrote to one of his students (Marcellinus) to tell him that in chanting of the Psalms one was always closest to God. Why? Because only when singing are you praising God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength. All of you praises all of him.

If prayer is the right response to suffering, then praise is the right response to joy. When God has blessed you it is appropriate to say thank you. This lifts you when you do it alone; but it is magnified when you do it with other Christians. Those who understand this find it hard to explain; but there are moments in worship when we are praising God that the soul reaches for the sublime limits.

Prayer for the Sick

We must begin this section with a warning. Of all of the formal practices of the New Testament, this is the one that is most subject to fraud by televangelists. Sending in your contributions to receive a vial of holy anointing oil is a practice that goes back to the early days of radio. The combination of having a scriptural proof and good marketing organization seems to be irresistible. You have been warned.

However, it is quite the case that this practice was performed by the apostles and the early church. They considered it normal. The major difference is that we think it is scientifically bogus. They did not have our concept of science. Since they didn't know that this was impossible they went ahead and did it anyway, and it worked. We might ask why this is so.

One major reason for this is that as part of the process of anointing they required confession of sin. It is a sad difficulty with the fact that the Geneva Bible added verses and chapters; it made the Bible much easier to quote out of context. Televangelists will quote verses 13 through 15, and cheerfully forget verse 16. The whole question of suffering because you have sinned is tied up in this. Do not pretend to sweet innocence when you're suffering has been caused by your own sin. Rather, confess

your sin and receive the anointing of the church – so that what has been bound in heaven will be bound in earth.¹⁶

Multitude of Sins

James 5:19-20 NASB My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, (20) let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mission of the Church

Perhaps we should begin with a review of just exactly what the mission of the church is:

- ✚ First, we are to convert people to Christianity.
- ✚ Second, we are to teach them what the apostles taught.
- ✚ Third, we are to keep them safe within the church.

If you do this, they go to heaven. If you don't, they go to hell. It's that important. These two verses address the third bullet: keeping them safe within the church.

Technical Side Note

The verses here are capable of being interpreted in two ways:

- ✚ First, there is the Roman Catholic interpretation: covering your sins helps save me.
- ✚ Second, there is the interpretation of pretty much everyone else: covering your sins helps save you.

The Greek can be interpreted in either fashion, though the bulk of Scripture seems to argue for the second interpretation. But both points are worth a thought; at the very least God will reward you for turning someone else from the error of his way. It's just possible that James meant this passage to be ambiguous.

Covering Sin

Please remember that James is writing to the Jews. The model he will use for covering sins, at least mentally, is that of the Ark of the Covenant. If you recall, inside the ark were the Ten Commandments, the pot of manna and Aaron's rod. A little research to the Old Testament will tell you that all three of these things are witnesses to the sins of the people of Israel. They are inside the box, covered by what is called the atonement cover. The cover is gold; it is sanctified with blood. I leave to the reader the symbolic significance of that; the key point is that in terms that the people of that time understood this cover prevented God from seeing the sins of Israel. What James is telling us is that our ministry to other sinners performs the same function. It covers over the sins.

Now you begin to see that we are indeed "my brother's keeper." It is the responsibility of the Christian, particularly the mature Christian, to turn others back from sin. This should be done gently, and always in the spirit that knows we are sinners too. But it should be done.

¹⁶ Matthew 18:15-19