

# **APPLIED CHRISTIANITY**

## **Studies in James**

by Dr. William C. Brownson

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In addition to a widespread speaking ministry in churches, on university campuses and at conferences, Dr. Brownson has written extensively for *the Church Herald* and other Christian periodicals.

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He continues to be busy in retirement teaching at Western Seminary, holding retreats, conducting tours to Turkey and Greece and spending time with family.

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## Preface

The New Testament letter of James is passionately practical. It breathes down-to-earth intensity. The author yearns to see the realities of the gospel translated into daily life. He has no patience with speculative theology or pious pretense. His cry is: “Let the faith be lived!”

The man behind the letter is James, half-brother of Jesus. He had the same mother, grew up in the same Nazareth home. James had observed Jesus in all the dimensions of family life, and found no fault in Him. He called the risen One “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”

It’s not surprising that James’ style is strikingly similar to that of Jesus. He includes more than 20 references and allusions to our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. He makes the same use of vivid figures drawn from nature. He burns with the same prophetic fire.

If we crave reality in religion, piety with integrity, wisdom for the way, we’ll surely find it in James’ letter. These studies are designed to aid in the search. God give us applied Christian!

## Chapter 1

### COUNT IT ALL JOY

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:1-4 NIV

It's a great privilege and a happy experience for me to write about the New Testament letter of James. Several features about this letter give it special interest and enormous practical value. You might call the book of James, "Studies in Applied Christianity." Here is down-to-earth religion, guidelines for everyday behavior. This letter shows us how the faith of the gospel is to be expressed in common life. It calls us to lead a life "worthy of the calling with which we are called" (Eph. 4:1). The letter builds squarely on the great affirmations of the gospel, but its strong emphasis is on faith-filled *living*. How much we need that! As John Wesley once said, "The problem of problems is to get Christianity put into practice." James can give us some powerful assistance in working at that together.

Another aspect of the letter which gives it unusual significance is its origin in the earliest Christian community. This letter was probably written in Jerusalem about A.D. 50 when most of the apostles and others who had seen the risen Christ were still alive. Quite evidently, it comes from a source very near to Jesus Himself. The material in James, for example, has more points of contact with the Sermon on the Mount than does any other New Testament writing. It contains perhaps twenty-two references or allusions to that matchless message recorded in Matthew's gospel. And just as Jesus did, the author of this letter makes frequent use of homely figures of speech drawn from the natural world: unruly horses, a scorching sun, a morning mist, the early and the latter rain. You get the sense in this writing that you are close to the fountain of the Christian faith and life.

But what intrigues me most in reflecting about the book of James is the author himself and the special relationship in which he stood to Jesus. We read in the New Testament of three men called James. One is James the son of Zebedee, brother of John. This "son of thunder" held a place in

the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. He cannot be the James who wrote this letter, however, for he was martyred at Jerusalem in A.D. 44. Another disciple, you recall, was named James the son of Alphaeus, but he never figures prominently in the New Testament narrative. The third James was a towering figure. Paul refers to him in his Galatian letter as a "pillar of the church" (see 2:9). In the Council at Jerusalem, where the entire leadership of the early church assembled, this James was the acknowledged leader. And he, who wrote this pastoral letter, was the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now think for a moment about what that means. Here was a man who grew up in the same family home with the incarnate Lord. He observed Jesus, talked with Him, ate with Him, lived with Him throughout His years of youth and early manhood. James' brother was to be confessed by Christians in all ages as the blameless One, "in every aspect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). For James to identify himself heart and soul with the Christian movement, as he did, was to affirm that throughout all his years with Jesus he had never observed anything to belie that testimony. That didn't mean, of course, that he believed from the start in Jesus as Messiah, Son of the living God. In fact, James, together with his other brothers, was somewhat skeptical and patronizing toward Jesus during His public ministry. But after the first Easter morning, everything changed. Gathered in the company of believers at Pentecost were not only His original disciples but also the earthly brothers of Jesus. James was among them. He could speak later of the Jesus whom he had known throughout his life as "the Lord of glory" (James 2:1). A more powerful witness to the truth of Jesus' claims could hardly be imagined. Think of it—this author had known Jesus intimately throughout his whole life! That alone makes what he had to say about following Christ to be weighty and impressive.

This man of God was widely known as "James the Just." He had a great reputation for godliness and devotion. It was said of him that his knees were heavily calloused through incessant kneeling in prayer. So highly esteemed was he that his martyrdom apparently caused a popular revolt.

James calls himself in this letter "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." There is more than a passing significance in that self-description. The word *servant* here means a "bondservant" or a "slave." Learn here a lesson in humility. James leaves it to others to call

him "the Lord's brother" or "a pillar in the church." For him it is the highest honor of all to be a servant of God and of the brother whom he calls Lord.

Written originally to Jewish believers scattered throughout the Roman empire, his words still have a kind of universal application. To all he wishes "greetings" or, literally, "joy." Now listen to his opening charge from the New International Version: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

James is picturing here a *situation of stern testing* for the people of God. The word he uses can be translated "temptation" in the special sense of that term, but it normally means any testing or trying experience. The image we receive from the original language is that of a journey along which a traveler meets with many obstacles and adversaries. Do you remember the parable Jesus told about the Good Samaritan? The wounded man to whom he ministered had been traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and had "fallen among thieves" (see Luke 10:25-37). That's the verb that James uses here. You're walking down the road of life and suddenly a horde of troubles, like so many menacing enemies, seems to converge on you. You have nowhere to turn, no possibility of escape and you don't know how you will possibly survive.

Some of the testing we meet with involves mistreatment at the hands of other people. We are slighted, abused, lied about, held up to ridicule. We are taunted for the faith we hold or the standards by which we live. People cheat us, scorn us, take advantage of us, or try to alienate us from family and friends. When others seem bent on injuring or destroying us, we pass through testing times. Sometimes we experience heartbreaking loss: financial reverse, destruction through fire, flood, or tornado. Perhaps we lose our vision, our hearing, our ability to walk or drive. Or we suffer the most desolating loss of all, bereavement. We've all had our share of sicknesses and embarrassments, frustrations and disappointments. We've sometimes been pressured to compromise our convictions, tempted to deny our Lord.

But it sometimes happens in life that an almost overwhelming combination of these things comes upon us. I remember a week in my childhood when our family suffered a bizarre series of mishaps. The living room ceiling fell, smashing our furniture. That same night, the furnace blew up. Then, a few days later, our house was robbed. Troubles



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sometimes come in bunches, don't they? In recent years, far more painfully, we've experienced the death of our oldest son, an agonizing trial in our local church, and the deep suffering of persons very close to us. Our family, of course, is not unique in that way. You could share your story of multiplied troubles. You could tell of moments in your life when you have faced, as James put it, "trials of many kinds."

But James reminds us that such *testings*, along with the confusion and pain they bring, *can also have positive, growth-producing effects*. Listen: "the testing of your faith develops perseverance." The last word is sometimes translated "patience," sometimes "endurance," but this rendering *perseverance* is probably best. It means passively bearing our hardships, putting forth our best effort to "hang on" in the midst of them, but also pressing on our forward way in spite of them all. James is speaking of the way in which tribulations develop *character*. No one is naturally patient. None of us has inherent ability to endure. The only way we learn patience is by going through something difficult, hard to bear, exasperating to wait for. The only way we develop the staying power of a seasoned veteran is by having something to endure. Faith is a vigorous, active thing, somewhat like a muscle. It only attains full strength and capacity by working against resistance. There seems to be a firmness and depth of Christian commitment that is formed only under extreme pressure.

Most of us are willing to acknowledge that—in theory at least. We can see when adversity overtakes us that it may bring beneficial side effects. We admit that we have often learned more from our defeats than from our victories. But when we've mastered those valuable lessons, why must the troubles persist? We're ready to say, "Now we've received the benefits of suffering; let's go on to something else." But James says, "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Apparently not simply pressure, but pressure over a long period of time, is sometimes required. We're called not only to endure but to keep on enduring, so that having passed through our trials we may come to maturity, to fullness of life in Christ. Can we believe that—that hard as some of these things are to face, they are what we need to bring us to our high destiny?

James was convinced of that. He wrote to all his Christian brothers and sisters, "*Consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds.*" Now that is an amazing charge. Anyone who has passed through

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times of testing and difficulty knows that these are not joyful experiences in themselves. And James isn't telling us to "make believe" we are happy when we are not, or to imagine that our pains are pleasant. He is talking rather about the attitude that we adopt toward testings. One of the most precious gifts of God to us is the freedom, even in the midst of life's worst experiences, to choose the outlook we will take toward them. James says, "Now because these trials are used by God to mold Christian character and build endurance, count them all joy." Decide that you're going to view them that way.

To some, this may seem like an impossible kind of mental gymnastics. Just because we know that a heartbreak may have long-term benefits, that doesn't mean we can "consider it pure joy." But a Christian knows that every difficulty, every crashing wave of affliction, brings an opportunity for God to show Himself strong and faithful in delivering us. And the best part of all is this: what seems impossible for us can begin to happen through the power of Christ. James knows that those to whom he writes have received more than good advice. They have new life in Jesus Christ. And that resurrection power, that present ministry of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of Christians, makes it possible for them, even when everything seems to go wrong, to say, "I will rejoice in the Lord." God help you, too, through faith in this risen Savior, whatever your circumstances, to "count it all joy!"

### **Study Questions**

1. What does James attempt to do in his letter?
2. What significance do you see in its early date?
3. What takes on fresh meaning for you when you realize that James was the brother of Jesus?
4. What function, according to James, do our trials serve?
5. How can we adopt the right attitude toward them?

## Chapter 2

### HOW TO BE WISE

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

James 1:5-8 NIV

"How to be Wise." Maybe the first step lies in grasping what wisdom is. It's not intelligence; some very brilliant people have been notoriously unwise. Nor is it information. Storing facts in the mind will make us more learned but not necessarily more wise. Our word *understanding* is closer to wisdom but still doesn't capture its essential content.

Wisdom, in the biblical sense, is intensely practical. To be wise means to know how to handle problems, how to deal with trials, in short—how to *live*. Wisdom involves managing our conduct according to God's norms. It means learning how to behave as we were meant to. What a priceless benefit that must be! The Old Testament writer of Proverbs wasn't exaggerating when he cried, "Happy is the man who finds wisdom . . . for the gain from it is better than gain from silver and its profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels and nothing you desire can compare with her" (3:13-15).

Listen now to these words of James, the Lord's brother, great champion of practical Christianity: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God." That's simply put, isn't it? "If anyone lacks wisdom"; we all certainly qualify there. Every day we face some perplexity in our relationships with other people, some problem in our work, some vexing difficulty, some agonizing decision. Often we feel at a loss. We don't know where to turn; we don't know what to do. We need wisdom. James says, "When you're in that situation, appeal to God." You may be able to gain other kinds of data from many different sources. We could say, "If anyone lacks knowledge, let him go to college!" But to find wisdom, according to James, we need to go to *God* and ask for it.

To encourage us in that quest, James *reminds us about the character of God, shows us the faith we need, and assures us that our prayers for*

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*wisdom will be answered.* Notice first how he describes the one to whom we pray. He is the God who *gives*. A literal translation of James' words would be, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask from the giving God." Isn't that a beautiful designation? The *giving* God. James is bearing witness here to the God whose nature it is to expend Himself, to bestow blessing, to impart good things. The grand heart of the Bible's message is this: God so loved the world that He *gave*. Yes, He even gave His only Son!

James goes on to describe this divine generosity in further detail. God is the one who *gives to all*. His mercy is great. His compassion is marvelously wide. God "gives to all, life and breath and all things." "He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). Numberless good things come from His hand to all the children of men. There isn't a human being alive in the world today who doesn't owe thanks to God for His many gifts. As the psalmist put it, "He opens his hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing" (see Ps. 145:16).

And, James continues, He *gives generously*. The Greek word here means literally "with singleness of aim." In other words, He gives because He wants to, because it's His nature to do so. He has no ulterior motives. He demands nothing in return. He gives, as we say, "out of a full heart." And more than that, He does so "without finding fault," without "reproaching" or "upbraiding." No one need fear to ask or become apprehensive lest approaching God should be seen as presumption. God doesn't mind our continually asking. No, let's say it much more strongly, "He *delights* in our asking." And, as someone put it, "He doesn't ask embarrassing questions about our deserts." He treats us graciously. God doesn't make us feel like worthless beggars or like fools because we need to ask. He'll never bawl us out or put us down for seeking His face.

We know this, don't we, because of Jesus Christ. He called God "Father" in the intimate language of the family. And He taught His followers that they are beloved children, too, and can always be sure of the Father's welcome. Because of Christ, through faith in Him, we can come to God with joy, affection and confidence, knowing that He is altogether for us. What greater incentive could we possibly have to ask for wisdom?

But there is a condition attached here. "When he asks," James continues, "he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like

a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does." When we come to God seeking wisdom, says James, we must ask in faith.

By faith here, he means more than a belief that God exists, more even than the confidence that He is personal and accessible. Faith involves insight also into God's character, a living awareness of His good will toward us. It means believing in His kindly action, in His desire to bestow good gifts. It includes, in other words, reliance upon God and firm expectation that what is asked of Him will be granted. It's the trust of an Abraham, "fully persuaded that what God has promised he is able also to perform" (see Rom. 4:21). It's the faith of a Sarah who "esteemed faithful the one who had promised" (see Heb. 11:11). It's the strong confidence referred to in Hebrews, "He that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (see Heb. 11:6). Faith is the very "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, KJV). When we truly believe, we hope for something as confidently as if we held the title deed, the legal guarantee to it, in our hands. It is the conviction that we will certainly receive what we cannot yet see.

You can see the need for that faith when you consider the alternative. James says, "not doubting." That word *doubt* means essentially "having a critical spirit." Suppose, when you come to God to ask for wisdom, that you seriously question if He has your best interest in mind. You're not at all convinced about His good will or dependability. You may be inclined to accuse Him of unfairness. Now under those circumstances, what kind of prayer can you offer? James sees such a "pray-er" as resembling a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. He's like the ocean spray, unstable and changing from moment to moment. What an apt, vivid picture of a mind that cannot fix itself in faith, that cannot ground itself on God!

James doesn't mean, of course, that we have to have perfect, unwavering faith in order to offer an acceptable prayer. Few, if any of us, could meet that standard. But unless our basic attitude toward God is one of trust in His fatherly care, we pray as deeply divided persons. James calls such persons "two-souled, double-minded." They are inwardly in conflict. That keeps them from receiving the wisdom they need from God and from living reliably among others. When we cannot build our lives

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upon the rock of God's faithfulness, we become "unstable in all our ways." Lacking faith in God, we find it difficult to be faithful ourselves.

God is grieved at our unbelief but honored by our trust. He delights in those who count on Him as kindly and reliable and who expect good things from His hand. Everything depends on trusting His goodness and mercy toward us. And you can be sure of that today. The marvelous pledge of God's faithful love is the gift of His Son. Because of Christ, because of His cross, you can know beyond all doubting that He cares greatly for you. If you will accept the gift of God's mercy in Jesus Christ and keep your eyes on that crucified and risen Savior, who ever lives to pray for you, you can live with this confidence: nothing can ever separate you from God's love. And you can pray prayers which, in spite of their feebleness, spring from genuine faith.

And when we do pray like that, when we ask God for wisdom with that faith, the promise is sure: "It will be given." How much like the words of Jesus are these assurances of His brother James! Remember how the Lord said, "Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you" (see Matt. 7:7). He seemed never to weary of driving home that point. "Every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." We can't be absolutely sure, of course, that every kind of petition will be granted. We may sometimes ask for things which God has never promised to grant and which wouldn't be good for us anyway. Your prayer for a million dollars, or for victory in all sports and games, may not turn out as you expect. But a gift like wisdom, the grace to know how to face life—we *know* God wants to give us that. He is far more ready to bestow it than we are to ask.

Take heart in this: God will provide the wisdom you ask for. Remember, He doesn't say just when or how. You can't lock God up to your timetable or prescribe to Him the manner in which He will guide you. You aren't promised a voice speaking from heaven or a miraculous vision. God may use all kinds of means to show you the path and make His way plain in your situation.

Further, His guidance may not answer every question and resolve all confusion. You may have to take some steps, make some decisions, when you haven't yet arrived at full certainty about them. But of this you can be sure: when you ask God for wisdom, trusting in His fatherly goodness in Christ, you're going to receive it. In the moment of crisis, you'll have the resources you need. When you stand at the crossroads,

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you'll know the way to take. You'll know how you're meant to live. And that's what it means to be wise.

But everything comes in its order: commitment to the God made known in Jesus Christ, trust in His goodness and faithful promises, and then persistent asking. In your search for wisdom, take that path. Turn to Him wholeheartedly now. Then, though heaven and earth should pass away, God will hear your prayer. He will see you through.

### **Study Questions**

1. How does wisdom differ from I.Q.?
2. What is there about God's revealed character that encourages us to ask Him for wisdom?
3. Why is faith so essential in requests of this kind?
4. In what form will God's answer to these prayers usually come?

## WHEN YOU PASS THE TEST

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James 1:12 NIV

What would you think if I said to you that the happiest human beings on earth are those who pass through the most severe trials? You might wonder about my intelligence or at least my good judgment. Or, you might be puzzled as to what kind of happiness I could have in mind. Are the afflicted ones happy? The impoverished and the oppressed? Is the way of pain and loss, frustration and disappointment, a way of gladness? Do you mean to say that troubles and sorrows somehow add to our well-being, even make us rejoice? James, our Lord's brother, seems to say just that. Listen: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial." And *blessed* here means, literally, "happy."

These words, like so many others in the letter of James, seem to echo or paraphrase those of Jesus Himself. It was the Lord who said, "Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who hunger. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy" (see Matt. 5:1-12). Think of that! What a strange formula for the good life!

But James doesn't say that we become happy simply because sore trials overtake us. Many who meet with heartbreaks and defeats seem anything but cheerful. The word is, "Blessed is the man who *endures* testing; blessed is the man who *perseveres*." The blessed ones, the happy, are those who react to trials in a certain way. They bear up under it. They don't fold under pressure. They aren't deflected from their life purpose. They don't give up on their dreams. In spite of everything, they "hang in there," as we say, and keep moving ahead.

Remember old Abraham, the man we know as the father of the faithful? I suppose that few people have been tested as he was. Told by God that he would be the father of a great progeny, he had to watch his wife grow older and older without her ever being able to bear a child. Then the seemingly incredible happened. Aged Sarah bore a son! At last Abraham held in his arms the child for whom he had hoped and prayed.



Imagine what that boy must have meant to the grizzled patriarch as the years passed.

Then one day, the Scriptures tell us, God "tested" Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham." "Here I am," came the reply. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Gen. 22:1-2 NIV).

"What, sacrifice my son? My only son? The one You gave me? Isaac—the child of promise?" But the old man persevered in his trial. What a terrible wrenching of soul he must have known as he had it out with God under the stars. But he decided to keep on trusting God, keep on obeying Him.

Early the next morning, Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. When he had found it, he took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac. He himself carried the fire and the knife, and the two of them went on together. When they reached the mount, Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood on it, bound his son Isaac and laid him on top of the wood. He was ready, though his whole soul cried out against it, to do the dreadful, unthinkable deed.

We know now that God never meant for him to slay his boy. But Abraham wasn't sure of that, and for him it was the most agonizing test imaginable. But he endured it. He went right on until God stayed his hand. You know people, perhaps, like Abraham. You're impressed, even awed, at the way they face disaster or cope with the prospect of desolating loss. There's something tremendously inspiring about sufferers who keep on struggling, who never quit. But can we really say that such people are happy?

Only if we take the long view. "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial," writes James, "because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life." James, as we've already seen, is a practical man. He's a realist, impatient with all pretense. He doesn't want for a moment to say that trials are pleasant or that crosses are easy to bear. We mock people when we tell them they ought to feel good in the midst of pain or smile when their hearts are crushed with grief. It's neither healthy nor Christian to mask our emotions or repress our painful feelings. None of us can enjoy our afflictions, but we can rejoice in hope of what lies beyond them. When you persevere in the trial, when you stand the test

and the pure gold is separated at last from what is base and unworthy, then, says James, comes "the crown of life."

This isn't the kind of crown that only one person can win. It's for all who endure under trial. We read several times in the New Testament of a crown that awaits God's faithful servants. Paul describes the "crown of righteousness"

(2 Tim. 4:8) which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to all who love His appearing. Peter promises elders with a shepherd's heart that they will receive

from the chief shepherd at last a "crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:4). Probably in these two passages, the crown means the highest realization of what is promised. Wearing a "crown of righteousness" means receiving fully the likeness of Christ when we are conformed at last to His image. The "crown of glory" is something very similar. We will share at last in the glory of God, the unveiled splendor of Christ. And this "crown of life," accordingly, must mean life itself, the life of the coming age. It's the abundant life, which we have tasted and glimpsed here, but will know fully then. James says that when you pass as a Christian through the daily dyings of a world full of trouble, you're on the road that leads to fullness of life. After the cross, the crown.

Sometimes I meet with people who are troubled by this notion of reward. They have believed the wonderful good news of the gospel. As Paul puts it, "By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). They know with deep assurance that nothing we do can possibly contribute one iota to our salvation. "Jesus paid it all; all to him I owe." It's not by works of righteousness that we have done but by His mercy that He has saved us. Since that it true, they argue, it seems like a compromise of the message of free grace to talk about rewards.

Now it's important to see that they have a point. If we think of our Christian obedience, our service to God, as a way of earning something, as a shrewd investment that will pay rich dividends, we haven't been gripped by the spirit of the gospel. But it's one thing to say that we shouldn't be chiefly motivated by rewards; it's quite another to say that God shouldn't promise them. We surely have no claim upon His favor. All our works and sufferings can never merit a reward or put Him in our debt. But if He chooses to heap grace upon grace, crowning the toils and trials

of His people with some added mercy, who are we to find fault with His goodness?

And remember, too, the rewards of God never minister to selfishness. They can only be enjoyed in fellowship with Him. They have appeal only for those who worship Him. The crown of righteousness and glory He promises is found in bearing His likeness. The life He offers is His own life of self-giving love.

So don't be led by some sort of super-idealism to scorn all thought of reward in the life to come. God is the one who promises it. Jesus told the rich young ruler, remember, that if he would sell his many possessions, give to the poor and follow Jesus, he would have treasure in heaven. He faced this man squarely with the challenge of faith. Did he believe that what Christ had to offer, those treasures in heaven, were more worth having than anything he possessed here? It's a vital part of faith to believe that God is our portion, that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, that no service for Him can ever be in vain. Let your heart be cheered with hope in the midst of every trial. There is a crown of life, given by the hand of God, for all who persevere.

But notice now that God has promised this crown of life to those who *love* Him. What is it really to love God? How is that expressed in a human life? Perhaps we think first of worship, offerings of thanks, songs of praise to God, in response to His marvelous grace. Yes, to call on the Lord, to seek Him with our whole heart, that is surely a sign of devotion.

But love has an everyday, practical character about it too. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Loving Him means seeking to please Him. It means walking in His ways, ordering our lives by His revealed will. It's a poor and hollow kind of love that doesn't seek to honor and please the beloved.

When Jesus asked Peter the crucial question, "Do you love me?" and heard the rugged apostle say three times, "Lord, you know that I love you," His next word was, "Feed my sheep. Shepherd my flock. Tend my lambs" (see John 21:15-17). He says to him, in other words, "If you love Me, Peter, then care for those whom I love. Give yourself for the welfare of My people." For if we don't love the brothers and sisters whom we see, how can we profess to love God whom we do not see? Love for God will always show itself in loving people.

But the passage we're studying today suggests that there is still another way in which we can show our devotion to the Lord. We can

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persevere in the midst of trials. We can meet adversities with patience and courage. Peter puts it this way in one of his letters, writing to those who were going through great suffering, "If when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval" (1 Peter 2:20). Or, as it might also be translated: "God says, 'Thanks!'" God accepts as a fragrant offering, as a work of devotion, the endurance of His people amid the testings of life.

Maybe you feel today that there is very little that you can do for Christ. Sickness has laid you low. The advancing years have stolen away your strength. Or right now you feel under such pressure that you are barely hanging on. Just to survive, to keep yourself together, is a daily struggle. What good am I now? you wonder. How can I possibly serve God? Well, believe this: as you live through what you have to face, trusting in Jesus Christ, you share the fellowship of His sufferings. Your persevering, your refusing to quit, your going on with the Lord in spite of everything—He sees as an offering of great love. "They also serve who only stand and wait," wrote Milton in his blindness. Take this great word to your heart today, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

### Study Questions

1. What does it mean to *endure* testing?
2. Does James tell us that we should enjoy our afflictions? Explain.
3. What is it that encourages us to persevere?
4. What are the chief ways in which genuine love for God can be expressed?

## HOW TEMPTATION WORKS

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

James 1:13-15 NIV

What happens when you are tempted? What goes on when you feel yourself drawn toward evil? What are the dynamics of that tense situation, and who is responsible for it?

As we've been noticing in the last few chapters, James, the brother of Jesus, is an intensely practical guide in matters of Christian living. His trenchant wisdom cuts through all religious sham, all pious play-acting. He calls for a commitment that is more than words and sentiment, for a faith that shapes our common life. James especially takes aim against our self-deception, the myriad ways we have of kidding ourselves. In the name of truth and godliness, he wants to shatter our pet illusions.

One of those has to do with temptation. Listen to these words on the subject from a down-to-earth saint: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death."

First then, he wants to clear the decks of our false, self-serving notions about temptation. "When you are tempted," James says, "when you sense a strong pull toward what you know to be wrong, when you find yourself under pressure to compromise, to deal falsely, to exploit other people, to inflict pain, don't fool yourself about what's going on. Don't say, "God is tempting me." James denies categorically that this is ever the case. God Himself cannot be tempted with evil. There is nothing in His holy being that responds to invitations toward evil. He is "light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). He is love and has no room in His heart for love's opposite. And this God whom no evil ever tempts, Himself tempts no one.

Here we need to look carefully at a key Bible word. The Greek verb *peiradzein* means "to test" (that is "try" or "prove"), but also "to tempt"

(solicit to evil). In each case, we discover its precise meaning only by the context in which it is found. On the surface, the Bible seems to teach in some places that God does tempt people. Do you remember that passage in the Old Testament where it is said that God "tested" Abraham—gave him the heartbreaking command to offer His son as a sacrifice? The verb used there in the Greek translation of the Old Testament is *peiradzein*. We could translate that, "God tested Abraham" or "God tempted Abraham."

Early in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we learn of a wilderness experience in which He encountered the devil. The verb used to describe the devil's activity on that occasion is the same word again, *peiradzein*. Yet the Bible can describe Satan as "the tempter" while affirming that God never tempts anyone. How do we make sense of all of that?

Both of these activities, testing and tempting, precipitate a crisis. Both are designed to produce a reaction, to reveal something about a person. But the action is testing or tempting, depending upon the motives of the person behind it.

Think of a parallel in the English language, the word *expose*. Let's say you are a political candidate, running for public office. Your campaign manager realizes that you are not well-known. You need to have your name and face more widely and prominently displayed. Your manager promises to take care of that. "I'll give you exposure," he says, meaning by that, "I'll let everyone know what an attractive, competent, dedicated public servant you are." Your political opponent, however, has something else in mind. He wants to ferret out your weaknesses, to discover moral lapses in your past, to learn of every compromising situation you've ever been in. He threatens you to your face, "I'm going to expose you." Both parties, then, want to create exposure, but with very different motives, in order to produce precisely opposite results!

Now James implies that the devil, the evil one, the enemy of God and man, is out to trip you up. He wants to see you fall. He'd like nothing better than to see you renounce God and make a mess of your life. So he *tempts* you. God, on the other hand, wants nothing but the best for your life. He wants to see you develop to your full personhood. He wants to see your faith come forth in the midst of life's struggles as pure gold. So He *tests* you.

When you think about that for a moment, you realize that in the same experience of life, Satan may be tempting and God may be testing. The

enemy is setting things up so that you can fall on your face while God is holding out an opportunity for you to stand strong.

But if you fall for the tempter's bait, don't blame God. That wasn't what He was after. It was no part of His plan for you. When you did respond to temptation, you had to stifle His still, small voice and turn your back on Him to do it. In fact, God was there all the time with resources to help you go the other way. Listen to this remarkable word about that from the writings of Paul: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13 NIV). No, you can't lay responsibility for your sin at His door. You can't even say, "The devil made me do it," because the tempter didn't overpower you. He didn't compel you to do something against your will. "Get this straight," James seems to say, "when you surrender to temptation, don't pretend that you're a helpless victim. The devil couldn't force you to sin, and God wouldn't."

The key to what happens when we disobey God and move toward evil is much closer to home. James says, "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." Do we hear that? Not some inscrutable design of God, not some overpowering pressure from the evil one, but our own desire. Sin is always, as we say, "an inside job." The fortress is overrun because there are traitors within the walls. We wouldn't have a problem with temptation if there weren't so much within ourselves to which it appeals. According to James, the culprit is our own desire, our evil desire.

To be a desiring person is not evil in itself. God made us with desires. He kindled in us the flames of passion and aspiration. To want, to crave, to seek, to thirst is a vital part of our humanity. But our desires, when no longer under God's control, can run away with us. They can become so demanding, so insatiable, that we become their slaves. Or they can be directed toward objects that God never intended for us to have. And when desires become so strong as to be idolatrous or so misdirected as to defy God's order, then they are evil. And that is the situation in which all of us live. We find desires within us warring against each other, striving against other people, challenging God. There's a bent in us toward wrong desiring. Our wants are corrupted, turned in upon ourselves. And that gives them explosively dangerous potential. When we are tempted, then,

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we aren't overwhelmed by some outsider force but we are enticed and drawn away from God's path by our own desires.

James goes on to describe the emergence of sin as a kind of birth process. Listen, "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." He leaves unsaid who the "father" is in this whole reproductive process, although he probably means us to understand by it the devil, whom Jesus described as "the father of lies." At any rate, the desire becomes wedded to the temptation, joined to the power of evil, and from that kind of union, sin is conceived. In other words, it's a kind of combination of the temptation itself and the unbridled desire within. The actual sin grows from that and then assumes a kind of life of its own. As it moves on in its natural course, as it works itself out in human experience, the final fruit is death, separation from the living God who gives us life.

Learn from this that no sin is a trifle or an isolated incident. Sin is a germinal force, a death-dealing power. We become involved in it through our own compliance, but then it grows in strength and begins to dominate us. Every time we say no to God and yes to temptation, we set freshly in motion a grim process, a drift toward death.

We could hardly bear to think about that (and I would surely have trouble talking about it), if that were the whole truth about human life. If yielding to temptation always led surely and inexorably toward death, there would be no hope for any of us. But God has broken into that gloomy cycle. In the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, He has come to do something about our desperate plight. The cross of Christ brings us forgiveness for every sin. His resurrection and the gift of His Holy Spirit bring a new inner dynamic to set us free. Though we've fallen many times, though we've wasted away our lives in a far country, there is still a way back and a welcome.

Look this day to Christ crucified for you, dying for your sins and rising to give you life and hope! There is the Savior, the one who offers you pardon, peace and power. If you will, in the light of His saving love, acknowledge your sin and waywardness and put your whole trust in Him, then a radically new process can begin to work in you. The Spirit of God within can bring forth the fruits of love and joy, and you can move toward fullness of life.

But, says James, as you walk that way, don't fall back into fooling yourself. Even as Christians, we still stumble. There are shame-filled



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moments when we deny our Lord and grieve His heart. When those come, face them honestly. Don't say with Adam, "The woman that you gave me to be with me, she gave me of the fruit and I ate it." Or don't use the woman's excuse, "It was the serpent" (see Gen. 3:11-13). And especially don't say, "God laid too big a temptation on me." The only way toward spiritual integrity, toward religious reality, is to assume responsibility for what you've done. Call it by its true name. Confess it fully, freely before God, and accept His forgiveness in Christ.

Then look to the same Savior who forgives you to make you strong. He says, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). Even though you're a Christian, you have no personal resources against evil. You never become "independently wealthy" in the spiritual life. Your only deliverance is in watching against evil and appealing to your mighty Lord. When you know how temptation works, when you know how from within, out of the heart of man all evils proceed, you know also your greatest need. You need Christ ruling by His Spirit in your heart. May it be so today for you and for me!

### **Study Questions**

1. What is the difference between "testing" and "temptation"?
2. What part does God play in our experience of temptation?
3. Who is to blame when we succumb to temptation?
4. What happens to us when we keep giving in to it?

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM GOD

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

James 1:16-18 NIV

The letters we receive from listeners at *Words of Hope* are often thrilling—but sometimes heartbreaking. I'm thankful to God for both kinds. I rejoice at the good news of what God has done for people through the ministry of the gospel, at the encouragement that comes from knowing that men and women, boys and girls have been deeply helped through our broadcasts. I appreciate also the honest sharing of people who open to us their hurts and sorrows and sometimes even cry out in confusion and rage at what they have to bear. It's wonderful to hear, on the one hand, of those who come to joyful faith in Jesus Christ, but it's also good to be in touch with those who fight lonely battles against doubt and fear. Let me share with you a paragraph from one especially poignant letter: "Why is life so unnaturally cruel to me and others in this condition? For what can I be thankful when my life has been ruined from birth? Where is this loving Creator that people speak of? Life certainly has a lot of cruel streaks in it. Who or what must I believe in?"

While the agony and pathos of that is fresh in your mind, listen to these words of James, the Lord's brother, from the first chapter of his New Testament letter, verse 16: "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." I'd like for you to look with me today at this New Testament teaching on what we can expect from God. Then let's face frankly how our experience seems at times to deny that, to shout a different message. And finally, consider with me why we can still believe.

First, what does James affirm about God's dealings with us? He says that God gives us "every good and perfect gift." James had just been dealing with those who were inclined to blame God for their temptations. If they gave way to some pressure toward evil, they were ready to say that

God had made the situation too difficult for them. It was His fault; He had let them down. James has said, "No!" God Himself can't be tempted by evil and He never tempts anyone. He's with you in the midst of temptation, ready to strengthen you or to make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it. Don't attribute the devil's work to God. Or, more to the point, don't lay to His charge the wanderings of your own heart.

Now James goes even further. He wants to warn his readers against every tendency to accuse God of evil. Do you want to know, he says, what comes from above? Do you want to know what to expect from God? Here it is: "Every good and perfect gift." If we are to hold God responsible for something, he says, this is it. Think of everything good that has ever come to this world and to your life. That's God's doing. Think of everything that has enriched you or brought you fulfillment. Think of every encouragement, every glad surprise. Those all came from God. If any joy has ever touched you, if any beauty has ever moved you, if any love has ever warmed your heart, see God's hand in those things. You may hold Him as responsible as you like for the blessings and mercies of life.

Further, this marvelous generosity is absolutely dependable. It's rooted in God's character. He is the "Father of lights" in whom there is no variation or shadow caused by turning. God is the one who made the heavenly lights, stars that blaze and shine for billions of years. Even the largest and brightest of those will some day grow dim and disappear, but God is light forever. His nature will never change. His love will never fail. The heart behind His gracious gifts will always be for us. The living God is not like men or the idols which they have made for themselves. He is not fickle or arbitrary. He does not rule by caprice. His steadfast love is the most dependable reality in the universe.

But this is precisely where many people have difficulty. "That all sounds wonderful," they say, "but where is the proof of it?" Where is the evidence that God gives nothing but good gifts and always wants the best for us? I can show you a mountain of evidence that points the other way. What about the babies that are born deformed or hydrocephalic or hopelessly brain damaged? What about the earthquakes that destroy whole cities, leaving thousands homeless and desolate? What about hurricanes, tidal waves and volcanic eruptions? What about cancers, brain tumors, multiple sclerosis, diabetes and a thousand other evils that befall people every day? Yes, what about physical pain, about mental anguish? What about the exquisite suffering of unrequited love? Where is

God when children starve and parents weep? How can you talk about God's love in a world of oppression and injustice, where the accumulated misery in any small village is enough to numb the most insensitive mind?

We can't afford to take those questions lightly. There is no virtue in pretending that the world is better than it is or in denying that life is monstrously painful for many, many people. The one whose letter I read earlier can scarcely find a "good and perfect gift" for which to give thanks. In the midst of her suffering, she seems to find no evidence that God is on her side. She sees no hint of an unchanging, divine goodness. All she knows is that life is shot through with streaks of cruelty. Who or what can she believe in?

It's easy to write such people off. We can berate them for complaining or accuse them of ingratitude or damn them for their unbelief. But when we do that, we haven't really heard them, and we have no healing, helping word to speak. Let's acknowledge that the mysteries they struggle with are real. Let's admit that life is hard, that people do suffer horribly and that no amount of cheerful optimism can explain it away. Let's take seriously these agonizing questions. Then, perhaps, those who ask them will be able to listen anew to our witness.

Enter James again. Let's call him to the witness stand. "How can you be sure, James, that God is so unchangeably kind and that all good gifts come from His hand?" James answers by pointing to something God has done, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." Listen to that: "by the word of his truth," by the message of His gospel, God gave new life to His people. We were cut off from Him by our self-will and stubborn pride. We had wandered away into the far country of estrangement. Severed from the source of our true life, we knew a living death. We were hopelessly enmeshed in guilt. We were slaves to the evil we had allowed to enter our lives. We were caught in a downward spiral toward doom.

But then God made us alive. Through His word, by His Spirit, He caused us to be born again and made us His own dear children. He pardoned our sins. He threw open the prison doors of our bondage. He lighted up our lives with hope. We tasted, through the word of the gospel, abundant life.

God made us in that way a kind of firstfruits of His new creation. He's planning, we learn, to make all things new, to remove all evil from His good creation and to reveal the glory of His grace in a new heaven and a

new earth.

Dear friends, do you see what James is doing here? For the supreme evidence of God's unchanging mercy and good will, he points to what God has done in Christ. That's the key to seeing life steadily and seeing it whole. Look at everything in the light of Jesus Christ.

If you look at the created order alone, its message seems ambiguous. Warm sunshine, life-giving rain, fruitful harvests, and breathtaking beauty—all these seem to sing that God is good. But there is also fire and flood, destruction and disaster.

Scrutinize history and you sense the same double message. There are great movements of human liberation, marvelous acts of self-giving love. But there is also hate and greed, violence and injustice. Not everything around us provides clear insight into what God is like or how He feels toward us.

What if there were a sure key to the mystery, a clue that would point us unflinchingly in the right direction? What if God had revealed His love once for all in history so that we would never have to doubt it again?

Christian faith says that He has done just that. The faith of the gospel doesn't deny or minimize the tragedy of life. It acknowledges evil of the most radical kind. It reckons with the most terrible realities of human suffering. But it says, "If you want to know what God is like and what you can expect from Him, don't look there. Look instead to Jesus Christ, and especially to His cross."

Ponder for a moment, will you, the crucifixion of Jesus. Here was the world's one, truly innocent person, falsely accused and strung up to die. Here was a blameless man who did nothing but good, whose heart overflowed with love. *He* was subjected to the worst torture, the most shameful execution ever devised by man. Wasn't that the supreme injustice? Wasn't that the darkest deed ever done? And God Himself was the sufferer. The Lord of glory was the victim.

Here it seems to me is where all other religious systems are found wanting. They cannot deal with the mystery of evil. They hold out a comfort too shallow, too superficial. But hear this: in Christ, God came in person to His world. He shared our human lot. He made Himself vulnerable to all we have to suffer. But more, He took upon Himself our sins and sorrows and allowed them to crush Him. He bore sin, death, and hell for us, so that we could know forgiveness and eternal life.

Perhaps your life today is immersed in troubles. You feel

overwhelmed with pain. Withering doubts assail you. You cannot feel that God cares. Well, I have no facile explanations for why you suffer as you do. I have no easy answers to those agonizing questions of yours. But I know this, that God for your sake and mine, in the gift of His dear Son, has suffered far more. God "spared not his own Son but gave him up for us all." "And if he did that," says Paul, "how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

Don't judge God's character by tragic happenings. Judge those tragic happenings by His character. Look at all of life in the light of the crucified and risen Jesus. That's the measure of God's mercy. Then you can know with assurance that every good and perfect gift comes from Him and that His steadfast love never comes to an end.

### **Study Questions**

1. Should we think of everything that happens to us as coming directly from God? Explain.
2. What makes it hard to believe that God gives only "good gifts"?
3. What evidence could you give for the conviction expressed here by James?
4. What conclusions should we draw from tragic, terrible happenings?

## LEARN TO LISTEN

Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

James 1:19-21

Remember this searching word of Jesus Christ: "Take heed how you hear"? That has an unusual turn to it. We usually think of hearing as something that just happens: either you hear or you don't. But Jesus seems to say that there are different ways of hearing. And, when it comes to the most important communications we ever receive, He wants to tell us, "listen carefully."

James, the Lord's brother, expressed again and again the same concern: "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:19-21). There it is: "let every man be quick to hear." Let everyone be carefully attentive. Let each be alert to listen.

Think for a moment of how important that is for our everyday living. If you want to complete a test at school successfully or do a good job at your work, you must listen to the instructions of the teacher or the boss. The best way to form and deepen friendships is to be an interested, sympathetic listener. And how vital that is for the close ties of family life! A dear lady told me recently the most wonderful gift her husband had given her over many years was his listening to her as she unburdened her heart. If we want to learn, if we want to love, if we want to live fully, we need to listen to the people around us.

But Jesus and His brother James are talking about attention at the highest level, about listening to *God*. If it's important to hear other people, how supremely urgent it must be to hear *Him*! The altogether thrilling news of the Christian gospel is that God has spoken. He has broken the silence. He has addressed His word to His world. He spoke through His prophets, through covenant promises to His people, through marvelous deeds of deliverance on their behalf. And finally, in these last days, He

has spoken to us in His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Savior, is the living word of God. The Bible is the word of God written, and the gospel you hear from Christian preachers and teachers is the word of God proclaimed. God has not only spoken in the past, but through His word, by His Spirit, He is speaking now.

Jesus wanted us to know what a great privilege it is to hear God's word. "Blessed are the eyes," He cried to His contemporaries, "which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Luke 10:23-24). These were of all people most blessed because God was making Himself personally known to them.

And with that blessing, that high privilege, came an awesome responsibility. "Take heed what you hear," urged Jesus, ". . . for to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away" (Mark 4:24-25). Something happens to people when the word of God comes to them. They are never quite the same after hearing it. When they welcome it, they are given more insight, more blessing, more capacity to receive than they had before. But when they hear with indifference or with resistance, they lose something. What light they had grows dimmer and their hearts are hardened. That's the shadow side of it, the needed warning. But most of the emphasis in the Bible falls on what the word of God can do in our lives when we do receive it, when we listen intently and take it in.

For example, James says that God has given us new life through His word: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth" (James 1:18). Seed falls into the ground and then, by a kind of miracle, brings forth new life. God's word is like that living seed. It has reproductive power. God uses it to bring about a new birth in us. By His word He creates us anew as His children. Have you realized that? When the message of the Bible is proclaimed to you, when Jesus Christ is set forth as the Son of God, crucified and risen for you, that very preaching is the means of a miracle. Maybe you read the gospel in the Bible for yourself, or you hear it from the lips of a friend, or learn it from a Christian tract or book. However it comes to you, that word can make you *alive*. If you welcome it and believe it, the gospel will make you a new person in Jesus Christ. That could happen to you right now, as you receive the word of God.

James calls it also an "implanted" word. It doesn't simply touch us and



move on, doesn't go in one ear and out the other. Once we receive it, it stays with us. It takes root, as it were, in the very center of our being. One of the Psalmists can talk about the word of God as "hidden in his heart" (see Ps. 51:6). And the word of God, living within us, is able, says James, "to save our souls." But isn't it Christ who saves us? Isn't He the Savior? Wasn't it His death for our sins and His triumphant resurrection that brought us salvation? The answer, of course, is yes. But it is through His word that He redeems us. The gospel can save you because the gospel brings Christ to you. And that isn't simply a one-time experience. Every time you listen carefully to the word of God's truth, He brings His saving purpose to fuller expression in your life. Wherever the gospel is being preached, we could well put up a revised roadway sign, "Caution, *God Working.*"

Well, if the word of the gospel can accomplish all of this in us, giving us new life, abiding in our hearts, working in us with transforming power, and if hearing it is indeed life's greatest opportunity, how ought we to receive it? James has several things to say about that. On the negative side, "Let every man be slow to speak." One of the problems many of us have with listening is that we talk too much. In conversation we have a hard time tuning in to what others are expressing because we're so impatient for our turn to speak. But as long as we're doing the talking, we aren't going to learn much about the people around us or about God's good news. Now James doesn't say: Be quiet all the time; never open your mouth! He cautions us rather against hasty, thoughtless speech. Be slow to speak. Give other people an opportunity to unburden their hearts. And most of all, keep quiet long enough to give God's word a chance.

Again He says, "Be slow to anger." All of us get angry at times, and there are times when we should. But it's a great thing when we can be *slow* to anger, patient with people. Do you know what makes us short-fused, or quick to fly off the handle? We're irritable. Irritation is a kind of a launching pad for anger. When we're irritated, we're like a coiled spring, ready to let go with explosive force. Guard against the things that make you touchy. Don't be quick to get all "riled up," even when you think your cause is just. Remember, as James says, "the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God."

Then more generally, James tells us that we prepare best for receiving the word when we renounce what is evil in our lives. "Therefore, put away," he says, "all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness." If you

want to receive the good seed into the soil of your heart, then break up the fallow ground and pull out the weeds. Say a resolute no to everything you know is displeasing to the Lord, whether it's a long-cherished habit, a questionable relationship, a darling idol. Hearing God's word is serious business. Don't let that precious seed fall into thorns and brambles. Clear the ground! Prepare the way of the Lord!

But positively now, how shall we hear the word of the Lord? James says, "Be quick, be swift, and eager." He's saying that we ought to give the hearing of God's word a high priority in our lives. Make it a first for the day.

Do you know what happened to me on the day I was preparing this chapter? I'd been up late the night before and got up just in time to do some necessary things around the house and drive to my place of work. I had a conversation with another person on the way and then greeted our staff at the office. Next I sat down at my desk to prepare this message: "Learn to listen"—about the importance of being quick to hear God's word. Do you know what I realized? I hadn't yet opened the Bible! Here I was getting ready to talk about listening, and I hadn't listened yet myself! So I stopped and I looked and I listened. I can't say I was quick to listen that day. I was rather slow! I hope I'll be quicker, more alert, more responsive next time.

James has another important word about how to hear: "Receive with *meekness* the implanted word." Listen, in other words, with humility, with a teachable spirit, with a contrite heart. Let me read to you about an Old Testament king who demonstrated the very opposite of that. In the days of Jeremiah, when the great prophet's writings had been inscribed on a scroll, Jeremiah himself was in hiding from the authorities. But someone brought his scroll of God's messages to the king:

So they went into the court to the king, having put the scroll in the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and they reported all the words to the king. Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and Jehudi read it to the king and all the princes who stood beside the king. It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him. As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a pen knife and throw them into a fire in the brazier, until the

entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. Yet neither the king, nor any of his servants who heard all these words, was afraid, nor did they rend their garments. Even when Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them

Jer. 36:20-25

Imagine that! The king hears the word of God and throws it in the fire! He carries out that sacrilege without batting an eye, even over the objections of his wisest counselors.

What a contrast between this and the kind of listeners, the kind of hearers, that God is looking for! He speaks now through His prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house which you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD. But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word."

Isa. 66:1-2

Mark that: "trembles at my word." It's possible to be very familiar with the Bible and not to tremble. We may read it often, yet without a sense of awe. We "tremble" when we take it seriously, when we are piercingly aware of who God is and what we are. We tremble when we realize personally that that word is the difference between hope and despair, life and death, heaven and hell.

The meekness which God seeks from us and which James recommends here involves also dependence upon God, prayerful openness, wholehearted submission. When we receive the word in that spirit, we are among the truly blessed ones who have "learned to listen."

### **Study Questions**

1. Why is it so important to master the "art of listening"?
2. How is God's word like a seed?
3. Evaluate this statement: "God's word will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from God's word."

## APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

4. Why is meekness so essential for the proper hearing of God's word?

## DOING THE TRUTH

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.

James 1:22-25

We were thinking in our last chapter about the art of listening, about really hearing what others say to us, picking up what may lie behind their words. We pondered especially the importance of listening to God, giving careful attention to what He says to us in His word. Faith begins and life takes a new direction when we truly hear God's voice.

But James, you remember, the author of this New Testament letter, takes an intensely practical approach to everything. He prized, above all, reality in religion and integrity in the spiritual life. He knows that even the sacred art of listening to God's word can be counterfeited. We may only seem or pretend to hear. The crucial test, of course, is in how we *live*.

We read in James, chapter 1, verses 22-25: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing." Listen, yes, but show that you have heard by what you *do*.

James is pointing here to a frightening possibility in your life and mine. Most of us would surely feel that if we are ever safe, if we are ever on solid ground, it is when we are listening to or reading God's word. Surely that must please Him! How can we possibly go wrong when we're giving attention to the Bible? Well, the sobering truth is that we can. We can read, we can hear, we can understand and yet do nothing about it. James illustrates for us what that's like. If we hear the word but don't act on what it says, we're "like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror, for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like."

Mirrors in New Testament times were usually made out of burnished metal, perhaps a mixture of copper and tin. Why do people, then and now, look in mirrors? Not usually for the sheer joy of admiring themselves, although that may sometimes happen. We ordinarily use a mirror because we want to check on our appearance. Do I need a shave? Is my hair reasonably well combed? Are there blemishes that need to be taken care of? Or perhaps we just want to assure ourselves that our face is clean.

Now suppose I discover that I look a mess. I need quite a bit of personal grooming before I can begin to be presentable. I see that clearly. The mirror gives me a faithful picture of what I look like. What then if I go my way without making any attempt to get cleaned up? You'd wonder about me, wouldn't you? Why bother to look at the mirror at all if I'm not going to act on what I see? Foolish me!

God's word is like that mirror. When we look into it, we see our "natural face," literally, "the face of our birth." We see, in other words, what we are like by nature. The message of holy Scripture exposes our sins and shortcomings. It lays bare what is unlovely and distorted about us, helping us to see ourselves from God's perspective. And that is mercy in disguise. God wants us to see ourselves as we are so that we will recognize our need. He wants to cleanse us, to order our lives, to make us whole. But first we must be convinced that real change is needed. Hence the faithful mirror of God's word. But if we simply read or hear and let it go at that, we have missed the whole purpose of God's sending His word to us.

Soren Kierkegaard, in his little book, *For Self Examination*, asks the question, "When are we really hearing God's word?" Suppose, he suggests, that a man receives a love letter from his sweetheart. The letter is written in a language he doesn't understand, so he gathers about him numerous grammars, dictionaries and lexical aids, and sets about translating the letter. While he's surrounded with all this linguistic equipment, a friend comes in and notices what he's doing. "Ah," he says, "you're reading a letter from your sweetheart." "Huh!" the other responds, "you call this reading? Here I'm slaving over these books, struggling to find out the meaning of each word. No, I'm just trying to piece together a translation. When that's all done, *then* I'll sit down and *read* the letter!"

Now let's carry the story one step further. Let's imagine that after he's translated it, he finds that the letter contains a request. His beloved wants him to do something for her that will be difficult, costly, perhaps

dangerous. How will he respond? Will he assume that the translation is faulty and set about to make a new one? Will he seek another interpretation of her words? Will he go on to a more pleasant paragraph? Or will he throw all his energies into doing what she asks?

The Bible, you remember, is God's letter to us, His message of love. When is a minister really reading it? When he is puzzling over the meaning of each Greek or Hebrew word? Or is it when that preliminary labor is behind him and he's really drinking in the message? And when that word calls any of us to the demanding road of discipleship, when it goes against the grain of our self-interest, how do we show that we have really heard it? By looking for another version? By explaining it away? By moving on to the next chapter? Or by deciding to respond? Obedience is the test of hearing. Action is the proof of love. We hear God's word as we ought when we are moved by it to live accordingly.

When that doesn't happen, when we remain passive, forgetful hearers, James says that we "deceive ourselves." Isn't it amazing how we can do that, how easy it is to fool ourselves? Sometimes as I walk to and fro amid the stacks of a large library, I simply look over the book titles. I've noticed that after I do that, I leave the library with a kind of warm glow. I think I'm smarter! Actually I haven't learned a thing. Not one new fact or insight has entered my mind! Yet I somehow feel more informed, more well-read than when I went in. Do you know what I'm doing? I'm kidding myself.

That kind of self-delusion is relatively harmless. It's much more serious when we play that little game with the word of God. You who make a practice of reading the Bible, isn't it sometimes true that you feel more virtuous, more godly, more righteous, just because you have read a few chapters? You're surely doing better, you think, than the people who never open the Bible at all. And when you go to church and hear the Bible preached, I dare say that you feel you're a better person for it. And you may well be! I'm not questioning that. But it wasn't simply reading it or hearing the word that made you more Christlike; it was hearing or reading it with a desire and purpose to obey, to please the one who sent His word to you. If that disposition, if that attitude of heart wasn't present, you may actually have changed for the worse! You may be more insensitive, more self-satisfied than you were before. If you thought that reading without responding, or hearing without doing got you closer to God, you were deceiving yourself.

## APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

So much for the forgetful hearer. James says there's a better way. "He who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing." Notice here how the Bible is described as "the perfect law" and the "law of liberty." It's the perfect disclosure of God's will. When God by His Spirit speaks to us through His word, we'll never be led astray about what He wants. But how can a law be a means of liberty? Because it expresses the lordship of the living Christ. And when we are serving Him, following Him, seeking to please Him, then we discover what it is to be free, creative, loving people.

This second kind of hearer looks into that perfect law, into that mirror of God's word, with great interest. The word means literally, "bending over" or "peering into." He's really eager to grasp what's there. And, unlike the first hearer on whom the words seem to make no lasting impression, this one perseveres. He continues in the word and lets the word continue in him. Remember how Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you"? (John 15:7). What does it mean to have His words abiding in us? Much more, obviously, than simply hearing their sound or understanding what they mean. It means mulling over them, searching out their relevance to our lives, memorizing them, inwardly digesting them. It involves "meditation on them," as the Psalmist says, "day and night" (see Ps. 88:1).

That kind of hearer, who receives the word with utter seriousness, becomes also a doer. He knows that the word is God speaking. She knows that the mirror shows us who we are so that we can repent and be changed by God's transforming power. He knows "truth is in order to godliness." It wasn't given simply to be stored like furniture in our midst but to be translated into action in our lives.

And this one, continues James, who does what she hears, is truly happy. Jesus said something very much like that on that last night with His disciples when He had performed for them the lowly service of foot washing. He urged them to follow His lead:

For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.

John 13:15-17



## APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

Happiness, in other words, comes not simply from knowing the word of Jesus but from both knowing and doing it. To be constantly exposed to the word and yet to live as though we had never heard it, is self-defeating and misery-producing. But eager, grateful, whole-hearted response to what God says brings us joy. You know how the familiar hymn puts it, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Maybe part of our problem in dealing with God's word is that we don't take seriously the fact that it is personally addressed to us. We sometimes read or hear it as though it were intended for everyone in general or for someone else. Charles Spurgeon put it this way, "The Bible to many is a dull book, as dry as an old will. But when you hear your own name read out in a will, you prick up your ears. What if there should be something in the Testament of our Lord Jesus for you? When I found my own name there, I danced for joy."

And so will you, when you find your name there, when you know that God is speaking to you in the gospel of His Son. When you begin to respond with living faith to all He says to you, you'll be a happy man or woman. May that great joy be yours!

### **Study Questions**

1. When does the hearing (or reading) of God's word fail to bring us profit and blessing?
2. How is the word like a mirror?
3. How do we sometimes "fool ourselves" in the way we use the Bible?
4. What formula for happiness does James present here?

## PURE RELIGION

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

James 1:26-27

I'd like to think with you now about *religion*. I wonder what that term means to you. I've heard people talk about it as though it were something mysterious that you "catch." "So and so has been a different man," they say, "since he got religion." Sometimes a person will decline to participate in a certain activity because, he says, "it's against my religion." Religion, together with politics, is said by many to be one of those touchy issues you should never discuss. And to hard-line communists, of course, it was the opiate of the people. So there's the spectrum: Religion can be viewed as something that hits you, something that restricts behavior, something that breeds violent arguments, or something that puts you to sleep. Quite a spread, wouldn't you say?

If we speak of "the Christian religion," or "the Jewish religion," or of some other kind, we usually mean the body of beliefs, principles, and ceremonies which go together to make these great world faiths what they are. But when we speak of an individual's "religion," we usually mean not what he (or she) believes, but how he expresses that belief, the total way in which he lives out his convictions. That, at least, is how James, the brother of Jesus, understood the term when he wrote this: "If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:26-27).

The great question here is: What kind of worship, what kind of outward expression of faith, is pleasing to God? What would mark out a person as genuinely religious?

Think now about various people you know. Some of them you would perhaps describe as "very religious," others as "fairly" so, still others as "not at all" religiously inclined. By what standards, by what criteria do you make that judgment? What to you distinguishes a person as being

religious? See if some of these characteristics come into the picture.

For one, regular churchgoing. When you observe someone consistently gathering with those of the same faith, conscientiously attending services of worship in spite of the weather or the season, you probably conclude: "There is a religious man (or woman, or family)." Also, if you find a person after some acquaintance to have clearly defined beliefs and strongly held convictions about God, that would certainly be a relevant factor, wouldn't it? Further, suppose a person shows great strictness in his personal habits. He doesn't frequent questionable places of amusement. He gives himself to times of fasting. Wouldn't that suggest to you a markedly religious nature? And what if this person were constantly denouncing social evils, calling attention to the decay and degradation of the culture around him, warning of God's judgment upon these wrongs? That would certainly strengthen the impression that his was a deeply religious approach to life. And suppose finally that he was so earnest about his faith that he went to great lengths to secure proselytes, showing the most intense zeal to communicate his views to others and win them over?

Now I dare say that if you knew someone who behaved like that, you would classify him or her as "very religious." And they would probably think of themselves in the same way.

But according to James, that estimate might be wide of the mark. We might be quite wrong about those persons, and they might be deceiving themselves. James, of course, isn't arguing against any of their specific behaviors. All of those might be found in truly religious people. But such traits in themselves do not guarantee the presence of genuine religion. In fact, if they're not accompanied by something else, something more, they may be a facade. Can you believe that a person could attend church regularly, eliminate objectionable habits, have strong convictions, denounce social evils, labor to secure converts, and still not be genuinely religious? What more, we wonder, could a person possibly do?

But now think of this: there were people whom Jesus encountered during His ministry who answered fully the description I've just given. They were regular in worship at temple and synagogue, firm and dogmatic in their beliefs, careful in personal habits, quick to point out the evils in society, and ready to travel to the ends of the earth to gain one proselyte. They considered themselves highly religious and enjoyed that reputation among others. But Jesus said that they were "whited sepulchres, blind guides, children of hell!" Instead of commending them for their devotion, Jesus warned them of their great danger. "Woe unto you, scribes and

Pharisees, hypocrites!" (Matt. 23:29).

Do you wonder that these people were scandalized? Do you wonder that Jesus' hearers gasped with amazement when He said these things? Who could be more religious than the Pharisees?

James apparently encountered people in the early days of the Christian church who manifested many of the same traits. But their supposed religion also was hollow and unreal. And James, like his Lord and brother before him, wanted to cut through all sham and get at the heart of what it is to be a religious person. He sets forth three marks: one, that you bridle your tongue. Does that surprise you? Many people act as though what we say is of relatively minor significance. But Jesus and His apostles taught otherwise. He spoke of the judgment that hangs over those who speak scornfully or contemptuously to their fellow human beings. He warned against false oaths, against words that make others stumble. Jesus even said that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account for in the judgment. "By your words," he went on, "you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:37).

James views human speech with the same seriousness. No matter what anyone professes about his or her religious life, if he doesn't bridle his tongue, his religion is vain. If her words or his are bitter, harsh, deceptive, insinuating; if they boast, browbeat, and cut people down, they raise serious questions about those who speak them.

The tongue, for Jesus and His apostles, is such an important member because it reveals what is in the heart. "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). Our speech betrays us, reveals what we are in the depths of life.

Now James doesn't mean to say that religious people never offend in their speech. In fact, he says that if anyone never sinned with his tongue, he would be perfect. James isn't condemning those who occasionally say things that they regret. He's talking about the normal pattern of speech. How do we relate to, how do we speak to, our fellow human beings? Do our words tear down or build up? Do they encourage fellowship or do they alienate? Do they spew forth venom or minister healing? To have your heart full of love and your tongue expressing it, that is pure religion.

Here's the second mark: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. If the first is gracious speech, the second is active compassion. That word "visit" doesn't mean simply to pay a call on someone. It means "to look after, to care for, to defend the interests of" people in affliction. It means to

have a heart for those in need and to extend ourselves for their help.

The widows and the orphans here stand for all who are weak, vulnerable, and without a defender. Some of the Pharisees pretended to care for such people but went right on exploiting them for selfish gain. Jesus called attention to the way they "devoured widow's houses" and "for a pretense made long prayers" (Matt. 23:14). Nothing so kindles the indignation of God as such heartless hypocrisy. Did you know that God has made Himself known in the Bible and in history as the God of the helpless and the defenseless? He is known as "the Father of the fatherless" and "protector of widows" (Ps. 68:5). He cares about their plight. His heart goes out to them. He acts on their behalf and judges those who oppress them. Active compassion reveals the presence of true religion because it shows a likeness to this heavenly Father, a living sympathy with His concerns.

Every genuine revival in history has been accompanied by and expressed in works of benevolence, ministries of help to the needy. Wherever people genuinely love God, they cannot help but seek the good of the poor and the downtrodden. Ask yourself today, you who profess to be the people of God, who worship Him and want to serve Him: What am I doing on behalf of the world's little people? What have you done this week to alleviate suffering, to minister to human need? What *will* you do as a sign of the faith within your heart?

Here's the third mark of true religion: "to keep oneself unstained from the world." This is more difficult to measure, isn't it? We can tell if we or others are bridling our tongues. How we treat the afflicted and deprived is also open to view. But the matter of defilement by the world is more subtle and inward. True, it has its external side. To keep ourselves unstained from the world surely means to avoid the unrestrained selfishness, the godless revelry of the world around us. But that doesn't mean withdrawal from these mixed-up people, from their activities and company. Jesus is our model here. He was spoken of with scorn as "the friend of publicans and sinners" (Matt. 11:19) because He sat at the table with outcasts, because He showed interest in people of dubious character, because He went to the homes of the despised.

We don't contract the world's stain on our clothing or on our hands but in our hearts. It's not the world system around us that contaminates, but the *love* of the world. Remember how John the apostle put it: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the

## APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 John 2:15-16). It's when we partake of the spirit of the world, when we adopt the values of the world, when we live for the plaudits of the world that we are deeply defiled.

Do we begin to see that what James is calling for is far beyond our reach? By our own resources, we simply can't live that way. We can fake some of the externals, but we can't change the inner spring from which all behavior proceeds. We can't "make the tree good," as Jesus put it, so that its fruit will be good as well.

What James builds on, of course, is the gospel, the message of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. It's when we trust in Christ as our Savior, surrender to Him as Lord, and receive the life-giving power of His Spirit that we begin to be renewed within. Pure religion is the outward expression of that inward change. So look first to Jesus Christ. Trust Him to make you a new person in the depths of life and to give you a truly loving heart. Then in your speech, in your kindness to the unfortunate, and in your turning from evil, you will be expressing what God calls "pure religion."

### **Study Questions**

1. Evaluate this statement: "Religion is our response to what we believe about God."
2. What marks out a person as "truly religious"?
3. What does our speech reveal about us?
4. Toward what kinds of people does God express special concern?
5. What does it mean to be "worldly"?

## THE FAITH THAT WELCOMES EVERYONE

Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ! Suppose one man comes into your meeting well dressed and with a gold ring on his finger, and another man, obviously poor, arrives in shabby clothes. If you pay special attention to the well-dressed man by saying, "Please sit here—it's an excellent seat," and say to the poor man, "You stand over there, please, or if you must sit, sit on the floor," doesn't that prove that you are making class-distinctions in your mind, and setting yourselves up to assess a man's quality?—a very bad thing.

James 2:1-4 PHILLIPS

Think with me now about the sin of snobbery. It's a peculiar trait. We recognize it quite readily in other people and cordially despise it. But sometimes we succumb to it quite unwittingly ourselves, never imagining that we could be guilty of such a thing. If someone accused us of it, we would be horrified. "Me? A snob?"

Just what are we talking about here? Webster's dictionary gives us this definition: A snob is "one who by his conduct makes evident that he sets too much store by rank, wealth, and social eminence." Did you get that? A snob is someone who shows by the way he lives that he is overly impressed by the riches, position, and prestige of other people. Suddenly that strikes close to home, doesn't it? How many people do you know like that? Or, how much is your own manner of living colored by such an attitude?

Snobbishness can crop up in the most unexpected places. James, one of the New Testament writers, discovered it, for example, in the church.

Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ! Suppose one man comes into your meeting well dressed and with a gold ring on his finger, and another man, obviously poor, arrives in shabby clothes. If you pay special attention to the well-dressed man by saying, "Please sit here—it's an excellent seat," and say to the poor man, "You stand over there, please, or if you must sit, sit on the floor," doesn't that

prove that you are making class distinctions in your mind, and setting yourselves up to assess a man's quality?—a very bad thing.

James 2:1-4 PHILLIPS

Can you imagine that? I can. I've seen much the same thing happen in groups I've been a part of and in churches I've attended. I remember seeing an attractive couple with two beautiful, well-groomed children visit a congregation and be almost overwhelmed with attention after the service, while another visitor, a mother of modest means with several shabbily dressed children, was almost ignored in the same setting. It seemed that even in a church which professed to welcome everyone, some were definitely more welcome than others.

I don't believe that was an isolated case. Some years ago, I canvassed a community, seeking to determine the church connection, or lack of it, of the people who lived there. That was interesting and disturbing. We found poor families in that community, living within a few blocks of several churches, who, as far as I could determine, had never been personally invited to attend one of them. But in the course of our calling, we also met a doctor who had recently moved into town. His family had already been greeted by callers from fifteen different congregations! Apparently, if they should turn up in church some Sunday morning, they could expect red carpet treatment, while less prominent, less prosperous visitors might slip in and out unnoticed. Perhaps church people don't do this sort of thing consciously, or by design. It just seems to work out that way, doesn't it?

But James, always the advocate of practical Christianity, won't let us get away with that. He wants us to look squarely at this practice, this tendency, and to see it for what it is: snobbery. He first analyzes it for us and then gives us compelling reasons why it should have no place among the people of God.

When we show such partiality, says James, we commit two evils. For one thing, we set up "class distinctions" within the church. Whether we are aware of it or not, the "respect of persons" creates divisions within the Christian fellowship. Those distinctions and divisions already exist, of course, in the secular world. They're common in every society. The rich and the famous are universally catered to and fawned over, but who goes out of their way to win the friendship or seek the company of the needy and the unemployed? The well-known entertainer or the talented athlete is welcome at social events from which common people, the unknowns of society, are excluded. We're used to that. But how tragic it is when the



spirit of the world finds expression in the church!

And what happens as a result? The favored visitors, of course, feel very much at home in the church. They may comment on the friendliness of the congregation, the graciousness of the people. It is strongly suggested to them that the same qualities which have made them successful and popular in the world will make a comfortable place for them in the church as well.

But what of the others? They see all too clearly that although some are wanted and welcomed with enthusiasm, they are not. Some are inquired after and invited out socially, but they are not. How will they feel toward the members of that church, and toward these other newcomers who get such special treatment? Can they possibly feel very close to either group? And will there be much incentive for them to visit that congregation again? They may drift away. We can say then, comforting ourselves, that it was because they were "spiritually indifferent" or they were not "our kind." Both estimates may have truth in them and yet both miss the real reason why many don't return. By our snobbishness, we built barriers too high for them to cross. We created distance where God wanted closeness.

Also, says James, by acting in that way, we "set ourselves up to assess a man's quality." We appoint ourselves judges, and we carry out that judgment in a highly questionable way. Those estimates of ours, based on appearance, wealth, social position, have nothing whatever to do with a person's character or worth. We ought, of course, to give special honor to those to whom honor is due. Perhaps the rich, the well dressed, the personally attractive deserve such recognition. But if they do, it is not because of *those* qualities. Perhaps the poor and the unheralded should receive less honor, but surely not because of their poverty or obscurity. Let people be honored for the depth of their faith, the self-giving service of their lives, the nobility of their character. There is a certain justice to that. But to rank people by externals is patently unjust.

From the standpoint of Christian faith, especially, such partiality has no justification. It doesn't even make *sense*. Look, says James, at the relative track records of the rich and the poor in their attitudes toward God and His people:

For do notice, my brothers, that God chose poor men, whose only riches was their faith, and made them heirs to the Kingdom

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promised to those who love Him. And if you behave as I have suggested, it is the poor man that you are insulting. Look around you. Isn't it the rich who are always trying to 'boss' you? . . . Isn't it usually the rich who blaspheme the glorious Name by which you are known?

James 2:5-7 PHILLIPS

James isn't saying here that poor people are all virtuous and godly, nor is he branding all the rich as heartless oppressors. But he does point out that those whom God has chosen have often been lowly and unnoticed in this world. Remember that quip, "God must love the common people. He made so many of them"? That has some truth to it. The early Christian churches, at least, were full of what the world would call "nobodies." Read these words of Paul to his fellow believers in Corinth: "For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (1 Cor. 1:26-27).

And though there are notable exceptions, great wealth and extensive power have not usually tended to make people more sensitive or compassionate. Fame and renown have not generally made their recipients more humble. So, although people having great possessions and high standing in society shouldn't prejudice us against them, such wealth should not create a bias in their favor. Judging by externals is always perilous, but if perfectly equitable treatment isn't possible and you have to give one group a slight edge, then, says James, the odds are with the common folk.

The most telling argument against snobbery within the church is the one with which James begins: "Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ!" This partiality, these class distinctions within the church are ruled out by the one whom we call "Lord." When He came, God in human flesh, He chose to be born in a humble family and to live in an obscure village.

Remember how it was that He treated people when He was here among us? He cared for those of the upper class. He had friends among the rich. He went to the homes of Pharisees to dine. He was proud to be a Jew and called a group of males to be His disciples. But what was remarkable about Him was the way in which He consciously and

deliberately stepped over the lines of class distinction and sided with others who were forgotten and despised.

In a world where the rich were often arrogant, He pronounced special blessings upon the poor. He saw it as His special mission to bring them good news. He lived in poverty Himself and died with no estate but the robe that He wore. In a world where women were less than second-class citizens, He treated them as persons of worth and dignity. He broke tradition by speaking to them in public. He taught them the word of God and accepted ministry at their hands. In a world where "the people of the land" were scorned by the meticulous Pharisees, He identified Himself with these outcasts, ate at their tables, and let Himself be called their friend.

And then there were the Samaritans. They were scorned by the Jews as half-breeds and heretics. But Jesus made a special point of going through their country. He praised a Samaritan for his faith and made another one the hero of His most famous parable, "The Good Samaritan." Nor did Jesus share in the commonly held revulsion toward lepers. He cared for them, conversed with them. He even *touched* them, a thing unheard of in His time, and made them whole again.

Do you see the kind of man He was? Nothing in a person's appearance or status or material means either impressed or repelled Him. He cared for all, served them, called them, welcomed them, no matter who they were or where they came from, no matter what they looked like or what others said about them. He was as far removed as a person could be from snobbery because He had a heart of love.

Now how, asks James, can you possibly combine faith in this Savior, in this Lord, with petty partiality? It can't be done. This word of God issues two calls to us today. First, trust in the glorious Lord who loved those of every class, who gave Himself for us all, who welcomes all who will repent and trust in Him. And when you do, when you rely upon Him as Redeemer, when you commit yourself to Him as Master, when you start out by His power to follow Him, then remember whose you are and refuse to be a snob. Yours is the faith that welcomes everyone!

### **Study Questions**

1. What is a snob?
2. How is snobbishness sometimes manifested in the life of the church?

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3. What damaging results follow from this?
4. What is the most powerful argument against smug exclusiveness among Christians?

## NO LITTLE SINS

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," said also, "Do not kill." If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James 2:10-11

What do you suppose it means to *keep* God's law? Do any people you know succeed in doing that, or even come close? I remember meeting a man once who felt quite sure that he did. It was while I was serving as a pastor in New Jersey. The man I was visiting was named Sam, and we were talking together about what God requires of us. I spoke of the way in which Jesus summed up God's commandments: love God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. I talked of what a tremendously high standard that is and how most of us tend to pursue our own interests without thinking much either about God or our neighbor. "Think of what it is," I said, "to have motives that are completely God-centered and to devote all your energies to pleasing Him! And think," I suggested, "of doing that not occasionally, but throughout your whole life!"

By this time, I felt that I had made the far-reaching demands of God's law very clear, and I had acknowledged how far I was from fulfilling them myself. Then I asked Sam how he felt he measured up in the light of that standard. He thought a minute, smiled, and said, "I'd give myself about ninety-five percent." I was somewhat taken aback. I had never heard anyone make that kind of a claim before. I thought after I left that maybe I should have asked his wife what she would have given him on that score! But I didn't.

There's a sequel to the story. About six weeks later, I talked with Sam again. He was deeply smitten with conviction. This time he acknowledged he was a sinner and needed God's mercy. He trusted Christ as his Savior. What a joy it was to witness that! As I reflected on the whole experience later, I came to feel Sam's "ninety-five percent" claim had been largely a bluff. He hadn't really believed that himself.

James, the Lord's brother, author of one of the New Testament books, apparently encountered some who were bluffing too. James was a no-nonsense Christian who abhorred all pious humbug. He was much

more ready to confront people with their self-deception than I had been with Sam. There were church members, apparently, who had been showing marked favoritism toward certain rich people who chanced to visit their church. But when poor, shabbily dressed worshipers arrived, they treated them with cold indifference. The church people tried to justify this snobbery by saying that they were treating wealthy, distinguished visitors according to the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

James urges, "wait a minute." If that's really what you're doing, fine. But if in doing that, you show partiality or respect of persons, the very law you are appealing to condemns you. If it's love for your neighbor that motivates you, what about the poor man, the plainly-dressed visitor, the mother with several ragamuffins in tow? Why don't you usher them to the place of honor? Why don't you greet them with enthusiasm? The fact that you don't, raises some serious questions. To discriminate against common folk in that way is the opposite of love. It suggests that the kindness and attention you are showing to the rich may not be motivated by love at all. You may cater to them because of the way they can enrich your congregation, or do you favors, or enhance your status. You may be, in all your attentions to the well-to-do, simply serving your own interests. If you were moved by love, you wouldn't be so selective in your cordiality. Remember, the needy and the ill-clad are "neighbors," too.

That brings James to the main point he wants to make: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' said also, 'Do not kill.' If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law." Did you note that? If you have broken *one* of the commandments, you have broken the whole law. That's a strange way of thinking, isn't it? It's not the way we commonly look at our moral record. All of us tend by nature to reason, as some religious teachers have, that our good works will ultimately be weighed against our bad ones. If there are more deeds (and more weighty ones) on the good side of the scale than on the bad, we can expect to be classified as righteous. But if the evil works tip the scale in the other direction, then we're in trouble. On that view, our hope is to get enough pluses each day to balance out the minuses.

But that would only work if the law were a collection of isolated commandments. So, "keep six and break four and you're all right!" But James says no. The law is a unified whole. That's why it can be summed

up in the two-fold command to love. Keeping it implies one attitude of heart and breaking it quite another. So a failure to love the poor, for example, implies lovelessness right down the line.

The law, you see, is not simply concerned with external behavior. It deals with the heart. God is interested in our ruling attitudes toward Him and toward other people. Keeping the letter of the law at some points may not be obeying its spirit at all.

Suppose your father commands you to stay in a building that has seven doors. At the first chance you get, you leave by the front door. Wouldn't it be ludicrous if you defended yourself by saying, "Well, I didn't go out this door or that door or the other one; I only went out the front door." That would hardly make you an obedient child, would it? The point is that you left the house, you went your own way, regardless of the door you used.

Imagine that your mother has a costly vase on the mantelpiece in her home. It's a family heirloom and she treasures it. You've been warned since your early childhood to handle it with great care or not at all. No rough-housing permitted in that room, nothing that might endanger the blue vase. But one day you forget. You're fooling around with one of your friends and suddenly you brush against the mantelpiece. To your horror, you look around to see the blue vase toppling toward the floor. You reach for it frantically but too late. The narrow, delicate top of the vase is broken off and lies in a score of pieces.

Now you have to face your mother and tell her about what has happened. You have to confess your carelessness, your negligence. You know she's going to be heartbroken. Would it really help matters if you pleaded this way: "Well, mother, I'm sorry, but as you can see, I didn't break the whole vase. It's only the top part that got smashed." No, that vase is a work of art. It has an integrity of its own. You didn't just damage part of it. You *broke* it. That's all there is to be said.

We sometimes talk about little sins, minor offenses, peccadillos. We all know what's meant by those. We're thinking, perhaps, of lapses in our personal behavior. They aren't good; we aren't proud of them. But at least they're not hurting anyone else. From the standpoint of the effect that our sins have upon others and upon ourselves, there surely are degrees of deadliness. To gossip about a person is not as hurtful as to kill, even though both may spring from the same root.

From God's standpoint, however, there can be no little sins. The

reason is clear: there is no little God to sin against. We haven't understood sin in its full biblical significance until we see it as personal rebellion against our Maker. We can speak of it as "missing the mark," failing to meet a standard, and it is that. We can think of it as behavior crooked and distorted, the marring of a beautiful painting, the spoiling of beauty by ugliness. Sin is that, too. But at the deepest level, sin is sin because it is directed against God. It spurns His love. When I sin, I turn my back on God. I renounce my dependence on Him. And I do something worse. I try to topple Him from His throne and take His place. I aim to do away with Him. That's what the career of Jesus Christ exhibited so poignantly. When God came to us in person, we crucified Him.

Every sin partakes of that spirit. Every disobedience is an act of treason, a gesture of defiance against God. That's the deepest reason why breaking one commandment is breaking the whole law. As James says, "He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' said also, 'Do not kill.'" His authority is behind every command. Wherever the law confronts us, we come face to face with Him. Every offense is serious because every one offends God. All sin grieves Him and rejects His offered fellowship. The point James is making is inescapable: "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."

If that's true, we ask, then what hope can there be for any of us? That's precisely the question God wants us to ask. He wants us to see that sin is not a minor liability that can be canceled out with a few good deeds. We have to deal not only with a flawed record but with a perverse nature. We need not only to be forgiven but also to be transformed in the depths of life. We need to be changed from people who rebel against God and despise our neighbors into new men and women with a new power to care.

And that is what Jesus Christ came to do for us. He died for our sins, bearing the judgment that we deserve. He died and rose again so that we, dying with Him, might rise to the Father's right hand, so that He might send His own Spirit to our hearts and begin to transform us from within. Now the law of God can be not only an external code, inscribed in tables of stone, but the law written upon our hearts, an inward disposition, a liberating impulse to love.

The fact is, dear friends, we have not kept God's law, not ninety-five percent, not at all. We are law-breakers, transgressors. The good news is that God loves us in spite of all and has provided in Jesus Christ, His Son,



a way for us to be pardoned and reconciled to Him. If today you will acknowledge your sin, your rebellion, your wandering from God, your many offenses against His will, and call upon the name of Jesus Christ, trusting Him as your Savior, yielding to Him as your Lord, you can be born anew. You can receive a new heart. Why not make this the day when you receive God's mercy, when you pass from death to life?

And when you do, or if that has already happened for you, remember this last word of James: "Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment" (v. 13). All of us need mercy when we face the judgment. But James says (and here he echoes Jesus, the Lord) that only the merciful can hope to receive mercy. That doesn't mean that you have to make yourself merciful and then God will take pity on you and forgive you. God's grace, His saving love, is always beforehand with us. But it does mean that if you are to accept God's love, to know His forgiveness, to live by His mercy, then you must express that in your dealings with other people.

If you show yourself unforgiving, snobbish, and cruel to your fellow human beings, this is surely the sign that you have never known God's saving mercy yourself. Those who live in the kingdom of grace learn to be gracious. Those who are forgiven come to forgive. Those who are marvelously loved begin themselves to love. So trust in Christ completely for mercy on the day of judgment and then let that same mercy appear in the way you treat each neighbor. God bless you!

### **Study Questions**

1. What does it mean to "keep" God's Law?
2. What is wrong with applying "the Golden Rule" selectively?
3. Why is the breaking of one commandment considered a breach of the whole Law?
4. Some sins are evidently worse than others, but why are there no "little sins"?
5. What bearing does our willingness to forgive have on whether or not we are forgiven?

## TWO KINDS OF FAITH

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:14-17

One of the key words in biblical religion is *faith*. It expresses, perhaps more than any other term, what God looks for in us as a response to His saving love. Jesus was continually urging it upon people as all-important for their lives. "Have faith in God. . . . Be not afraid, only believe. . . . Believe in God, believe also in me." He taught again and again that faith releases the limitless power of God. When asked about how a fig tree came to wither at His word, Jesus replied: "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done unto the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Matt. 21:21-22). Where people lacked faith, Jesus performed few of His mighty works. But where marvelous healings and deliverances did take place, He would often say, "According to your faith, be it done to you . . . as you have believed" (Matt. 9:29), or "go in peace, your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50).

We meet this same emphasis in the writing of the apostles. The apostle John writes that faith is "the victory that overcomes the world" (1 John 5:4). According to the writer to the Hebrews, nothing else can ever take its place. "Without faith, it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). And the apostle Paul affirms tirelessly that God's redeeming mercy is appropriated through faith. "By grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8). "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). We are justified, exults Paul, declared righteous, accepted of God, freely forgiven—through faith.

Let me pause at that point for a moment and ask you a question: Have you taken seriously this central witness of the Bible? Have you recognized that what God wants of you pre-eminently is the trust of your

heart? Sometimes we wonder what we have to do, how we have to perform in order to be on good terms with God. We need to hear Jesus saying to us: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29). That's the great step you need to take if you have never taken it. Trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, who died and rose again so that you could have everlasting life. The one thing needful for you is to rely on Him wholeheartedly as your Savior.

That's a step you can take today. It involves recognizing and confessing your sins, turning from your own way, and submitting to the lordship of Jesus. Remember, Jesus Christ is risen, alive from the dead, and present here now. He's speaking to you by His Spirit, listening for your prayer of response. Right now, where you're lying, or sitting, or working, you can say to Him, "Lord, Savior, I do believe." Through that simple trust, you can become a child of God, a new person in Jesus Christ, "Be not afraid; only believe."

But now with those thoughts in our minds about the crucial importance of faith, I want to think with you about a disturbing passage of Scripture that seems to say something quite different. It's from the letter of James, chapter 2, beginning at verse 14: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." How do we understand that? Is James contradicting his brother and Lord? Is he at odds with Paul, John and other New Testament writers? Is he asserting that faith is not nearly so significant and effectual as others claim it to be?

Before we draw conclusions too quickly, let's look carefully at what James is saying here. He seems to talk about "faith" in two different ways. It's almost as if he were describing in this passage two kinds of faith. Here's one kind, for which James obviously has no use. Suppose, he argues, that a man says he has faith but manifests none of its fruits. He says he's a Christian. He claims to believe. But his actions consistently fail to bear it out. His religion consists mainly of talk. He speaks comforting words to those in need, makes promises, wishes them well, but does nothing. He knows a great deal about the orthodox creed, what Christians are to believe, but nothing of the orthodox calling, how Christians are to live.

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How, asks James, could such a faith possibly be demonstrated to anyone else? If one should challenge its existence and demand proof of it, none could possibly be given except bare words. And what proof do they offer apart from some confirmation in daily living? Didn't Jesus say that this practical question would be asked at the last day: "Why call ye me Lord, Lord and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46, KJV).

What can we say then about this kind of "faith"? James says a number of things. For one, it is "idle." It doesn't do any work. This faith is "alone," all by itself. You could even say that it's dead, like a corpse, a body without a spirit. Can this "faith" save anyone? Absolutely not, says James. This kind of faith never benefits others and can do the person who professes it no good. In fact, it can't do *anything*, except perhaps lull us into a false sense of security.

But for James, what we've just been talking about is a miserable caricature of faith. It's faith in quotation marks, a so-called faith, a worthless substitute for the real thing. The second kind, the faith worthy of the name, is quite different. This faith, says James, is expressed in all kinds of good works. It not only speaks to the needy but goes into action on their behalf, ministers to their wants and gives freely to them. Abraham showed this faith when he went out at God's call, not knowing where he went, and especially when he was willing to offer up his only son. That's why Abraham was a man of faith, the father of the faithful—not because he talked about trusting God but because he lived it out even when that was puzzling, costly, and painful.

This faith, says James, is not opposed to works. It co-labors, it co-energizes with them. It is perfected, brought to fulfillment through them. This faith isn't merely verbal—it's also visible. Anyone who wants to can watch it at work. No dead faith, this one. It's an animated body, doing something in this world. Such faith, says James, really does justify us before God. It *can* save. It is the one thing needful. This faith can do for us what it did for Abraham; it can mark us out as God's friends. Isn't that a beautiful, almost incredible thing, to be called a "friend of God"?

"But," someone objects, "I don't like the sound of this. It puts too much emphasis on what we do. Doesn't it get us back into the old performance trap—making it seem that we have to earn our way?" That's not a new argument. It's at least as old as Martin Luther, the great reformer. He was so bothered by this emphasis in James that he once called the letter "a book of straw." He couldn't bear to think that the New

Testament gospel of salvation through faith alone should be undermined by such an insistence on good works. Where Luther felt that Paul and James were in conflict, his love for the gospel of grace led him to side with Paul.

But the most careful students of the Bible today agree that the conflict between Paul and James is more apparent than real. The apparent conflict is this: Paul says that we are justified by faith alone without any works of the law. James, on the other hand, contends that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

But wait a minute. Look with me at the strongest, clearest expression of Paul's doctrine. Galatians 2, verse 16: "A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ . . . We have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified." That's making the issue plain, isn't it? Paul says that we are justified by God's grace. We are justified through Christ's work. We are justified by faith alone and not by works of the law. Accordingly, he writes to the Romans, "What becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? The principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom. 3:27-28). Paul's argument is that God saves and not man. None of us has anything to boast about. It's Christ's work that justifies, not our work. Not our self-righteous efforts, but our self-forgetting trust is acceptable with God.

Now I'm convinced that James would say a hearty "amen" to that Pauline teaching. Remember when James was presiding at the Jerusalem council described in Acts 15? At that time, Peter affirmed the same gospel that Paul had preached. When some wanted to insist that certain ceremonies and performances were essential for salvation, Peter protested. "Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:10-11). James, the acknowledged leader of the meeting, was in full accord with what Peter said. He was ready to accept these Gentiles who had trusted Jesus as brothers and sisters, members of the people of God. But he was concerned that those who had believed should lead upright lives and not cause anyone to stumble. And that is precisely the concern which he later expressed in his pastoral letter.

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What we very much need to see is that Paul and James are writing to different situations and contending for different truths. Paul is insisting that God's grace in Christ is all-sufficient. We need not, we cannot, add anything to it. James, however, is speaking to another point. He is underlining the word of the Lord: "by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:16). He argues that true faith always manifests itself in good works.

As they develop these truths, Paul and James are battling against different errors. The teaching that Paul confronts head-on is the lie that we can earn salvation by our own efforts. Not so, says Paul. James zeroes in on another kind of falsehood, namely, that a person can have saving faith without any evidence of it in his life. "That's heresy," thunders James.

You see, James is agreeing with Paul that faith saves, that faith justifies. But he presses the question, "What kind of faith is that?" Is it merely an idea, a shibboleth? Or is it a living trust that shows itself in good works?

On the other hand, Paul, who denies that good works are ever the root or cause of salvation, agrees perfectly with James that they are its fruit. Right after affirming that salvation is through faith and not through works, he can write to the Christians in Ephesus: "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). And he can urge Titus to teach the truth faithfully "so that those who have believed in God may be careful to apply themselves to good deeds" (Titus 3:8).

What is the faith we need, the faith that works wonders, the faith that saves and overcomes the world? It is a *passive* faith in that it is first receptive, receiving Christ and all His benefits, looking away from self and self-effort to Him alone, depending on Him completely for salvation. But faith is also *active* in the sense that it always brings forth the fruit of good works. It always results in deeds that befit repentance, in an altered lifestyle, in a new way.

Do you know why faith is always active and fruitful? Because faith, through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, unites us to Jesus Christ. Faith so joins us to the Savior that we receive new life, His life. It is impossible that this life of the living Lord should dwell within us and not show itself in some way.

Let your faith, then, be more than words, more than a mental assent

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to certain ideas. Put your trust in the Christ to whom the Bible unfailingly points you. Rely on Him completely and receive Him with a living faith. As He enters your heart and life by His Spirit, then as surely as night follows day, as surely as God is faithful and Christ is mighty to save, your faith will bring forth good fruit. And that kind of faith will save you, now and forever.

### **Study Questions**

1. Why is faith an all-important response to God on our part?
2. In what sense is true faith completely apart from works?
3. In what sense is faith without works "dead"?
4. How would you explain the difference of emphasis between Paul and James?
5. Why does genuine faith always produce good works?

## TAMING THE TONGUE

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James 3:7-8

Many a bully has discovered that *small* doesn't always mean *weak*. Tiny isn't necessarily timid. Calvin Murphy, for example, was a rather short man playing in a game for giants—professional basketball. When bigger opponents, however, tried to intimidate him, they discovered to their surprise that he was tougher, stronger and more formidable than they were. Murphy, the little man, was one of the league's most feared "enforcers"—players who keep the opposing bullies in line.

The Bible often speaks of the remarkable power that small things exercise. The New Testament writer James, for example, gives us several sketches from life that illustrate the point. Here's a sleek stallion, muscles rippling, the picture of raw power. But by a small bit placed in that horse's mouth, a man can guide and restrain it and make it obey his slightest whim. Or picture a heavy ocean vessel, capable of withstanding the most violent storms. The helmsman can direct the motion of that huge vessel in any way he wants by the use of a very small rudder. Or again, to change the image, an almost limitless expanse of forest can become an inferno of destruction and death when ignited by one fleeting spark. If James were writing today, he would have even more impressive illustrations ready at hand. We know now what staggering energies are locked up in one incredibly tiny atom!

But the Bible doesn't simply speculate about how things are or hold up the mirror to nature. James is interested supremely in human life and behavior, in genuine, down-to-earth religion. His thoughts about the power of the small lead up to what he really wants to talk about: the *tongue*. Listen to James, chapter 3, verse 5: "So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things." The tongue seems to be a rather small and unimposing part of the body. Soft, without bony structure, it is usually hidden from view. Who would guess that it can wield such power? But it can. Listen to these biblical proverbs about its use: "The lips of the righteous feed many. . . . The tongue of the wise is health" (Prov. 10:21; 12:18). The human tongue can affirm others, can express love, can impart



truth, can share the good news of God's love. It can speak words that heal, liberate, and redeem. But that is not all. "Rash words," says another proverb, "are like sword thrusts" (Prov. 12:18). The tongue can wound. It can demean and deceive others. It can destroy a good name or blaspheme the Name above all names. You have heard it said that "the pen is mightier than the sword." But isn't the tongue mightier than both? "Death and life," says the Bible, "are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21).

James wants especially to impress on his hearers its *destructive* possibility. "The tongue is a fire," he writes. "The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). The tongue can be a fire that sears, ravages, and destroys. It takes in a whole universe of possible evil and is capable of the worst deeds imaginable. Remember that little rhyme we used to say as children? "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." We were whistling in the dark, weren't we? We really knew that the words could hurt worst of all.

"The tongue," says James, "defiles the whole person." What you say with that one small member can altogether permeate your life with pollution and guilt. The tongue can inflame and torment every faculty of our being or of another's. It is so fiendish in its cruelty and destructiveness that its fire, says James, must have been kindled by the flames of hell. Oh, what words can do to people! What speeches and harangues can do to the world! I still remember the chilling sensation I felt when I first heard a recording of public addresses by Adolph Hitler. I couldn't understand the language, but the palpable power of those speeches to kindle hate, fear, suspicion and cruelty, was downright terrifying. And we don't have to be tyrants speaking to multitudes to create these hellish effects. Why, sneering projections of blame, our jokes at another's expense, our badgering and name-calling, have been doing the same deadly work. The tongue is a fire, a world of wickedness.

But now comes the most frightening fact of all about the tongue. No man can tame it. Listen to James again: "Every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison." What about that? The tongue, ceaselessly busy at some evil, endlessly spewing forth venom, and all the while totally unmanageable.

Is the picture overdrawn? Out of what kind of experience do you suppose James made these observations? Simply observing people. Human relationships, then and now, can become inconceivably bitter and painful through the unbridled exercise of the tongue. The play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an ugly example of that, so gripping because it's so close to life.

Maybe we are restrained in our speech toward certain people. We watch what we say around those we want to impress or whose disfavor we fear. But then we really let fly at someone defenseless or unimportant to us. We haven't tamed the tongue; we've only domesticated it for show.

Do you know why we can't tame the tongue? Because it's the index of something deeper. Jesus gave us the most profound of all insights into human speech when He said, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). The tongue, of course, is nothing in itself but a flap of flesh; but it reveals, it expresses, it sends forth what is in the human heart. "The good man," says Jesus, "out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil" (v. 35). From within, out of the heart of man, from the inmost personal center of our being, come forth all manner of evil things. And one of their chief channels is the tongue.

We cannot tame our tongues because we cannot heal our hearts. The real problem is there. The tongue only gives it away. Remember those scornful words spoken to Peter on the night our Lord was betrayed? When the rugged apostle denied that he was a Galilean, someone said, "Your speech betrays you" (see Matt. 26:73). Your accent makes a liar out of you. What you say shows you up for what you are—every time. That happens to all of us. Given the right conditions, given the right stimuli, each of us has a tell-tale tongue. It gives away the secrets of the heart.

All attempts to refine speech without transforming personality are doomed to be superficial. It's of no use to perfume the waters that flow by your house when the stream is poisoned at the source. What good are band-aids and lotions for surface sores when the cancer is in the blood and the bone?

What is James bringing us here—a counsel of despair? "We have a dreadful problem on our hands or in our hearts and we can't do a thing about it?" No, he doesn't mean to say that. In fact, he says it's a deplorable situation of which we ought to be ashamed if evil keeps pouring forth from our tongues—especially if we claim to be God's people.

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With the same tongue, says James, "We bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so" (James 3:9-10). It's contrary to all nature, he reasons, that the rotten and the pure, the evil and the good, should come alike from the same source. "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grape vine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh" (vv. 11-12). James argues that there ought to be a consistency in what comes forth from our inner lives.

He is building, you see, on the foundation of the gospel. He's writing to people who have experienced the saving power of Jesus Christ. He's already said that no human being can tame the tongue. But he knows that the situation isn't hopeless, because *Christ can*. Remember the account in the gospels about the raging maniac who made his home among the tombs? Chains and shackles could not bind him. No power on earth could calm his violent rage. But at the word of Jesus he became sober and teachable. People who had known him before were amazed to find him clothed and in his right mind. Jesus can change the most tortured, rebellious heart. He can tame the most unruly tongue. By the power of His Holy Spirit, He can make all things new.

Here is the marvelous good news of the Christian message. God in Christ has done something unspeakably wonderful for us. In the dying of Jesus for our sins, He has provided a way whereby we can be forgiven and accepted as God's dear children. In the resurrection of Christ and the gift of His Holy Spirit, He has begun a process of transformation within us. To be born again, to be converted, to be saved, means among other things to receive a new heart.

Remember that ancient prophecy in which God said the day was coming when He would take away the stony heart within His people and give to them a heart of flesh? He would plant within their inmost being a new disposition to obey God, a new impulse of power to love other people. He would give us clean hearts, tender hearts, hearts healed of their dividedness. Then the effects of that would be felt in all of our experience. Out of the good treasure of our hearts we would begin to bring forth good things. From within our inmost being, there would begin to flow forth not vileness and pollution, but streams of living water, bringing life and refreshment wherever they go. That is God's vision for human life, your life and mine.

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And the wonderful thing is, it can start coming true! No matter what kind of tongue you have, what kind of heart, Jesus the Savior can do something about it. If you will trust Him, simply trust Him, as the one who came from the Father's heart to seek and to save you, to die for you, and give life, you can receive now the gift of His Spirit. You can taste what Paul meant when he said, "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). You can partake of the bread of life. You can drink the living water. You can have life—more abundantly.

Will you now receive Jesus Christ, the living Lord? Will you acknowledge your need of Him? Will you acknowledge the plague of your heart, the sins of your tongue, and will you invite Him into your life to save and to rule? Will you do that now in a simple act of commitment? A simple prayer of trust? Then you can know beyond all doubt that Christ lives within you by His Spirit and has given you a new heart.

Perhaps today you are already a believer in Christ. You have been for years, but you still have problems with your tongue, and that makes you uneasy about your heart. It seems at times like that fountain of which James spoke, giving sweet and bitter water at the same time. You're ready to agree with James that these things "ought not to be so" and yet they don't seem to change.

Well, you began to find the answer when Christ entered your life, and you'll find it more and more as He dwells in your heart by faith, as you know the fullness of His Spirit. It's not enough simply to trust Him at the outset of the Christian life and then go the rest of the way on our own. We need Him every day, every moment. Our only safeguard against eruptions of the old life is His keeping power. Even Peter, true-hearted believer that he was, could become the devil's mouthpiece in an unguarded moment. We're called to abide in Christ, to live in His fellowship, to walk in the Spirit, to be continually open and responsive to His leading.

The new heart, the new disposition, never becomes a possession of ours apart from communion with Him. *He* is our life and our salvation. A daily listening to His voice, an ever-fresh commitment to follow Him, the repeated appeal of dependent prayer, in these we find our strength. The Psalmist prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (see Ps. 51:10). That's a good prayer for us. And so is this one: "Teach me thy way, O LORD . . . unite my heart to fear thy name" (Ps. 86:11). Perhaps the most important task we'll ever undertake is the

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heeding of this charge: "Keep your heart with all diligence"—yes, let Christ keep it for you—"for out of it are the issues of life" (see Prov. 4:23).

### **Study Questions**

1. In what sense is the tongue powerful?
2. Why do we find the tongue so difficult to control?
3. Does becoming a Christian eliminate this problem? Why?
4. How does faith in Christ lead to "taming the tongue"?

## WHY WE HAVE WARS

What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 4:1-4

When we're in the midst of an armed conflict, it becomes almost impossible to keep an objective view of what is happening. Our patriotic feelings, our loyalty to the loved ones at the front, slanted news reporting, stereotypes of the enemy, all tend to sustain a monstrous illusion. We convince ourselves somehow that what we're involved in is worthwhile, even noble and virtuous. We don't stop to think about what wars, any wars, do to people.

An old German proverb has it that "a great war leaves the country with three armies—an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves." What beauty is there in a nightmare of violence that leaves thousands maimed and disfigured for life? We're sometimes so moved by the chivalry and pageantry of war that we forget that bombs and bullets have no respect for beauty. They tear out the eye and rend the flesh. They shatter limbs and smash faces.

And that's not even to mention "the army of mourners." What a tidal wave of grief sweeps over lands whose fathers and husbands, sons and brothers, go to war and never return. Who can measure what that loss is, that throbbing, aching sorrow in one household, not to speak of a whole land? War sunders the closest of human ties and leaves a multitude of lonely, broken survivors.

But war does something else which, if possible, is yet more tragic and sinister. Some who are never wounded or bereft bear a different kind of scar. They lose their humanness. War concentrates all human crimes and seems to hallow them. Its final evil is that it makes monsters of us. It turns human beings for a time into creatures worse than beasts of prey. It can

spawn the worst and kill the best in all who are gripped by it.

And why, we wonder, why these wars? What can justify the madness that makes murderers out of well-meaning people? Some would gladly do any stranger a good turn. In wartime they are ready to murder that same stranger on sight! What could ever give to such horrible wickedness even the semblance of value? What is it that hurls people into the hell of war? That's a profound question, a crucial one even when the guns are silent and the bombs have ceased to fall. What makes us fight with each other? What makes us wound and slaughter—on the battlefield, in family feuds, or personal quarrels?

Here is an inspired word on the subject from the New Testament letter of James. Listen: "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (4:1).

What causes wars? What foments strife? What leads people to attack one another? James says that all of that originates within our hearts. Our passions, our runaway desires drag us headlong into battle. We want what we don't have. We covet what we can't get. And that unsatisfied craving eventually overwhelms everything in its path. We menace, we destroy, we stop at nothing to quench our inner thirst. People on the other side become to us only obstacles and enemies. We are ready to sacrifice them, if need be, on the altar of our desires.

But aren't there many higher reasons why nations go to war? To make the world safe for democracy and to free the oppressed? To defend our nation's honor? There are doubtless real motivations like that stirring in the hearts of millions. But those who plan wars, who launch offensives, who invade other countries, have for the most part very different designs. They may scream of injustices suffered and affronts received. They may rage about their stolen rights. But the dynamism of the drive toward war is usually quite earthy. We crave land, trade routes, sea ports, crops and forests, gold and oil. And when we're convinced that we can get away with it, we tend to take what we want. Trace any international conflict back to its roots. Behind all sham and intrigue, you find human passion, raw craving, the lust for possessions and power. What a vast conflagration can be touched off by the fiery hankering of one human heart! Think of

what Hitler's wild cravings did to Europe and the world!

Do you wonder why things seem to go wrong at home, why your household is so tormented by strife? Does it puzzle you when conflicts break out at work or at church, in your group or club, between you and your closest associates? Everywhere we find people wanting what they feel they must have and walking over others to get it. What causes wars, on the battle field or in the board offices or in the bedroom? James says it's "your passions that are at war in your members."

And there's a poignancy, a terrible irony in all of this. Wars seldom, if ever, accomplish what we think they will. What war ever made the world safe for democracy or guaranteed human freedom? What country ever gained true honor in the deadly game of war? When were the spoils of victory ever worth the price that had to be paid? Even when we seem to win everything, have we really found what we're looking for?

Why do we crave things the way we do? We want them because we are persuaded that somehow our happiness, our well-being and security are bound up in them. If we but have them, we imagine, we'll be fulfilled and content. That's what we're really seeking—relief for that inner pain and emptiness. And that, says James, we could have had without ever a shot being fired, if we had only asked. "You do not have because you do not ask."

The Bible, generally, and James in particular picture the Almighty as the giving God, the one who grants to all liberally. He never reproaches us for our asking. From His generous hand comes every good and perfect gift. James learned that from Jesus, his brother and his Lord and Savior. Jesus taught that God is the father of His people and delights to bestow good things upon His children. He invites them, urges them, waits for them to ask. "Ask and it shall be given you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you" (see Matt. 7:7). Jesus reasons with a pleading note, "What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:9-11).

God knows the thirst of our hearts. He knows the fulfillment we long for more than we know ourselves and He has another way for us to find it than by trampling over each other. There's a better way to happiness than grasping and taking, a better path to joy than a victory parade.



Have you ever stopped to think about what God might have done in your life if you had simply and persistently asked? The promises, apparently, are unlimited. John Wesley once mused about that: "How holy, how happy, how full of love to God and man we might have been if we had only asked." The old hymn expresses it well, "Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!"

But to be realistic, says someone, does it actually work that way? I don't see the good things of life coming to people who wait and pray. It's the movers and the takers who get what they're after. It seems to me that power really counts, not prayer.

James apparently encountered cynics like that in his time. They were ready to sneer at his formula for the good life. Tell us, James, what if people ask for good things and don't receive them? We've tried that, they say, and it doesn't work. What about that? James is ready for them. Here's his answer, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." What frustrates our asking? Those same runaway desires. Bring on your people, says James, who boast that they asked and never received, that they gave religion a fair try and found it wanting. Their problem was they didn't know the God to whom they prayed. They didn't see Him as the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth whose name is to be hallowed, whose kingdom is coming, whose will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven. They didn't know Him as the God who wants all His human children to have bread to eat, forgiveness for their sin, and deliverance from every evil. They didn't welcome His lordship. They didn't want His love. They little valued Himself in His gifts and so they received nothing.

They wanted, yes. They sought, they asked, they knocked, but only to spend it on their desires. They saw no bigger purpose. They only wanted to get, not to give, only to take, not to love, only to possess, not to share. So for all their frenzied asking, they came up with nothing. God is no blessing machine, no fountain of supply to be turned on at our convenience. He wants us to seek first Himself and His kingdom. Then all His resources are freely ours. But He loves us too much to pamper our greed.

Now James launches into the heart of his indictment. "You unfaithful creatures [literally 'you adulteresses'], don't you realize what you're doing?" That's strong language and it's language that runs through all the

Bible. It's what the prophets of God say again and again to people who pretend to worship God but do not give Him their hearts. God sees them as faithless marriage partners, leaving His loyal love for the arms of strangers. That's what we do when unbridled desires master us, when all else is swallowed up in the itch to possess. That's the kind of friendship with the present world system, says James, that marks us out as God's enemies. You can be sure where any man or woman stands if you know what he or she loves best. Ask yourself the question today, as I probe myself with it: What do you seek? What do you crave supremely? Those to whom James was writing were supremely after what the world system can provide: sensual satisfaction, things to be coveted, strokes and status to be scrambled after. But to love these above all is the very antithesis of loving God, who is Himself our only treasure, our true happiness.

Here we face an elemental decision in life. Jesus says that "no [man] can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24). Oh, today, in the light of God's love for you in giving Christ, in the light of Christ's dying for your sins and rising to give you new life, because of the futility of greedy craving and the richness of the grace He offers, choose this day whom you will serve. If you seek the Lord, you will surely find. When He is your portion, you will be deeply satisfied. And when your heart is full and glad, you will be a man or a woman of *peace*.

### **Study Questions**

1. What factors can sometimes blind us to the horrors of war?
2. Where do conflicts, great and small, originate?
3. What surprising alternatives does James suggest?
4. How do our warlike tendencies show us to be idolaters?

## THE PROUD AND THE HUMBLE

But he gives more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

James 4:6-10

We little understand. A great deal about God and His ways with mankind is shrouded in mystery. As the psalmist put it, "clouds and thick darkness are round about him" (Ps. 97:2). "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). The apostle Paul, one of history's towering minds, found himself completely at a loss before the secret of God's dealings with His people. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:33-34).

We can be deeply grateful, however, that God hasn't left us completely in the dark. Though much continues unexplained, He has given us in His Word clear hints at least as to how He governs the universe and how He deals with us. One of the plainest and surest of those is in the passage I want to look at with you today. It's from the New Testament letter of James, chapter 4, verse 6, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." There is a basic principle of God's rule. He ranges Himself against the haughty, the arrogant, and showers His favor upon the lowly.

We're sometimes confused about what those words mean. The "pride" that the Bible speaks against is not the same thing as self-respect. Nor is it the legitimate satisfaction a man finds in his accomplishments, as when we say, "He takes pride in his work." That's a different thing. Again, the "pride" that God resists is not the fond sense of elation we experience when our children become successful or receive recognition.

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Pride, as the Bible speaks of it, is an essentially God-ignoring, God-defying attitude. We are proud when we arrogate to ourselves the credit that belongs to God alone, when we rob Him of the honor and thanks that are His due. We are proud when we do not acknowledge that God is the Lord and presume to act in willful independence of Him. We are proud when we forget our creatureliness, when we act as though we were self-made people, when we become "wise in our own conceits" (Rom. 11:25). Pride says, as the ancient Pharaoh did, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?" (Exod. 5:2).

Our pride shows itself in the way we relate to other people. The proud imagine that they are conspicuous, significant, and deserving beyond others. With lofty self-importance, they look down on their less righteous, less wise, or less competent inferiors. Remember the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the publican praying in the Temple? The Pharisee's prayer was the self-congratulation of a proud man. "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12). "Look at me," he says in effect, "I obviously outshine all the rest." When we are proud, we are very apt to suspect others, to find fault with them, and take careful note of their deficiencies. Pride makes us stiff and inflexible in our opinions of others, seldom ready to admit wrong in ourselves. The proud, however brilliantly they shine, are not easy to live with.

The Bible makes it abundantly plain that when we adopt this outlook, this lifestyle, God sets Himself against us. Abasing the proud is apparently one of His chief concerns. Listen to these remarkable words from the prophecy of Isaiah: "The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the pride of men shall be humbled; and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high" (Isa. 2:11-12). Or remember these inspired words of Mary's Magnificat: "[God] has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts" (Luke 1:51). The eyes of the Lord seem to run to and fro throughout the whole earth to find the vaunting proud ones and to put them down.

We tend for the most part to consider pride a rather minor failing. If a man or woman is successful, powerful, personable, we may overlook their arrogance, even secretly admire it. But it seems to be the evil that God most abhors. When the writer of the Proverbs declares, "There are six

things which the LORD hates, seven which are an abomination to him" (6:16) first on the list is "a proud look" or "haughty eyes." Whatever we may think about pride, God is everlastingly against it.

What now of the "humble"? Who are they? Not those necessarily who run themselves down, denying their abilities or belittling their accomplishments. That self-deprecation may be an inverse form of pride. People who employ it may be angling for us to say in response, "Oh, no, you're not like that," or "You really do quite well." Even shyness and timidity do not always indicate a humble spirit. Pride can sometimes make us desperately fearful of others. A humble man is characterized chiefly by a thankful sense of dependence upon God. He knows that he has nothing which he did not receive as a gift and a trust. He looks on others with patience and forbearance, defers to them, and esteems them at least as highly as he esteems himself. He can be reasoned with, entreated and corrected. He can laugh at his own pretensions. His self-awareness and his hope are both expressed in the poignant prayer of the tax collector, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

To such people, says James, God shows favor. His grace becomes their sufficiency. His strength is perfected in their weakness. He takes them up into His fellowship. They are the apple of His eye. "For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a humble and contrite spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite'" (Isa. 57:15). Again, "This is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2). That's the heart of it. The humble and contrite take God seriously, listen to what He says, stand in awe of Him and live as those who will render account to Him at the last day. Humble hearts are the verdant valleys, as it were, on which God sends the rain of His kindness. Wherever in this world you find lowly people, you can be confident that God is there to lift them up.

Suppose we recognize today that we are not among the humble, that we are all too proud in heart. What then? James has several words of good counsel for us. The first is, "Submit yourselves therefore, to God." Place yourself under His lordship. Because God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, surrender to Him. Renounce your self-will, your insistence on having your own way, and yield yourself up to His service. Sometimes we've forgotten that this is an essential ingredient of faith. We

have imagined that to believe was to give assent to certain doctrines, to identify ourselves with some religious organization, to participate in various ceremonies and acts of worship. But all that has no religious value without what the Bible calls "the obedience of faith." To believe is to entrust ourselves to God, to commit our lives to His rule, to acknowledge that we are not our own but belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

If the main characteristic of your life thus far has been that of ignoring God's claim on your life and doing as you please, your first and most significant step toward humility is the active recognition of Christ's lordship. The one who died for you and rose again is the King of glory. All authority belongs to Him on heaven and on earth. God has given Him everything in the universe to do with as He pleases. All the eventualities of history, including your personal destiny, are in His hand. Will you say to Him today, "Lord, I trust You, I offer myself to You"? That's what it means to submit yourself to God.

In connection with that commitment of faith, we are called also to "resist the devil." Satan, the enemy of our souls, is the dark prince of the kingdom of pride. He fell from favor because he chose to set himself up as his own god, to take the place of the Almighty. Every temptation to haughtiness and rebellion comes ultimately from him. "Resist him," says James, "and he will flee from you." In the strong name of Jesus Christ, command him to be gone. In saying a great "Yes" to the one who is meek and lowly in heart, say "No" to the evil one.

The next charge James give us is this: "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." Recognize that your hope of growth in the Christian life, of progress in humility as well as in other graces, lies in fellowship with the living Lord. Make it your daily quest to live close to Him, to walk in communion with Him. Make use of the means of grace. Read His Word. Call on His name. Cleave to His people. Keep seeking the Lord with all your heart. He "satisfies the longing souls and fills the hungry souls with goodness" (see Ps. 107:9). Your search will never be disappointed. In every step you take toward Him, you'll find Him already coming to meet you. Let the witness of the psalmist be the motto of your life, "It is good for me to be near God" (Ps. 73:28).

And then, finally, let your repentance run deep. Listen to James: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection. Humble yourselves before

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the Lord and he will exalt you." Because of your vain ways, because of your proud affronts to God, let there be inward feelings of misery and outward expressions of the heart's sorrow. Let unclean ways and unworthy motives be renounced and let your life be characterized by that joyful seriousness which is such a significant part of New Testament faith. Bow before Him, and prize the honor which only He can give.

Dear friend, remember that the genuine humility of which the Bible speaks is not to be found within ourselves. All our self-engendered efforts to be humble may end by making us proud of our contrition. We see ourselves as we are only when we look away from ourselves and become conscious of God's overwhelming grace in Jesus Christ. The words of the moving old hymn still say it best:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.  
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
Save in the death of Christ my God;  
All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to His blood.

### Study Questions

1. What is the difference between pride and self-respect?
2. How does pride reveal itself in our dealings with other people?
3. What does it mean to be genuinely humble?
4. How is humility toward God most appropriately expressed?
5. If a person wanted to become humble, how would you advise him to go about it?

## TAKING GOD SERIOUSLY

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain"; whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

James 4:13-16

One of the most common human failings is that of presuming about the future. Listen to this searching word on the subject by the New Testament author James, the brother of Jesus: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain'; whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."

Here are people who set forth their long-range plans with smug assurance. We can envision them as a group of first-century merchants. They have before them a map of the Mediterranean world. You might call them the forerunners of executives in our multi-national corporations today. They are planning a large-scale business expansion. They'll establish a string of stores stretching from Jerusalem to Rome. "Here's our time frame; we'll get things going in Antioch and after two years, move on to Ephesus. After another two, we'll start a thriving enterprise in Athens. In ten years, our products will be in use all over the empire and we'll be on Easy Street."

But it's not only the merchant, the established entrepreneur, who plans this way. I remember a young friend in college telling me of his projections for the future. Ten years out of college, he expected to be making \$50,000 a year. That may not seem so unusual now, but at the time I heard it in the late 40s, it sounded rather grandiose. You've heard others confidently mapping out their lives in that way. Here's an ambitious young man, headed for the top. "At this point in my career," he predicts, "I expect to be holding this post. Several years later, I'll be promoted to that



position. Then I'll be ready for the final power play." Sometimes we tend to admire people like that, to stand in awe of them. "He knows what he's after and he's going to get it." Or, "What a mover he is! He won't let anything stand in his way."

According to James, however, this way of talking is another form of *hubris*, of human pride. When we speak thus, we presume to control the future. We set ourselves up as masters of our destiny, as those who can speak with authority about coming events. We fling out, for everyone to hear, a kind of boasting in our self-sufficiency.

But isn't such planning necessary, we wonder, if we want anything to be accomplished? Surely, those who have a clearly formulated plan are most likely to succeed in any field. If we aim at nothing, we're likely to hit it. Isn't it better to establish a course for ourselves than simply to drift with the wind and the tide?

Certainly it is. Most of us (including this biblical writer James) would heartily agree. James is not against making plans. He doesn't want to ridicule foresight or even to discourage ambition. Why not have a goal for your life and work? Why not cherish a dream? "You gotta have a dream," says the song in *South Pacific*, "If you don't have a dream, how you gonna have your dream come true?"

What's wrong then with these projections of first-century merchants or with our announced career-schedules today? Precisely this: they often express our tendency to make plans and predictions without taking God into account. In that kind of talk, we appear as self-appointed sovereigns of our destiny, ignoring the fact that God is the Lord. We show no awareness of dependence on Him. We forget the most elemental fact of human existence: that we are God's creatures and that our lives are in His hands.

Not only is this a fault, says James, it is really the most laughable foolishness. "Come now," he says. Be reasonable! Stop kidding yourselves! You talk knowingly about what you're going to do in years to come, but the truth is that you don't even know about tomorrow. You don't know what a *day* will bring forth, much less a decade.

I've had the privilege of attending several "future conferences." Highly regarded experts in a number of disciplines have been meeting with evangelical leaders in an effort to anticipate what's coming and how the church of Jesus Christ can prepare for it. At our first meeting, we were thinking in terms of the rest of this century. When all the study and discussion had been concluded, we weren't very clear about next year! Even a surface reading of the recent past makes it plain that absolutely no

one foresaw many of the key developments during our century. So many unexpected breakthroughs, unheard of chains of circumstances! One of the few relatively certain things we can say about the future is that it will be full of surprises.

But the folly of our long-range personal predictions lies not only in our short-sightedness. We are fools to presume because our existence is so frail and fleeting. "What is your life?" asks James. Then he answers his own question. "You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." That's quite a description, isn't it? "You are a mist." Maybe James is thinking about the wispy clouds that drift around a mountain peak or the low-lying mist that shrouds a lake in pre-dawn hours, or the silent fog that blankets a seacoast village. You see it, it seems to have substance, but before the slanting rays of the morning sun, it suddenly disappears. Your life, hints James, is like your own breath on a winter morning—visible before you but quickly gone.

"That's overdrawn!" objects someone. "All over the world, life expectancy is on the rise. We're finding the means to cope with one disease after another. The actuarial tables tell us that our chances for long life are pretty good. The human body is resilient. It has amazing recuperative powers. It clings to life with stubborn tenacity."

Yes, but granting all that, we're still talking only about abstractions, about averages. What guarantees are there about the longevity of any particular individual? About yours? About mine? What does it take to scatter this mist we call life? Not much. Justinian, one of Rome's mighty emperors, died by going into a room that had been newly painted. Adrian, a pope, was said to have been strangled by inhaling a fly. Men have been choked on the seeds of a grape, poisoned by a few drops of water, or even carried off by a whiff of foul air. In our time, it takes no more than a nod at the wheel of a speeding car, a weakened bolt on the mounting of an airplane engine, or any one of a thousand machine malfunctions, to snatch away our lives in a moment. And what do we really know of what is transpiring now in our own bodies? We all remember people who seemed to be in perfect health, but were suddenly and fatally stricken.

One morning several years ago, I heard our handicapped son, Billy, in the adjoining bathroom at about 6:30. I got up to see if he was all right and helped him back to bed. He seemed normal enough. An hour later, when I went to wake him for his work, I found that he had died in his sleep. Those who performed the autopsy discovered no certain cause for

his death. Twenty-four years old! What is your life! "A mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

In prosperity, in good health, in reasonably settled times, it's hard for us to credit this, at least about ourselves. Our television sets, our newspapers shout to us every day about the uncertainty of life. You have frequent reminders of that in your own community, even in your circle of relatives and friends. Even so, it is desperately hard to realize in an existential way how frail we are. But when we feel the pressure of affliction, things can change. Listen to Job, swamped by troubles, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle. . . . My life is a breath" (Job 7:6-7). Or hear another sufferer among God's people, "Behold, thou hast made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in thy sight. Surely every man stands as a mere breath" (Ps. 39:5).

Maybe we really know that all the time, but we have a way of blocking it from consciousness. It's too unsettling, too disturbing to consider, so we keep acting as though "it couldn't happen here."

Albert Camus, in his novel *The Plague*, reminds us how we rarely consider in parting from those we love that we may not see them again. "Mothers and children, lovers, husbands and wives who had a few days previously taken it for granted that their parting would be a short one, duped by our blind human faith in the near future—and little if at all diverted from their normal interests by this leave taking—all these people found themselves without the least warning hopelessly cut off, prevented from seeing one another again or even communicating with one another." The poet spoke wisdom when he said, "Look thy last on all things lovely, every hour." Don't play the fool by imagining that you or those precious to you have a permanence here on which you can depend.

Does the Bible call us then to a gloomy preoccupation with our mortality, a restless brooding on the fact of death? Not at all. To know how transient we are is not necessarily to court despair. On the contrary, the significance and preciousness of life come home to us only when we recognize "the measure of our days."

We don't need to ignore the realities of our existence in order to be happy and hopeful. James recommends a better way: "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.'" It used to be a common practice among Christians to say with regard to some announced plans for the future, "God willing, we shall do this." The familiar initials "D.V." at the end of a letter abbreviate the Latin phrase, "If

God wills." The custom seems to be little in vogue today. Perhaps that represents a significant loss.

But there is no magic, of course, in merely saying or writing the phrase. James calls for an attitude of heart, a characteristic way of looking at our lives. God wants from us the recognition, the acknowledgment that all depends upon His gracious will. Not a hair can fall from our heads without His knowledge. No breath of harm can touch us without His permission. Nor can any project of ours prosper without His attendant blessing. To know that, to realize that we have to do with God in everything, and that our only security is in His keeping, that is what the Bible means by "the fear of the LORD," which is "the chief part of wisdom" (see Prov. 2:7).

It may be today that both our boasting and our blindness spring from a different kind of fear. We cannot face our mortality with poise because we know down deep that all is not well between us and God. We are still living without Him, rebelling against Him when we do not ignore Him completely. We go on pretending we will live here forever because we cannot bear the thought of what may lie beyond.

I want you to know today that you don't have to live in that fear. The God who holds your life in His hand has shown in Jesus Christ the extent of His caring. He has given His dear Son to die for you so that you may be forgiven and received as a beloved child. If you will repent of your vain ways, renounce your "God-complex," and trust His mercy in Christ, you can this day be at peace. Then you won't have to bluster and pretend. When you take God seriously, the God whose name is Father, you can be lighthearted about everything else.

### **Study Questions**

1. In looking forward toward the future, what is the difference between planning and presumption?
2. Why are predictions about our future accomplishments so precarious?
3. What reminder can keep us from vain speculation about the future?
4. What is the heart of what the Bible means by "the fear of the Lord"?

## WAITING PATIENTLY

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors.

James 5:7-9

One of the central affirmations of the New Testament, perhaps the most startling, is that Jesus of Nazareth will one day return to the earth. So universal was this belief among the early Christians that the apostolic writers were rarely concerned to convince anyone about it. They straighten out misconceptions about the Lord's return in the minds of the faithful, discourage them from irresponsible waiting for it, and give explanations for its delay, but they seldom defend the conviction itself. For the most part, they simply assume it.

James, the brother of our Lord, offers a classic example of this attitude. In dealing with the sufferings and conflicts of everyday life, he appeals repeatedly, almost incidentally, to the fact of Christ's return. Listen to these words from his letter, chapter 5, verses 7-9: "Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors." Three times in this brief passage of practical admonition, James refers to the *parousia*, the second coming: "Be patient until the coming of the Lord . . . Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand . . . Behold, the Judge is standing at the doors."

I wonder if that seems to you as strange, as incomprehensible as it did to me when I first heard it. Jesus Christ, coming back to earth? Whoever heard of such a thing? I hadn't, until the gospel was presented to me in my high school years. I didn't know what to make of that astounding notion. It certainly seemed different from what most people around me were expecting the future to bring. I heard people dreaming of unlimited progress and others outlining various stages of planetary doom.

But a grand finale to history featuring Jesus Christ was something new to me and hard to accept.

It's very difficult for any of us, I suppose, to envision the end of history. It's somewhat like trying to comprehend the limits of space. We can't imagine something like space as having any limit. If it did end, what would lie beyond it? On the other hand, our minds can't conceive of its going on infinitely either. To think of human history, either as going on and on, or as having some definite conclusion, involves us in a similar problem. In those musings, we quickly find ourselves beyond our depth. We stand at the gates of mystery.

The New Testament makes no effort to remove that tension. No detailed explanations are given of the *parousia* and its accompaniments. We have no definite time frame for its happening. The wonder of God's denouement is allowed to stand.

Of some things regarding Christ's advent we can be sure. For one, it will be a personal, bodily coming to earth. The New Testament speaks at times of other comings of the Lord in the midst of history. He comes to receive His faithful followers at the moment of their death. He comes to the world in visitations of judgment and to His people in blessed seasons of renewal. He is present now by the power of His Spirit in our midst. But His coming at the last day will be more than a spiritual presence. Shortly after His resurrection, when Jesus ascended to heaven, this message was given to His followers: "This same Jesus, shall come" (see Acts 1:11). This same Jesus, the one who was born in Bethlehem, who played in Nazareth, who preached in Galilee, who died in Jerusalem, He will come. After His resurrection, He had been different, no longer subject to the same human limitations. But He was still recognizable. He could walk. He could be touched. He could eat. He could speak. This is the Jesus who departed from the earth once and who once again will stand upon it.

The New Testament also insists that His coming will be visible. "This same Jesus," we are told, "who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Jesus Himself had stressed that fact. He warned His followers against rumors that He had come in secret. "Lo, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Lo, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out; if they say, 'Lo, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man" (Matt. 24:26-27). Something far more wonderful than worldwide television coverage will attend His advent. On the last great day, we learn, "every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7). All the world's peoples shall "look on him

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whom they have pierced" (Zech. 10:10). His followers shall then "be like him, for they shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

That coming, we learn further, will be inconceivably glorious. Once He came in humiliation, taking the form of a slave, made in the likeness of men. As the prophet said of the suffering servant, "He had no form nor comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isa. 53:2-3).

But when He comes again, it will be with power and great glory. The apostle John caught a glimpse of that in the visions of the Revelation:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems . . . On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords . . ." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Rev. 19:11-12,16; 22:20

Now James appeals to this tremendous event when he calls his Christian brothers and sisters to "endure." Endurance is essentially "staying power," the ability to bear up under pressure. Endurance is that inner strength that does not easily succumb under suffering. To endure is to go through the worst that life brings and not give up.

God's true servants, in the first century and now, must often pass through severe affliction. James wants them in their darkest hours to remember the Lord's coming. "Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord." It's as though he says, "Hang on! Help is on the way!" "Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

Farmers in Palestine depend on two rainy seasons. The "former rains" come in October. They moisten ground which has been hardened almost into rock by the blazing summer sun. They make it possible for the workers to plow and for the stony earth to receive the seed. The "latter rains" come in the spring time. They refresh the earth before the summer drought and ripen the long-awaited harvest.

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The farmer plows and plants in hope. He waits in faith for that on which his life depends. The rains have come before; he trusts that they will come again. Far more faithful than these returning showers and regular harvest is the promise of the Lord, "I will come again." For the believer, that means the end of sorrow, the fruition of hope. We can take heart when we know that His returning draws nigh because, as the apostle Paul put it, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory which is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). The coming of the Lord is a grand, compelling incentive to hold on.

And that same hope call us to be patient and kind with each other. Patience is the special grace we need in our interactions with other people. While to endure means not to despair when we are burdened, to be patient means not to be vengeful when we are offended. James says, "Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged." Don't speak against one another. Don't harbor grudges in your hearts. Don't be quick to take offense and slow to forgive. To assume the role of a bitter, critical judge is to risk judgment ourselves. As James puts it, "the Judge is standing at the doors."

That's a vivid image, isn't it? Before the door of every man's life, the Judge of all the earth is standing. If we die before He comes, we pass through a door of death to the place where He is waiting. Or when He returns to earth, He will open a door and come through it to reckon with us. In either case, we soon will stand before Him.

Is it shocking for you to think that Jesus Christ will be your Judge? Isn't He the compassionate Savior? Didn't He come to die for us so that our sins could be forgiven? Didn't He bear the stroke of judgment due to us? Yes, He did. And if you are trusting Jesus Christ as your Savior, if you've welcomed Him as the Lord of your life, then you can know that the issue of your salvation has already been settled. You are justified freely by His grace, acquitted at His judgment seat. If you haven't taken that crucial step, if you haven't made that commitment, will you do so today? Will you trust as your Redeemer that one who is to come?

But James is pointing here to another kind of judgment that Christians face. "We must *all*," as the apostle Paul puts it, "stand before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive the good or evil, according to that what he has done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10). What we have built on the one foundation of Jesus Christ makes a difference. If what we have built stands the test at last, we shall have a reward. If the



fire of God's trial consumes it, we will suffer loss.

James wants to remind us of our accountability to God for the use we have made of our opportunities, our abilities, our resources. We will answer also to our Lord and Judge for the way in which we have treated those whom He calls brethren. Let this call you to graciousness. "The Judge is standing at the doors."

Perhaps all of this leaves you somewhat confused or unimpressed because you aren't sure about the heart of the story. You're not convinced that Christ is coming back. Maybe you heard about the distinguished Jewish rabbi who publicly expressed the view that Jesus may have been raised from the dead. He didn't yet accept Him as the Messiah or the Son of God, but He said it was well within the Jewish tradition to believe in the God who raises the dead. He saw the resurrection as the most reasonable way to account for the amazing transformation of Jesus' disciples after they had been so discouraged at His crucifixion.

Many of the rabbis' colleagues were alarmed and scandalized at this conclusion. One of them said, "If I believed in the resurrection of Jesus, I'd be baptized tomorrow." Maybe that rabbi, though less believing, was more consistent than the first. The point is that the evidence in history for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is seen even by a non-Christian as very strong. If Jesus did rise from the dead as He promised He would, we have an exceedingly powerful witness to His truthfulness. And the same Jesus who said He would conquer death said also that He would come again. You may safely trust Him. If you take Him now at His word, you may not know what's coming tomorrow, but you'll be sure about the last of all tomorrows. Then, come what may, you'll be able to endure. God bless you!

### **Study Questions**

1. Why is it hard to imagine what Christ's second coming will be like?
2. What can we know about that great event?
3. What effects can an awareness of His coming produce in our lives?
4. In what sense will Christians be judged when Christ returns?

## THE LONG VIEW

As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

James 5:10-11

I'd like to think with you next about how we can *endure* in the midst of cruel and continued suffering. James, the brother of Jesus and a first-century church leader, has a great deal to say about that kind of enduring. He is writing his New Testament letter to people who have been sorely tested, who even now may be going through the fires of affliction. He speaks to the bruised and brokenhearted. Perhaps his words are timely and fitting for you or for someone close to you. "As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose (or the end) of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

James calls us first here to *consider the example of other faithful sufferers*. If you want to know how you can possibly make it through an agonizing trial, think of how others as human and vulnerable as you have stood the test. Now this isn't simply a variation of the old theme that "misery loves company." Nor is James one of these bothersome moralists who tell us in our anguish that we ought to be thankful because other people have had it even worse. He doesn't want us to focus so much on the sorrows and tribulations of others as on the way they were able to hold up and go on in the midst of them.

He mentions first "the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord." Their careers in the service of God present a remarkable combination of suffering and endurance. Think of what they had to bear. God's word came to them with such compelling urgency that it was like a fire shut up in their bones. Whether they wanted to or not, whether or not it was safe and expedient, they had to speak. What is more, the people to whom they were sent often proved strangely obtuse, stubbornly unwilling to listen, hardhearted, even downright hostile. The prophets tangled again and again with the powers that be, challenging kings, upbraiding the

priestly classes and exposing false prophets. They thundered against cruel landlords and pilloried the idle rich. Quite frequently they were scoffed at, ridiculed, and accused as traitors. Some were thrown into prison, lowered into pits of mire, bound, beaten, even sawed in two. It's hard to imagine any kind of reproach that wasn't heaped on them.

Remember when Jesus said to His followers, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely"? (Matt. 5:11). He reminded them at that very moment that "so men persecuted the prophets who were before you." He stunned the rebellious people of his own time with these words: "Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town . . . O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!" (Matt. 23:34,37). But just as remarkable as the suffering of the prophets was their steadfastness. They resolutely refused to compromise their calling. Bold Micaiah spoke for all of them when he was pressured to tone down his message. "Behold," they ordered him, "the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them and speak, favorably." But Micaiah said, "As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that will I speak" (1 Kings 22:13-14). And so did they all. Not threats nor blandishments, not tortures nor bribes could stop them. They sometimes stood almost alone against entire nations, yet persevered. Some of them toiled and suffered their lives away on behalf of their own people, only to die unheeded and unappreciated. These prophets knew how to endure, to hold steady when everything was collapsing around them.

Then, says James, there's the example also of Job. Remember him? First his flock and herds were carried off and his servants slain. Then all his sons and daughters perished together in a terrible windstorm. Finally his health failed when his whole body was covered with loathsome sores. All the comfort he got from his wife was the suggestion that he should "curse God and die!" What more could have happened to him?

You've heard, says James, about the patience of Job. In some ways, the man wasn't very patient. Who would have been? At times he complained bitterly to God. He was hotly indignant against his "friends" when they accused him. He went through agonies because he felt himself misunderstood and forsaken. But still he endured. He refused to "curse

God and die." He kept on searching, struggling, crying out to heaven.

Enduring in the midst of your suffering doesn't mean silence and passivity. It doesn't mean that you say nice and proper things when the pain is unbearable. The faithful sometimes scream and rage. But they never finally despair. Job, for all his bitter questioning, endured.

It helps to focus on fellow sufferers like that. And we don't have to go all the way back to the Old testament to find them. You know people whose indomitable spirit in the midst of affliction has awed you. I remember an elderly lady I used to visit. She had submitted to four major surgical operations. She had had seven children, but all but one had died before her. Can you imagine a woman like that being full of wonder and gratitude at how good the Lord had been to her? She was. She endured. We draw strength when we see that other people are able to make it, come what may. I read just the other day that the main source of hopefulness among severely burned patients was their witnessing the recovery of others who had been similarly burned. Consider those who have come through the dark valley and take heart!

But if we're going to find comfort in the example of these veteran sufferers, we're going to need to *take the long view*. We admire these martyred prophets. We extol them. We count them blessed now. But they had to pass through deep waters for a long time. Remember what a weary period of depression Elijah went through? Remember how hopeless his cause seemed and how near he was to giving up? He was tested to the limit.

Even though God finally granted Job health, children, and lands again, life must have seemed bleak for him in the intervening years.

And what about Jeremiah's whole lifetime of preaching in which his hearers never heeded his message! Toward the end of his ministry, when his chastened countrymen should have known better, they still mocked his prophetic word. They asked him to seek the Lord's direction on their behalf. He did so faithfully, and when he told them the way that God would have them go, they took precisely the opposite course! We need an exceedingly long perspective to derive encouragement from Jeremiah's example. For him, things didn't seem to get better.

The only people who can take the long view are those who know there is something more beyond this earthly life. When a person dies stricken, rejected and alone, who can be anything but depressed by that if death ends all? Without eternity, the prophets and martyrs were a pack of

fools! Poignant lyrics of an old song said it well: "If that's all there is, my friends, then let's break out the booze and have a ball, if that's *all* there is."

The key to hope lies in these words of James. "You have seen the end of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." His first reference here is what God did for Job at the end of the patriarch's ordeal. "And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job . . . and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. And the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:10,12). There we see the end, the goal, the purpose of the Lord.

As we saw a moment ago, God didn't do this for Jeremiah or for many of His faithful servants. But in Job's case, He drew back the veil and gave us a glimpse of what He has in mind for His people. Job was a kind of Exhibit A. You know how it is with God's judgments here and now. Though a final day of judgment is assured, it seems that the world presently is full of injustice. Often the evil prosper and the righteous are afflicted. The proud strut about oppressing others while the lowly are driven to the wall. But every now and then, God lets us witness some striking instance of His judgment here in this age. We see just enough to hint that there is more to come. So it was with Job. He's an isolated case of God's heaping blessings at last on an afflicted servant, but Job hears the promise that one day the Lord will do that for them all.

The New Testament tells us of a far surer pledge. How do we know that God will finally make all things right and wipe away all tears from the faces of His suffering saints? How do we know that He is compassionate and merciful beyond all measure? Because of the resurrection of Jesus. Easter assures us that those who believe in Him shall never die. As Christ lives, we shall live also. In that tremendous saving event, as nowhere else, we see "the end of the Lord," His loving purpose for His people.

The experience of every age teaches us, though, that we need to give God time and let Him do things in His own way. "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform . . . Judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust Him for His grace . . . His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour. The bud may have a bitter taste but sweet will be the flower." Those are words from a hymn that was especially precious to our family during a time of deep sorrow. They remind us that in the end, in the long view, it will become fully evident that God is gracious and full of compassion.

## APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

Some time ago, a small group of sufferers in a hospital watched an old movie from the 1940s, *Mr. Lucky*, starring Cary Grant and Laraine Day. They commented on how refreshing it was to see a movie that had a happy ending. Many today scoff at that whole idea. "Those storybook endings," they say, "are not true to life. That's not the way things happen." In the short run, they are probably right. But in the long run, stories with a happy ending are the truest of all, because they point to the purpose of the compassionate Lord. You see, the worst things are not the last. They are only next-to-last. Last of all comes the best—the unveiling of God's gracious design in Christ. If you call on Jesus Christ today and trust God's fatherly love in Him, you can await the happiest of all endings.

So whatever you're suffering now, remember those who have suffered before you, trusting in the Lord. And don't be fooled by appearances. Take the long view, for in Jesus Christ, "you have seen the goal of the Lord!"

### **Study Questions**

1. How does the example of other faithful sufferers fortify us in the midst of our own struggle?
2. What is remarkable about the careers of the Old Testament prophets?
3. How was Job's experience a kind of "Exhibit A"?
4. In what sense can Christians be called optimists?

## WHEN TO PRAY

Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

James 5:13-15

What we need is a faith for all seasons, a religion that is relevant for every dimension of our experience. We need something to live by through all our days. That's the kind of Christianity which James, the brother of Jesus, writes about in his New Testament letter. In the passage I want to think about with you in this chapter, James brings us God's word about what to do when we're burdened with sorrow and suffering, what to do in our brightest, happiest hours, and what to do when some bodily infirmity has laid us low. Listen: "Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:13-15).

First, what should you do when you're passing through the fires of suffering? You have to live with a pain that never goes away. Someone you love is in trouble or someone else close to you is breaking your heart. Perhaps as a Christian you're hated and despised because of what you stand for. You're ridiculed, humiliated, persecuted by people you've tried to love and serve. Or maybe through some crushing circumstance you've just lost everything. What do you do?

James says, "Pray." You've heard some people say that with dripping cynicism. The implication there is, "When everything else fails, when all practical measures prove unfruitful, try prayer! There's nothing else to do and it surely won't hurt." But we get the impression that when we're reduced to that, we really are in bad shape. For James, however, prayer is the first resource for sufferers. When you are hurting deeply, call on God. Tell Him about it. Pour out your soul before Him.

If you want some hints as to how to do that, read the Psalms. How

many cries go up to God there from wounded spirits? "O, Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; Many are saying of me, there is no help for him in God . . . (Ps. 3:1-2). I am a worm, and no man; scorned by men, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me . . . (Ps. 22:6-7). I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast . . . (v. 14). Thou knowest my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to thee. Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair . . . (Ps. 69:19-20). Why art Thou so far from helping me . . .?" (Ps. 22:1). There it is, the whole throbbing tale of human anguish. People who are lonely, broken, scorned, and desperate cry out to God from the depths.

Or take a prophet like Jeremiah. What a volcano of feeling boils up toward God in his prayers! "O, LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived . . . I have become a laughing stock all the day; every one mocks me (Jer. 20:7). Give heed to me, O LORD, and hearken to my plea . . . (Jer. 18:19). They have dug a pit to take me, and laid snares for my feet . . . thou, O LORD, knowest all their plotting to slay me (v. 22). Cursed be the day on which I was born . . . Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" (Jer. 20:14,18).

Or hear the Lord Himself in Gethsemane, when He was "exceedingly sorrowful, sore amazed." "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (see Luke 22:42). Or finally from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). Here is the greatest sufferer of all times—and how He prays!

Sometimes great tribulation can leave us numb and passive. It can shackle us with self-pity or plunge us into despair. It can make us cold, bitter, and hard. How much better it is to lift our hearts toward God! We cannot fathom His ways. God's purposes in our sufferings are inscrutable, beyond our reach. But of this we can be sure: He invites us to turn to Him in the midst of them. He treasures our prayer.

Don't worry about being a "fox-hole Christian" because you begin to pray in earnest when you're greatly afflicted. There will never be a better time! Don't be discouraged from prayer because you don't know the accepted language or because you don't have feelings that seem proper. Learn from the psalmists, the prophets and the Lord Jesus that it's all right to express everything in your breaking heart. Come freely and spread out your pain before a caring God!

But suffering is not the whole story of our lives. Sometimes things



seem to be going our way. The whole universe smiles down on us benignly. Sometimes life is good, touched with new gladness. What then? Hear James. "Is any cheerful?" he asks. "Let him sing praise." If we are tempted in adversity to renounce God, we are tempted even more in prosperity to forget Him. When we're in the fiery crucible, all of us are driven to thoughts of God in some way, if only to rage at Him for what's happening to us. But when our skies are sunny and all is well, there are so many other things to think about and enjoy!

One day when Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, He was accosted by lepers. Standing at a distance, these outcasts pled with Him, "Jesus, master, have mercy on us" (Luke 17:13). He told them to go to the holy city and show themselves to the priests. A strange command! This was precisely what people did who had already been healed of their plague! And sure enough, as they made their way toward Jerusalem, all ten of them were completely cured. What an overwhelming experience! They were like men come back from the dead or from something worse. Imagine how much joy was generated among those ten, among all who knew them. But only one returned to give thanks. Only one, as far as we know, sang the Lord's praises.

But the psalmist put it well: "It is good to give thanks to the LORD . . . to declare thy steadfast love in the morning, and thy faithfulness by night . . . (Ps. 92:1-2). Every day I will bless thee, and praise thy name for ever and ever" (Ps. 145:2). Praise throws open the windows of a self-centered life and lets the fresh air of heaven in. It releases God's power in our lives. Best of all, it gives glory to Him. Let your best moments, says James, your highest joys, be translated into worship. When your heart is full, let it sing to God.

What do we learn from this call to pray in sorrow and praise in joy? Aren't both prayer and praise always appropriate? Surely, but James wants us to see that our circumstances and our feelings are not insignificant. We aren't to act as though all of life were on a dead level. It has its soaring peaks and its deep gorges too. Let your approach to God grow out of where you are. Let it express what is present and vivid to your consciousness now. Forget what you *ought* to feel or what someone else urges upon you. Claim the freedom to be in touch with your own feelings, fully yourself when you come before God.

Well, what about when you're sick? When health flees and your strength is almost gone? Prayer and praise are certainly fitting then and

must occasion special joy around the throne of God. But sometimes you are so drained you can hardly speak. Sometimes it's all you can do just to hang on. Much as you might want to, you can scarcely pray. Hear James again, "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord."

It's assumed here that a person will make use of the best medical attention available. But for James and all the New Testament writers, this is never divorced from the life of faith. God is still the healer of His people. Skilled doctors don't make prayer superfluous.

The one stricken by illness is to "call for the elders of the church." Notice that it's the patient's initiative. We see nothing here of a widely publicized healing service to which the sick are pressured to come. This is something rather private and personal, growing out of the need and faith of the afflicted one.

The elders are to anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord. This use of oil has rich biblical precedent. Oil was seen as having healing properties, of course, but it was never viewed as a cure-all. It was mainly used as a visible sign of the Holy Spirit's working, a pointer to God's healing, reviving power.

But here is the heart of the provision James offers: "Let them pray over him." The prayers or the unspoken yearnings of the sick person are assumed, but none of us is an independent, self-contained unit. We need the intercessions of the saints on our behalf. We are to let them bear something of our burden. We need to acknowledge our dependence on the fellowship. In calling these representatives of the congregation, we express a sense of need for the support of the whole body of Christ.

Notice the blessings promised here. "The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Physical restoration and spiritual healing: the two are very close. There is a mysterious relationship between sin and sickness. That doesn't mean that illness always results from the individual's own sins. It's the heritage of a fallen race. Nor can we label specific ailments as being caused by particular sins, as religious teachers have sometimes tried to do. Some thought that dropsy came from fornication, jaundice from hatred, poverty and humiliation from pride, and liver trouble from unkind speech! That's both unfair and over precise. Still, human life is a complex unity. The physical, the psychological, the spiritual are strangely

interrelated. And here's the important thing: God's grace and power can heal the whole person.

But what about this seemingly universal promise of healing? What do we make of that in light of all the prayed-for people who haven't recovered? The visited ones who subsequently died? James is simply giving us here a specific instance of Jesus' general teaching about prayer: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7). Obviously the practice James urges doesn't result in the healing of every kind of condition and surely doesn't always forestall death. But it does assure us that God's restoring power is released through believing prayer. It makes us confident that calling on God for the sick and the infirm will never be in vain. Prayers of faith will always alter the situation and minister to the life of those for whom they're offered.

For James, as for Jesus, confidence in prayer is bound up with knowledge of God's revealed character. He is the Father who delights to give good gifts to His children. He is the living God who acts and responds. He has shown us in Christ His great concern for physical healing. Yet even in Jesus' ministry, healings were never an end in themselves, but always a hint, a sign, of something more. The ultimate answer, the final fulfillment is in the resurrection, when all God's people will be completely whole.

Dear friend, faith in Christ Jesus is for everyone and for all occasions. Whatever we're going through in life, we can come with our fellow Christians before God's throne and find Him all-sufficient, marvelously responsive to our need. When ought we to pray? Always, for all things, in the name of Jesus Christ to God our Father!

### **Study Questions**

1. Why are people sometimes hesitant about praying when they are in serious trouble?
2. What kinds of feelings may believers express freely before God?
3. What are we prone to forget when things are going well for us?
4. How does James' program for divine healing differ from what is often proposed today?
5. How do you account for the fact that many sick people who are sincerely, believingly prayed for do not recover?

## TWO-WAY CONFESSION

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.

James 5:16

I want to think with you now about a practice that is highly rewarding, yet quite unpopular. It can generate untold joy, but is almost universally neglected. What I have in mind is the mutual confession of our sins. Listen to these words from James, chapter 5, verse 16: "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects."

I suppose that most of us have at least some idea of what it means to confess our sins. The word *confess* means literally to "speak the same as." When we confess sins, we say about them the same thing that God says. We call them what He calls them. When we confess, we frankly admit that we have rebelled against His authority, disobeyed His will, spurned His fellowship, and gone our own way. The specific wrongs we do are all expressions of this basic attitude, this willful estrangement from God. His written Word, the Bible, reveals to us where we transgress or fall short. When we then confess our sins, we are saying yes to His estimate of us. We agree with His verdict.

If you have grown up within the Roman Catholic church or have lived in a culture shaped by her tradition, you may think of confession chiefly as something made to an official representative of the church. A priest hears your confession, pronounces the words of absolution, and perhaps recommends a way in which you can express your penitence.

Protestants, on the other hand, customarily think of confession as offered directly to God. We confess our sins in prayer, asking God to forgive and cleanse us. Confession on this view is a private, personal matter between the individual and his or her Maker.

Some of us are familiar perhaps with various forms of public confession. A member who has committed some serious offense may be required to acknowledge his wrong before the whole body of believers. We were in a church in Soviet Russia last summer where those who became Christians were expected to pray a prayer of penitence before the

gathered congregation, confessing aloud their sins and failings.

What James refers to, however, is something different from any of these. He calls us to confess our sins "to one another." This is a mutual, reciprocal act. The people who make confessions to their fellow Christians are expected to hear theirs as well, while all who hear are responsible also to confess. There is nothing forced or official about this. It is left to the discretion of the erring person as to when and where he makes his confession, but it is always in a setting where others engage in the same honest sharing.

Why does James recommend this practice? Aren't other forms of confession sufficient? Each surely has its place but also its limitations. If confession is made, for example, only to appointed officials, the sense of mutuality and fellowship is lost, and we may come to identify God's forgiveness too closely with religious rites and human authority.

If, on the other hand, we confess our sins only to God, we may gain a sense of His forgiveness but miss the support of the Christian fellowship. We may come to see ourselves as spiritual "lone rangers" rather than as members of one body.

And as for public confessions, whatever their values in heightening conscience, they are always attended with dangers. A person's sincere admissions have sometimes been used later to harass him or even to destroy his good name.

Confession, whatever form it takes, can be a liberating experience. When we suppress our guilt and refuse to face it honestly, it doesn't just go away. It tends to control, to enslave our lives in hidden ways. It may make us terribly afraid. As Fulton Sheen once said, "There are tens of thousands of persons today suffering from fears which in reality are nothing but the effects of hidden sins." Guilt may make us hostile, bitterly critical of others. It may plunge us into discouragement and eat away our zest for life. Hear how King David expressed his experience when for long months he tried to conceal his wrongdoing: "When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Ps. 32:3-4). An inner sickness, a fearful sense of pressure, the withering of joy and gladness—all that came from sin unconfessed. I wonder how much physical debility and mental anguish in the lives of people today can be traced to the same cause.

Confession, on the other hand, brings release and relief. How blessed it is not to have to hide or pretend, to make excuses or blame someone else! How freeing to come out of the darkness of concealment into the

light of truth! It's like a huge debt canceled, a dreadful burden lifted when we confess our sins and find forgiveness. Have you experienced what that can be?

Confession, especially mutual confession, can also be a powerful deterrent to sin. Concealing sin makes it worse, adding shamelessness and obstinacy to the original fault. When we don't confess, we are likely to become increasingly careless and hardened. But to bring that offense out into the open is to build a defense against repeating it. When I admit to someone the lie that I have told, I'm fortified to some degree against future deceptions. When I admit to another person that I have injured him, I'm far less likely to hurt him again. Confession expresses and reinforces my purpose to change.

It's easy for us who are Protestants to become smug in the fact that we "confess our sins to God through Christ" and have no need of human mediators or confessors. But our avoidance of confessing to fellow Christians may trap us in an isolating form of pride. We may loudly acknowledge that we are sinners saved by grace but never own up to any specific failures. We are miserable offenders, we say, but just let anyone try to point out a specific wrong in our lives! We'll scream in protest or be ready with a counter-accusation.

Mutual confession can free us from those pretensions. We can discover the meaning of grace by letting ourselves be "found out" only to realize that we're still loved anyway. We can abandon forever that vain image building that sets us apart from our fellow believers. We can rather take our places with them as weak, blundering, wayward people.

For this to happen, however, it's important that the confession be genuine, unforced. When others pry and probe, when they insist that we should bare our souls, the whole blessing may be lost. No one was ever made better by having someone tell him what a louse he is, but many have become whole persons by avowing their guilt themselves. When confession can take place in a circle of believers who care deeply about each other, who are at the same time honest and accepting, it can bring about bona fide miracles of renewal.

What James especially points out is that mutual confession lets others in the fellowship know about our need. We're supposed to bear one another's burdens, aren't we? I heard a minister once talk about being vulnerable, about letting others know our weakness, the weights we carry. He said, "How can other people bear our burdens if they don't even know

what they are?" You'd be surprised at how many people in our churches feel that their failings are more glaring, their lapses more grievous, their faith more feeble than anyone else's. They look around at others who seem to have it all together and they become discouraged about themselves. And they surely won't be led to expend much energy in assisting people who need no help! But if they know where you hurt, if they know the temptations you struggle with, they'll feel a sense of kinship with you, and be ready to give you the support that you inwardly cry out for.

"Confess your sins one to another," says James, "and pray one for another, that you may be healed." The more we open ourselves to caring brothers and sisters, the more we can expect their intercessions on our behalf. That's the great reason for these shared confessions, that they may lead to burden-bearing prayer. We let trusted friends in on our pain, our guilt, our fear, that they may come to our aid. And James reminds us that the prayers of even one person who knows God and lives before Him with a good conscience can have incredibly powerful effects. The "righteous man" he refers to is not one who never sins but one who is honest about his sins, one who keeps bringing them into the light of God's presence. No one can ever receive a gift more precious, more life-enriching than the faithful prayers of a godly man or woman.

James affirms with full confidence that whatever ills we have of body, mind and spirit, they are never beyond the healing power of God, in response to the prayers of His people. Those who confess their sins freely to their fellow Christians and enlist their intercessions can expect wonderful things. In the depths of life, they will surely be healed.

But honest confession, however much we recommend and extol it, never comes easy. It's one of the hardest things in the world for us to do. Confession to our friends and fellow believers may be the most difficult form of all. It means taking down all our carefully built defenses, and that comes hard. It only happens, really, as an act of trust. Few people genuinely open up under pressure. Confessions may be extorted by violence and torture but these aren't the outpourings of the heart. It's only love that can produce the real thing. It's when you know that that little circle of people cares about you that you're willing to risk exposing something of which you're ashamed. You trust they'll deal with you kindly, that they won't take advantage of what you've shared or use it against you. You put your life, as it were, in their hands.

But behind that is an even deeper act of trust. Of what value is any confession of our sins unless there is the hope of forgiveness? As long as we feel that God is angry with us, ready to condemn us, we will have little heart to turn toward Him. Maybe you've had at times dreams similar to mine. You're being pursued, you run at top speed, you leap over hedges and fences, you dart around corners, burst into a straightaway, but you can't gain any ground. Your pursuer is still behind you. It's hard to keep from panicking. But what if you knew that *God* was after you on a mission of mercy, with pardon in His hands? Why, then, you'd stop and turn toward Him.

Well, Christians know that God is good and ready to forgive. They're sure of that because He gave us Christ. The death of Jesus on Good Friday is the pledge that the holy God who hates sin is also the loving Father who takes it upon His own heart and bears it away so that He can freely offer us His pardoning love. You can afford to acknowledge your sins to God and His people because a free forgiveness has already been provided. You don't have to hang back in the shadows. He's waiting to welcome you into the light. Listen again to this glad word of the gospel: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness . . . The blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:9,7). Believe that, and live in God's peace!

### **Study Questions**

1. What is the root meaning of "confession"?
2. With what forms of confession are we most familiar?
3. How does James' exhortation differ from these?
4. What blessings flow from mutual confession?
5. What needs to happen within us before we can confess our sins freely to God and to others?



## POWERFUL PLEADING

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.

James 5:16-18

Sometimes I've heard claims for the power of prayer which seemed to me grossly exaggerated. The impression was given that any person, praying about anything, could achieve amazing results. That kind of sweeping claim can hardly be supported from Scripture or from common experience. Prayer is not magic. It's not a sure-fire formula that anyone can take up to immediate advantage. In fact, a great deal of prayer, so-called, may have little religious meaning and no significant effects. Our prayers may sometimes be what Jesus called "vain repetitions." Or, to use Shakespeare's phrase, they may be "words without thoughts" which "never did to heaven go." God sometimes said to His own people through His prophets that their prayers had become an abomination to Him. "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood" (Isa. 1:15). That's hardly a guarantee, is it, that prayer will always "change things"?

What the Bible does teach plainly, however, is that a certain kind of person, praying in a certain way, can affect to an astonishing degree what happens in this world. Listen to these words from James, chapter 5, beginning at verse 16: "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit." Now look carefully with me at the person who did the praying, at the way he prayed, and at the effects that followed.

The man singled out here as a model is Elijah the Tishbite, greatest of

the Old Testament prophets. He, for James, is an outstanding example of "a righteous man." What can that phrase mean? When we study the Scriptures carefully, we discover that no one of us, not even Elijah, can qualify as righteous on the basis of his own character and conduct. The psalmist tells us that "God looks down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any that are wise, that seek after God" (Ps. 53:2). The result of the survey is, "They have all fallen away; they are all alike depraved; there is none that does good, no, not one" (v. 31). The apostle Paul picks up that thought and amplifies it. "All men," he contends, "both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written, 'None is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one'" (Rom. 3:9-12). If then, to pray effectively we have to be righteous in the sense that we always do right, no one of us can qualify.

But James obviously doesn't mean that. He implies that a number of people can be called "righteous," of whom Elijah is one representative. How can the unrighteous be called, in God's book, "righteous"? That is the central mystery of the gospel, the marvelous provision that God has made in the gift of Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, God's incarnate Son, was the only one who ever lived a truly righteous life in this world. He, the just one, came to die for us, the unjust. He, the sinless one, bore the weight of our sins. He, the innocent one, felt the stroke which we, the guilty, deserve. When we rely upon Him as our Savior, God accepts us as righteous in His sight.

That was true for the Old Testament believers who believed in God's *promise* to send a redeemer. Remember those great words about Abraham, how he "believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness"? (James 2:23). If we are righteous people today, our righteousness is not in ourselves but in Christ. It is, in the words of the apostle, "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Rom. 3:22). It can be yours if you will trust the Savior and commit yourself to Him.

Elijah, then, was a righteous man, not because he was perfect or sinless but because he trusted in God's covenant promises. He relied upon His saving mercy. And, in response to God's grace, he sought to live an obedient and grateful life.

But surely Elijah was a special case, an extraordinary kind of believer. What towering faith he had, to believe God for unheard-of things! What

magnificent courage he showed in standing alone against the king and all his hired prophets! What dramatic encounters with God he had during his turbulent career as a prophet! All that is true, and yet it doesn't put Elijah in a class by himself. James is aware of our tendency to put past heroes of the faith on a pedestal, to see them "haloed" with supersanctity, and ourselves as hopelessly beneath them. He reminds us that Elijah was a man "of like passions as we are." Great as he was, this Tishbite was thoroughly human. He could be furiously angry. He could be filled with scorn and contempt. He could mock his enemies with bitter sarcasm. He could be despondent and give way to self-pity. He could be lonely, weary, and prone to complain. Like so many of us, he could go in a matter of minutes from the mountaintop of elation to the valley of despair. He was no stained-glass saint, but a fellow struggler.

Well, what was his praying like? The first thing we note is that he prayed about very practical, earthly matters. He asked for signs of God's power in the natural order, like fire from heaven to consume a sacrifice. When the people of God had become wayward and idolatrous, he prayed for a long drought upon their land. Then, when the day of their repentance and restoration came, he prayed for rain.

Sometimes conscientious people are troubled about such requests, wondering if they are worthy or even legitimate for the people of God to ask. They have been told, perhaps, that they should limit their petitions to "spiritual" matters and not expect God to interfere at their bidding with the order of His creation. But that represents a sophistication foreign to the Bible. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the Lord of all creation. His action isn't confined to some shadowy spiritual realm. It's no harder for Him to alter weather conditions than it is to change a human heart. In fact, the latter is much more difficult because there He deals with a rebellious human will. The God who can accomplish the supreme miracle of quickening a dead soul can surely send rain as He pleases upon a barren earth. There is nothing too hard for the Lord, and those who know Him do not hesitate to ask of Him down-to-earth, day-by-day blessings.

Needless to say, however, not all prayers for a change in the weather are answered. What a chaotic world this would be if they were! Sometimes our prayers for daily benefits never get beyond the trivial. They are simply expressions of a narrow self-seeking turned heavenward. But Elijah's prayers for drought and downpour were not expressions of

personal whim, nor was he out to demonstrate what a powerful man he was. Those practical prayers of his arose from a heart burdened for God's cause and kingdom. Elijah saw his people forsaking the God of their fathers. He saw them about to forfeit their whole destiny as a chosen race. He looked on in anguish while idolatry did its dehumanizing work among them. His heart was broken. He yearned to see God restore Israel. And that's why he rose from prayer one day to thunder at King Ahab, "As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1).

When we hear Elijah praying on Mount Carmel, we understand the motives that mastered him. "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O LORD, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back" (1 Kings 18:36-37). There it is. Elijah prayed for practical things like healing, daily bread, rain from heaven, but he did it out of zeal for God. Remember how Jesus called His followers to pray first for God's name to be hallowed, for His kingdom to come, for His will to be done, and then to offer petitions for their own needs and those of others? That's always the spirit of true prayer. Those who engage in it see everything in the context of God's cause. All they ask is ultimately "for His name's sake."

But James adds something else about Elijah's praying. He says literally: "with prayer, he prayed." Or perhaps better: "he prayed in his prayers." James is expressing here the fervency, the passion with which the prophet appealed to God. Whenever we see Elijah, he's gripped by some kind of passion, whether it's anger at Ahab or scorn at the priests of Baal, whether it's fury against idolatry or despondency under a juniper tree. He's a man who lives and feels intensely, and that's the way he prays. All the ardor of his being goes into that plea for God's glory.

It's a question to ask: Do we "pray" in our prayers? We may know the proper petitions and the accepted phrases in which to couch them. We may pray with great fluency or with taste and refinement. But do we pray in our prayers? Do we pour our whole souls into them? Is prayer for us the vent through which the burning eagerness of a whole life finds expression? Such were the petitions of God's man, Elijah.

What about the results? Beyond all human expectation! One man's prayer, following by an almost interminable dry season! The same man

prays again and the heavens become black with clouds! Rain comes to renew the earth! It seems that the prophet's prayers can open and shut heaven. They can bring fire or flood. They can destroy or revive. "The prayer of a righteous man," writes James, "has great power in its effects."

But is such prayer, even from saints like Elijah, always answered? Does the prayer of faith, for example, heal the sick in every case? Are God's praying servants always vindicated in the struggle here between faith and unbelief? Do the heavens always send rain when godly hearts unite to pray? The answer, of course, is no. Sometimes afflicted ones die even as prayer rises on their behalf. Sometimes God's choicest followers are humiliated and martyred. Sometimes aching needs go unmet for years and years. But the promise remains. When those who trust in Jesus Christ pray passionately for things that concern His kingdom, the power of God is surely put forth. We may not always see the fire when it falls or hear the sound of the rain. The healing we seek may tarry till resurrection morning. But when finally the scaffolding is removed and the glory of the Lord revealed, when finally we see things as they are and understand the moving forces of history, we will know that the prayers of God's faithful people have accomplished more than we dream. Because God is a faithful Father, because His word is utterly reliable, because He calls us to pray, the prayers of His servants will always, always, always have great power in their effects. Believe that, be of good cheer, and keep on praying!

### **Study Questions**

1. Under what conditions does prayer become ineffectual and meaningless?
2. In what sense are believers in Christ "righteous"?
3. Is it permissible to pray for changes in the weather? Explain.
4. What special feature of Elijah's praying does James stress?
5. What can we be sure about when genuine prayer is offered?

## **BRINGING SOMEONE BACK**

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James 5:19-20

What is the saddest of all stories, the ultimate pathos? Some of you have passed through experiences that were close to such a story, perhaps recently. They seemed the most heartbreaking things that could have befallen you. Your long-awaited child was born deformed or hopelessly limited. Your marriage, after years of happiness, collapsed in ruins through your partner's unfaithfulness. The dearest person on earth to you was suddenly snatched away by death. Or your doctor, after examining you, has discovered an inoperable cancer. Your daughter, in bitterness and defiance, has left home and you don't know where she is. Who can measure the agony of traumas and losses like those? We wonder if anything could be more poignant, more exquisitely painful.

But consider the tragedy of this—that a person who has known God's forgiving love should turn away, that someone who has found the way of abundant life should abandon it, that one who has tasted the joy of salvation should go back to the misery of alienation and sin. Of all the sadness imaginable, that seems to me the deepest and the worst.

James, in the final words of his inspired letter, envisions a situation like that: "My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." Someone numbered among the brethren, belonging to the congregation, a part of the Christian fellowship, wanders from the truth. He turns from truth to error, from obedience to sin, from Christ to his own way. What could be sadder than that?

And it happens, doesn't it? Remember how it was with many who started out to follow Jesus? Listen: "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66). And Jesus said, with pain in His voice, to the inner circle of His friends, "Will you also go away?" Even one of them, in Jesus' hour of greatest need, sold Him to His enemies and betrayed Him with a kiss. The apostle Paul knew something

of the same withering disappointment. He had a trusted friend and fellow laborer named Demas. For a time, this man served Christ zealously and well, but a day came when Paul had to say of him, "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (see 2 Tim. 4:10). How grievous! The apostle Peter knew people also who had renounced the way of Christ for the old paths of self-indulgence. He describes the outrage of that in these pungent words: "The dog has returned to his own vomit again and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire" (see 2 Peter 2:22).

But all that was long ago and far away. Most of us could also cite present-day instances much closer to home. I can see faces right now in my mind's eye that weigh upon my spirit and almost make me weep. I had a phone call one day from a young man in a distant city. In his early youth he had been highly excitable and easily led. He soon found himself in serious trouble, behind prison bars before he was 21. But there he found Christ and made a new beginning. Later he was accepted into college, became active in a church. He began to read his Bible and feel the pull of new aspirations. But one day he decided to throw it all over and quit. When he called me, it was from the bedlam of a bar. Back to the booze, back to the heroin. "I guess," he said, "I'll just be a bum."

And he's only one. I know another man who was once a gifted, dedicated evangelist, but who now lampoons the gospel he once proclaimed. I think of still another whose faith was strong, whose witness was bright, but who wanders today in a wilderness of half-belief because he went back on his life commitment. The admonitions of his friends, even the pleas of his wife and children, couldn't dissuade him from a course that brought suffering to all concerned. Like many a prodigal son, he wandered from his true home.

But James mentions this kind of sad story, not to dwell upon its tragedy but to move his readers to respond. He says in effect, "Listen, these are my last words to you. If you forget everything else I've said, please remember this: there's something you can do about those who turn from God and stray from His path. In the power of the Lord, you can bring them back!" How important it is to believe that, to cling to the conviction that restoration is possible! If we think that backslidden brothers and sisters are hopeless, that their apostasy is final, we'll simply leave them alone. Despair cuts the vital nerve of our efforts to help them. And when we give up on people, they know it. If we see them as incorrigible, irreclaimably bad, we will lose our chance to reach them. I read one day of

how vital it is in psychotherapy for the psychotherapist not only to believe that his patient can recover but to communicate that belief. In a similar way, the true helpers of the erring and the fallen are those who cherish the hope that such people can change.

But can any one of us really bring another human being back to God? Doesn't that take a divine miracle? Isn't it the Spirit of God alone who can change the heart? Doesn't salvation from beginning to end belong to the Lord? Yes, surely, all that is true. And yet James speaks here as though we can perform this reclaiming ministry for each other. "If any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul." The commission which Paul the apostle received from the risen Christ contained similar language. "I sent you to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (see Acts 26:17-18). *He* opens their eyes. This is the profound mystery of our witness. We are frail, ordinary people and we speak our limited human words, yet through us the living Christ is pleased to speak and act!

How does it usually happen that people who have wandered away are brought back? Does it require an expert in the Bible to straighten out their confused thinking and show them where they are in error? That may be involved, but when people turn away from Christ, the heart of the problem is usually moral rather than intellectual. Our theological problems are often a smoke screen for the fact that we are unwilling to obey. People who have believed the truth and then turned away from it do not need first and most of all to hear that truth repeated. It may be that in their hearts they still know it to be true. But whenever we adopt a lifestyle radically different from the Christian way, we quickly lose our hold on revealed truth and become vulnerable to all kinds of falsehood. And we aren't usually freed from such errors by arguments and reasoning alone.

James has already suggested in this passage a powerful means of help to the estranged: "Pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects." He goes on to tell how the prayers of one man, Elijah, led to a long drought in Israel and how the prayers of the same man later brought rain. When we pray, of course, for changes in the weather, we are hardly in the position of Elijah, because we lack his prophetic insight into God's purpose for the land. But when we pray for those who have wandered away, we stand where he stood. We know God's mind and will in the matter. We can be assured



that He wants to bring His banished ones back home, that He welcomes back wanderers. And so we plead with strong confidence, as Elijah also did, that the hearts of God's people will be turned back to Him.

In the congregation I used to serve in Chicago, it was our practice each Saturday morning to meet as a group of men to pray for the life and ministry of our church. We kept a list before us of church members who had become inactive, who had left their first love or wandered in some way from their faith. The primary focus of that prayer meeting was on the restoration of these erring brothers and sisters. Sometimes we combined our prayers with visits, letters, and expressions of personal concern. But prayer was the constant factor. How deeply satisfying it was as the months passed to see one after another of these people returning to the Lord. Week by week, we checked off the names. God graciously heard our prayers!

But James also reminds us that those pray best who live best. "The prayers of a *righteous man* have great power in their effects." All our prayers and efforts to win back wanderers will either be reinforced or undercut by the lives we live. Genuine godliness both shames and attracts those who are living in rebellion against God. Real devotion to God awakens and fascinates, disturbs and draws. Peter writes in one of his letters of how the steady Christian living of a wife can sometimes lead her husband to repentance, even though she may never talk to him about his sin and need. Most significant in our witness is the power of persistent, accepting love. Knowing that there are Christians who care about them, who sustain interest in them, who would do anything in the world to help them, has an unspeakably powerful effect in leading back those who have drifted away from Christ.

Now notice what happens when people do return. James writes, "whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." Think of that! The saddest of stories can have the happiest of endings. Prodigals can be welcomed back! Wanderers can return! And as they come back, they can be saved from the way of death. Their sins, however many, can be blotted out. It's evident here that what's involved is a wholehearted turning to the Lord in which people once again take Christ as the road to the Father and experience pardon through faith in His saving work. All true returning to God is by way of the cross. And for wayward people to repent and believe the gospel is the most joyous event in the universe. It's what sets all

heaven singing.

Now the big question for us is: Do we share deeply, both in the sadness and in the joy? Are our hearts broken when people depart from the Lord and are they filled with gladness when they come back? James proposes no motive here for seeking the lost except the great blessing that will come to them when they are found. He counts on it that he's writing to people who have so known Christ that they begin to share His concerns. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the people were rebellious and would not respond to His overtures of love. And he's glad with joy unspeakable when one sinner repents. What we see in Jesus reveals to us the heart of God. Do our hearts beat with His?

Oh, dear friends, there's something fatally wrong with us if we have no strong desire to bring sinners back to God and if we do not feel the deepest happiness when they return! We can scarcely be Christ's disciples at all unless we have His attitude about this. Perhaps your apathy today exposes you as one of those who are yet estranged, who have still not tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Let me urge you this day to repent and believe in Christ, to turn to Him with all your heart, to renounce every sin, everything you know to be displeasing to God, and commit your life completely to the Savior. And if you do know Him, then adopt His priorities. Remember that the Lord's great purpose in coming from heaven to earth was to seek and to save the lost. Go and do likewise!

### **Study Questions**

1. What should we conclude about the spiritual condition of those who once followed Christ but now have turned away?
2. In what sense can Christians "bring back" the erring?
3. How does this usually happen?
4. In the light of this passage and of Luke's gospel, chapter 15, what attitude toward the reclaiming of sinners is appropriate for a Christian?