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• EAST AFRICA •

JAMES

by

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The book of James was probably written by the half-brother of Jesus, and most scholars consider it to have been probably the first New Testament book written. The book contains many parallels with the teachings of Jesus. The book concentrates on what is necessary for us to live as we should. It discusses many of the most important issues of life, including: testing, trials, and temptations; prayer; the sin of partiality; the nature of true, living faith; control of the tongue; wisdom from above versus wisdom not from above; indwelling sin and its outward manifestations; the sin of autonomy and its outward manifestations; and true faithfulness.

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I. Introduction

A. *Author*

The book of James claims to be written by “*James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (**Jas 1:1**). Carson and Moo point out that “the lack of elaboration points to a well-known James” (Carson and Moo 2005: 621). The most well-known persons of that name in the Bible and in the early church were the apostle James and James the brother of Jesus. The apostle James was martyred in approximately AD 44, which is probably too early a date for the letter itself. The probable author therefore is James the brother of Jesus, which is the traditional view and the view of the majority of biblical scholars (Eusebius 1988: 78-79 [*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.25]; Carson and Moo 2005: 621-26). “Corroborating this decision are the striking similarities between the Greek of the Epistle of James and that of the speech attributed to James in Acts 15:13-21” (Carson and Moo 2005: 622).¹

B. *Date*

While there is dispute concerning when the book was written, it is probably a relatively early NT book. Harold Lindsell notes, “If the traditional identification of the author is correct, the letter must have been written before A.D. 62, the date of the martyrdom of James. Some hold it to be the first New Testament book to be written, around A.D. 45.” (Lindsell 1971: 1822) Most scholars who accept that James the brother of Jesus is the author conclude that the book was written in the mid-late AD 40s, before the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 which took place in AD 49 or 50 (see Carson and Moo 2005: 627; *Africa Study Bible, New Living Translation* 2016: 1841; *Life Application Study Bible, New International Version* 1986: 2243; *New American Standard Bible* 1995: 1159).

C. *Parallels with the teaching of Jesus*

James has multiple thematic parallels with the teaching of Jesus, particularly as recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. In some cases there also are substantial verbal similarities:

James	Matthew	Luke	Subject
1:2	5:12		rejoicing in trials
1:4	5:48		being perfect
1:5; 4:2-3	7:7	11:9	ask and you will receive
1:12	5:11-12; 24:13	6:22-23	enduring trials
1:19-20	5:22		against anger
1:22-25; 2:14-17	7:24-27	6:46-49; 11:28	being doers of the Word
2:5	5:3	6:20	the kingdom belongs to the poor
2:8	22:36-40	10:25-28	loving your neighbor
2:13	5:7		the results of mercy
3:12	7:16-18	6:44	the fruit of the tree
3:18	5:9		being peacemakers
4:4	6:24	16:13	against divided loyalty toward God
4:8	5:8		purity of heart and nearness to God
4:9		6:21, 25	those who laugh will mourn
4:10	23:12	14:11; 18:14	the humble will be exalted
4:11-12	7:1-2	6:37	against judging others
5:1		6:24	woe to the rich
5:2-3	6:19-20	12:33	do not hoard wealth
5:9	24:33		the judge is at the door
5:12	5:33-37		on oaths: let your yes be yes and your no be no

D. *Outline*

Different authors have proposed various outlines of the book of James based on their views of the books themes and structure (see Martin 1988: xcvi-civ). James has a discernible structure. The short, pithy sayings (aphorisms, maxims) of chapter 1 are elaborated in subsequent chapters.² Chapters 2-5, at least in a general way, are in the reverse order of the sayings in chapter 1 to which they correspond. The integrating apex of the book is

¹ For more on the identity of James, see the discussion below on **James 1:1**.

² “Chapter one functions as something of a ‘table of contents’ for the treatise, or as an ‘overture’ of its themes” (Johnson 1995: 15). Ralph Martin similarly states, “Chap. 1 holds the key to the letter’s structure and sets out the basic issue to be faced: how in human existence to fulfill its goal and find its dignity?” (Martin 1988: cii).

3:13-18, “the wisdom from above,” which is what is necessary for us to live as we should. Further, the book uses an alternating series of contrasts between the positive ways in which we should live and the negative (sinful) ways in which we tend to live. The book therefore may be outlined as follows:

1:1-27—Introduction of all the major themes: positive

- Sender and addressees (1:1)
- Testing, trials, and temptations (1:2-4, 12-15)
- Wisdom, grace, and prayer (1:5-8, 16-18)
- The rich and the poor (1:9-11)
- The tongue (1:19-20, 26)
- True faithfulness (1:21-27)

2:1-13—The sin of *partiality* (see 1:9-11): negative

2:14-26—Living/working *faith* (see 1:22-27): positive

3:1-12—The sin of the *uncontrolled tongue* (see 1:19-20, 26): negative

3:13-18—The *wisdom from above* vs. the wisdom not from above (see 1:5-8, 16-18): positive

4:1-4—*Indwelling sin* and its outward manifestations: quarrels; conflicts; fighting; murder; adultery, i.e., signs that you do *not* have the wisdom from above (see 1:13-15): negative

4:5-10—How to *seek* God’s grace and *obtain* the wisdom from above (see 1:2-4, 12): positive.

4:11-5:6—The sin of *autonomy* and its outward manifestations: judgmentalism; presumption; and materialism, i.e., signs that you have *not* humbled yourselves or submitted to God (see 1:9-11, 14-15, 20-21): negative

5:7-20—Concluding exhortations which again address the major themes, except the rich/poor issue, which was dealt with in 5:1-6: positive

- Testing, trials, and temptations—5:7-11, 13 (see 1:2-4, 12-15)
- The tongue—5 :9, 10, 12, 16 (see 1:19-20, 26)
- Prayer—5:13-18 (see 1:5-8)
- True faithfulness—5:19-20 (see 1:21-27)

II. Jas 1:1-27—Introduction of all the major themes

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

“*James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Assuming that James the brother of Jesus wrote this epistle, we know several important things about him:

- His actual name is Jacob (that is how it is spelled in the Greek NT); it became James as a result of translation into various European languages.
- He was one of Jesus’ half-brothers (**Matt 13:53-55; Mark 6:3; Gal 1:19**), probably next in line after Jesus because he is listed first in **Matt 13:55** and **Mark 6:3**.³ He is also the brother of Jude, author of the

³ The Bible frequently states that Jesus had at least four brothers (James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas are named) and at least two sisters (see **Matt 12:46-47; 13:53-56; Mark 3:31-32; 6:3; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor 9:5; Gal 1:19**). Because of their view that Mary was a perpetual virgin, Roman Catholics hold that Jesus’ brothers were actually his cousins. However, “the only passage where the bothers of Jesus are not conjoined with His mother is John 7:3, 5, 10. The conjoined mention of the mother of Jesus appears to imply that children of the same mother are meant.” (Zodhiates 1993: “*adelphos*,” 80) Further, the fact that Jesus was the oldest of actual “brothers” (not cousins) is “supported by the *prima facie* meaning of ‘first-born’, *prōtotokos*, in Lk. ii. 7. It is unlikely that Luke would have used this word, if he had known that Mary had not given birth to other children, for the word *monogenes* (used in Lk. vii. 12, viii. 42 of ‘only’ children) lay ready to hand. We should also note that the natural implication of the words in Mt. i. 25 ‘knew her not till she

epistle of Jude (**Jude 1**; see also **Matt 13:55** [the Greek for Jude is “Judas”]).

- During Jesus’ ministry on earth, James and the other brothers did not believe in him (**Mark 3:21**; **John 7:5**). However, James was changed when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (**1 Cor 15:7**).
- James was present with the disciples in the upper room on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 1:14**) and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (**Acts 12:17**); he played a key role at the important Council of Jerusalem, by apparently chairing the Council and announcing its judgment (**Acts 15:13-29**). He was known as one of the “pillars” of the church (**Gal 2:9**).
- James’s reputation grew, and he became known as “James the Just” (Eusebius 1988: 76 [*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.4, 7]).
- He was martyred in AD 62 by being stoned to death after having been pushed off the pinnacle of the temple (Eusebius 1988: 77 [*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.11-16]; Josephus 1987, *Ant.*: 20.9.1).

“To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.” James is a Christian (**Jas 1:1; 2:1**) and is writing to Christians (see **Jas 5:14** and his reference to calling for “*the elders of the church*”). However, James was raised as a Jew and was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. In light of these factors, there are two main views concerning who “*the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*” refer to: Jewish Christians who were living outside of Palestine, or all Christians (Jews and Gentiles).

1. Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine. Some reasons point to the primary recipients of the epistle as being Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine.

- **Acts 11:19** speaks of apparently Jewish Christians who were “scattered” outside of Palestine. In **Jas 1:1** the word “dispersed” (*diaspora*) in Greek is the noun form of the word “scattered” in Acts. That is the same way *diaspora* is used in **John 7:35**.
- When **Jas 2:2** speaks of the “assembly” of Christians, the literal word used is “synagogue.”
- Throughout the book, James draws on OT examples, metaphors, and allusions, suggesting that his readers were familiar with the OT.

2. All Christians (Jews and Gentiles). Other reasons suggest that the primary recipients were all Christians, regardless of whether their ethnic background was Jewish or Gentile.

- “The twelve tribes” does not necessarily indicate Jewish-Christians but indicates that “the author looks on the recipients of the epistle as the true Israel. The church has quite naturally appropriated the title, for it was the work of the Messiah to reestablish the twelve tribes (Je. 3:18; Ezk. 37:19-24; Pss. Sol. 17:28), and Christians recognized themselves as the true heirs of the Jewish faith (Romans 4; 1 Cor. 10:18; Gal. 4:21-31; Phil. 3:3).” (Davids 1982: 63; see also Moo 1985: 58)⁴
- The term *diaspora* (“those dispersed abroad”) similarly “had a metaphorical sense, characterizing Christians generally as those who live away from their true heavenly home (1 Peter 1:1)” (Carson and Moo 2005: 628; see also **Heb 11:13; 13:14; 1 Pet 1:17; 2:11**).
- The use of OT examples, metaphors, and allusions is not unusual, since all biblical writers draw on such material inasmuch as the OT is the foundation for the NT. Even the use of “synagogue” in **Jas 2:2** does not necessarily suggest meetings of Jewish Christians, since in **Rev 2:9** and **3:9** Jesus uses that term when addressing the church as a whole.
- “If the ‘twelve tribes’ must refer to ethnic Israel, then it is unclear how it can refer only to Jews who happen to be Christians [since nothing is said about the ‘twelve tribes’ being Christians]. Logic demands that we either understand the term as referring only to all Jews, or else we understand the term symbolically.” (Nystrom 1997: 38) Since the context of the entire book clearly is directed to Christians, not Jews, the “twelve tribes” must be a symbolic or metaphorical description of the church as a whole, not an ethnically-based subset of the church.
- The message of James is equally applicable to all Christians in all times and places. The fact is that nothing in the message of James—either explicitly or implicitly—is limited to Jewish Christians or differentiates between Jewish versus Gentile Christians. Instead, the entire book is equally applicable to all Christians, regardless of their ethnic background or location. This flows from the fact that, in Christ, “*there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (**Gal 3:28**; see also **Col 3:11**).

had brought forth her firstborn son’ is that, after that birth, normal marital relationships followed and other children were born.” (Tasker 1982: 22-23)

⁴ Christ and the church as fulfilling the OT and as constituting the new, true, faithful Israel are discussed at length in Menn 2016: 26-93.

The book is a very practical source of wisdom and practice for believers of every background.

1:2-4—² *Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,* ³ *knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.* ⁴ *And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

James begins the substance of his epistle by raising one of the most important issues we all face: the testing of our faith by the trials and temptations we endure and how we respond to them. There are certain important aspects of this issue raised in these verses.

1. The Greek word translated as “trials” (*peirasmos*) can also be translated as “temptations.” Zodhiates explains the difference: “Trial, temptation, a putting to the test, spoken of persons only. When God is the agent, *peirasmos* is for the purpose of proving someone, never for the purpose of causing him to fall. If it is the devil who tempts, then it is for the purpose of causing one to fall.” (Zodhiates 1993: “*peirasmos*,” 1135) Marshall, Travis, and Paul elaborate this: “The ‘trials’ to which he refers are not necessarily open persecution, but any kind of pressure which tempts a believer to give up on faith, for example illness or tragedy, harassment from non-Christian neighbours, the difficulty of maintaining Christian values in a hostile world. Such trials are not traps set for us by God, but may come from our sinful human nature or from the devil (1:13-16; 4:7). But to endure such testing promotes growth toward maturity and in the final reckoning wins ‘the crown of life’ (1:4, 12; 5:7-11).” (Marshall, Travis, and Paul 2002: 257)

2. The context of **vv.2-4** indicates that the proper translation here is “trials.” This is seen when we consider our *attitude* toward the hardships and tests we face and the *result* of enduring such hardships and tests. Our attitude is to “*consider it all joy*” when we fall into various trials. Note that James says “when” we fall into various trials, not “if” we fall into various trials. Hardship and trials are universal. Therefore, when pressures and bad circumstances beset us, we should not think that God has abandoned us or that we are being punished for sins or that if we only had more faith we would not face such hardships. On the contrary, Jesus himself faced all kinds of hardships and said, “*In the world you will have tribulation*” (**John 16:33**, ESV). Consequently, we should understand that the problems we face are not unique but are themselves *the very evidence that God is working in our lives to reveal and refine our faith in order to conform us into the image of Jesus Christ!*

The reason why we can face our trials with joy is found in **vv.3-4**: we “know” that God is sovereign and is using the trials to “test our faith” in order to produce *endurance* which will result in our being “*perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*”⁵ The word translated “endurance” is *hupomonē* which “refers to that quality of character which does not allow one to surrender to circumstances or succumb under trial” (Zodhiates 1993: “*hupomonē*,” 1425). The word translated “perfect” is *teleois* which refers to “one who has attained moral maturity, the goal for which he was intended, namely, to be a man obedient to Christ” (Zodhiates 1993: “*teleois*,” 1372). In other words, God uses the trials in our lives to turn us into mature people of deeply steadfast character who, like Jesus himself, can repeatedly face the worst circumstances of life with a spirit of joy, hope, peace, and love. One can therefore look at these verses as an important way in which God develops the “fruit of the Spirit” in us (see **Gal 5:22-23**). What James is saying is similar to what Paul says in **Rom 5:3-5** and what Peter says in **1 Pet 1:6-9**.

3. The issue of trials and temptations runs through the entire book. The entire book may be seen as an outworking of the above three verses. Thus, the “wisdom” of **Jas 1:5** relates back to the “knowing” of **v.3**. The discussion of the rich and the poor in **vv. 9-11** occurs in the context of dealing with trials (both poverty and wealth are temptations or trials that test one’s faith). **Jas 1:12-15** then specifically raises the issue of trials and temptations again. Further, as noted in the introduction, the rest of the book repeats and elaborates the issues raised in **James 1**. The entire book, in essence, is about what real faith looks like—and real faith ultimately is only seen when it has been tested by trials and temptations.

⁵ We might take comfort when we face persecution explicitly because of our faith, like the apostles in **Acts 5:40-41**. However, trials truly become “testing of our faith” when we are diagnosed with cancer, are severely injured in an accident, or other suffering strikes us *for no discernible reason whatsoever*. In those circumstances, our faith is put to the test because we can only “*walk by faith, not by sight*” (**2 Cor 5:7**).

1:5-8—⁵ *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.* ⁶ *But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.* ⁷ *For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord,* ⁸ *being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

The words “but” and “lacks” connect these verses to **vv.2-4**. They show us that the key to successfully enduring and overcoming trials and temptations is *wisdom*. Wisdom is key because wisdom goes beyond knowledge: wisdom combines both knowledge and application. Wisdom is “knowing” (**v.3**) that God is behind the trials and is using them for our ultimate good and also shows us *how to cope* with our trials and temptations. It gives us a clear view of our situation *from God’s perspective*, not from our perspective which may be warped and distorted because of our pain and suffering. With wisdom we perceive that our misfortune, whatever its source, is an opportunity for God to bring about his purposes in our life.

These verses also tell us that the provision for being able to successfully deal with our trials and temptations is God himself. He is the one who “*gives to all generously*” (**v.5**). Further, we know that God is the one who provides for our need for wisdom because he is the source of wisdom (**Job 12:13; Prov 2:6; Isa 11:2; Luke 21:15; 1 Cor 2:13; Eph 1:16-19; Col 2:2-3; 3:16; Jas 3:17**).

The “faith” with which we must ask (**v.6**) is not “faith in the power of prayer” or “faith in the power of faith.” Faith is not some kind of magical “power.” Rather, biblical faith essentially is trust in God and committing one’s life in obedience to God through Christ in reliance on what he has said. Thus, in the OT, one set of Hebrew word groups for faith or belief describe the concept of “regard for or confidence in someone or something [i.e., God]”; another set of Hebrew words which describe the same concept “are much more frequent in the Hebrew Bible but are usually translated ‘to trust’ rather than ‘to have faith/believe.’” Thus, “Abram’s willingness to trust God . . . makes him a primary example of the biblical concept of faith. His willingness to believe and obey God is the fulfillment of the covenant that God had made with him.” (Schowalter 1993: 222) The NT’s concept of faith is similar, the primary difference being that the object of one’s faith is Jesus Christ. Thus, the language of faith is used “both for the practical recognition of Jesus’ supernatural authority and also for the appropriate response to the gospel which he came to proclaim” (France 1992: 223). This tells us that there is a stability and constancy about real faith that is not dependent on and does not fluctuate with one’s outward circumstances but is based on a living relationship with the Lord.

This stability and constancy of faith is indicated by their opposite—“doubt.” James characterizes the doubter as being “*like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind . . . a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways*” (**vv. 6, 8**). In other words, such a person is up one day and down the next, driven by external circumstances not inward confidence and conviction. Douglas Moo explains, “What James criticizes in these verses is not the person who has occasional doubts about his or her faith, or lapses into sin now and again—few indeed would ever have prayers answered were that the case! Rather, James castigates the person who is basically insincere in seeking for things like wisdom from God; the person who is seeking to serve two different masters at the same time (see Matt. 6:24; James 4:4).” (Moo 1989: 1154) Ronald Ward puts it like this, “*Doubting* is not disbelief or philosophical skepticism. Its characteristic is an inner cleavage. The doubter both affirms and denies; he clings to the promise—and is sure it will not be fulfilled.” (Ward 1970: 1224) It is the trials and temptations we face that both reveal the state of our faith and that serve to increase our faith and trust in the Lord as he works in and through us in our trials and temptations.

1:9-11—⁹ *But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position;* ¹⁰ *and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.* ¹¹ *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.*

This discussion of the rich and the poor also arises in the context of perseverance under trials—here regarding people in different economic circumstances. Poverty itself can always be a difficult trial. Yet being wealthy also is a trial; wealth brings with it the great temptation to divide our loyalties. The sentiment expressed here is similar to **Prov 30:8-9**: “*Give me neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is my portion, that I not be full and deny You and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or that I not be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God.*” The key, as indicated in **Jas 1:9-11**, is to focus on the Lord and one’s eternal state, not on one’s outward economic circumstances. James is saying essentially what Christ said in **Matt 6:19-21**: “¹⁹ *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.* ²⁰ *But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do*

not break in or steal; ²¹ for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Douglas Moo puts it this way: “James, then, exhorts both the poor and the rich Christian to remember that the sole basis for their confidence is their identification with Jesus Christ. . . . Both Christians, in other words, must look at their lives from a heavenly, not an earthly, perspective.” (Moo 1985: 69)

1:12-15—¹² *Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.* ¹³ *Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.* ¹⁴ *But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.* ¹⁵ *Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*

In these verses James explicitly returns to the theme of **vv.2-4**. However, **v.12** goes beyond **v.4** regarding the rewards of remaining faithful while under trial by introducing the element of future reward—the “*crown of life*”—that those who persevere will receive. That is consistent with the James’s emphasis in **vv.9-11** that people need to keep their focus on their eternal state, not on their temporal economic state.

Jas 1:13-15 is a profoundly important analysis of the nature of temptation and sin. These verses reveal a number of important points:

1. In **v.12**, the word translated as “trial” (*peirasmos*) is the same word used in **v.2**; in **vv.13-14**, the words translated as “tempted” and “tempt” (*peirazō*) is the verbal form of that same Greek word. The context indicates that the proper translation in **v. 12** is “trial” and in **vv.13-14** the proper translation is “tempted.” However, even though the same words are used, in **vv.2** and **12** external circumstances are being referred to, but in **vv.13-14** internal desire is being referred to.
2. These verses reveal that the true origin of sin—and the true origin of temptation itself—lie *within us*. Our external circumstances, other people, and Satan himself continually are giving us opportunities to demonstrate faithfulness or to sin. But even powerful circumstances combined with persuasive people working in concert with Satan himself cannot spiritually endanger us *unless and until we make Satan’s suggestions our own*. Temptation is internal, not external. Two people may be confronted with the same external circumstances, but one sins and the other does not. For example, a poor person in great need sees an unguarded wallet; whether he steals it or not is based entirely on whether or not he is “carried away and enticed by his own lust.” A lonely, married, businessman far from home meets an attractive woman who wants to go to bed with him; whether he sleeps with her or remains faithful to his wife depends entirely on whether or not he is “carried away and enticed by his own lust.” James is telling us that the popular phrase, “the devil made me do it,” is not true. The devil cannot make us do anything that we choose not to do. We ourselves are responsible for everything we do, and God legitimately can hold us accountable for our actions. In essence, James is saying what Jesus said in **Matt 15:19**, that “*out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.*”
3. The word translated as “lust” in **vv.14-15** is *epithumia*. Although the word “lust” often has a sexual meaning, that is not its primary meaning here. *Epithumia* basically means to “desire greatly, strong desire, longing”; particularly when used in a bad sense it means “irregular and inordinate desire, appetite, lust” (Zodhiates 1993: “*epithumia*,” 627). In essence, these verses are telling us that we always and only do *what we most desire*. For example, if our employer tells us that we have to lie about something or we will lose our job, if we lie it is not because we were “forced against our will” to lie but because we desired to keep our job rather than to be a person of integrity and tell the truth. If, during the genocide in Rwanda, we were told to kill someone and if we did not do so then we ourselves would be killed, if we kill the person it is because we desire to live more than we desire to obey God’s command, “*You shall not murder*” (**Exod 20:13**). When opportunity (our circumstances) meets desire, then conception occurs. The conception of sin always brings forth death.

This pattern has been the case since the very first human beings (Adam and Eve) committed the very first sin (eating the forbidden fruit): When Eve “*saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate*” (**Gen 3:6**). In other words, they desired to eat the fruit for the benefits they thought they would get more than they desired to trust and obey God. That always is the way. We sin because we want to.

1:16-18: ¹⁶ *Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.* ¹⁷ *Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.* ¹⁸ *In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.*

Verse 16 applies both to vv.14-15 and to vv.17-18. Those four verses show strong contrasts:

vv.14-15	vv.17-18
Temptation = being carried away and enticed by his own lusts	Every good thing and every perfect gift comes from the Father
Lust—conceives and gives birth to sin	He—brought us forth by His will and by the word of truth
Sin brings forth death	We would be first fruits among His creatures

The characteristics of “first fruits” (v.18) include the following:

- The choice crops (**Exod 23:19**)
- Pure and fresh (**Lev 2:11-12, 14**), the best (**Num 18:12**), without defect (**Num 28:31**)
- Honors the Lord (**Prov 3:9**)

As “first fruits,” our lives should reflect the above characteristics.

- First fruits support the priests (**Num 18:8-12; Ezek 44:30**); now we, the church, are a “*holy priesthood*” (**1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6**), i.e., we are to support each other.
- The priests’ portion was so that “*they might devote themselves to the law of the Lord*” (**2 Chron 31:4-5**); now we are to “*abide [continue] in My word*” (**John 8:31**) and be “*doers of the word*” (**Jas 1:22**).
- First fruits show that God will accept Israel (**Lev 23:10-11**); now we, the church, are the “true circumcision” (**Phil 3:3**), the true children of Abraham (**Gal 3:29**), the true temple (**1 Cor 3:9, 16-17; 2 Cor 6:16-7:1; Eph 2:21; 1 Pet 2:5; Rev 3:12; 13:6**), the true “commonwealth of Israel” (**Eph 2:12, 19**), the true Israel of God (**Gal 6:16**).

Verse 18, like v.16, is a transitional verse. It concludes what James has been saying up until this point, beginning with v.2. Our focus is to be in God; he gives us the wisdom to successfully cope with trials (v.5); he does not tempt us to sin (v.13) but, instead, gives us all good things (v.17). The reason for all of this is that he who “*brought us forth by the word of truth*” (v.18), i.e., he has regenerated us, given us new life, saved us (**John 1:12-13; Eph 2:8-9**). But he has saved us for a purpose, that “*we would be a kind of first fruits among his creatures*” (v.18). What that looks like is the subject of the rest of chapter 1 and, indeed, the rest of the book.

1:19-20: ¹⁹ *This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger;* ²⁰ *for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*

We are often guilty of thoughtless, rash, and intemperate speech—either gossip or anger. Further, we are often quick to assume the position of self-righteous anger, i.e., thinking that we have been wronged, that we have a right to be angry, and that God is on our side. These attitudes lead to our “*returning evil for evil or insult for insult*” (**1 Pet 3:9**). That is the opposite of the grace-based life we are to lead. In a grace-based life, we are not to return evil for evil or insult for insult but are to “*give a blessing instead*” (**1 Pet 3:9**).

The Greek word for “anger” is *orgē* which refers to “anger as a state of mind” in contrast to the word *thumos* which refers to “wrath as the outburst of a vengeful mind” (Zodhiates 1993: “*orgē*,” 1055). James is echoing Jesus who said that evil and what defiles us comes from within (**Matt 15:15-20; Mark 7:14-23**). Consequently, we must guard our heart, mind, and emotions. By being “*quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger*,” we will avoid the sin of being judgmental and therefore avoid being judged or condemned ourselves (see **Matt 7:1-2**).

1:21-27: ²¹ *Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.* ²² *But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.* ²³ *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;* ²⁴ *for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.* ²⁵ *But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.* ²⁶ *If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.* ²⁷ *Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

This last, lengthy section of chapter 1 provides the general overview of the rest of the book; the rest of the book deals with specific applications of the principles discussed here. The key to living a faithful life is the word of God. Thus, although “*the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God*” (v.20), the word of God, when it is implanted in one’s soul, does achieve the righteousness of God—it alone “*is able to save your souls*” (v.21). However, the word is not simply to be read or even memorized; rather, it is to be acted on. Thus, v.22 tells us to “*prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.*”

Verse 21 reminds us that we are surrounded by moral filth. If we take that into ourselves, it leads to our becoming wicked or evil. The Greek word translated “wickedness” here is *kakias* which refers to “wickedness as an evil habit of the mind . . . evil in a moral sense meaning wickedness of heart, life, and character” (Zodhiates 1993: “*kakia*,” 807). As he did in vv.19-20, James is going to the heart of the matter: our inner, true selves. We can only “receive the word” in *humility*. That also relates back to vv.19-20 because humility is the opposite of the self-centeredness and anger of those verses. Humility is a recognition that the word we receive which saves our souls is given to us purely by God’s grace, not because of any merit in ourselves. We do not earn it by our achievements or work; it is given to us in spite of—indeed, because of—our sins, failures, and unworthiness. When we truly understand that, it cannot help but lead to the proper state of heart and mind of which James is speaking.

Verses 22-25 set forth the key principle: “*prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers*” (v.22). The word is the mirror of our life (vv.23-25). The word is also the standard by which we are to judge our life. The word shows us how we are to live. But the word is more than this. In v.25 the word is called “*the perfect law, the law of liberty.*” This is so because the word liberates us from falsehood. As Jesus said, “*If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*” (John 8:31-32). The word also liberates us from bondage to the power and consequences of sin; as v.21 said, the implanted word saves our soul. Thus, the word is, in effect, equated with the gospel which has freed us from the power and penalty of sin so that we are no longer slaves to sin (Rom 6:6-7). Not only does the word free us *from* falsehood and sin, it also liberates and enables us *to* know God, worship God, think rightly, and live rightly. Thus, v.25 promises a blessing to those who are effectual doers of the word. In doing that, James is echoing what Jesus said in Luke 11:28 (ESV): “*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!*” However, the blessings and benefits of the word will only be ours if we “look intently” at it. In other words, we study the word, we learn the word, we meditate on the word, we practice the word so that the word becomes “implanted” in the very core of our being. In short, we become people of the word.

Verses 26-27 summarize what James has been saying by defining what *God* considers to be “true religion.” The word translated as “religion” in these verses is *thrēskeia* which refers to “ceremonial service or worship” (Zodhiates 1993: “*thrēskeia*,” 742) or “expression of devotion to transcendent beings, esp. as it expresses itself in cultic rites” (Danker 2000: “*thrēskeia*,” 459). In other words, it is talking about the religious ceremonies that have value in God’s sight. People do many different religious rituals or ceremonies: some genuflect (bend the knee or touch one knee to the floor to show reverence); some make the sign of the cross; some raise their hands when they pray; others bow their heads, close their eyes, and fold their hands. James is saying that the real rituals or ceremonies that God values are not bending the knee, bowing the head, etc., but are “*to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world*” (v.27).

James is pointing out that “*pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father*” involves the entire person inside and out. Keeping oneself “*unstained by the world*” primarily relates to our inner being, i.e., not being “stained” by the values, priorities, and mindset of the world. This is important because “society reflects, by and large, beliefs and practices that are unChristian, if not actively anti-Christian. The believer who lives ‘in the world’ is in constant danger of having the taint of that system ‘rub off’ on him.” (Moo 1985: 87) This exhortation goes back to v.21 where James told us to put aside “*all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness.*” We do that by setting our mind “*on the things above, not on the things that are on earth*” (Col

3:2). We do that by “*taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*” (**2 Cor 10:5**) and by focusing on “*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute,*” excellent, and worthy of praise (**Phil 4:8**). In short, we are to “*seek first his kingdom and His righteousness*” (**Matt 6:33**) and “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind*” (**Luke 10:27**; see also **Matt 22:37**), which is the first and great commandment (**Matt 22:38**).

Visiting orphans and widows in their distress speaks to the external expression of our devotion to God. That is the outward, visible sign of the inward, spiritual grace in one’s life. It is what Jesus called the “second” commandment, “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (**Matt 22:39**; see also **Luke 10:27**). The care and concern we are to show others are not limited to “orphans and widows.” In fact, “orphans and widows” became in the Old Testament a stock description of the helpless in the world” (Moo 1989: 1155). Jesus made this clear in speaking about the judgment of the sheep and the goats. He said, “³⁵ *For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.*” ³⁷ *Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink?’ ³⁸ And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”* The apostle John emphasized that our outward actions of showing love to others is the proof, the test, of whether we have real saving faith or not. In **1 John 4:20** he states, “*If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*” In short, “the ‘pure religion’ of the ‘perfect Christian’ (v. 4) combines purity of heart with purity of action” (Moo 1985: 87).

The first chapter of James has dealt with the most important issues of our lives and our faith: from trials and how to overcome them, to sin and its nature, to how we should live, ending with a description of what is true religion in God’s sight. He has continually gone to the heart of the matter. His description of the nature of true religion in **v.27** is actually pointing to what our faith should lead us to become: as we draw on God’s wisdom and live out our faith, we will exhibit the very character of God himself who is “*a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows*” (**Ps 68:5**) and who, in the person of Jesus Christ, was “*tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*” (**Heb 4:15**), i.e., was “*unstained by the world.*” How living such a life looks in specific circumstances is the subject of the rest of the book. To that we now turn.

III. Jas 2:1-13—The sin of partiality—My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ² *For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and you say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,’ ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?*

⁸ *If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*

The word in **v.1** translated “*with an attitude of personal favoritism*” is a Greek word (*prosōpolēpsia*) which literally means “receiving the face,” i.e., showing partiality or favoritism (see Moo 1989: 1155; Zodhiates 1993: *prosōpolēpsia*, 1239). The word is in the plural (i.e., “acts of partiality”), which indicates that, although James uses one example of partiality shown to a rich, well-dressed man over a poor, shabbily dressed man (**vv.2-6**), the *principle* that James discusses in this section applies to “the treatment of any person on the basis of external considerations—be it race, nationality, wealth, or manner of dress” (Moo 1989: 1155).

1. This section gives us a comprehensive theology of why showing partiality is so sinful:

• **v.1—Jesus is our Lord of Glory.** If we give certain people the glory, like the rich man in James’s example, then we are acting “as if Jesus were no longer the glory; the entrance of the rich is celebrated as if it were and appearing of the Lord Jesus Himself” (Ward 1970: 1227). Showing partiality to certain classes of people is “inconsistent with faith in the One who came to break down the barriers of nationality, race, class, gender and religion” (Moo 1985: 88; see **Eph 2:11-22**). In other words, when we give certain classes of human beings preference at the expense of other classes of human beings, we are actually dethroning Jesus Christ from the position of preeminence that He alone is entitled to. This is a very serious matter.

Further, God is equally the creator of all. God did not simply make the first two human beings (Adam and Eve) and then leave us on our own. Rather, God makes *every single person* (**Exod 4:11; Job 10:8; 31:15; Ps 100:3; 119:73; 139:13-16; Isa 44:24; Jer 1:4-5; 27:5**). Because God made us, we are his (**Deut 10:14; Ps 24:1; 50:10-12; 95:6-7; 100:3; Isa 17:7; 29:19; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:1-10; Rom 9:20**). Additionally, all human beings have been made in the “image of God” (**Gen 1:26-27; 5:1, 3; 9:6; Jas 3:9**). Given all this, **Rom 2:11** says, “*There is no partiality with God*” (see also **Lev 19:15; Deut 10:17**). That verse uses the same Greek word (*prosōpolēpsia*) that James uses in v.1. Now in Christ, **Gal 3:28** says, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” The significance of this is that, when we show partiality to certain people, we are acting contrary to the very nature and character of God and Christ!

• **v.4—When we show partiality, we become judges with evil motives.** In **John 7:24** Jesus said, “*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.*” When we start discriminating based on mere externals such as economic status, race, tribe, etc., God considers this an evil form of judgment, because the basis of the judgment is based on irrelevant factors. Even worse, judgments based on such external factors are mostly colored by such things as greed, envy, hatred and other *sinful* motives. We need to remember **1 Sam 16:7** (ESV): “*God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*” To the extent that we show partiality based on externals, we are evaluating and judging people contrary to the way God evaluates and judges people. When we do that, we are like Peter when Jesus said to him, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*” (**Matt 16:23**)

• **vv.5-6—When we show partiality, we dishonor those whom God has honored.** Jesus himself was a poor man. He said, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*” (**Luke 6:20**).⁶ When we discriminate against any class of people we are acting “in contradiction to God’s own attitude and actions” (Moo 1989: 1156). In effect, we are spitting in the face of God who has blessed and chosen people out of *every* “*tribe, tongue, nation, and people*” in the world (**Rev 5:9; 7:9**). We are essentially saying, “God, you have bad judgment for favoring such people. I have better judgment than you do, because I don’t like such people.” Think of the arrogance of that! Instead, we need to recall that “Christians, however poor in material possessions they may be, both possess spiritual wealth presently and anticipate greater blessings in the future. It is from this spiritual vantage-point, not the material, that Christians should judge others. Whether believers or unbelievers, people should not be evaluated by Christians according to the standards of the world.” (Moo 1985: 91)

• **vv.6-7—By showing partiality toward the ungodly rich and powerful we are honoring those who dishonor Christ.** In James’s day, the rich were exploiting the poor even though most of the Christians were poor. Therefore, it is both ironic and contrary to the cohesion and unity of the church to “mistreat those from whom most of them were drawn in order to curry favor with the wealthy and powerful” (Moo 1989: 1156). However, the situation is worse than that. Verse 7 says,

⁶ Verse 5 says that “*God [chose] the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him.*” It should be borne in mind that “James does not say that God has chosen *all* the poor or *only* the poor, but that God has a special concern for the poor (Luke 6:20)” (Moo 1989: 1156). Further, “God’s choice of the poor must not be taken as based on any merit inherent in poverty. One reason God ‘has chosen those who are poor’ may be seen in the account of the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-27). There Jesus indicated that those who have riches find it exceedingly difficult to enter God’s kingdom (vv.23-25), apparently because their wealth stands in the way. God blesses those who willingly recognize their spiritual bankruptcy (Matt 5:3). A second reason why God chooses the poor is explicitly stated in 1 Cor 1:26-29. God selects those who have nothing or are nothing in themselves ‘so that no one may boast before him’ (v.29).” (Burdick 1981: 179)

“Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?” Christians bear the noble name of Christ. Those who exploit, oppress, or persecute Christians (v.6) are, in effect, exploiting, oppressing, or persecuting Christ himself (see **Acts 9:4-5**). To treat Christ in that way amounts to blaspheming his name. As Donald Burdick says, “To show favoritism to those who blaspheme that wonderful name is the greatest incongruity of all” (Burdick 1981: 179). Again, however, the situation is worse than that. When we honor and favor blasphemers because they happen to be rich or powerful, *we share in the responsibility for their blasphemies*. Paul made a similar point in **1 Tim 5:22** when he said, *“Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others.”* What James and Paul are both saying is that how we treat people has implications far beyond what we tend to see. They are saying that showing preference for an ungodly person because he is rich goes beyond the money; it is really vouching for and approving the person’s ungodly and blasphemous life.

- **vv.8-11**—When we show partiality to people based on non-biblical criteria, we are breaking the “Royal Law.” To *“love your neighbor as yourself”* is called the “Royal Law” because it is from the King himself. It is “royal” because “it is the supreme law to which all other laws governing human relationships are subordinate” (Burdick 1981: 179). Indeed, **Gal 5:14** says that the whole law is summarized and fulfilled in the statement, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Therefore, to *“show partiality, [shows] you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”*

The fact that the whole law is fulfilled by loving your neighbor as yourself leads to James’s point in v.10, *“if you keep the whole law but stumble in one point, you become guilty of all.”* Why does he say that? The reason is that the law is a whole—sort of like a chain. To break one link involves breaking the whole chain. God’s law was given by Him. Therefore, even the smallest sin involves an offense against the Lawgiver, because it implies a rejection of his *whole* authority over all the areas of our lives. As Burdick puts it, “To violate the law at any one point is not to violate one commandment only; it is to violate the will of God and to contradict the character of God. . . . When viewed like this, an act of favoritism is far from insignificant.” (Ibid.: 180)

God gave his law in part to expose the condition of our hearts. He knows that we look at the outside—but He looks at the heart. When we show partiality we are really exposing the contempt we have for someone in our heart—because Jesus said in **Mark 7:21**, *“Out of the heart come the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries.”* Interestingly, both in **Mark 7** and here in **James 2**, Jesus and James link evil thoughts, murder, and adultery. They both know that all of these things are simply manifestations of a corrupt and evil heart. In that sense, therefore, showing partiality to someone based on external characteristics is not just some “little sin” that we are all prone to. Instead, it is as deadly as murder or adultery.⁷

- **vv.12-13**—Showing partiality will result in merciless judgment. Christians must always bear in mind that there will come a day in which we will be judged (**2 Cor 5:10** [*“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”*]). As Jesus said, *“There is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops.”* (**Luke 12:2-3**; see also **Matt 10:26**; **Mark 4:22**; **Luke 8:17**) Additionally, Jesus said that *“by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return”* (**Luke 6:37**).

Ronald Ward points out that the statement in v.13 that *“judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy”* may appear “vindictive and sub-Christian. But this is not so. Judgment, as judgment, is merciless. The moment it shows mercy it ceases to be pure judgment.” (Ward 1970: 1228) In other words, those who in this life have not shown mercy will receive exactly what they deserve: pure justice. Thus, the judgment is related to the “royal law” of love. How we treat people in this life will be a primary basis for our final judgment, both for reward and punishment, because that reveals the true state our heart and our real relationship with Jesus (**Matt 6:1-4**, **12**, **14**; **10:42**; **24:45-51**; **25:31-46**; **Mark 9:41-42**; **Luke 6:35**; **12:33**, **41-48**; **14:13-14**; **16:1-9**; **Rom 2:1-6**; **1**

⁷ Showing partiality is similar to Jesus’ equating one’s inner attitude of anger with murder (**Matt 5:21-22**; see also **1 John 3:15**) and the inner attitude of lust with adultery (**Matt 5:27-28**). Anger and lust need not be acted upon to be equated with murder and adultery. Showing partiality is worse, because showing partiality, by definition, is *acting upon* a corrupt, sinful, inner attitude toward someone.

Tim 6:18-19; 2 Tim 4:14; Heb 6:10; 1 Pet 5:1-4). Jesus makes this particularly clear in the Lord's Prayer and his description of the judgment concerning the Sheep and the Goats. That part of the Lord's Prayer which says "*forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*" (**Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4**) is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus specifically emphasized and explained: "*For if you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your heavenly Father will not forgive your transgressions.*" (**Matt 6:14-15**; see also **Mark 11:23-26**) Similarly, Jesus' explicit teaching on the final judgment indicated that eternal damnation or eternal blessedness will be based on how we treat people in this life because: "*to the extent that you did it [i.e., showed concern and compassion] to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me*" (**Matt 25:40**), and "*to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me*" (**Matt 25:45**). The reason why the one who has shown no mercy cannot expect to receive mercy at the judgment is that mercy "will be an important evidence of the reality of our relationship with God, even as Jesus stressed in his parable of the unmerciful servant (v. 13; cf. Matt. 18:21-35)" (Moo 1989: 1156). Stephen Travis's comment on this is especially relevant regarding James's example of dishonoring a poor person and showing partiality to a rich person: "One striking thing in this latter passage [the Sheep and the Goats] is the way in which neither the 'sheep' nor the 'goats' have consciously realized that, *in caring or not caring for the poor*, they have in fact been responding to Christ. . . . Nothing could express more sharply than that how the deeds which God approves flow naturally out of a right relationship with God. It is what a person does when he is not seeking approval that shows his true character." (Travis 1982: 191, *emph. added*)

James's concluding statement in **v.13**, "*mercy triumphs over judgment*," is probably best taken as referring to the mercy that we show to others: "our showing mercy *triumphs over* God's judgment in that it defends us before God's judgment seat" (Moo 1985: 98). If our lives are characterized by forgiveness, love, and mercy, it shows that we have taken to heart the Lord's Prayer, the "royal law," and the principle Jesus enunciated in the parable of the unmerciful servant, "*Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?*" (**Matt 18:33**). Burdick concludes, "Mercy should be the mark of the regenerated person. If it is present in the believer's life, he will have nothing to fear at the judgment. . . . The presence of love (or mercy) shows that God has performed a work of grace in the believer's heart, making him like Christ. As a result, he can have confidence when he is judged." (Burdick 1981: 181)

2. The effects of the sin of showing partiality:

- The effect on the poor person. The person who is discriminated against is likely to think, "If that's how they treat me, then why should I become a Christian, or come to this church? They are no different from the world." Ward points out that, after having been the victim of discrimination, "The poor man is hardly likely to believe the preached Word now" (Ward 1970: 1227).
- The effect on the rich person. Even though the rich person is shown special favor, he knows he is being used. Isn't he likely to think, "I'm getting this honor because I'm rich, because they want my money. They are no different from the world."
- The effect on the church. James began chapter 2 by referring to believers—the church—as "brethren." All believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are all equal in God's sight (**Gal 3:28; Col 3:11**) because we are all part of the same family (**Matt 12:49-50; 2 Cor 6:18; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 5:1-2**). In fact, we have all been adopted into God's family (**Rom 8:14-17, 23; Gal 3:25-4:7**). Therefore, to show discrimination *among Christians* based on non-Christian, external characteristics, is a great sin because it strikes at the heart of what Christ has done for us in saving us all equally, in giving us all his Holy Spirit equally, and in adopting all of us into his family equally. To favor certain rich *non-Christians* over poor "brethren" is even worse. Such behavior divides the church. What Christ has joined together we must not put asunder.
- The effect on nonbelievers. When a nonbeliever sees us discriminating based on unbiblical, external characteristics isn't he likely to think, "If that is what Christians and Christianity are like, then why should I become a Christian? They are no different from the world."

What we do in this life—especially how we treat people—has effects we cannot see. Further, what we do has effects not only in this life but also in eternity. We need to bring this to our conscious awareness all the time as we go about our daily lives. That is why the Bible says, "*Take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*" (**2 Cor 10:5**). As we do this, we will start living more intentionally. We will start living more Christlike lives. We will start becoming more like Christ Himself.

IV. Jas 2:14-26—Living/working faith—¹⁴ *What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?* ¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,* ¹⁶ *and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?* ¹⁷ *Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.* ¹⁸ *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.”* ¹⁹ *You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.* ²⁰ *But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?* ²¹ *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?* ²² *You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;* ²³ *and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God.* ²⁴ *You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.* ²⁵ *In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?* ²⁶ *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*

This section of the book provides perhaps the clearest description of what true, saving faith looks like. James emphasizes the importance of “works” in connection with one’s faith (“*faith without works is dead or useless,*” **vv.17, 20, 26**; “*a man is justified by works and not by faith alone,*” **v.24**). Some people think that this contradicts Paul’s emphasis of justification by faith alone (“*by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight,*” **Rom 3:20**; “*a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law,*” **Rom 3:28**; “*to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,*” **Rom 4:5**).

In fact, James and Paul do not contradict each other; they complement each other. This is so for a number of reasons:

- Paul and James “are talking about different things: Paul of the declaration of our righteousness, and James of the demonstration of our righteousness. . . . Both Paul and James are referring to the sinner’s righteousness before God, but Paul is focusing on the initial reception of that status and James on the way that status is vindicated before God in the judgment.” (Carson and Moo 2005: 633) “The difference between Paul and James consists in the sequence of works and conversion: Paul denies any efficacy to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works” (Moo 1985: 102). Burdick puts it this way: “James was combating a superficial faith that had no wholesome effect in the life of the professed believer. Paul, on the other hand, was combating legalism—the belief that one may earn saving merit before God by his good deeds.” (Burdick 1981: 185)
- Because James and Paul are focusing on different issues or combating different false ideas concerning true, Christian faith, they are using the idea of “faith alone” (i.e., faith apart from works) in different senses, even though they both agree on what true, saving faith is like: James is describing “faith alone” as being not true, saving faith; Paul uses the idea of “faith alone” as describing true, saving faith: “James’s ‘faith alone’ is far from being genuine Christian faith: this ‘faith alone’ is mere talk without action (vv. 15-16) or head knowledge without heart knowledge (v. 19). This is not Christian faith. And with this Paul would have no argument; he also stressed that it is faith ‘expressing itself in love’ that counts.” (Moo 1989: 1157) “The kind of faith that James says is ‘dead’ (that is, mere intellectual assent, 2:14-17) is not what Paul would have recognized as real faith (that is, ‘faith working through love’, Gal. 5:6)” (Marshall, Travis, and Paul 2002: 255).
- “Paul’s treatment of ‘faith and works’ is related to the question of whether Gentile Christians must do ‘the works of the law’ – mainly circumcision, sabbath and food laws. James’ argument does not have Gentiles or such ‘works of the law’ in view at all. . . . They are in fact engaged in argument not with each other but with different opponents – Paul with those who would impose ‘works of the law’ on Gentiles, James with people who have become sluggish in their Christian living.” (Marshall, Travis, and Paul 2002: 255)

Carson and Moo emphasize the importance of listening to both the perspectives of Paul and James: “When faced with legalism, with the attempt to base salvation on human works, Paul needs to be heard—as he was so powerfully at the time of the Reformation. But when faced with quietism, with the attitude that dismisses works as unnecessary for Christians, James needs to be heard—as he was equally powerfully in the time of the Wesleys.” (Carson and Moo 2005: 633) This section includes the following important aspects of faith and works:

1. The nature of real, saving faith. The issue in this passage clearly is the nature of true, saving faith—not just doing “good deeds” to score points with God or earn our way to heaven. Therefore, **v.14** begins, in substance, by asking the question: “What kind of ‘faith’ is truly saving?” “Faith” is more than just a mental “belief” in something. “Faith” does indeed include an important doctrinal component (see, e.g., **Acts 2:22-24, 32-36; Rom 1:1-4; 10:9; 1 Cor 15:1-8**). But it also includes just as important behavioral (see, e.g., **Eph 2:8-10; Jas 2:14-20; Matt 28:18-20; John 14:23-24**) and affective or devotional (see, e.g., **John 15:4-11, 12-15; 17:3; 21:15-17**) components. In other words, true, saving faith involves our whole life. We see that faith involves the whole of our lives in **v.19**. There, the demons are *doctrinally* correct: they know who God is; they know that Jesus is the Messiah. But the demons’ *belief* did not change their lives or their behavior. It did not make them love or be devoted to Jesus Christ. They remain followers of Satan in rebellion against God in Christ. As such, their faith is not real, saving faith. They are lost and doomed.

2. The relationship of faith and works. **v.18** makes clear the true relationship between faith and works when it says, “*I will show you my faith by my works.*” The issue is not having faith *plus* works or having faith *minus* works. Rather, true saving faith always results in a change of life, a change of habits, a change of “works.” Our works—how we live out what we say we believe—is the inevitable proof of the reality (or lack of reality) of our faith. The Reformers clearly understood the principle that *we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone*:

- *Martin Luther*: “Faith must of course be sincere. It must be a faith that performs good works through love. If faith lacks love it is not true faith. . . . To think, ‘If faith justifies without works, let us work nothing,’ is to despise the grace of God. Idle faith is not justifying faith. . . . Inwardly it [justifying faith] consists in faith towards God, outwardly in love towards our fellow-men.” (Luther 1535: re. Gal 5:6)
- *John Calvin*: “As often as we mention Faith alone in this question, we are not thinking of a dead faith, which worketh not by love, but holding faith to be the only cause of justification. (Galatians 5:6; Romans 3:22.) It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone: just as it is the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light.” (Calvin 1547: Antidote, Canon 11)
- *Epitome of the Formula of Concord [Lutheran Confession of Faith]*: “After man has been justified by faith, then a true living faith worketh by love, Gal. 5:6, so that thus good works always follow justifying faith, and are surely found with it, if it be true and living; for it never is alone, but always has with it love and hope.” (Epitome 1577: III.11)

Remember, the question in **v.14** that began this whole discussion was, “*Can faith without works save a person?*” James’ answer clearly is “No.” He cements this point in **vv.17, 20, and 26** by repeating, “*faith without works is dead (or useless).*” He is clearly equating “dead” faith and “useless” faith. We see that in **vv.16-17** where he asks “*what use is it if you don’t help a person in need when you have the ability to do so*” and then says “*even so faith, if it has no works, is dead.*” In other words, faith without works is *not saving faith*.

3. Why faith and works are intimately related. Faith is first and foremost a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The order of things is this: the Holy Spirit first regenerates us (**John 3:3, 5-8**); He works in our lives to give us a new heart (**Jer 31:33; Ezek 11:19; 36:26**). As **Eph 2:8-9** says, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁸not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” It is God who does the saving, not us. *Then we respond* by confessing our belief in Jesus Christ and living a new life. As Paul puts it in **Eph 2:10**, “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*” Our very salvation is “*for good works*” which God prepared for us to do. God is concerned about the totality of our lives. His salvation is holistic because, as **Rom 8:29** tells us, the whole point of our lives and of God’s choosing us and saving us is to “*become conformed to the image of His Son [Jesus Christ].*”

The key to understanding the relationship between faith and works is stated by Onesimus Ngundu: “Works are an index of the spiritual condition of a person’s heart. . . . The judgment is not a balancing of good works over bad works. Rather, works are seen as unmistakable evidence of the loyalty of the heart; they express belief or unbelief, faithfulness or unfaithfulness. The judgment will reveal whether or not people’s loyalties have been with God and the Lamb or with God’s enemies.” (Ngundu 2006: 1576) The issue is *the reason why* we do good works. The normal reason why people do good works is to try to earn God’s favor. However, that inevitably results in uncertainty and fear,

because we never can be sure we are “doing enough” or being “good enough” Under the gospel, however, we do not obey God and do good works in order to earn his favor; we obey God and do good works *because he has already given us his favor!* As the apostle John said, “*We love, because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). Consequently, we never need to fear or be uncertain but can “*draw near with confidence to the throne of grace*” (Heb 4:16), knowing that Jesus “*will never leave us or forsake us*” (Heb 13:5). It is precisely because God “*is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13) that we can look forward to the judgment, knowing that our deeds will be “*manifested as having been wrought in God*” (John 3:21). That is why, both now and at the final judgment, God judges and repays people and nations “*according to their deeds [or ‘ways’ or ‘works’]”* (Judg 1:6-7; 9:22-24, 56-57; 2 Sam 12:9-12; 1 Kgs 2:32-33; 20:35-42; 21:17-19; 2 Chron 6:23, 30; Job 34:11; Ps 18:24; 31:23; 62:12; Prov 24:12; Eccl 12:13-14; Isa 59:18; Jer 17:10; 25:14; 32:19; Ezek 7:3, 8-9, 20, 23-24, 27; 9:10; 11:21; 16:43, 59; 18:30; 22:31; 24:14; 33:20; 35:6, 11, 15; 39:24; Hos 12:2; Joel 3:5-7; Obad 15; Zech 1:6; Matt 16:27; 25:14-46; Luke 12:47-48; John 5:28-29; Rom 2:1-6; 12:19; 1 Cor 3:8, 11-15; 2 Cor 5:10; 11:15; Gal 6:7-8; Eph 6:8; Col 3:25; 2 Tim 4:14; Heb 10:26-27; 1 Pet 1:17; 2 Pet 2:20-22; Jude 14-15; Rev 2:23; 14:13; 20:11-13; 22:12). The deeds we do—and the reason why we do them—reveal the condition of our heart.

4. Examples of real, saving faith.

- *The first example is the hypothetical example in vv.15-16 of a poor person in need of clothing or food.* Notice first how this passage flows from the discussion of the rich and the poor in vv.1-13. In vv.1-13, the poor person was being *dishonored*. Here, James begins with the very example of a poor person and points out how real faith works actively to *help the poor* get out of his plight. In this example God is revealing *His* values and *His* priorities to us. Jesus also made very clear what is on God’s heart when he told us the nature of the judgment we will face after we die in **Matt 25:31-46** (the sheep and the goats). The “faith” of the goats never changed their lives or their relationship with people—particularly the needy. On the other hand, the faith of the sheep penetrated into their heart, mind, and soul and changed their values and lives—and they didn’t even realize the extent to which they had started living like Jesus, because Jesus’ values had become a part of them; Jesus’ values had become their values, so when they began acting like him, it did not seem out of the ordinary to the sheep. Note that when James is talking about the nature of true, saving faith in **James 2**, he uses two of the same examples Jesus used in **Matthew 25**—someone who needs clothing and someone who is hungry. When we see things like this repeated, that is a clue that God is revealing what really matters to Him. It is *people*—how we treat people—especially the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the marginalized—that demonstrates whether our faith is real or not.
- *The second example of saving faith is the example of Abraham in vv.21-24.* In v.23 the quotation, “*And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned (or counted) to him as righteousness*” is from **Gen 15:6** when God promised Abraham a son and told him to look at the stars and try to count them, because that is how great the number of his descendants would be through the child God would give him. Abraham was an old man, not able to have children, but he believed God, and God counted that belief as righteousness. James goes on to talk about when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the son God had promised; Abraham obeyed, although God saved Isaac (v.21). Abraham’s faith in the promise of God—that he would have a son and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars—was put to the test. The reality of Abraham’s faith was confirmed by his actions, his works. Verse 22 describes the intimate relationship of Abraham’s (and our) faith and works: “*Faith was working with his works*” (see also **Gal 5:6**). Moo explains, “Abraham’s faith was a ‘working’ faith, an active faith, a faith that was not so much the source as the constant partner of his works. . . . ‘Faith’ was not something that Abraham exercised on one occasion; it stimulated, directed and co-operated with his works.” (Moo 1985: 112) As a result, James points out in v.22 that Abraham’s obedience “completed” or “perfected” his faith. The word means “to complete, make perfect by reaching the intended goal” (Zodhiates 1993: *teleioō*, 1373).

Our faith cannot grow or reach maturity without works, without being lived out. Otherwise, it is like a stillborn child. Or it is like Jesus’ parable of the sower of the seeds: some people receive the word, but Satan snatches it away; some fall away because of hardship; some have the word choked off because of abundance and ease (**Matt 13:3-9, 18-23; Mark 4:3-9, 13-20**). All of those never reach maturity. They are all useless to the sower. Only one group of seeds fell on good soil, and grew up, and bore fruit. That group is the mature—the faithful—those whose works confirm the truth and reality of their faith.

- *The third example of saving faith is Rahab in v.25.* Rahab’s hiding the two spies and then being spared when the Israelites took the city is *not* just an example of “one good turn deserves another.” Rather, in **Joshua 2** it says that Rahab confessed her *faith* by saying “*I know that the Lord has given you the land*” (**Josh 2:9**) and “*the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath*” (**Josh 2:11**). The truth of her confession was proved by what she did in hiding the spies. Therefore, **Heb 11:31** specifically links her faith with her actions and contrasts that with those who were “disobedient” when it says, “*By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.*”

In all of these examples, the works James is talking about are outward, visible *evidence* of faith that flows *from* our inward, spiritual faith.

5. The nature of our works and their relationship to faith. Real, saving faith is designed to force us to evaluate the priorities of our lives and may lead us to act in counter-cultural and unpopular ways. For example, look at Abraham and Rahab. Q: What was Abraham willing to do? A: Murder his own son. Q: What did Rahab in fact do? A: Commit treason. We need to understand something about the example of Abraham. What God called Abraham to do was a unique, “specific” command given to Abraham, not a “general” command given to all believers or Israelites. It was a special typological event in redemptive history that foreshadowed God’s sacrifice of his own Son on the cross.⁸ Other Scriptures clearly reveal that God is opposed to—and specifically prohibits—shedding innocent blood (see **Exod 20:13; Prov 6:16-17**). The *principle* of the unique story of Abraham which applies to us is *not* “go stab your children,” but “be prepared to serve God with everything that is dearest to you.” Rahab’s example, however, is more common: when the government requires us to do things that are contrary to our faith, then, as Peter said, “*We must obey God rather than men*” (**Acts 5:29**). This principle goes all the way back to the beginning of Israel when the Egyptian midwives disobeyed Pharaoh and refused to put newborn Israelite boys to death because they “feared God” (**Exod 1:15-21**).

The examples of Abraham and Rahab are proof that the “works” James is talking about are not simply “good deeds” or even “acts of charity” but are acts of *obedience* (see **John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:12-17; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 6**). God may put us in hard places and put our faith to the test. Obedience to God may result in our being persecuted for our faith and even being put to death (see **Matt 10:22; 24:9; John 15:20; Heb 11:35-40**). This has happened throughout history, beginning with the first apostles who were imprisoned and flogged for preaching Jesus but “*rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for his name*” (**Acts 5:41**). It is the times of stress, opposition, hardship, and temptation that reveal what is really inside us. It is those times and circumstances that reveal who our *real* Lord is: Is it Jesus, or is it our own wellbeing?

⁸ The entire story of Abraham and Isaac prefigured Christ’s crucifixion. Just as Isaac was Abraham’s “*only* [i.e., unique] *son*” (**Gen 22:2**), so Christ was God’s “*only begotten son*” (**John 3:16**). Just as the wood to burn the sacrifice was laid on Isaac (**Gen 22:6**), so Christ was made to carry his own cross (**John 19:17**). Just as Abraham said that “*God will provide for Himself the lamb*” (**Gen 22:8**) for the sacrifice, so God provided Jesus Christ, “*the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (**John 1:29**; see also **Rev 5:6**). Just as Isaac was obedient to the will of his father, even to the point of death, so Jesus was obedient to the will of his Father, even to death (**Matt 26:39; Phil 2:8**). Just as Isaac was “dead” to Abraham for the three days of their journey (**Gen 22:4**), so Jesus was in the grave for three days (**Matt 12:40; Luke 24:21**). Just as Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead (**Heb 11:19**), so Jesus literally was resurrected (**Matt 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-13; Luke 24:1-6; John 20:1-28**). **Heb 11:19** (NASB) even says that Abraham received Isaac back “*as a type.*” Some have even found typological significance in the fact that the ram was “*caught in the thicket by his horns*” (**Gen 22:13**). Augustine said, “What, then, did he [the ram] represent but Jesus, who, before He was offered up, was crowned with thorns?” (Augustine 1950: 16.32)

V. Jas 3:1-12—The sin of the uncontrolled tongue—*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.* ² *For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.* ³ *Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.* ⁴ *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.* ⁵ *So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!* ⁶ *And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.* ⁷ *For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.* ⁸ *But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.* ⁹ *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;* ¹⁰ *from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.* ¹¹ *Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?* ¹² *Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.*

This section of the book, which focuses on people's speech or the tongue, can be divided into three subsections: **vv.1-2**—the responsibility of teachers; **vv.3-6a**—the powerful influence of the tongue; and **vv.6b-12**—the destructive potential and perversity of the tongue:

1. **vv.1-2**—The responsibility of teachers. James begins this section concerning speech (the tongue) by talking about teachers, because teaching is such an important ministry in the church (see **Acts 13:1; Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11-12**). If done poorly or for the wrong motives, teachers can bring heresy into the church and lead many astray. Because of the great responsibility of teaching the Word of God well, James warns that teachers “*will incur a stricter judgment.*” That warning is in accord with the principle stated by Jesus in **Luke 12:48**: “*From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.*” In **Mark 12:38-40** Jesus applied that principle to the Jewish scribes who were motivated in their position of authority by the desire to wear long robes, receive respectful greetings in the market place, and sit in the chief seats in synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They used their position to “*devour widows' houses.*” In other words, as Victor Babajide Cole explains, “They preyed on the innocent and the vulnerable, represented by defenceless widows. Worse still, they tried to mask their evil with pretentious, lengthy public prayers (12:40). Jesus warned that people who act like this will be judged harshly. Unfortunately, this warning still rings true in our day. Both the people of God and ministers of the gospel must beware of falling into habits like these that will surely incur God's wrath.” (Cole 2006: 1193)

The reason for James's warning in **v.1** is found in **v.2** which begins with the word “for” (i.e., “because”). “The teacher places himself in greater danger of judgment because the main tool of his ministry is also the part of the body most difficult to control: the tongue” (Moo 1985: 120). James's thought in **v.2** is not limited to teachers but includes all people, since “*we all stumble*” and “*if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man*” (of which there are none). This is reminding us that sin is universal, even among believers. This verse therefore also is acting as a transition to the subsection beginning in **v.3** concerning the powerful influence of the tongue. James draws the connection between what we say and what we do. His argument is that “since sins of the tongue are hardest to avoid, anyone who could control his tongue would surely be able to ‘keep his whole body in check’—i.e., keep it from being used as an instrument of sin” (Burdick 1981: 187). Since the concluding “fruit of the Spirit” listed by Paul in **Gal 5:22-23** is “self-control,” James in effect is saying that if we can demonstrate self-control of our tongue, we will be able to demonstrate self-control in every other area of our life.

2. **vv.3-6a**—The powerful influence of the tongue. In **vv.3-6a** James uses three examples to show that, even though the tongue is a small organ in the body, it has a powerful influence over our lives. He compares the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth that can control the movement of a large and powerful horse, to a rudder that can control the direction in which a large ship sails, and to a small spark that can start an entire forest fire. Moo summarizes: “So the tongue can determine the destiny of the individual. When the believer exercises careful control of the tongue, it can be presumed that he also is able to direct his whole life in its proper divinely charted course: he is a ‘perfect man’ (v.2). But when that

tongue is not restrained, small though it is, the rest of the body is likely to be uncontrolled and undisciplined also.” (Moo 1985: 122)

The example of the fire at the end of **v.5** and beginning of **v.6** also is transitioning to the next subsection concerning the destructive potential and perversity of the tongue. This is seen in the contrast between fire and the horse and ship examples. The bit and rudder, like the tongue, are used to control large objects to make them go in the direction a person wants them to go, but a forest fire is out of control. Further, in **v.6a** James not only says that “*the tongue is a fire*” but goes on to call it “*the very world of iniquity.*”

3. **vv.6b-12**—The destructive potential and perversity of the tongue. The destructive potential of the tongue is made clear by four statements in **v.6**:

- *The tongue is a fire.* This refers back to the last part of **v.5** which talks about how a small fire can kindle an entire forest fire.
- *The tongue defiles the entire body.* James is pointing out that the tongue accomplishes the reverse of “*pure and undefiled religion*” (**Jas 1:27**). The word translated “defiles” in **v.6** literally means “spotting” or “staining” (Greek = *spilousa*). It is derived from the word used in **1:27** which says that pure religion includes keeping oneself “*unstained [Greek = aspilon] by the world.*” In **v.6**, when James says that the tongue “*defiles the entire body,*” he is in essence saying that “the sins committed with the tongue spread spiritual pollution to the whole person” (Moo 1985: 125).
- *The tongue sets on fire the course of our life.* This statement goes beyond asserting that the tongue only affects the life of the speaker to saying that “the tongue’s fiery destructive power affects all of human existence, from beginning to end, and in all its circumstances” (Ibid.: 125-26).
- *The tongue is set on fire by hell.* This statement tells us where the tongue gets its enormously destructive potential: from hell. By saying that the tongue “*is set on fire by hell,*” James is saying that Satan is the ultimate source of evil speech and of our potential to destroy ourselves, others, and our relationships by what we say. “Hell” is here being used as a shorthand expression for Satan, since the eternal fire of hell “*has been prepared for the devil and his angels*” (**Matt 25:41**). This is similar to how Matthew frequently uses the phrase “*the kingdom of heaven*” to refer to the kingdom of God (see, e.g., **Matt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19; 7:21**). Further, Satan “*does not stand for the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*” (**John 8:44**)

The perversity of the tongue is seen in **vv.6a, 7-12**. We see that first in **v.6** and **8** which describe the perverse nature of the tongue. Verse **6** calls the tongue a “*world of iniquity,*” and **v.8** adds that the tongue is “*a restless evil and full of deadly poison.*” This is in accord with what Jesus said in **Matt 15:11, 18-19**, “*It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man. . . . But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.*” The tongue reveals the corrupt, sinful, fallen condition of mankind.

Second, we see the perversity of the tongue in **vv.7-12**. Verses **7-8** assert that, unlike our ability to tame animals, the tongue cannot be tamed. Verses **9-10** then show that inconsistency is an element of the tongue’s perversity: from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. Finally, **vv.11-12** compare the tongue to a fountain, a fig tree, and salt water. His point is that all of these other things act in accordance with their nature: a fountain does not send out fresh and bitter water; a fig tree produces figs, not olives; salt water does not produce fresh water. Similarly, God has designed us to love Him and to love others and has given us the ability to do that. However, instead of consistently loving God and others, we are like a fountain that sends out fresh and bitter water, or are like a fig tree that produces olives, not figs. As James says, “*My brethren, these things ought not to be this way*” (**v.10**). The reason why this is so important was stated by Jesus who said, “*The tree is known by its fruit*” (**Matt 12:33**). The issue is spiritual: what comes out of our mouth reveals the spiritual condition of our heart. Ultimately, therefore, our tongue reveals whether we are or are not saved.

VI. Jas 3:13-18—The wisdom from above versus the wisdom not from above—¹³ *Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.* ¹⁵ *This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.* ¹⁶ *For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.* ¹⁷ *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.* ¹⁸ *And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

In this section, James contrasts heavenly wisdom with earthly wisdom. In **v.13** James shows us that wisdom is analogous to faith (see **Jas 2:18**): just as faith is *applied belief*, so wisdom is *applied knowledge*. Moo puts it like this: “True wisdom, like real faith, is a vital, practical quality that has as much (or more) to do with the way we live as with what we think or say” (Moo 1985: 132). James makes the following comparisons:

<i>Earthly Wisdom</i>	<i>Heavenly Wisdom</i>
Source	Source
Earthly, natural (unspiritual), demonic (v.15)	From above (heaven) (v.15, 17)
Nature and Fruits	Nature and Fruits
Jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, every evil thing (v.16)	Good behavior, gentleness (v.13), pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy, righteousness, peace (vv.17-18)

Note that earthly wisdom is self-centered, whereas heavenly wisdom is others-centered. James’s comparison of earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom parallels Paul’s comparison of the flesh and the Spirit in **Gal 5:16-26**.

VII. Jas 4:1-4—Indwelling sin and its outward manifestations—*What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?* ² *You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.* ³ *You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.* ⁴ *You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

Chapter 3 ended by contrasting true wisdom versus false wisdom. Now chapter 4 follows from that by discussing the nature of those who act on the basis of false wisdom. The seriousness of this is seen in the harsh language James uses. Such people have “quarrels and conflicts” among themselves; their pleasures “wage war” within themselves; they “lust” and “commit murder”; they are “envious” which leads them to “fight and quarrel”; they have “wrong motives”; they are “adulteresses”; they are an “enemy of God.” The saddest thing is that this is written to people who call themselves Christians (see **Jas 2:1**). These verses raise a number of issues:

- vv.1-2—The source of our problems.** In these verses James makes clear that the source of our conflicts and quarrels is our self-centeredness. Hence, he speaks of our pleasures, lust, and envy as the source of our problems with others. These are all rooted in self-centeredness. In **1:14**, in speaking of the source of sin in general, James similarly had said that “*each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.*” Here he is focusing on the interpersonal conflicts caused by our self-centered pleasures, lust, and envy. Such interpersonal conflicts are proof that we are *not* obeying either the first and great commandment, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind*” (**Matt 22:36**), and we are also not obeying the second commandment, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (**Matt 22:39**).
- v.2—“Murder.”** Verse two states, “*You lust and do not have; so you commit murder.*” Since James is writing to Christians, he is probably not referring to Christians actually murdering each other. Rather, “In the context of forceful words such as *polemoi* (‘wars’) [translated above as ‘quarrels’] and *machai* (‘battles’) [translated above as ‘conflicts’], it seems better to take *phoneuete* (‘you kill’) as hyperbole for hatred. This also resolves the problem of seeming anticlimactic word order. To say ‘You hate and covet’ is a much more natural order than to say ‘You murder and covet.’ Furthermore, Matthew 5:21-22 and 1 John 3:15 show that hatred is equal to murder.” (Burdick 1981: 193) Additionally, James is recognizing that, since quarrels, conflicts, and fights are already present in the Christian community, continuing to be motivated by lust, envy, and self-centeredness will inevitably lead to actual violence and murder.
- vv.2b-3—Prayer.** After talking about the self-centeredness, lust, and envy which has led to conflicts, quarrels, and fights, James says, “*You do not have because you do not ask.*” He then immediately adds, “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your*

pleasures.” In effect, self-centered “prayers,” where someone requests things from God for self-centered reasons to spend on one’s lusts and pleasures, are the same as not praying at all! In fact, it is worse than that. He is saying that even prayer is actually being used as a tool for satisfying our lusts.

This is an important issue today, particularly with the rise of the so-called “prosperity gospel,” which contends that God’s desire for us is to be materially wealthy and that material wealth is the sign that we are in good relationship with him and have God’s favor. In prosperity teaching, faith and prayer are redefined: “Belief of the heart is tied to confession of the mouth to create a new reality. ‘You receive in this life just what you say with your mouth. The word in your mouth is your faith speaking. *The words you speak are what you believe.* Your words can be for you or against you. They bring you health or sickness. Your words decide whether you live in abundance or lack.’” (Sarles 1986: 347-48, quoting Gloria Copeland). This teaching is completely false. “In this perspective faith is a form of magic, with the spoken word as the incantation. The interior logic of prosperity thought argues that since man is a godlike creature, his words, when spoken in faith, have the same intrinsic power as God’s. But this concept of human speech is magical, not scriptural.” (Ibid.) Gordon Fee adds, “At its base the cult [of] prosperity offers a man-centered, rather than a God-centered theology. Even though one is regularly told that it is to God’s own glory that we should prosper, the appeal is always to our own selfishness and sense of well-being.” (Fee 1984: 42-43) The appeal of the prosperity gospel to our own selfishness is nothing but an appeal to greed and covetousness. Far from demonstrating faith, the Bible says that a covetous man “*is an idolater*” (**Eph 5:5**), and greed “*amounts to idolatry*” which brings about “*the wrath of God*” (**Col 3:5-6**).

It is true, of course, that Jesus said, “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you*” (**Matt 7:7**) and “*everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive*” (**Matt 21:22**). Some have used these verses to argue for a “name it and claim it” theology—i.e., believers can have whatever material possessions they ask for, and the only reason they don’t receive them is lack of faith. However, **1 John 5:14-15** tells us that effective prayer is conditioned on asking “*according to his will*” (not our own will). Even then, God refused to grant the requests of both the Apostle Paul (**2 Cor 12:7-9**) and the Lord Jesus Christ himself (**Luke 22:41-42**)—yet neither of them suffered from a “lack of faith.” God ultimately is in charge, and we need to remember that when we pray. **Jas 4:3** is highlighting the point that our motives for requesting something are crucial. Our prayers reveal whether our trust really is in God and whether we really desire his will in our lives, or whether our trust and desire really are in material things and our own well-being. If the latter is the case, we reveal ourselves to be idolaters at heart—and God will not bless idolaters.

4. **v.4—Our relationship with God.** Verse 4 puts the seal on the discussion about self-centeredness, lust, envy, and prayer. The problem with many of the people to whom James was writing—and the problem with all adherents of the prosperity gospel and many of us today—is that they were and are “of the world” in addition to being “in the world.” In other words, their values, priorities, and desires were based on the world’s values, priorities, and desires. Their worlds revolve around themselves, not around God and Jesus Christ. James’s calling self-centered, lustful people “adulteresses” shows that, at heart, one’s relationship with God is at stake. The reason is that “adulteress” is “a figure of speech for spiritual unfaithfulness. It is a blunt and shocking word, intended to jar the reader and awaken him to his true spiritual condition. The concept of spiritual adultery was no doubt taken from the OT (cf. Hos 2:2-5; 3:1-5; 9:1).” (Burdick 1981: 193) We, the church, are the bride and wife of Christ (**Eph 5:23, 32; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9**). The Lord, our bridegroom, demands and is entitled to our exclusive loyalty and faithfulness, just as any spouse demands and is entitled to absolute fidelity from his or her spouse.

James could not be clearer or more pointed concerning the seriousness of this when he says, “*Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*” What is most important to us and what we want the most, as expressed in our prayers, have eternal consequences. These things reveal the true state of our heart. And we must always remember that “*the Lord looks at the heart*” (**1 Sam 16:7**). As he has done throughout this book, this passage hits at the heart of true faith versus false faith. This is an issue that goes back as far as **Gen 3:15**: “*I will put enmity between . . . your seed [i.e., Satan, the god of the world, and all who follow him] and her seed [i.e., Jesus, the true God of the world, and all who follow him].*” It has always been this way: the world versus the kingdom of God; faith versus works. This view of reality, that there are only two ways—God’s way and the way that is opposed to God—is found throughout the Bible (see, e.g., **Pss 1; 73; Matt 7:13-20, 24-27; 1 Cor 2:14-15**). It finds perhaps its fullest expression in the book of Revelation where all of humanity (“*every tribe and people and tongue and nation*”) is seen as being a member of one of two, mutually opposing,

campes: the world (Rev 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; see also 17:15), or the church (Rev 5:9; 7:9); those who dwell on the earth (Rev 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8), or those who are citizens of heaven (Rev 6:9, 11; 7:9-10; 11:12; 12:10; 14:1-3; 15:2-4; 19:1-9, 14; 20:4-6); those who worship the beast (Rev 13:3, 4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 19:20), or those who worship the Lamb (Rev 4:8-11; 5:9-14; 6:9; 7:9-17; 11:15-18; 12:11, 17; 14:4, 12; 15:2-4; 17:14; 19:5-9; 20:4; 21:9; 22:3); those who bear the mark of the beast (Rev 13:16-17; 14:9, 11; 19:20), or those who are sealed by God (Rev 7:3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4); those whose names have not been written in the book of life (Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:15), or those whose names have been written in the book of life (Rev 3:5; 21:27); those who are part of the “great city” (Rev 11:8; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21), or those who are part of the “beloved city” (Rev 20:9). There is no “neutral” or third alternative.⁹

VIII. Jas 4:5-10—How to seek God’s grace and obtain the wisdom from above—⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”? ⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” ⁷ Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

These verses provide the counterpart and antidote to the self-centeredness and all the relational problems it causes that were discussed in vv.1-4. Ultimately, the answer is found in humbling oneself and drawing near to God who provides abundant grace to us and thereby exalts us. These verses raise a few important issues:

1. **v.5—A major translational issue.** The above translation takes “He” (i.e., God) as the subject of the verse. Drawing on what was just said in v.4—the image of God as our bridegroom—this verse “explains the seriousness of any flirtation with the world by bringing to mind the jealousy of the Lord, which demands a total, unreserved, unwavering allegiance from the people with whom he has joined himself” (Moo 1985: 144). It is not clear that the “spirit” is referring to the Holy Spirit as opposed to the “spirit” breathed into man at creation. In either case, the verse is reminding us that “God has a claim on us by virtue of his work in our lives” (Ibid.: 146). On the other hand, the NIV says, “Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?” This translation takes “spirit” as the subject of the verse (i.e., the “spirit” breathed into man at creation) and means that “because of our fallen nature, we have a tendency toward envy” (Life Application 1986: 2250n.4.5). Regardless of the translation, “James is not quoting a specific verse or passage—he is summing up a teaching of Scripture” (Ibid.).
2. **v.6—God gives us the grace to meet his requirements and overcome our sinful tendencies.** This verse quotes **Prov 3:34** (see also **1 Pet 5:5**). In order to experience this grace, *humility* is required. Verses **7-10** then tell us how to appropriate the power of God’s grace in our lives.
3. **vv.7-10—How to appropriate God’s “greater grace.”** These four verses include ten imperatives (commands) which suggest seven steps we should take to realize God’s “greater grace” in our lives. Just as the “fruit of the Spirit” in **Gal 5:22-23** all describe what “love” (which heads the list of the fruit of the Spirit) is like, and the various requirements to be a leader of the church listed in **1 Tim 3:2-7** all describe what being “above reproach” (which heads the list of requirements) looks like, so the imperatives here may be seen as describing what true submission to God is like.
 - *Submit to God.* This is foundational. Everything that follows both flows from submitting to God and describes what submitting to God involves.
 - *Resist the devil.* In v.4, James showed that there is a fundamental contrast between the world and God. Now he reveals that the real conflict is with the devil. The reason is that the devil is “the ruler of this world” (**John 12:31**) and “the god of this world [or ‘this age’]” (**2 Cor 4:4**).
 - *Draw near to God.* This is the counterpart of resisting the devil. Since Satan is the ruler and god of this world, everyone who is not part of God’s kingdom is under the power and authority of the devil (**Acts 26:18**). There is no neutral or third alternative. Additionally, David Nystrom points out that drawing near to God “is more than simply to resolve to improve one’s spiritual life. It is fully to

⁹ In the second half of Revelation we see this dualism expressed through the contrast of three vivid images involving animals, women, and cities: Beast—Lamb; Harlot—Bride; Babylon the great—New Jerusalem.

enter the presence of God, to reside there, to be comfortable there, to be at home.” (Nystrom 1997: 231)

- *Cleanse your hands.* Our hands imply our outward actions. This, however, must be accompanied by the next step.
- *Purify your hearts.* Our hearts imply our inner thoughts, attitudes, and motives. They are the true source of our outward actions. Jesus called those who only cleansed their hands “whitewashed tombs” (**Matt 23:27-28**; see also **Luke 11:37-41**).
- *Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning.* This has to do with being truly sorry for and repenting of our sins. Christ has promised his comfort for those who do (**Matt 5:4**). On the other hand, he pronounces woe on those who laugh now, for they shall mourn and weep (**Luke 6:25**).
- *Humble yourselves.* An attitude of humility reveals that we have submitted to God and drawn near to him. In fact, one cannot submit to God or draw near to him in any way except with an attitude of humility. God will exalt those who humble themselves before him and, as James said in **v.6**, God will reward our humility by supplying us with more than sufficient grace that we need.

IX. Jas 4:11-5:6—The sin of autonomy and its outward manifestations

In light of **4:7-10** which described what we should do and what true submission to God involves, this section shows us what we should *not* do, i.e., they are signs that a person has *not* humbled him- or herself or submitted to God.

4:11-12—¹¹ *Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.* ¹² *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?*

Speaking against or judging a brother is a sign of arrogance and self-centeredness. It is contrary to the attitude we just saw in **4:5-10** that we should have. The Greek word used here for “speaking against” (*katalaleō*) “refers to any form of speaking against a person. What is said may be true in its content but harsh and unkind in the manner of its presentation. . . . James crushes any right his readers may have claimed to sit in judgment over their neighbors. This is not to rule out civil courts and judges. Instead, it is to root out the harsh, unkind, critical spirit that continually finds fault with others.” (Burdick 1981: 196)

This is more serious than many people realize. As Ronald Ward points out, James is saying that the person who has such a critical and judgmental spirit and in that spirit speaks against others “has made himself a judge; and not merely a judge who administers the law but something further. He has made himself a lawgiver. He has really set up another law by which he judges his brother. This denies God, sins against God and arrogantly usurps His position.” (Ward 1970: 1233)

The prohibition against judging others here does not contradict **John 7:24** where Jesus said, “*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment,*” or **1 Cor 2:15** which says, “*The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one,*” or **1 Cor 14:29** which says that the congregation should “*pass judgment*” on people claiming to be prophets. Everyone must be able to discern and evaluate the difference between true and false, good and bad, right and wrong. That is what Jesus and Paul are talking about. The difference between what Jesus and Paul are talking about and what James is talking about comes down to one’s motives, having the mind and character of Christ, and being led by the Spirit. Dachollom Datiri summarizes this in his comment on **1 Cor 2:14-15**: “Paul distinguishes between two kinds of people. The first group are those *without the Spirit*, who live as though there was nothing beyond physical life (**2:14**). Their values are all material, and they judge everything from physical and material perspectives. Such people do not, and cannot, understand spiritual things. By contrast, those who are mature or spiritual, whose lives are controlled by the Spirit, enjoy the special privileges of being able to *make judgments about all things*, that is, they can examine them carefully and sift out what is important (2:15). Someone who possesses the mind of Christ is able to make the right decisions about issues.” (Datiri 2006: 1381)

4:13-17—¹³ *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.”* ¹⁴ *Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.* ¹⁵ *Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”* ¹⁶ *But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.* ¹⁷ *Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

Whereas **vv.11-12** involved speaking against and judging others, in these verses the basic sin being confronted here is an *inner attitude* of life: the attitude of autonomy or self-sufficiency, that is, leading one’s life without reference to God. It is intimately related to the sin of presumption, i.e., presuming upon the Lord that all of one’s plans will go exactly according to plan without realizing that God is sovereign and may have other plans. Such presumption is arrogance, as James specifically calls it in **v.16**.

Making plans for the future is not being condemned here any more than discerning, evaluating, and judging, *per se*, were condemned in **vv.11-12**. Everyone of necessity has to plan his or her future. But all of our plans must be made in the context of God’s existence, his will, and his plans. We must always keep in mind that our plans are contingent on his will and his plans. On several occasions, Paul explicitly conditioned his plans with phrases such as “if God wills” (see **Acts 18:21; Rom 1:10; 1 Cor 4:19; 16:7**; see also **Heb 6:3**). He did not do this every time he was planning something (see **Acts 19:21; Rom 15:28; 1 Cor 16:5, 8**). This should remind us that saying words like “God willing” are not “magic words” that take care of the need. Rather, the issue is our inner attitude: whether we explicitly say words like “if the Lord wills” or not, “we are consciously to place all our plans and hopes under the lordship of Christ, recognizing that he is the one who prospers or brings to grief those plans” (Moo 1989: 1160). James concludes this section in **v.17** by noting that now that we know the right attitude we should take regarding our plans, to fail to consciously submit our plans to the will and plans of God is sin. On the other hand, if we truly believe, accept, and abide in the truth of God’s sovereignty and our absolute dependence on him and his will (see, e.g., **John 15:5; 1 Cor 6:19-20**) we can have great peace whether our plans succeed or fail.

5:1-6—*Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.* ² *Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.* ³ *Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!* ⁴ *Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.* ⁵ *You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.* ⁶ *You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.*

This section follows up on **4:13-17** regarding the transitory nature of life and not making arrogant and selfish plans and also is an extended comment on **1:9-11**. The theme of warnings against the rich are prominent in the teaching of Jesus (see **Matt 6:19-24; 19:23-24; Mark 10:23-25; Luke 12:16-21; 16:19-31**) and Paul (**1 Tim 6:5-11**).

In this passage James uses the very language that Jesus had used regarding the use of money in order to condemn the rich. Jesus had said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹ for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (**Matt 6:19-20**) James says that the rich *have* “stored up their treasure on earth.” A person stores up his treasure on earth by loving money and possessions, by constantly striving to make and have more, by hoarding their money and spending it on themselves rather than by giving generously to help the poor and needy, and by living lives of luxury, excess, and wanton pleasure. In God’s eyes, our riches “rot” and “rust” and our garments become “moth-eaten” when we accumulate wealth for our “self” rather than using it to help others and spread the kingdom of God (see **1 Tim 6:17-19**).

Three other aspects of this section should be mentioned. First, in **v.4** the cries of the laborers who worked in the fields of the rich but were not properly paid “*has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.*” This echoes **Gen 4:10** when Abel’s blood cried out from the round to the Lord. It is not only the laborers whose cry reaches the Lord, but “*the pay of the laborers . . . cries out against you.*” This is similar to **v.3** which says that the *rust* of the rich people’s gold and silver itself “*will be a witness against you.*” Further, God is called the “*Lord of Sabaoth*” (sometimes translated as “*Lord of Hosts*”). “*Sabaoth*” refers to armies and stresses the omnipotence of God (Danker 2000: “*Sabaoth*,” 909; Zodhiates 1993: “*Sabaoth*,” 1268). This indicates that

God is going to war against the rich on behalf of the poor whom they have mistreated. The only other place in the NT where God is called the Lord of Sabaoth is **Rom 9:29**, which also refers to Sodom and Gomorrah. This is significant in that it is for the very sins James is mentioning here—the love of money and possessions, hoarding and spending money on oneself rather than giving generously to help the poor and needy, and living lives of luxury, excess, and wanton pleasure—that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (**Ezek 16:49-50**).

Second, **v.3** says, “*It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!*” Some people think that the “last days” is a period of time in the future which will occur just before Jesus comes again. That is not true. Christ’s first coming: (A) marked the beginning of the “last days” which will continue until His return; and (B) fulfilled the OT prophecies concerning the “latter days” or “last days.” The NT makes this clear. “This is specifically stated by Peter in his great sermon on the day of Pentecost, when he quotes from Joel’s prophecy as follows: ‘For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day, but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh . . .’” (Acts 2:16-17). The words ‘in the last days’ (*en tais eschatais hēmerais*) are a translation of the Hebrew words *’acharey khēn*, literally *afterwards*. When Peter quotes these words and applies them to the event which has just occurred, he is saying in effect: ‘We are in the last days now.’” (Hoekema 1979: 16) Every other use of the phrase “last days” in the NT likewise presupposes that we are in the “last days” now (see **2 Tim 3:1-5**; **Heb 1:1-2**; **2 Pet 3:1-4**). Thus, James is talking about people and what they do with their money *now*.

Third, the context of this entire passage is that the wealth of the rich people here is a sign, not of God’s favor but of his *judgment*. Many people think that riches are a sign of God’s favor. It is true, of course, that God “*richly supplies us with all things to enjoy*” (**1 Tim 5:17**). But the teaching of the so-called “prosperity gospel” that riches are the sign of God’s favor is simply a lie. Jesus was a poor man who was persecuted by the rich and powerful, and ultimately was arrested, beaten, unjustly accused, and crucified as a common criminal or slave. Paul was rich, but that was *before* he became a Christian. *After* he became a Christian he was beaten, whipped, stoned, shipwrecked, persecuted, imprisoned (**2 Cor 11:23-33**) and ultimately had his head cut off. All of those things that happened to Jesus and Paul were not because they lacked faith or were in sin; those things occurred precisely *because* they were faithful. The sign that we are Jesus’s disciples is not that we have money or health but that we love one another (**John 13:34-35**).

Riches *may* be a sign of God’s blessing and favor—but that depends entirely on what we do with that with which God has blessed us. James’s point is that, if we hoard and spend our money on ourselves, living lives of luxury and pleasure instead of using what God has blessed us with to help the poor and needy and spread the kingdom of God, our wealth is a sign of God’s *judgment!* He makes this clear in **v.3** which says, “*Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire*” and in **v.5** which says, “*You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*” In **v.5** he is comparing the rich to cows or pigs who are being fattened up for the slaughter. The “*day of slaughter*” is an OT term for the day of judgment (**Jer 12:1-3**; see also **Ps 49:20**). James is telling us that, like animals who are about to be slaughtered, the rich, in their wealth and ease, are unaware—even on the day of their death—that they are about to be condemned and slaughtered. And, as **v.3** points out, their very wealth (upon which they relied and which they thought was a sign of God’s favor) will be a witness *against* them on the day of judgment. It is a witness against them because they used it for themselves rather than using it to help others and spread the kingdom of God.

The reference to killing the righteous man in **v.6** “may refer to the practical outcome of the failure of the rich to share their possessions and to pay the wages of the workers. . . . However, *condemn* (*katadikazō*) is a judicial term, and suggests rather that the rich are using, and perhaps perverting, the legal processes available to them to accumulate property and to gain wealth.” (Moo 1985: 166) The last phrase, “*he does not resist you,*” is generally taken to mean that the actions of the rich are worse because their victims refuse or are unable to resist. However, “it is possible to translate the clause as a question, expecting the answer ‘yes’: ‘does he not resist you?’ The subject of the verb could then be God . . . and the reference be to the future judgment: ‘will not God stand against you?’” (Ibid.: 167)

In this section, James is telling us that, ultimately, money is spiritual. What we do with our money, perhaps more than anything else, reveals who our true Lord is. That is why Jesus said more than once, “*You cannot serve God and wealth*” (**Matt 6:24**; **Luke 16:13**).

X. Jas 5:7-20—Concluding exhortations

5:7-11—⁷ *Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains.* 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.*

“Therefore,” which begins this section, links **vv.1-6** to the second coming of Christ and therefore reinforces the theme of judgment in those verses.¹⁰ In fact, the exhortations to be patient (**vv.7-8**), to not complain against one another (**v.9**), to endure suffering (**vv.10-11**), to speak simply and truly (**v.12**), to pray, sing praises, and confess sins (**vv.13-18**), and to turn fallen brethren back to the Lord (**vv.19-20**) can all be seen as exhortations of how to live in light of the fact that Jesus is coming again. **Psalm 37** has a similar perspective concerning the security of those who do the right thing and live for the Lord versus the insecurity and coming judgment of those who do not (see also **Psalm 73**).

The contrast between how a Christian should live compared to those James discussed in **vv.1-6** is seen even in the contrast between the rich who “*have fattened your hearts*” (**v.5**) versus believers who are to “*strengthen your hearts*” (**v.8**). The theme of patience which begins this section applies to all of the specifics James discusses: failure to be patient leads to complaining (**v.9**); and enduring suffering (**vv.10-11**) requires patience. David Nystrom points out one important reason why James is calling believers to patiently endure suffering: “One benefit from patient endurance of affliction is that we are granted the opportunity to minister to others who are similarly afflicted. These are hard words, but true. My wife and I have been married for fifteen years and are without children. The physicians say that we will never be able to have children. The manic and unexpected emotions of this painful want are difficult to describe. But my wife and I have been able to come alongside others who face similar pain—the pain of a mother whose child died in childbirth, or that of couples who, like ourselves, are without children. I cannot say that we take great comfort in this role, but we have found it to be a role that we can play.” (Nystrom 1997: 297-98)

Additionally, in **vv.7, 8, and 9** patience is linked to the coming of the Lord and the judgment he will bring. Although God's stage is larger and his time-frame is longer than we might like, he *is* coming again, and nothing is being forgotten or overlooked. Justice *will* be done, and the saints *will* be rewarded. But God has done more than just assure us that he will justly judge humanity for the sins, wrongs, and evils they have committed: God himself came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and was subject to sin and evil; he bore our sin and paid the price for our sin so that all those who turn to him will receive life instead of eternal death at the judgment. In light of all of this, Russian Christian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky concluded, “I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for. I believe that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man. I believe that at the world's end, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that has been shed. I believe that it will not only be possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.” (Dostoevsky 1957: 217) By keeping this firmly in mind, the Christian will be able to be patient and endure anything that he or she faces now.

5:12—*But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.*

James here is paralleling what Jesus said in **Matt 5:33-37**. Since Jesus is the truth (**John 14:6**; see also **John 1:14**), Christians—more than any other people in the world—should be people of truth and integrity.

¹⁰ The “Lord” in **v.7** is the same as the “Lord of Sabaoth [Lord of Hosts]” in **v.4**. The “Lord” in **v.7** clearly is referring to the second coming of Christ; the “Lord of Sabaoth” in **v.4** is an OT description of God. Thus, Christ is God.

5:13-18—¹³ *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.*

In this section, **vv.13-16a** talk about prayer in all circumstances of life; **vv.16b-18** talk about the effectiveness of sincere prayer. “Suffering” in **v.13a** indicates trouble or problems of any sort—physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, financial, relational, etc. Similarly, “cheerful” in **v.13b** “refers not to outward circumstances, but to the cheerfulness and happiness of heart that one can have whether in good times or in bad. . . . When our hearts are comforted, it is all too easy to forget that this contentment comes ultimately only from God. Thus, perhaps even more than when suffering, we must be reminded in times of happiness of our glad obligation to acknowledge God’s supreme role in our lives. We are to do this, James say *singing praise*. . . . This singing in praise was closely related to prayer (*cf.* 1 Cor. 14:15); indeed, it can be regarded as a form of prayer.” (Moo 1985: 175-76)

There are a number of aspects of praying for the sick in **vv.14-16a** that should be observed. First, the words used in these verses—“sick” (**v.14**); “anointing with oil” (**v.14**); “restore” (**v.15**); “raise him up” (**v.15**); and “healed” (**v.16a**) sometimes are used in the Bible spiritual contexts involving salvation, as opposed to physical illness and physical healing.¹¹ However, the context here appears to be that of physical illness and physical healing (Moo 1985: 181).

Second, the “elders” who are to pray and anoint with oil were the spiritual leaders of the local churches (see **Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1**). “Anointing with oil” was seen as having medicinal value in biblical times (see **Luke 10:34**), which has led some commentators to conclude that “James is prescribing prayer and medicine” (Burdick 1981: 204). However, the majority and probably better view sees the anointing with oil as a symbolic act that the sick person is being set apart for God’s special attention and care (see Moo 1985: 179; Moo 1989: 1162). This is indicated in that the anointing is to be done “*in the name of the Lord*” (**v.14**), and anointing with oil is symbolic of the action or presence of the Holy Spirit (see **1 Sam 16:13; Ps 89:20; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38**). There are two related cautions that must be borne in mind in connection with the use of anointing oil:

- “Prayer is the more significant of the two ministries performed by the elders. ‘Pray’ is the main verb, while ‘anoint’ is a participle. Moreover, the overall emphasis of the paragraph is on prayer. So the anointing is a secondary action.” (Burdick 1981: 203-04)
- “It is neither the oil nor the elders that heal, but it is the Lord himself, since the anointing is done in his name. Some in Africa believe it is actually the oil itself that has miraculous power to heal. Others think that healing depends on the quality of the oil used. Such people must stop thinking of the oil as sacred or as possession special powers and must cling only to the promises of God. That is why the author of this letter recommends prayer (5:15). It is the prayer of faith rather than the repetition of special formulas that brings miraculous healing.” (Andria 2006: 1516)

Third, the “prayer of faith” is linked with the forgiveness of sins in **v.15**. There are three cautions that should be borne in mind here:

- Although some sickness and death may be caused by sin (**1 Cor 11:27-30**), the Bible makes clear that sickness is not necessarily the result of sin (**John 9:2-3**). James acknowledges that at the end of **v.15** when he says “*and if he has committed sins.*”
- The linking of healing and forgiveness in **v.15** (“*and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him*”) “has led some to think that healing of the body is an integral part of salvation. The problem with this position is that someone may fall sick several times and be healed as a result of prayer. But one day that person may finally fall ill and die. Such a death does not mean that the person has forfeited salvation. Our

¹¹ Ronald Ward observes, “The ambiguity caused by the different meanings of all these words can hardly be denied. It is possible to give a consistent medical or a consistent spiritual interpretation. Either the patient is ill and *the prayer of faith* will heal him and *the Lord will raise him* from his bed; or he is helpless and weary spiritually and he will be saved in a spiritual resurrection. James may be ambiguous deliberately, leaving his readers to choose the interpretation which accords with the outcome of the elders’ visit.” (Ward 1970: 1235)

salvation is definite and eternal. What this passage is teaching is that the healing of the body is a sign of our redemption.” (Andria 2006: 1516) The fact is that all people, including all Christians, are terminal. Some Christians have certain medical conditions and they are *never* healed, despite many prayers and great faith (see, e.g., **2 Cor 12:7-10** [Paul’s “thorn in the flesh”]). This fact leads to the third caution:

- While **v.15** says “*the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick,*” it is not the prayer itself that has some special power to heal any more than it is the anointing oil that has special power to heal—it is God who heals. “A true prayer of faith, then, always includes within it a tacit acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty in all matters; that it is God’s will that must be done. And it is clear that it is by no means always God’s will to heal those who are ill (*cf.* 2 Cor. 12:7-9). Therefore, the ‘faith’ that is the indispensable condition of our prayers for healing to be answered—this faith being the gift of God—can be truly present only when it is God’s will to heal. . . . In this life, we shall not, most of the time, be able to know whether God’s will is to heal; we shall not always be able to sense whether that ‘faith’ that gets what is asked for is present. When our sincere, fervent prayers for healing go unanswered, therefore, it is not our lack of faith that is at fault; the context in which such faith could be present was absent.” (Moo 1985: 182, 186-87)

Fourth, **v.16a** exhorts the entire congregation (not just the elders) to “*confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.*” Most Christians pray for one another, although it is probably done relatively infrequently or, at least, sporadically. On the other hand, few Christians actually confess their sins to one another. Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses why this is so important: “In confession a man breaks through to certainty. Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? . . . We must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness? . . . Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. . . . As the open confession of my sins to a brother insures me against self-deception, so, too, the assurance of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by a brother in the name of God. Mutual, brotherly confession is given to us by God in order that we may be sure of divine forgiveness.” (Bonhoeffer 1954: 115-17)

Verses **16b-18** then go on to discuss the effectiveness of prayer. A “righteous man” (**v.16b**) is not a member of a particular “class” of Christians (bishops, elders, members of the clergy, etc.) or one who has particular spiritual gifts, but is anyone in a right relationship with God: someone whose sins are confessed and forgiven, who loves the Lord, and who consciously seeks to obey God and love and serve others. The example of Elijah reinforces this. Although Elijah was a great prophet, James emphasizes that “*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours*” (**v.17**). In fact, **1 Kings 19** reveals that Elijah was afraid (**1 Kgs 19:3**); he was depressed (**1 Kgs 19:4**); and he was full of self-pity (**1 Kgs 19:10**). Nevertheless, Elijah’s encounter with the prophets of Baal and the events which took place afterwards (**1 Kings 18-19**) give us an indication of why his prayers could accomplish much: his prayer pointed to and sought to glorify God rather than glorifying himself (**1 Kgs 18:36-39**); he expected God to give results (**1 Kgs 18:41**); he was persistent in prayer (**1 Kgs 18:42-45**); he acted and called the people to action in accordance with God’s word and his will (**1 Kgs 18:40**); he lived in a close relationship with, and was zealous for, the Lord (**1 Kgs 18:46; 19:9-14**); and he was obedient to the word of the Lord (**1 Kgs 19:5-8, 15-19**).

5:19-20—¹⁹ *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.*

These two verses close James’s letter with the practical emphasis which has characterized the entire letter. It is ambiguous whether the one who strays is a true believer who is backsliding into sin yet is still among the redeemed or is a false professor of Christ who is in need of salvation. (The church has always been a “mixed multitude” consisting of people who are saved and others who claim to be saved but really are not, something like the “mixed multitude” who left Egypt at the time of the exodus [see **Exod 12:38**].) The phrase in **v.20** that turning a sinner from the error of his way “*will save his soul from death*” suggests that the person is not a true believer. Either way, however, believers are to zealously look after the spiritual health of their brothers and sisters in the church and do all they can to keep them on the right path. To do this, believers have to know each

other well and be in close relationship with each other. This naturally should follow from the fact that the church is a family (**Matt 12:49-50; 2 Cor 6:18; Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 3:15; 5:1-2; 1 Pet 4:17**). Dhati Lewis puts it like this, “The church is not *like* family; it *is* family. . . . This can be seen by the fact that the word *disciple*, so prevalent in the early part of the New Testament, disappears after the book of Acts. It is replaced by the term *brother* in the rest of the Bible.” (Lewis 2015: n.p.) Families take care of each other. As Wayne Grudem points out, “The fact that the church is like a family should increase our love and fellowship with one another” (Grudem 1994: 859). On the other hand, if the churches do not start treating their own members like beloved members of a common family, then the world will (rightly) mock the church and ask: “Why should we become Christians, since you Christians don’t even like each other?”

James’s exhortation to us as he closes this epistle is important—but the need to turn people back from the error of their ways is less likely to occur if the church takes the many “one anothers” of Scripture seriously. The NT repeatedly exhorts believers to love one another (**John 13:34-35; Rom 13:8; 1 Thess 3:12; 4:9; 1 Pet 3:8; 4:8; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; 2 John 5**), encourage one another (**1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:24-25**), teach and admonish one another (**Rom 15:14; Col 3:16**), serve one another (**John 13:14-15; Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 4:10**), be patient, tolerant, and accepting of one another (**Rom 15:7; Eph 4:2**), be kind, compassionate, hospitable, and caring for one another (**1 Cor 12:25; Eph 4:32; 1 Pet 4:9**), live in harmony and peace with one another (**Mark 9:50; Rom 12:16; 1 Pet 3:8**), and honor each other by considering them as better than ourselves (**Rom 12:10; Phil 2:3**). In short, believers are to “*be devoted to one another in brotherly love*” (**Rom 12:10**). All of these things are the marks of a good, well-functioning family. This is ministry; it is life in the Spirit; it is what life in the body should look like. James’s last line, that bringing an erring brother or sister back will “*cover a multitude of sins*,” is just a specific application of what Peter said, “*Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins*” (**1 Pet 4:8**). May this be true of our churches.

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