

# Sermons on James-Robert Morgan

**Introduction** - Robert J Morgan is the teaching pastor at [Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee](#) and is well known for expository messages that are rich in excellent illustrations of Biblical principles. These sermons are older messages preached on various passages in Romans.

## THREE DIMENSIONS OF FAITH

### James 1 & 2

Today we're beginning a series of sermons entitled "365," daily obedience based on the New Testament book of James. Every single day this year is a day in which our faith should be exhibited by the way we live and by the obedience we have to the Word of God and particularly to the book of James, which is one of the most practical books of the Bible. It is the New Testament version of the Old Testament book of Proverbs. It is made up of pithy sayings, commands, imperatives, and words of practical wisdom. Some people liken it to the Sermon on the Mount. The theme of James is that faith wears work clothes. Faith wears work gloves. Faith is very active. The faith that James is talking about is the kind of faith that operates where the rubber meets the road and where the water meets the wheel. It is a very practical kind of faith.

This little book of five chapters has had a couple of strikes against it in Christian history. First of all, the book of James was slow to be accepted by the early church as Scripture. The process of coming up with the twenty-seven books of the New Testament didn't happen all at once, and it certainly didn't happen like some people have claimed it did at the Council of Nicea in the early fourth century. It was a prolonged process during which the church gradually came to recognize that certain books had divine authority, primarily those written by an apostle or by someone very close to an apostle. So within the first years of the Christian era, these books began to be compiled and everybody recognized they were New Testament books. James was one of the last of those books to be accepted and there was some dispute about it for a while.

We don't have time to get into that, but over a thousand years later, there was another strike against James by our old friend, the reformer Martin Luther. Luther didn't care much for the book of James. He grew up in a world, in Europe, during the period when the great teaching of the clergymen was that we are saved and redeemed on the basis of a number of things that we must do. We have to keep these rituals. We have to keep these regulations. We have to live in a particular way. We have to fulfill these sacraments, then there is a good possibility we'll go to heaven. Or at least we'll go to purgatory and eventually on to heaven.

Luther said that if ever there was a monk who tried through sheer monkishness to make it to heaven, it would have been him. But there was nothing that he could do, no matter how hard he tried, to expunge the sin that he felt in his heart and to be reconciled to God; so he went into a great period of perplexity and depression. That is when he discovered the book of Romans.

I want to show you some verses that Luther found in Romans. The theme of the book is in Romans 1:16-17: "I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith."

When Luther read that, the light came on and he understood he could never be declared righteous in God's sight by trying to perform tasks. Christ had already done all that was required, and Luther was declared righteous in God's sight by faith in the finished work of Christ.

Look at Romans 3:21: "No one can be declared righteous by observing the law, but now a righteousness from God apart from law and apart from the works, has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood."

There you have the gospel. We can never be declared righteous in our own eyes by anything that we can do, but God himself became a man and offered himself as the sinless sacrifice. We can be declared righteous only on the basis of grace through faith.

Now in Chapter 4 he's going to say the great example of this is Abraham in the Old Testament. All of the way back at the beginning of the Jewish nation, this is the pattern. Abraham was saved by grace through faith. This isn't some new doctrine. This is the way it has always been. "What shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter. If in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about but not before God. What does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness."

That's what Luther discovered and it changed his life. It changed all of Christian history. "For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not by works. Not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8).

Luther was full of this. This was his message. This was his clarion cry. This is what he shouted all across Germany. This is the message that changed all of the world of his day. Then when he got over to James, this is what he read. Look at James 2:20: "You foolish man. Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor, Abraham, considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did. The scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteous' and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone."

Do you see that? Abraham, Paul said, is the evidence that someone is justified not by works but by faith and James says Abraham is evidence that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Luther just couldn't understand how James could say that in the light of the great soul-transforming truth he had discovered in the Pauline letters. Now we know, looking at it from our perspective, that the two statements appear to be contradictory on the surface but actually are not. In the context, we see that Paul and James are coming at things from different aspects and looking at the same subject from two different ways and complimenting one another's message. We'll look at that more carefully when we come to James 2:20 in our studies, but to Luther it was just astounding.

In the 1500's when Martin Luther translated the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into the German language, he took James out of the Bible, along with three other New Testament books that he was not too happy with. He put them in the back of his Bible as a special supplement or appendix and did not list those four books in the Table of Contents of the German Bible. He just took James right out.

A little later when John Wycliffe began translating the Bible into English, he followed Luther's example. Then William Tyndale, the great writer and translator of the English Bible who gave up his life because he was translating the Bible into English, did the same thing when preparing his translation. So in the German Bible of Luther's day and in our earliest English translations, James was omitted from the Bible and put in the back as sort of an appendix and not listed in the Table of Contents. It wasn't until the great Bible in the 1500's, the forerunner and precursor to the King James' Bible, that the translators took the book of James and put it back where it belongs.

Well, I love the Book of James. I am so glad it's in the Bible. I don't know why anybody wouldn't appreciate it. There are some odd things about it and those are explainable. He does approach things differently than Paul, but not in a way that provides contradiction. Paul and James compliment one another. If you don't have James you cannot understand fully what Paul is trying to say.

The great theme of James is the: The kind of faith that saves us, the kind of faith that really transforms us, has got to be the kind of faith that exists in three different dimensions. James believes in three-dimensional faith.

**We Need an Intellectual Faith**

First, we need an intellectual faith. Faith it is not anti-intellectual, it is not anti-academic. Genuine faith corresponds to what is true.

Faith is not believing in something despite the evidence, it is believing in something reasonably and logically because of the evidence.

Look at chapter 2 of James and I'll give you an example. He says in verse 18, "But someone will say you have faith, I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God, good. Even the devils, the demons believe that and shudder."

If all you have is intellectual faith, even the demons themselves have that kind of faith. In their minds they know there is a God. They believe in God. They shudder about it.

At the very end of the book in chapter five, he says in verse 19: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth then someone should bring them back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins." He's talking about wandering from the truth. Faith is when our thinking corresponds to what genuinely is true.

Biblical faith is looking at the evidence and saying, "Hey, this is logical, this is reasonable." This is why we are creationists and believe there is a Creator despite what people have said for 100 years in so many of the school classrooms.

I want to read you a little article that I pulled out of a magazine on diabetes that I read while waiting at the pharmacy the other day. The title was: "Down the Hatch: How Food Turns to Fuel." I'm just going to read a little bit of it to you because to me it was just so interesting. The author here, Merrill David Landow says:

"Since nutrition, food, and digestion are such a big part of diabetes management, we thought you might like to understand just what happens when you take a bite. Digestion starts in the mouth where enzymes secreted by the salivary glands begin the process of breaking down complex sugars and starches into simple sugars. The grinding action of chewing is also important because it softens and smoothes those pieces of filet mignon and sautéed broccoli into a pulpy mixture that the stomach can more readily accept.

This mixture travels from the mouth to the stomach via a 10" long tube known as the esophagus. At the bottom of the esophagus a ring like valve relaxes with every swallow to let the food through and then tightens again. It is in the stomach that the process of digestion starts to swing into high gear. Here, enzymes and digestive juices further mash the mixture as does the rhythmic contraction of the stomach itself. After two or more hours in this digestive furnace, food becomes a blended thick liquid known as chyme.

Another ring at the stomach's bottom opens periodically to move the chyme down into the smaller intestine. The small intestine is

where your body actually absorbs the nutrients from your food. Propelled by a succession of muscle contractions, the chyme moves through the small intestine as additional enzymes supplied by the pancreas, gall bladder, and liver further break it down into the tinier molecules that our cells desire such as peptides, amino acids, glycerol and vitamins.

These substances are taken into the body via finger-like tissue called villi which project from the myriad folds of the small intestine's lining, which are the folds which increase the surface area if you are absorbing the nutrients. Some parts of the intestinal walls are highly specialized. For example, vitamin B-12 is taken up in only one corner of the intestine, iron in another, and these nutrients are then transported to the cells around the body by the blood and lymphatic systems. Any remaining undigested chyme passes into the large intestine, the colon, where additional useful substances, primarily water and salt, are absorbed. After that the rest is pushed through the colon by peristalsis until it reaches the end and is eliminated.

Given its complexity and vastness--spread out the surface area of the small intestine alone would cover a tennis court--the digestive system is a marvel.

That's just talking about one little part of me and of you that we can't see. It's right here on the inside of us. How intricately and perfectly designed it is, like a marvelous machine. That's not talking about the circulatory system or the nervous system or the complexity of that. That is just this little system that takes the food in and turns it into energy. The theory of evolution says that no one using nothing created a large explosion in which everything appeared in all of its complexity. That's harder to believe than that there is a Creator, and there are increasing numbers of scientists that say that as well.

There was an article just the other day about a scientist at MIT named Dr. Rosalyn Pecard who is the Director of Effective Computing Research at the media lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. She said that to say you can't be a thinking, intellectual, fulfilled scientist and embrace faith, is bunk. Her area of scientific expertise is computer. In the article, Dr. Pecard says: "Human faces can make 10,000 different expressions in the course of a ten minute conversation. A person's face makes between 300 and 400 different faces easily. No computer, no matter how advanced, can be that responsive or can do anything like that." She said that some scientists assume that nothing exists beyond what they can measure but she says, "There is something more." Pecard says she personally has faith in scientific progress but also faith in God. She was raised an atheist, she says, but someone challenged her to read the Bible as a young adult. She said, "I thought, okay, if I'm going to be a well educated atheist I should at least read this book that I think is bogus." She started reading a Proverb a day and worked her way through the entire Bible several times. "I started to have a very big change of heart," she said. "It was a slow process." But now, when she talks about DNA, which is the basic ingredient that forms organisms, Pecard raises the notion of there being a much greater mind, a much greater scientist, and a much greater engineer behind who we are. "It is enormously complex, this DNA", she says. "It takes a lot of faith to believe that it arose from purely random processes. There is definitely a mark of intervention and invention in that."

This is intellectual belief. It is believing there is a God, there is Christ, He lived, He died, and He rose again! The Bible is true. These things are factual. These things are corresponding to the truth. That's faith. That is the intellectual dimension of faith. It is necessary, we've got to have it, but if that is all you have, if that is as far as your faith goes, it doesn't do you any good because even the devils believe like that...and shudder.

#### We Need an Internal Faith

This second dimension of faith is the internalization of faith. It is internal faith, interior faith. It is when you say, "I'm going to not only believe this in my mind, I'm going to receive it in my heart and I'm going to derive peace and joy and hope and excitement and enthusiasm in my life because of this faith." This is what James is talking about in chapter 1: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."

James is saying, "When you have problems of diverse kinds, different kinds of disappointments or struggles in life, well, if you have faith, if you know in your mind that God created the universe, that Christ died and rose again for you, you know the contents of this book are true, and you personalize it and it is real to you, then that is going to help you through those difficult times. In fact, you can face these different trials with a sense of joy. You can reckon it joy, you can count it all joy. You can consider it joyful because it is an opportunity for God to work in your life through adversity to help you get to know Him better and to find more of His promises and to claim them more thoroughly in your own experience." That's "interior" faith. It gives us piety, it gives us peace, it gives us hope and joy and the very things that we need to be emotionally healthy in life.

I had a man who called me this week very disturbed because of some bad news that appeared to be coming. We talked for a while and he said that he was just so worried and anxious. He said, "I'm just cleaning out my carport to stay busy." I said, "It's important to stay busy. That is one of the best antidotes for worry. Just stay busy and stay working. But why don't you also find some verse of scripture that speaks to your need, and while you're working on that carport just memorize that verse as well." I told him a verse that I am memorizing now, 1 Chronicles 28:20. While that wouldn't necessarily be the one right for him, I suggested that he find a verse and memorize that verse and just focus on that verse.

There's something about discovering the promises of God, which you believe in your mind, but then getting them into your heart and meditating on them day and night that gives you perseverance. Perseverance is the ability to keep on going with a reasonably joyful attitude, even in difficult times. That is interior peace. That's interior faith. You have to have that. But, if that is all you have that is not enough. That is an incomplete faith. That is a faith that is not consummated or resolved in your own life. It's just dangling out there.

## We Need Incarnational Faith

There is another dimension of faith. Genuine is incarnational. Incarnational is a word that means to become flesh. Carne is the word for flesh, carnal. Incarnational means that your faith becomes flesh and you begin to live it out. It affects the way you live and it results in obedience. It results in helping people and it results in having a different attitude towards life. It manifests itself in tithing and it manifests itself in generosity; and because you have faith, you're kinder to people and you do good works and do good deeds and people recognize that you're a Christian. You can see it on the outside because they are living out their faith every day. Their faith is wearing work clothes and their faith has on gloves. That is the kind of faith here that James is concerned about.

Let me show you. Turn to James 1:22: "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." So, faith is looking into the word of God and doing what it says, living in obedience.

Look at verse 26. "If anyone considers himself religious, if anyone says he has faith and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts is pure and faultless as this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Verse 1 of the second chapter: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism, don't be prejudice, don't be biased."

Look at Chapter 2, verse 14: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds. Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food and if one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" In the same way, faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead."

This is incarnational faith. It's when we wear our faith everyday, wherever we are, in the way that we live, in the way that we treat people, and the kindness that we have and the generosity of our hearts and the purity of our lives and our sensitivity to the needs of other people.

Look at chapter 3, verse 13: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

In chapter 4, verse 17, "Anyone then who knows the good that he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

So, the theme of this book of James, it that it is not enough to have intellectual faith. It is not even enough to have intellectual and internal faith. We have got to have intellectual, internal and incarnational faith, the kind of faith that shows up every single day in the way we befriend other people and the way we keep our life pure and the way we're generous and the way we love people and the way in which we live, the attitudes we have at home, the way we manage our tongue, the way we manage our anger, the way we treat people, the way that we notice when someone has a need.

## Conclusion

There are two things that we can devote the year to.

First, we need to find people and befriend them. Just find somebody every day that you can befriend in some simple little way.

Maybe let someone have your parking space. Maybe help someone out if they are having a problem, maybe a neighbor, maybe a friend, maybe just 10 minutes talking to a youngster when you really don't have time, maybe turning off the TV and focusing on someone. Just find different ways of befriending people. This is Christianity in action. Jesus said, "if you give a cup of cool water in My name you do it as unto Me."

There was an article in yesterday's Tennessean about a man down at the Rescue Mission who was saved from a life on the streets recently, and now every night when it is frigid and the temperature drops into the single digits, while you and I are warm under our blankets, he's going in his van up and down the streets of Nashville looking for anyone who appears to be homeless out in the cold and getting them in to a place where it is warm and getting them some food and befriending them.

That is Christianity in action. That is faith in action and that is the kind of faith that James is talking about here. Find someone. We need to do this as a church but we need to do it as individuals, so find someone this year to befriend and befriend them.

Secondly, find someone to evangelize, then evangelize them. This needs to be the year of evangelism. I'm praying for more baptisms and more conversions than we have ever seen before. You, all of you, even more than me, are out there every day where there are unsaved people around you - at work and at school and the community. We all need to do what Paul told Timothy, do the work of an evangelist.

I read yesterday in Voice of the Martyrs about a church in Java of 700 members, and the Muslims came led by one fanatical imam who was determined to shut down that church. He organized a mob and on Sunday morning they showed up, nailed the doors closed and not letting anyone in the church. It was a highly Islamic community, and the Christians there, when they came to worship, suddenly found themselves in great danger. But very bravely, every Sunday, the church would still gather outside of its building and sing and worship. This imam was the Mosque leader, and he showed up with his mob every Sunday until finally there was one old woman in the congregation who is particularly vocal with her singing and her preaching and with her praying. The Muslim Imam pulled out his machete and stuck it in front of her throat and said, "You be quiet."

She looked up to heaven and said; "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." The man dropped his machete. He had never heard anything like that before. Those words haunted him, and the next Friday at his mosque when he got up on the platform to begin his Islamic sermon, out of his mouth came the words, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation."

He couldn't believe that he said it. It just came out of his mouth. The people in the mosque stormed him and beat him and he had to

flee with his family a thousand miles away to another island in the Indonesian archipelago. He is there now and he says, “I’m serving the Lord and it’s all because of one woman with a machete at her neck who spoke words for Christ that I never expected to hear.”

We don’t have a machete to our necks, but can’t we speak some words? Can’t we say some things and invite people to church and tell them what Jesus has done for us and make this the year of evangelism?

The book of James says, “You’ve got to have faith. We are saved by grace through faith alone.” But the kind of faith that saves is intellectual and internal and incarnational. It is the kind of faith that finds someone who needs a friend and befriends them. It finds someone that needs salvation and wins them. That is what I desire for us, for our church, for this year.

## COUNT IT ALL JOY

### James 1:1-5

For the last year or two, I’ve preached quite a bit about dealing with the pressures and problems of life, about faith, about trusting the Lord. As a matter of fact, we recently finished a series of sermons from the book of Job on that very subject. I know that in my own life and in the life of those with whom I counsel, there’s a great need for encouragement and for a message of faith. Someone wrote a book entitled, “In Every Pew There Sits a Broken Heart.” That phrase is based, I believe, on an old quote from the great British pastor of yesteryear, Dr. Joseph Parker; and I try to keep that in mind when I’m preparing my sermons.

But not long ago I thought to myself, “I’ve been preaching about this too much; I need to preach on the commandments, on moral behavior, on sin, on how we should live, on practical matters of everyday obedience.” So I decided to begin 2008 with a series of sermons from the book of James on practical obedience 365 days a year, because James is arguably the most practical book in the New Testament on ethics and moral behavior.

But I had forgotten how the book begins. So even though I’ve known this passage for years, somehow it came as a shock to me when I started reading this book of James, which deals with all kinds of ethical and behavioral issues, and the first thing out of his mouth was: “Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you fall into various trials, because these have come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.” The starting point is always faith, the life of faith, the victory of faith.

So let’s begin our study of the text of the book of James by reading this passage, the first paragraph of James, and then I want to show you today the five methodologies he gives for dealing with the hard times that come into our lives:

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. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given 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 1:1-8).

I’ve loved this passage since I was in college, but as I studied it afresh in preparation for this message, I saw it in simpler terms than I’ve ever noticed before. It seems to me that James is clearly giving us five methodologies for dealing with stress and strain and pressures and problems.

#### 1. Turn Yourself Over to the Lord Jesus Christ

My brothers and sisters

Verse 2

One of the most important words here is brothers. It’s a word that James uses over and over in his epistle – about 19 times – far more than the apostle Paul did in his letters. For example, here in chapter 1 he says:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers.... The brother in humble circumstances... Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers... My dear brothers, take note of this...

And as James begins chapter 2, he defines what he means by brothers: My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism....

The Greek word adelphoi means brothers and sisters, and it refers to his fellow believers, to those who have come to the saving knowledge of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. The advice James is giving here is applicable only to Christians. It doesn't work for non-Christians. It's isn't applicable to them. They have no access to this grace, which is found only in Christ. You can't give your problems to Christ until you've given yourself to Him. One of our greatest desires this year is to lead more people to Christ and to see more people come to the saving knowledge of Christ and to become a part of his family. Maybe you. Maybe today.

## 2. Reason Your Way Into a Different Mindset

Consider it Pure Joy...

Verse 2

Second, if you are a Christian, you have the prerogative and the privilege of reasoning your way into a different mindset about the burdens of life. Verse 2 says, Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds....

The old translations said, "Count it all joy." The word count or consider is a Greek word that means to think something through, to consider something mentally, to look at something from a different mindset. The actual Greek term, γέομαι hēgéomai, means to make a decision about something after weighing all the facts and circumstances. That's why the NIV uses the word "consider" instead of the old King James word "count."

This doesn't mean that Christians jump for joy in the face of tragedy. It means that when we have a series of reversals or difficulties, our first emotions and reactions will be hard, but we have divine resources and divine help and divine promises and a divine presence, and therefore we can think it through and work it out in our minds. And in so doing we'll come to a different conclusion about our problems than a non-Christian would.

I remember hearing my wife talk about this once in regard to her mother, Hilja. My mother-in-law was a wonderful Christian woman who dearly loved the Lord and was ever so faithful to her little village church in West Paris, Maine. She raised seven children, and on one occasion she was confronted with terrible news about one of them. It was like a blow in the stomach. But as Katrina remembers it, her mother took off her apron, walked out the door, and walked and walked and walked, thinking it through, praying about it, giving it to the Lord, and when she returned she was composed and able to deal with things.

Some years ago, something similar happened to me. I was confronted with a very difficult situation and I didn't know what to do. Lives were at stake, and I needed to make a wise decision, and my heart was very heavy. I went out to a state park and stayed for two days, just pouring over my Bible and taking long walks, and praying about it and trying to get the mind of Christ; and when I came back I knew what I should do about the situation.

The writer of Psalm 73 did this. He was very cast down in his mind and in his heart, very disturbed, and he goes on in verse after verse about his pain and perplexity; then he comes to verse 17 and there's a breakthrough. He said, in effect, "I went into the sanctuary, I altered my thinking, I begin to see things from God's perspective, and I understood."

Let me put it this way. Last year I checked into a motel in Tulsa, and my room was an icebox. The air conditioner is one of those under-the-window units, and no matter how I adjusted the setting, it still blew out cold air. I didn't want maintenance staff tromping through my room, so I just endured it, but I just about froze to death. I fiddled with the controls on the air conditioner a dozen times every day, but it was still cold as an icebox in my room. Finally the time came for me to leave, and I packed up the room. As I was walking out the door, I noticed another thermostat, this one on the wall, set in the low 60's. Out of curiosity (and feeling like an idiot) I adjusted it, and the air-conditioner responded immediately. Evidently when the room was updated, the controls were switched.

Our emotions are like that. They blow hot and cold, unresponsive to our efforts to adjust them. Sometimes when I'm angry, depressed, or anxious I try to adjust my mood, but it doesn't cooperate. The real thermostat is my brain, and the best way to adjust my emotions is by adjusting my thoughts. If I can start thinking differently, my feelings respond. That's why the Bible puts so much emphasis on our minds, and the first thing James says to us is Consider, Count, Reckon, Think it through in the light of God's Word, begin to see it from God's perspective, count it all joy when you fall into various trials and problems.

## 3. See Your Trials in Terms of God's Chain Reaction

...the testing of your faith develops perseverance

Verses 3-4

You say, "Well, how do I do that? What do I think about? In what direction should my mind go?" That leads to the third step in this process: See your trials in terms of God's chain reaction. Look at the passage again:

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.

In 1954, President Eisenhower, responding to a reporter's question about Indochina, said, "You have... what you would call the 'falling domino' principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences." This became known as the famous "Domino Theory" that led to the Vietnam War. Historians still debate the merits of the Domino Theory, but the Bible has a Domino Theory of its own—except that it's no theory. The trial becomes a test that produces perseverance which leads to maturity.

First of all, we have the trial, which is the testing of our faith. I'm just as sure that this happens to us as I'm sure that I'm standing here right now. In the Gospels, do you remember how Jesus would spend the day teaching the disciples something; and then he would have them get into the boat and they would sail into a storm and go into sheer panic. And Jesus would quiet the storm and then ask the disciples why had they not learned anything from His teaching. The storm was His way of testing their faith.

I have had times in my life in which I faced a crisis—or what I perceived to be a crisis—and I know the Lord was using it to test my faith and to see if I would really trust Him or not, and so many times I failed the test.

The trial is a test.

What trial are you facing right now? What problem are you having? Don't think of it as a problem, but as a test. God is watching to see if you're going to trust Him.

And what comes out of it? Perseverance: You know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance is the ability to keep right on going with joy in our hearts despite apparent setbacks and disappointments, and this seems to be a quality that the Lord values almost beyond all else. There is another passage in the Bible that teaches exactly this same thing. Look at what the apostle Paul said in Romans 5: Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance....

Notice the same sequence... Sufferings... joy... perseverance....

Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.

From our perspective, stress and strain and problems and pain are those things that mar our lives; but from God's perspective, those are the things that develop our faith and our perseverance and make us people of maturity. James said: Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

There was a famous Salvation Army evangelist of yesteryear named Samuel Logan Brengle. When he became old, he faced many physical problems including encroaching blindness. But his attitude never faltered. Writing to a friend, he said, "My old eyes get dimmer. The specialist says the light will fade altogether. So I gird myself for darkness, quote James 1:2 to 4, shout Hallelujah and go on!" (Quoted in Samuel Logan Brengle: Portrait of a Prophet by Clarence W. Hall (Atlanta: The Salvation Army Supplies and Purchasing Dept., 1933), p. 247.)

That's perseverance. That's maturity. Trials become tests that develop perseverance and maturity. That is God's pattern for every one of His children, including you and me. So here are James' steps: (1) Give your heart to Jesus Christ; (2) think through your problems in the light of His grace; (3) recognize that every problem creates a chain reaction designed to deepen and mature you. And (4) ask God for wisdom.

#### 4. Ask God for Wisdom

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God

Verse 5

Now, we all need wisdom in many ways. We were just talking about that Thursday night in the deacon's meeting. The deacons of this church are an underappreciated lot. We gather month by month by month, year after year, and we bear the burden of the

church. What should we do about this and about that? And when we gathered this past week, we talked through a problem, and we didn't know what to do; so we said that we would ask God for wisdom. We would take the whole month and just ask God for wisdom. Do you know that I have learned that when I take my time and pray through a matter and ask God for wisdom and think it through in His presence, I almost never make a bad decision? But if I skip one of those steps, I usually live to regret it. We need to ask God for wisdom, but the context here is specific. We need to ask God for the wisdom to see our trials and tribulations and problems and pressures from His perspective. Lord, help me to see this situation as You do. Help me to understand this trouble as You see it. Give me the wisdom to react to it as You would.

#### 5. Trust Him to Grant Your Request and to Meet Your Need

But let Him ask in Faith

Verses 6-7

The fifth and final step, then, is to expect and fully trust the Lord to answer your prayer and to give you the necessary wisdom. Look at verses 6-7: 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.

Now, faith is always a very important commodity, but this is talking about something specific. When you are facing a trial and a trouble, count it all joy because you know that God is testing your faith and setting up a chain reaction whereby you are going to grow increasingly into His image. So ask God to show you how to respond and how to react, and don't doubt that He will do it. He will certainly give you the wisdom to find His will, respond to His promises, and react to that problem in a way that pleases Him.

## HUMBLE CIRCUMSTANCES

### James 1:9-11

The newspapers in Canada are full of stories this week about a sensational trial taking place in Toronto. Several years ago, a woman won \$5 million in the lottery, but she subsequently kept her financial dealings so secretive that not even her husband knew what she was doing with her money, or what she was doing with his money (because she controlled the family finances). He was a medical doctor and made a good living, so the two of them together were quite wealthy, or so he thought. Now, according to the newspapers, he is alleged to have injected her with a deadly cocktail of drugs and killed her. But after her death, he discovered that the cash was gone, the winnings were gone, his savings were gone, the bills are enormous, and no one knows what happened to the family's money. He is on trial for murder at the age of 71, and the family had to borrow money to pay for the woman's funeral. (Compiled from various media reports.)

Well, money does bizarre things to people. Money turns people into strange creatures. It's a big part of everybody's life, and it's a big part of everyday life. And things both wonderful and terrible happen every day because of the way money is managed or mismanaged.

The world says that we have to have the right philosophy about money. For example, consider the philosophy of the great American thinker, Henry David Thoreau. His most famous book was the one about Walden Pond, in which he has a great deal to say on this subject. In fact, the first chapter is titled "Economy." You don't have to read very far in Walden to know that rich people didn't impress Thoreau. He believed the happiest life was the simplest life. He said that all of us should live so simply that if an enemy should appear at the outskirts of our city, we could walk out of the gate empty-handed and without anxiety. He scoffed at people who went to estate sales to buy things from dead people, only to dust them for a few years and have them end up in their own estate sales. A little cabin in the woods and a good fire was enough for Thoreau. But of course, the prevailing philosophy of the world today is just the opposite. The prevailing philosophy is that money is the key to happiness, and the more of it we have, the happier we'll be.

Well, I'm not an advocate for any particular philosophy of money or materialism. The world gives us philosophies, but the Bible gives us theologies. We need the right theology on this. The word "theology" comes from the Greek term Theos, or God, coupled with the word logos, which means word or thought or logic. Theos + Logos = Theology. Theos = God, + Logos = Logic. Theology is God's logic. Philosophy is human logic, but we need God's logic when it comes to money and goods and things and materialism.

In the Bible, God reveals His thoughts and His ways and His logic. And when it comes to money and money-management, the Bible is remarkably consistent in what it says. And that's what I'd like to talk about today. Currently on Sunday mornings here at , we're

working our way through the book of James, chapter 1 and 2, in a series of sermons entitled 365, on the subject of daily obedience, and today we're coming to a little paragraph on the subject of money and materialism—James 1:9-11:

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his labor (James 1:9-11).

Now, James addresses the subject of poverty and wealth several times in his book. He comes back to it again and again, but this is his starting point. He has something to say to two different groups in the church. He has something to say to Christians who are having a hard time making ends meet, and he has something to say to Christians who are relatively well-off. So since James makes two points in this passage, those are the two points of my message today.

#### Poor Believers Should Be Aware of their True Wealth

##### Verse 9

First, believers in humble circumstances should be aware of their true wealth. Let's look at the actual words James uses here in verse 9. We know that he's talking to Christians by his use of the word brothers. The Greek term adelphoi, literally means "brothers and sisters," and it refers to Christians. So James is saying, "The brother or sister in humble circumstances," and I think that's a very good translation. The Greek word means humble, but in this context the emphasis seems to be on humble circumstances, because this person is being contrasted with the rich person in the next verse.

James says that if you're struggling financially and if you don't have a lot of money and if you're not very rich, you should rejoice and be glad and become more aware of your high position.

What does he mean by that? Well, there is one commentary on this verse that is better than anything else you can find. The very best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself, and the best commentary on James 1:9 is found in James 2:5. Look at this verse in the next chapter: Listen, my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be RICH IN faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised to those who love Him?

The two words I want you to notice are: RICH IN....

There's more than one way to be rich. We can be RICH IN money and houses and land. But how much better to be RICH IN other ways. We can be RICH IN faith.

Turn over to a parallel passage in Paul's writings, to 1 Timothy 6. Look at verse 6ff: But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction...Command those who are RICH IN this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be RICH IN good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age....

In Luke 12, Jesus told a parable about the rich fool who built larger and larger barns and accumulated more and more wealth, but suddenly he died and faced the judgment. The passage ends with these words: Jesus concluded, "This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not RICH IN God's sight" (Luke 12:21, GNT).

1 Corinthians 1:4-5 (HCSB): I always thank my God for you because of God's grace given to you in Christ Jesus that by Him you were made RICH IN everything—in all speaking and all knowledge.

2 Corinthians 8:7 (NCV): You are RICH IN everything—in faith, in speaking, in knowledge, in truly wanting to help, and in the love you learned from us.

2 Corinthians 9:11: You will be made RICH IN every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.

So if you're a Christian and you don't think you're very rich, you're not cognizant of the Bible's valuation of your assets. The Bible says that in Christ we are...

RICH IN...

- Good deeds
- God's sight
- Knowledge—what we know
- Speech—what we have to say
- Faith
- Every way

How rich I am since Jesus came my way,  
Redeemed my life and turned my night to day,  
How very rich, how very rich I am!

And, in addition to being rich in faith now, we have an eternal inheritance ahead of us. James 2:5 says: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to inherit the kingdom He promised to those who love Him?

#### Rich Believers Should be Aware of their Transitory Lives

Verses 10-11

So the first principle in this text in James 1 is that believers in humble circumstances should be aware of their true wealth in Christ. That's verse 9, but in the next two verses, James tells us that rich believers should be aware of their transitory lives: But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

I read about a man who was dying and he was quite wealthy. On his deathbed, he told his wife that he wanted to be buried with his money, and he made her promise that she would put a million dollars in the casket with him. And then he died, and at the funeral she took a large envelope and slipped it into the casket just before the lid was sealed. Afterward, her friends said to her, "Did you really put a million dollars in the casket with him?" And she said, "Yes, I always keep my word and I promised I would do it.... I wrote a check!"

Well, we're not going to cash any checks when we die. We're not going to make any deposits. We're not going to need one thin dime. And our lives are so uncertain. In chapter 5, James is going to warn rich people that their lives are nothing more than a vapor that is here for a moment and then vanishes.

A couple of years ago, I read about a man near Indianapolis who won the lottery. He won thousands and thousands of dollars, and that very night as he was walking to the grocery store near his home where he had bought the winning ticket, he was hit by a car and killed. He never received or enjoyed one dime. ("Lottery Winner Dies in Accident Hours After Show," an AP story at [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) on January 24, 2004.)

Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart." Paul said, "We brought nothing into this life, and it is certain we can take nothing out of it." So we shouldn't become too enamored with the things of this world. Well-to-do Christians should boast in the fact that they aren't going to be here very long to enjoy their wealth. So we should use it and invest it and give it as faithful stewards who will have to give an account to God.

Some time ago when Jonathan and Teresa Snow were in Japan, I had the pleasure of visiting them; and one day we visited some missionary friends of theirs. The missionary wife said, "My father has written a book about his experiences as a missionary in Vietnam." Well, that perked up my interest, and upon returning to the States, I found a copy of that book. It's entitled *Servant on the Edge of History* by missionary Sam James. Near the beginning of the book, he told about his commissioning service. Sam was about to take his family into a dangerous part of the world under the auspices of the Southern Baptist Board of International Missions, and the Executive Secretary of that Board gave the message. He said, "You are going to Vietnam. Things are not looking good there for the future. Take whatever you want to take. Take your piano, your appliances, and anything else you want to take. But take them in your hands. If they ever get into your heart, you are through as a missionary." (Sam James, *Servant on the Edge of History* (Garland, Texas: Hannibal Books, 2005), p. 15.)

The apostle Paul says something about this in 1 Corinthians 7: What I mean, brothers, is that time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as though they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of this world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Psalm 62:10 says: Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

CNN recently carried a story of a 62-year-old man who was rushed to Cholet General Hospital in France, suffering stomach pain. His family told doctors the man had a history of mental illness and a penchant for swallowing coins, but nothing could have prepared the doctors for X-Rays of the man's stomach. It was filled with 350 coins he had swallowed. The doctors performed surgery to remove the mass, but the man died of complications twelve days later.

"What a sick man," you say. But he's illustrative of this world that is gorging itself sick on materialism when our real wealth is eternal.

The commentator J. B. Mayor makes a profound point when he said that this passage gives the poor self-respect and it gives the rich self-abasement. Christianity—the message of Jesus and the church and the family of God—obliterates class distinctions. In the early church, the people might gather from various economic strata, and the person who taught the lesson or served the communion might be a slave, and the one who knelt at the altar to give his heart to Christ might be a prince.

In the early church, poor people found a basis for self-respect they had never had before based on their wealth in Christ. They learned that regardless of their economic or social status, they were of incredible value to God, that Jesus Christ had died for them, and that they could be rich in faith and good deeds, and that their true riches were stored up for them in heaven and in eternity. And the rich learned, as Jesus put it, that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesses. You can gain the whole world but lose your own soul. You can have fifty billion dollars in the morning, and be on the undertaker's table by the evening, cut down even while going about your business. So James was teaching self-respect for the poor and self-abasement for the rich, which was a unique concept in the ancient world—and it's not widely practiced in this one.

You say, "How can I apply this message from James to my life?" Well, just do what it says. If you don't have very much money, rejoice in how rich you are in faith, in good deeds, in Christ, in eternal blessings. And if you are getting along pretty well financially, think about how quickly it's all going to be over and you're going to face the Lord.

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his labor (James 1:9-11).

Are you ready to meet the Lord? What if your heart failed today? What if you keeled over with a stroke and died on the floor before you even got out of this building? What if you were in an automobile wreck before you got home? What if an hour from now, you were facing the Lord in eternity? The last thing on your mind would be your checking account. All that would be gone forever, but you'd still have eternity to go. The Bible says about Jesus Christ: Consider His grace, for though He was rich yet for our sakes He became poor, that we, through His poverty, might become rich. Have you received Him as your Savior? Are you ready to meet Him?

## **BLESSED PERSEVERANCE**

### **James 1:12**

Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him. -- James 1:12

If you want proof that fame and fortune do not lead to happiness and satisfaction, all you have to do is look at the cover of almost any magazine in America this week and read the sad story of the 28-year-old Australian actor, Heath Ledger. I confess that I've never seen one of his movies, but this week as I've read about him my heart has gone out to him and I feel so sorry for him. Despite being one of the most successful and famous young actors of recent times, he died surrounded by sleeping pills, anxiety medication, and antidepressants, following a failed relationship and a very difficult role in an upcoming movie. In fact, many of the articles about him have pointed out that he had a history of playing very intense roles; and some have speculated that he was unable to break away from his final role of playing the character of the Joker in the soon-to-be-released Batman movie. Heath Ledger indicated that getting inside the role of that dark and twisted character played with his mind, and afterward he wasn't able to sleep and he felt incredible stress and sadness.

Well, today I'd like to talk about being happy in life.

There was once a great ruler in Spain by the name of Abd Er-Rashman III, who ruled in the 10th century. Here's what he said about it: I have now reigned about 50 years in victory or peace, beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my felicity. In this situation, I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen my lot. They amount to fourteen.

Everyone wants to be happy; but have you ever thought about those words "happy" and "happiness"?

They come from the old Middle English word "hap" which means "luck." We get our English word "happening" from it, and "haphazard" and "happenstance" and "mishap." If someone is "hapless," it means that he is unlucky. And from the world's perspective, happiness depends on our happenings, on what happens to us, on how lucky or unlucky we are in this world.

But the Bible consistently uses a different word and a better word. The Bible writers didn't talk very much about happiness. They used the word "blessed," which is the English translation of a Greek word that is found exactly 50 times in the New Testament—makarios. The simplest definition of makarios or blessed is this—it is God's kind of happiness. It is divine happiness. It is the kind of happiness that isn't based on happenings but on something deeper, something better. It is a contented, long-lasting, deep-seated, joyful contentment in life. So when you see the phrase "blessed is..." or "blessed are..." that is a special phrase in the Bible that describes a truly happy life, and we call those statements beatitudes.

So there are 80 beatitudes in the Bible, and I've included this on the list of Bible studies and subjects that I'd like to preach about one day. Now, here's an interesting thing. In the New Testament, most of the beatitudes are found in the first and last books—the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Revelation. Revelation has seven beatitudes that I'd like to show you tonight.

In the letters of the apostle Paul, we only find a very few references to the word "blessed," and our friend James used it only twice.

Today, in our study through James, we're coming to the beatitude found here in James 1:12: Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.

The Reality:

Blessed Are Those Who Persevere Under Trial

The first part of the sentence gives us the reality of the matter. In this life we'll have trials and testings, and we must learn to persevere. The verse says: Blessed are those who persevere under trial. The world says, "Happy are those who find fame and fortune, who avoid illness and disease, and who take trips to Disneyland and Daytona Beach." Well, there's nothing wrong with those things, but James makes a very different point: Blessed are those who persevere under trial.

The word persevere is another of those great New Testament words. Sometimes I'm afraid that I focus too much in my sermons on the meaning of the original Greek or Hebrew terms, or on the etymology and background of the various words used in the Bible.

But every word in the Scriptures is pure and wonderful—every word is a gem or a jewel—and if we don't really understand the words, we can't understand the sentences or the paragraphs or the chapters. So let me take a moment to show you some of the times this word appears in the New Testament, because it will help you understand the nature of what it means.

Look at Luke 2:43: After the feast was over, while His parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. The word "stayed" here is the same basic word that is translated "persevere" in James 1:12. It's the idea of "staying power."

Now look at Matthew 10:22: All men will hate you because of Me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. The words "standing firm" are the same in the Greek as the word "persevere."

Now look at Hebrews 10:32: Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. See the words "stood your ground"? This is the same Greek word.

Now look at Hebrews 12:2: Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame.... What word here do you think is the same as "persevere"? It's the word "endure."

So the idea is to have staying power, to endure, to stand firm, to bear up, to keep at it. And that's really one of the great secrets in life, isn't it? In Romans 5, the apostle Paul indicates that this quality is at the very core of a person's character. The quality of

tenacity and perseverance is the foundation for the success of all our other attitudes and actions.

For example, I want to read you something. As I researched for this message, I came across an article in a New York newspaper. It was written by a woman named Dr. Rachel Bryant, and the title was "Children Learn When They Persevere." The column begins this way:

The power to persevere is one of the most important, and yet hardest, things to teach kids. If we teach them to persevere, then we give them their goals. If we don't teach them how to apply themselves, then all the love and tutoring in the world will never result in their reaching their potential.

Dr. Bryant goes on to say:

Success requires ability, but ability is not enough. Many bright kids who sail through the early grades find themselves suddenly overwhelmed in fifth or sixth grade when the work requires much more effort. If a 10-year-old student has never learned to apply herself, she may struggle and even feel like a failure, because suddenly the answers don't come so easily. Often, she just needs help learning what most kids have to learn by second grade: I have to work hard and practice to learn the lesson.

Learning how to persevere is more than learning how to study, but studying does provide us with daily opportunities to develop this in our school-age kids...

Imagine two 6-year-olds with the same level of intelligence and the same fine motor skills. Both are trying to learn to tie their shoes. One fumbles with the laces for five to 10 seconds and says, "Oh forget it. It's no use." The other, goes off and spends five full minutes carefully trying to get the laces to go the right way. Even if this second child meets with failure, he has demonstrated that he is developing a life skill that will give his potential every chance to grow.

Whatever the task, building a tower, gluing a model airplane, reading a social studies chapter or doing a page of math problems, first let your child know that you are pleased to see them trying, and with your presence help them to stretch themselves just a few more minutes. ("Children Learn When They Persevere" by Dr. Rachel Bryant, at <http://www.stargazettenews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080102/MOMS02/301020002/-1/ARCHIVES%20date=20070417>, accessed January 22, 2008.)

Well, according to this verse in James 1, the Lord feels that way about His children, too. He wants us to keep on going, to keep trying, to keep a positive attitude, and to stick to our guns in the matter of Christian living. There isn't much that is ever accomplished apart from perseverance.

Robert Louis Stevenson once said, "Saints are sinners who keep on going."

William Barclay wrote in one of his books about the importance of discipline and of perseverance in our lives, and he used the British author, Samuel Coleridge, as a negative example. Barclay wrote:

Nothing was ever achieved without discipline; and many an athlete and many a man has been ruined because he abandoned discipline and let himself grow slack. Coleridge is the supreme tragedy of undiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little.

He left Cambridge University to join the army; but he left the army because, in spite of all his erudition, he could not rub down a horse; he returned to Oxford and left without a degree. He began a paper called *The Watchman* which lived for ten numbers and then died. It has been said of him: "He lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done." Coleridge had every poetic gift but one—the gift of sustained and concentrated effort. In his head and in his mind he had all kinds of books, as he said himself, "completed save for transcription. I am on the eve," he said, "of sending the press two octavo volumes." But the books were never composed outside Coleridge's mind, because he would not face the discipline of sitting down to write them out. No one ever reached any eminence, and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline. (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1958), vol. 1, 284.)

Without perseverance!

What James is saying is that life is hard, but we've got to trust the Lord and keep on going. We can't give up. Temptations come, but we've got to keep resisting. Disappointments come, but we've got to keep on believing. Failures appear, but we've got to keep on trying. Hardships come, but we've got to keep on moving forward.

This is what saved the free world during World War II. It was Roosevelt's optimism and Churchill's dogged tenacity. You've heard recordings of Winston Churchill speaking to the British Empire during those days. It seemed impossible that England could be saved from the Nazis. But this is what Churchill said in his famous speech to the House of Commons on June 4, 1940:

I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are

being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty's Government—every man of them. That is the will of Parliament and the nation. The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.

It was Churchill's message of "Never Give In" that kept the world afloat.

This is really what evangelized the world. If you want to know what perseverance is all about, you read the biographies of the pioneer missionaries of the modern era—William Carey, Robert Moffat, Robert Morrison, Adoniram Judson, James Calvert, John Paton of Scotland. I don't have time to tell their stories, but it is almost beyond belief, how they kept going and going and going in spite of horrendous privation, hardship, heartache, and discouragement. But they would not be denied.

I don't know where or how I first came to understand the importance of persevering, but I suppose it was from my parents. They were hard-working. They were optimistic. They kept on going. They faced difficulties without giving up. They bore the burden of the work and the heat of the day. And I learned at an early age by watching them that we just have to keep on going, and that if we keep working in season and out of season, God will send the harvest.

So James is telling his readers here—some of whom are facing all kinds of tests and challenges—that we are blessed when we persevere under trial. And so with the authority of God's Word, I want to say to you: If you're facing some hardships and difficulties and trials—keep on going. Stay optimistic. Don't collapse in defeat or self-pity. Blessed are those who persevere under trial...

The Reward:

They Will Receive the Crown of Life

But the verse doesn't stop there. It goes on to say: Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life....

Commentators are divided about what this means. There are two possibilities. It's possible that James is using the symbol of a crown here as a picture of heaven and of eternal life. He is saying, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. We have heaven ahead of us, we have eternal life, we have New Jerusalem."

Other commentators believe that the "crown of life" is a special reward that God will give those who persevere through adversity in this life. You know, the New Testament speaks of various crowns that will be awarded in heaven. There's the crown of life, the crown of glory, and the crown of righteousness.

There's an old song that swept over the country 100 years ago and everyone was singing it, especially in the churches and evangelistic rallies. It's not used much anymore, but the words are still true:

When all my labors and trials are o'er,  
And I am safe on that beautiful shore,  
Just to be near the dear Lord I adore,  
Will through the ages be glory for me.

The Reason:

To Those Who Love Him

But there's one part of this verse remaining—the reason we persevere. What is the driving force behind it all? It's our love for the Lord Jesus Christ. It isn't just that we're stubborn people, or that we're superhuman, or that we're strong-willed. It's that we're filled with a love for Him that bears us along, sustains our spirits, and triggers our songs.

At the beginning of the 17th century, there was a young Englishman named Jonathan Burr who trusted Christ as his Savior in childhood, fell in love with his Bible, and became a pastor of Suffolk. He was known for his humility, and he would sometimes tell his congregation, "I preach not what I am, but what I ought to be." But Jonathan Burr was a Dissenter, that is, he didn't conform to the Church of England, and as a result he was forbidden to preach. He said, "My preaching is my life. If I be laid aside from that, I shall quickly die." So he and his wife and family decided to immigrate to America where he could preach in freedom.

But shortly after arriving in the colonies, Jonathan Burr contracted smallpox, and he almost died. However, he did not die, and in the aftermath of his recovery, he wrote out a covenant with the Lord. I'd like to read it to you as we close this message:

I, Jonathan Burr, being brought in the arms of Almighty God over the vast ocean, with my family and friends, and graciously provided for in a wilderness; and being sensible of my own unworthiness and self-seeking; yet of infinite mercy, being called to the tremendous work of feeding souls; and being of late with my family, delivered out of a great affliction of the small-pox; and found the fruit of that affliction, God tempering, ordering, and mitigating of evil thereof; so that I have been graciously and speedily delivered; I do promise and vow to Him, who has done these things for me:

That I will aim only at His glory and the good of souls, and not my own glory.

That I will walk humble, with lower thoughts of myself, considering that I am a puff of breath sustained by the power of grace alone.

That I will be more watchful over my heart, to keep it in a due frame of holy obedience... for I have seen that He is my only help in time of need.

That I will put more weight in that firm promise, and sure truth, that He is a God hearing prayer.

That I will set up God more in my family, more in myself, wife, children, and servants, conversing with them in a more serious manner. For this God aimed at by sending this affliction into my family. I will remember death. In myself I am nothing, in Christ all things. (E. Michael and Sharon Rusten, *The One Year Book of Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003), 444-445.)

If we love the Lord Jesus above all else, He will give us day by day the persevering grace we need and crown of life we seek; and we can say:

O that will be glory for me, glory for me!

When by His grace I shall look on His face,

That will be glory, be glory for me!

## **DON'T CELEBRATE THE WRONG BIRTHDAY**

### **James 1:13-18**

I read this week an interesting story about West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, who is 90 years old and is the oldest and longest-serving member of the United States Senate. For many years, he celebrated his birthday on the wrong date. His mother died when he was very young, in the flu epidemic of 1918, and he was adopted by his aunt and uncle. Somehow in the process, everyone thought his birthday was on January 15th, and for many years that was when he celebrated his "birthday." And then in the 1970s, his brother found an old copy of the Senator's birth certificate and told him, to his surprise, that he had actually been born on November 20th. He wasn't as old as he thought, and he had to change his birthday. His political opponents accused him of flip-flopping!

Well, today's message is entitled: Don't Celebrate the Wrong Birthday. Now, in some periods in the past, various obscure groups of Christians have taught that we shouldn't celebrate birthdays at all. One of the reasons is that there's no record in the Bible of anyone who was godly ever celebrating a birthday. In fact, in the entire Bible there are only two references to birthdays. One is in the Old Testament and the other is in the New. Two different men had birthday parties, and someone died at both parties.

The first birthday party was that of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, in Genesis 40, when Joseph was in prison. Pharaoh gave a feast for all his officials on his birthday, and as part of the festivities he hanged the chief baker. Maybe he didn't like his birthday cake. The second birthday party was that of King Herod in the New Testament, and that's the story of Herodias providing the entertainment and then demanding the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Since those are the only birthdays recorded in the Bible, a handful of Christian sects have said, "Well, birthdays are pagan

celebrations; we shouldn't observe them at all."

Personally, I like my birthday, and I think birthdays are great. I've noticed that people who have the most of them tend to live the longest. The only problem is that at some point the candles start costing more than the cake. But the Bible does warn us not to celebrate the wrong birthday. And that brings us to our Scripture reading for today, from the book of James. We're in a series of studies through James, and today we are coming to James 1:13-18. As we read this text, notice that it falls into two distinct paragraphs, and that both paragraphs discuss the idea of birth, or of being born:

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.

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 1:13-18).

#### 1. The Birthday of Mr. Death (vv. 13-15)

The first paragraph describes the birth of Mr. Death. Look at verse 13. It begins: When tempted.... It doesn't say, "If we're tempted..." but "When we're tempted..." Is there anyone in this room who doesn't know what it's like to face temptation? Here is something that is wrong, it is unhealthy, it is questionable, it is self-destructive, yet we are drawn toward that item or practice or experience with an almost irresistible force. We're drawn like a moth into the flame. We're drawn like a bird into a net. It's the magnetism of sin. Where does it come from? Well, James insists that it does not come from God. God may test us, but He never tempts us to do evil. Verse 13 says: When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone.

Now let's take a moment to compare this verse with another one. Look at Hebrews 4:15, which is referring to our Lord Jesus Christ: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

So James says that God cannot be tempted with evil; and Hebrews says that Jesus Christ was tempted every way, just like we are. This illustrates the mystery of our Lord's dual nature. He was both God and man. As God, He was beyond temptation; but as a man, He was subject to temptation. Who can understand that? It's part of the mystery of His incarnation.

Do you remember in the Gospels that immediately after His baptism, He endured an intense period of temptations by the devil himself? Satan was apparently mystified by the two-fold nature of Christ. The devil didn't understand what was happening. Here was God becoming a man. God is untemptable. He is above and beyond all temptation. He is separate from all sin. He is holy beyond understanding. But when He became a man, suddenly He entered the world of fallen humanity, and He had a human nature, which was temptable. And so the devil tried it out. He was experimenting. He actually thought that perhaps he could lure Jesus Christ, in His human nature, into sinning.

But he failed, and our Lord Jesus Christ proved to be the only human being in all of history who never yielded to temptation or gave in to sin. This tells us that temptation itself is not a sin, but it becomes a sin when we yield to it. That process is dissected and described for us in the next verse.

James 1:14 says, But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed....

Now, the words "dragged away," and "enticed" were hunting words in the original Greek, and they were used to describe the various traps and snares that hunters used to catch an animal, or the bait that fishermen used to catch fish. The devil sets traps for us. He studies us, knows our patterns, discerns our weakness, and attacks us at our point of weakness. And inwardly, our fallen human nature gives birth to temptations that draw us away and entice us to evil.

And then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown gives birth to death.

James explains the chain reaction. First there's an unhealthy desire within us, then we give in to it, birthing sin; and sin, in turn, gives birth to death. The birthday of Mr. Death occurs because of sin. Apart from Christ, the only birthday we celebrate is the birthday of Mr. Death, and the candles are burning in our own hearts.

Aesop tells a fable about a farmer who went out to his barn during the winter and found a snake that was so cold and so frozen that it was as stiff as a stick. The farmer had compassion on the creature and took it and nestled it in his coat and inside his shirt; and the creature was revived by the warmth and resumed its natural instincts and bit the farmer with his deadly and poisonous fangs, and the man died in anguish and agony.

Some of us may think we can tame the temptation and play around with the serpent, but temptation, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin gives birth to death.

## 2. The Birthday of Mr. Life (vv. 16-18)

But James doesn't leave us there. The Bible never leaves us there. The next paragraph tells us about the birthday of Mr. Life. He begins with a little preamble in verse 16: Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. And then we have one of the most wonderful verses in the Bible about God's grace and His gifts and blessings to us: Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.

Commentators and expositors have marveled and wondered about that phrase, "the Father of heavenly lights." It's the only time this phrase occurs in the Bible, and this is the only time in Scripture God is given this title. Most people believe it means just what it says—God is the creator of the sun and moon and planets and stars, the heavenly lights. I read something interesting the other day about the stars. A star is really a giant ball of burning gas that's held together by its own gravity. The force of gravity is continually trying to cause the star to collapse, but the pressure of its gas and radiation is continually trying to push outward; and at the very center of the star are constant nuclear reactions and explosions.

And the heat and light from these stars is unimaginable. The brightest stars we know about are a million times brighter and hotter than our sun.

And here's something else I didn't know. We all know that our earth is revolving around the sun, one time every 365 days. But did you know that the sun itself, and thereby our whole galaxy, is revolving around something? The sun and all the stars in our galaxy are revolving around the center of our galaxy, the Milky Way. Just as our planet makes a trip around the sun every 365 days, our sun makes a revolution around the center of the galaxy one time every two hundred million years.

What's at the center of the Milky Way? That's a great question. A teacher asked her class that question one day—What's in the center of the Milky Way, and a little boy answered, "Chewy nougat and caramel."

The point that James is making is that the same God who flung out the stars and scattered the galaxies is the same one who gives us so many other gifts, so many good and perfect gifts.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

And what particular gift does He want to give us? Verse 18 says: He chose to give us birth—there's our key thought again—through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created.

This is a very important verse, and I'd like to look at every phrase of it in turn.

The verse opens with the words: He chose..., and this points to the sovereign prerogatives of God. Ephesians 1 says: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace.

James was hitting on this same truth when he said, "He chose to give us new birth..." James is the fourth writer of the New Testament to talk about being born again or experiencing a new birth.

- Ø We first encounter this concept in John's Gospel, when Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again."
- Ø The Apostle Paul said in the book of Titus, "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."
- Ø Peter wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."
- Ø And now James says that God chose to give us new birth.

Just as sin gives birth to death, God gives us birth leading to everlasting life—and that's why you often hear Christians described as "born-again-believers." This is a big sports day around the world as we have the Super Bowl tonight, and as you know there are very many Christians involved in the world of high school, college, and professional sports. One organization that has advanced the cause of Jesus among athletes is the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, but many people don't know how that organization came into being.

Years ago there was a boy named Don McClanen who grew up in a family that went to church regularly, but their Christianity was largely external. Don's father was a leader in the church, but there were some glaring inconsistencies in his life that weren't lost on the boy. One day Don said that he was thinking of being a minister, a preacher, when he grew up, and his dad scoffed at that.

To be truthful, Don did things that made a lot of people scoff. One summer he took over his brother's job of mowing lawns, and one of the biggest lawns belonged to the mayor. He got on the mower, but the mower got away from him and went splashing into the pond. And in time, he became the school clown; yet he evidently had some leadership qualities because he was elected class president his junior and senior years in high school, and was the president of his church youth group. He also played sports and loved it.

When Don was seventeen years old, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and the United States entered World War II. An observable change came over Don, as if he grew up overnight, and he couldn't wait to turn eighteen so he could sign up for the Naval Air Corps. Unfortunately, he missed a question on the entrance exam and didn't make it in, so he aimed at getting onto a submarine, and at first that didn't work out either. But eventually he did get onto the U.S.S. Chub, which was stationed at Pearl Harbor and patrolled the Pacific during the War.

After the War, Don McClanen returned home and met up with a girl from high school, Gloria, who was working for the telephone company. He asked her for a date, she turned him down, and he asked again. They were married, and Don went to college on the GI Bill, and then he became a coach at Eastern Oklahoma State College.

Don loved children, and he was thrilled with Gloria became pregnant. But Gloria lost the baby, and Don was disconsolate. His heart was absolutely broken. One day during the lunch hour, he went for a walk and he passed a Roman Catholic Church. He tried the doors, and they were open. Going in, he found a chapel and knelt down and gave his heart and his life to Jesus Christ.

It was a life-changing moment for him. It was like being born again. He was born again by the Word of Truth that came down from the Father of Heavenly Lights. He and Gloria became involved in church, and Don wanted to incorporate his newfound Christian faith into his athletics and into his sports life. He started collecting articles that mentioned sports personalities who were willing to talk about their faith. He wrote to each one of them, wanting to see them; but he had little success.

Finally the baseball player, Branch Rickey, gave him five minutes; and the five minutes turned into five hours, and together they dreamed up an organization known as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Branch came up with some money, and Don did the footwork; and today, fifty years later, FCA has a ministry that reaches around the world.

It's because of one man who knelt down, gave his life to Jesus Christ, and was born again by the Word of Truth.

The "Word of Truth" is a phrase that occurs two other times in the New Testament, in Ephesians and Colossians; and in both references the Word of Truth is specifically identified with the Gospel, the Good News of Christ.

Ø Ephesians 1:13: You also were included in Christ when you heard the Word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation.

Ø Colossians 1:4-5: We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the Gospel.

And this verse in James says that God chose to give us birth through the Word of Truth that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created. What does that mean? According to Revelation 21 and 22, one day God is going to make a new heavens and a new earth. He's going to make all things new. He's going to usher in the newness of eternity in a recreation of the stars above and the earth beneath.

But when we're saved, when we're born again, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ within our hearts, we become the tokens and symbols and vanguards and firstfruits of eternity.

I'd like to end with an appeal for you to give your life wholeheartedly to the Lord Jesus Christ. I once read that Rev. Charles

Spurgeon of London was counseling a girl about loving the world or loving Christ. They were standing in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and Spurgeon advised her to this effect: "There are three things you can do, and I will explain those three things by using an illustration. When you leave the Tabernacle today, you'll walk onto the street and a streetcar will come by. You can go up to the streetcar, put one foot in the car and leave the other on the ground. But if you don't have a tumble, I'll be very surprised. That's what happens to people who try to keep in touch with the world and in touch with Christ at the same time. They have a terrible fall before long.

"Or you can stand there and let the streetcar pass by. You see it, hear its bell, and notice the people on board, but you stay where you are in. That's a picture of those who love the world and stand in the mud of their sins.

"The third option is to step totally off the street into the car, entrust your full weight and being to it, and let it take you where it's going. And that's what I recommend. Give yourself fully to Christ. Jump in with both feet. Let the Conductor guide you along the tracks of holiness until at last He brings you to the terminal of His glory."

## THREE PLATINUM RULES

### James 1:19-21

Today is a great day for us because it's a great day for our young people; and as we dedicate our Student Ministry Center, I am so encouraged by the growth of our church this year and by the new people we're reaching, including new junior high, senior high, and college students. They are VIPs at this church. And I'm grateful for our minister of students, Matt Mitchell, and his wife Johanna, and for our blue-ribbon team of adult workers.

The first sermon that I remember preaching was when I was just a kid in Elizabethton, Tennessee. Our church had Youth Day, and it was my responsibility to give the sermon. I was an absolute nervous wreck, and I went through my material so fast that the pastor had quite a bit of time to fill after I sat down. But my subject was on the Golden Opportunities of Youth.

Well, if there was ever a day of golden opportunities for students, it's today. The Lord has never needed teenagers more or used them more greatly. But neither has there been a time when temptations have been more accessible, dangers more evident, skepticism more blatant, and the future so uncertain.

Today I'd like to give our students and all the rest of us three platinum rules for living. You've heard about the Golden Rule—well, these are platinum rules, and they are easy enough to memorize as lifelong principles for a great life. They're found in the book of James, chapter 1. We're in a series of studies from the New Testament book of James, and last week we finished with verse 18, and today we're going pick up our study with verse 19, so this special sermon for young people and for all of us is a continuation of our winter series entitled 365. The passage says:

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you (James 1:19-21).

The first thing to notice about this passage is that there are two preliminary comments. The first is the address: My dear brothers.... That is, "my dear brothers in Christ... my fellow Christians."

Later this year, the Olympic Games will be held in Beijing, and all the athletes will be given a rulebook. This rulebook, which has been developed over the years, is designed to guide the conduct of the athletes. Let's suppose I found a copy of the Olympic rulebook somewhere. I read it and found it very interesting. It told me, for example, who could be with me in restricted areas and in the Olympic village; it told me what to do in the event of sickness or if I had a disagreement with the judges; it told me, for example, that if I won my event, I was to proceed immediately to the central podium for the playing of my national anthem.

Now suppose that I found one of those rulebooks, which had been left behind on a café table or park bench. I might find it very interesting. I might find that it contained helpful advice. But if I had not qualified for the Olympics, it would not apply to me. It would be somebody else's book. I would not even be able to keep the rules and observe the regulations. I'd be on the outside.

That's the way it is with these three platinum rules—they are for people who are on the inside of the Christian life, who have made a

decision to follow Jesus Christ and who, as a result, have the Holy Spirit indwelling them and empowering them to live a supernatural life. The Bible is full of insights about supernatural living, but we can't claim its promises or obey its commands without the supernatural aid of the Holy Spirit. That's why it's important for you, if you're not a Christian, to come to Jesus Christ today.

Now, there is a second word of introduction before we get to the three rules. Look at verse 19 again: My dear brother, take note of this. The King James Version follows a variant reading and just says, "Wherefore...." But the Greek word is oida, which means, "You know it," or "Know this," and it really comes at the very beginning of the sentence. It's very emphatic. If you translate this from the literal Greek, it is: Know this, my beloved brothers.... Or, Of this you can be certain.... Or, Remember this....

Some commentators think James is telling us to memorize this passage and to hide these three rules in our hearts. It seems to be written in an aphoristic style, as an aphorism, to be committed permanently to our brain cells.

So the first phrase of verse 19 says two things:

- Ø This is very important; we should memorize it.
- Ø This is for believers, to those who are brothers and sisters in Christ.

#### 1. Be Quick to Hear

And now, with that prologue, we come to the three platinum rules. The first: My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen.

This word quick is found thirteen times in the New Testament. There are times when we need to do something quickly, urgently, promptly. For example, Matthew 5 tells us to settle things quickly with our adversary. In Matthew 28, the angel at the tomb told the women to go quickly and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. Well, said James, here is something we should do quickly—we should be quick to listen, quick to hear.

The Jewish rabbis said that God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we would do twice as much listening as speaking. Who should we listen to? Well, the book of Proverbs says that we should listen to our parents. This is especially in the earlier chapters of Proverbs; there are a lot of admonitions about this. Listen, my son, hear my words, treasure my teachings....

I'm bringing this up because it's not always an easy thing to do. The years from 13 to 19 are years in which we're learning to be independent, to be self-governing, to be more in control of our own reactions and decisions. So we tend to bristle when our parents still try to control or advise.

I remember how it was between my parents and me when I was in high school. My parents were both high school teachers, and I had them for class every day, so I couldn't escape them! And there were occasionally some difficult moments that I'll not go into. But I can say that even when I didn't want to listen and even when I disagreed, and even when I knew I was right—I still knew that my dad had a lot of sense. And at the important moments, he spoke to me in a way that I could accept, and I listened to him. And even today, even though he's been gone many years, I still find myself thinking, "What would my dad say? How would he advise me?"

Let everyone of us be quick to listen.

And then we should listen to our leaders at church and to the preaching of the Word. When I was in college, I had a buddy named Joe who was a close friend to Billy and Ruth Graham. We sat together in chapel and we went to church together in Columbia, and I noticed that Joe carried around a little notebook and took copious notes of all the sermons he heard in church or school. One day I asked him about it. He said that on those weekends when he drove up to Montreat to spend time with the Grahams, he would go to church with them at the little Presbyterian church they attended. The pastor was Calvin Thielman, who is now in heaven. One day after church as he drove home with Billy and Ruth, Joe said, "Man, I almost went to sleep in church today. That was a boring sermon." To which Billy replied, "Why, Joe, I thought it was a wonderful sermon. I got a lot out of it."

That was a rebuke to Joe, and later he asked Ruth about it. She told him to listen more carefully and to take notes. And I remember seeing Joe in chapel and in church with his little notebook, meticulously taking notes during the sermon, jotting down the outline, the cross-references, and even the stories and illustrations. And it made a huge difference every week.

Let everyone of us be quick to listen to our parents and advisors, to our preachers and teachers.

But to be perfectly honest with this text, the specific application of James 1:19 seems to be this: Let everyone of us be quick to

listen to the Word of God itself. Be quick to listen to what God is saying directly to you in the Bible.

Look at the context. The preceding verse, James 1:18, says: He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created. My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to hear...

To hear what? The Word of Truth.

And notice what comes next, right after this paragraph in verse 22: Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says....

So while its important to listen to our parents and to our teachers and preachers and counselors, it's even more important to read our Bibles, listen to God's Word, and do what it says.

I read this week about a Hispanic teenage girl named Madolyn who was working at a restaurant. One of the other waitresses made a racist comment to her in front of customers. As soon as she could, Madolyn confronted this other girl. They got into a shoving match in the back room, and Madolyn's anger exploded, and she punched the girl in the face. The manager fired both girls on the spot, and Madolyn marched out of the restaurant in a rage.

On her way home she thought about her anger. For many years, she had been subject to racial taunts. Even back in elementary school, children had called her names because of her Mexican heritage. She had internalized her anger until she had gotten to high school, and now she was increasingly vocal and physical in the way she expressed her anger. She'd even gotten into some fistfights.

She certainly had a reason to be angry; but Madolyn was also a Christian, and she knew that she had not really allowed God into this angry part of her life.

One night shortly afterward at a meeting of her church youth group, two guys got into a shouting match and started shoving each other. The next week, these two guys got up and stood in front of the group, apologized to each other, and read Proverbs 22:24: Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man; do not associate with one easily angered."

Madolyn wrote, "Those words hit me like a blow to the gut. That verse is talking about me." She thought of how hot-tempered and immature she had been. And even though her anger was understandable and even justifiable, it wasn't healthy. She thought about her bad language and threats. And she later wrote that hearing Proverbs 22:24 and letting God apply that verse to her life was one of the most powerful experiences she has ever had. She still faces taunts and temptations, but she is learning to respond with strength of character and wisdom because of the power of listening to the Word of God. ("Letting Go of Anger," by Madolyn Cavazos as told to Karen Langley, at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/cl/2004/005/11.10.html>, accessed on February 7, 2008.)

Let everyone one of us be quick to hear—our parents and teachers and preachers and advisors, but especially our God and His Word.

## 2. Be Slow to Speak

That brings us to the second platinum rule: Be slow to speak. Verse 19 says: My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak....

Now, I'm not going to say a great deal about this because we're going to come back it again and again as we work our way through this little book of James. This epistle is very concerned about the way Christians use their mouths and their tongues, and James keeps bringing it up. Look at verse 26: If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

And look at chapter 2, verse 12: Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

And look at chapter 3:5: Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person.

And look at chapter 4, verse 11: Brothers, do not slander one another...

And chapter 5, verse 9: Don't grumble against each other, brothers....

I have no respect for people who grumble or slander or resort to obscenity and profanity. We've had an example of this very subject this week in our headlines. The basketball coach at Texas Tech resigned—Bobby Knight. He should have been remembered as a brilliant basketball coach and for winning more college games than any other coach, but how people do people think of him? What's his reputation? When we hear his name, we think of an angry man who can't control his temper or his mouth.

Let everyone of us be slow to speak.

### 3. Be Slow to Become Angry

And that brings us to the third platinum rule—be slow to become angry. Verse 19 says: My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

Someone once said, "People who fly into a rage always make a bad landing."

This is one of the most important lessons for students, because it is the barometer of maturity. When we're born, we have little control over our emotions, and so we get angry easily and throw temper tantrums. I was in the grocery store the other day when this happened. A parent was at the store with her preschool child, and I'm not sure what happened but that child had a total meltdown. You've never heard such screaming and crying kicking and fussing. To her credit, this parent handled it as well as she possible could, but all of us who are parents know something about children's meltdowns and temper tantrums.

But as we grow older we've got to learn to control our emotions. One of the most important aspects of maturity is gaining control over our reactions, and one of the most important aspects of Christian maturity is letting the Holy Spirit have control over our emotions, like the Hispanic girl I talked about earlier. When people lose their temper, they lose the respect of others, but they also lose respect for themselves.

But there's an even bigger reason to be long-tempered, and it's given in the next verse, which I think is one of the most profound verses in the Bible on the subject of anger. Look at verses 19-20: My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

In other words:

- Ø A holy life never grows out of an angry spirit.
- Ø Bitterness never makes us better.
- Ø A hot temper never leads to higher ground.
- Ø Positive accomplishments for the Lord are never produced by angry passions.
- Ø The Phillips Translation says: Man's temper is never the means of achieving God's true goodness.
- Ø The Living Bible says: Anger doesn't make us good, as God demands that we must be.

Now, here's what I want to say to our students and to all the rest of us. These three platinum rules—as simple as they are—can make all the difference in the future as to whether you are a person who is mature and respected and useful for the kingdom. You say, "Well, I'm not exactly hitting on all three of those cylinders. What can I do?"

That's the last verse of the paragraph—verse 21: Therefore, get rid of all moral filth....

Is there any moral filth in your life? Get rid of it...

...and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word that is planted in you, which can save you.

The Lord wants to take these three little rules and plant them in your brain and in your heart. So you have to clear away the weeds and prepare the soil and let these three little seed thoughts take root in your mind and heart and soul.

And as we dedicate this Youth Ministry Center today, my message to you is this: My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Let every one of us be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because our angry reactions do not produce the mature and holy life that God desires. So get rid of all the moral filth in your life and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word that is planted within you, which can save you and mature you and make you great in the eyes of the Lord.

## THE MIRACLE MIRROR

### James 1:22-27

In our series of studies, 365, on daily obedience from the book of James, we're coming today to the end of chapter one of that book. We've taken our time and gone through James 1 verse-by-verse, and it's taken us seven weeks. Next Sunday, Lord willing, we'll plunge right into chapter 2. So today let's turn to our passage of study, James 1:22-27:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like. But those who look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continue in it—not forgetting what they have heard but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

#### Let's State This Truth (v. 22)

This is a very easy passage to expound. In verse 22, James states the principle that he wants to emphasize: Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Now, none of us like to be deceived. Many years ago, I had a man who came to my house one day with a pitiful story. He said that his daughter was under the care of a particular doctor, and that she badly needed medication for a life-threatening condition. He had medical insurance, but he needed a little money for the co-pay. He said that the prescription was ready to be picked up down at the drugstore on the corner, and would the church help him in his hour of need. He was sincere and tender and earnest and gave every indication of being in genuine need, and I was ready to help him in any way that I could. But I wasn't born yesterday, so I excused myself and went inside to the phone. I called the office of the doctor he had mentioned and told the receptionist the full story. They said they did not have such patient. I called the pharmacy he had mentioned, and they had no such prescription. Going back outside, I gave him this news, and he muttered something unpleasant and stalked off down the street, I suppose, to the next church. One of the challenges that every church has is how do we help cases of legitimate need without being taken in by all the scams that people are running. We don't like to be lied to and we don't like to be deceived.

But the worst kind of deception is self-deception, and James is warning us—as Christians—that we can deceive ourselves in this way: We can think that reading our Bibles and listening to the preaching of the Word of God is sufficient. Going to church is sufficient. Hearing an occasional sermon is sufficient. But the reading and preaching and teaching of Scripture is utterly useless unless it leads to application, and to practical obedience in our lives.

The Bible was never given as a good luck charm or just to satisfy our intellectual curiosity about metaphysical realities. It was written to be applied. The Bible says in 2 Timothy 3 that... All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that God's people may mature and be useful in every kind of service.

So that's the principle stated: Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

#### Let's Illustrate This Truth (vv. 23-25)

Now, in the next three verses, James is going to illustrate this truth by giving us an analogy: Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like. But those who look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continue in it—not forgetting what they have heard but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

There was an article last fall from Reuters UK that announced a survey conducted by a British beauty company which found that women look at themselves in the mirror every 30 minutes during the day. They actually check their reflection 34 times a day during an average 16-hour waking day, and they reapply their makeup 11 times. Women in Liverpool checked their looks 71 times every day, more than twice the national average. But men only checked their images in the mirror 27 times a day. And, according to the survey, if you're over sixty years old, you only check yourself in the mirror five times a day. ("Women Seen Checking Mirror Every Half-Hour," Reuters UK, November 5, 2007)

Well, James is comparing the Word of God to a mirror. It's a miracle mirror. It shows us a reflection, not just of our faces, but of our souls and spirits and daily lives. When we look into its pages, we can see ourselves, we can see our flaws, we can see our blemishes, we can see what needs to be improved and corrected, and we can take remedial action through faith and obedience. Verse 25 says: But the person who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues doing this, not forgetting what he has heard but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

A lifelong pattern of looking intently into Scripture and obeying it leads to a lifetime of blessings. So James states this principle in verse 22, and he illustrates it using the analogy of a mirror in verses 23-25. And now he's going to apply it in verses 26-27, and that's where I'd like for us to spend the rest of our time. James is concerned about three areas in life in which Christians are prone to failure when it comes to the application of Scripture. He could have talked about tithing. He could have talked about pride. He could have talked about church attendance. He could have talked about marriage. But in this passage, James is vitally concerned that Christians read, study, and obey the Scriptures in these three areas.

#### Let's Apply This Truth (vv. 26-27)

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

There are three points of application here.

The first area is: Our Tongues. James is keenly desirous that Christians diligently practice what the Bible says about the tongue. He says, Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

The word James uses here is the word they used for bridling a horse. We used to have horses in Roan Mountain, and many a time I've put a bridle in the horses' mouth. James is saying that we should bridle our tongues and maintain tight control over our words.

Our society feeds on gossip. Most newspapers have gossip columns, and we've gotten to the point where celebrity gossip often even dominates the headlines of broadcast news. But it's a sad thing when that aspect of our culture infiltrates the church. Sometimes I fear that Christians are among the worst people when it comes to gossiping. I think it's because we're in sort of closed environment that is filled with people of various opinions and different levels of maturity, and we deal with very heartfelt and emotional subjects. And so if someone hears something about someone else or if we're discontented about someone else, then we stand around talking and talking and talking—often about somebody else—and we forget that the Bible says, "In a multitude of words there lacketh not sin" (Proverbs 10:19).

There was an article the other day in the newspaper about the impact it makes when children overhear their parents saying something complimentary about them. For example, a child may accidentally hear you say, "I am so proud of how Jeremy has improved in his reading!" Or, "You should have seen how well my son handled this or that problem." When you child overhears it when you say something good about him or her to another person, that it perhaps the most powerful deposit you can make into his or her self-image. The psychologist said that's more powerful than actually complimenting the child directly, because when they overhear you say something positive about them to someone else, they know that it represents how you truly think; and a child's self-image is based on his perception of what his dad or mom thinks about him.

Now, let's reverse that scenario. What if it's not a child, but it's another church member or a friend or a fellow Christian. And what if the things we are saying are words of complaining or gossiping or accusing or tale-bearing? What if they are overheard? How would that make them feel? What would that do to their hearts and spirits?

I'd like to advocate the acronym THINK as a basis for deciding what to say and when to say it.

Ø T: Is it true? That is a simple question, but a vital one. Am I sure it is true?

Ø H: Is it helpful? There are a lot of things that are true, but it's not helpful to repeat them.

Ø I: Is it inspiring? Will it edify others? The Bible says, "Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouth except what is good for edifying others."

Ø N: Is it necessary? Quite often our words may be interesting enough to focus attention on ourselves as we share them, and they may be plain-spoken enough for us to feel that we're getting something off our chests, but is that conversation really necessary?

Ø K: Is it kind? What is my motive behind what I am going to say? How will it make others feel?

James said, Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

The second area is: Our Benevolence.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress....

Christians have always been known by their deeds of charity, kindness, compassion, and benevolence. That's why we have the Hanna Project, and that's why we have members of our church in Africa right now giving medical care to poverty-stricken populations. I continually feel that our church needs to increasingly do more in this area, but it begins when you and I as individuals reach out and help someone who needs it in our own daily lives. When my father died, a man came up to me at the funeral home and said, "You'll never know how many students 'Fess helped." My dad was called 'Fess,' I think, because it was short for Professor. But this man told me of a time when my dad had taken him out of class, taken him into town, and bought shoes for him. Up in the hills, many families were destitute, and my father had grown up in poverty; and he evidently helped a lot of students with shoes and clothes and food that we never knew about.

Christians have always done that. The great charities of the world have been and are Christian based. Some time ago, I read about a woman named Emma Whittemore. She and her husband Sidney were part of New York's most glittering society.

One day a preacher came to New York. Emma had a friend who invited her to go to the evangelistic campaign, and Sidney had a friend who invited him to do the same. They both went to the rally, but neither knew that the other was there.

Both Sidney and Emma were stirred by the message and went forward at the invitation to accept Christ as Savior, and both were wonderfully saved. Soon afterward, Emma's friend invited her to visit Jerry McAuley's Water Street Rescue Mission on the lower end of Manhattan.

"Never can that night be erased from my memory," Emma wrote later. "From the time we got off the car at Roosevelt Street, each step opened up some new horror." She heard curses, saw quarreling, fighting, police abuse, and women dragged off to the station. Her heart went out to the girls and women who lived on the street, and she determined to do something about it. On October 25, 1890, Emma Whittemore opened her first Door of Hope to house girls who had nowhere to live or to go except to the streets. Within four years, the Door of Hope had helped 325 girls. Eventually Door of Hope went international. By Emma's death in 1931, there were 97 homes in seven countries.

That's what Christians have always done, but it begins when you and I find someone with a need and find a simple way to help or encourage them. John Kasich is an Ohio politician who is probably going to run for governor of the state. He's a Christian, and he's also a journalist with a weekly program on one of the cable news channels. Some time ago, Kasich wrote a book entitled *Courage is Contagious*, and in the first chapter he wrote about two boys who had changed his life. They were two brothers, Eric and Bobby Krenzke, who lived with their parents and siblings in the town of Hilliard, Ohio. Both brothers suffered from dystonia, which is a rare, genetic neurological disorder.

These brothers had a great desire to visit Washington, D.C., and to meet the President, and visit the Capitol, the Supreme Court, and the Hard Rock Café. For some reason, when the Krenzkes arrived in Washington, they had trouble arranging a tour of the Capitol Building, and so they called their Congressman's office. Congressman John Kasich met the family in the House Dining Room, and at first he was a little shocked to meet the boys. Both of them were sitting in wheelchairs because they were too weak to walk, and both were wearing bicycle helmets to protect them if they fell.

But these two boys stuck up an amazing friendship with the Congressman. He couldn't get over how sick they were, but how cheerful and thoughtful and smart. When Kasich went home to Ohio on weekends, he always drove over to see the boys. He'd take them to museums and shows. He'd play video games with them and read to them. During the week, he'd call from Washington, and the boys loved him. Bobby, with whom he was especially close, once told his mother, "Mom, John's just a kid in a Congressman's body."

Well, Bobby grew weaker and was finally placed in a hospice. It was clear he didn't have long to live, and he wrote a letter to Kasich, which said, "Dear John: this is important. This next part is kind of a secret. I usually talk to my stuffed animals. If I die, mostly I want you to say something at my funeral. I might not die at this age. I'm still myself, but I'm weaker than myself. But if I die, you can tell everybody how nice a kid I am, that I'm smart, and that I'm funny. I love when you come to visit me. It was fun watching

the movie with you. You look very tired. Are you taking care of yourself? I hope you are. That's all I have to say this time. Love, Bobby."

Shortly afterward, Bobby did die, and the Congressman did speak at his funeral, but on the program he wasn't listed as a congressman or as a eulogist. The program simply said, "John Kasich, Buddy."

John Kasich shifted his attention to Eric, and the two of them became very close. But then Eric, too, went into a decline; and Kasich went to see him. Eric had drawn a watercolor picture of heaven, with stars representing his friends who were already there. And then Eric passed away, and Congressman Kasich went to his funeral, too. Several songs were used in the service, including "Amazing Grace," "Love Lifted Me," and the Scooby Doo Theme.

On the program was a reproduction of Eric's handwritten note. It said: "Gone to see Bobby. See you soon. Love, Eric."

John Kasich later explained why he had been so drawn to these two boys. He said, "I think one reason...was that I had lost my parents so suddenly. One night in August 1987 they were leaving a restaurant...when a car driven by a drunk driver crashed into their car. My father died instantly and my mother died a few hours later. There was no chance to say goodbye; these two hardworking, God-fearing, decent people who had sacrificed so much for me were just suddenly gone. A tragedy like that can destroy you, but it can also be an opportunity to grow. God blessed me and I grew. It caused a rebirth of my religious faith. Their deaths made me more sensitive to others, and made me want to help people deal with their tragedies when I could" (John Kasich, *Courage is Contagious* ).

I've been so pleased with the way our LifeGroups do this. We're at the size now in the life of our church where the staff cannot always adequately do everything that needs to be done in the dispensing of pastoral care, and so we've deputized everyone in our church—especially through our LifeGroups—so that we can care for one another in our times of needs.

The third area is: Our Purity. James ends chapter two with this phrase: ...and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. This refers to our character. Are you keeping yourself from being corrupted by this world in the various areas of your life.

This is the powerful message with which James ends his first chapter. Do not merely listen to the Word of God, but obey it! Do what it says! The Word of God is a Miracle Mirror that shows you what you look like in God's sight, and if we gaze into its pages and study it and obey it, we'll be blessed in whatever we do. And we'll especially work on three areas—our tongues, our kindness to those in need, and our moral purity as we endeavor to keep ourselves from being polluted by this world.

And after all, isn't this a perfect description of our Lord Jesus—always using words with wisdom, always caring for the poor and sick and needy, always keeping Himself pure in a polluted world. May the Holy Spirit make us like Him!

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart,  
Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move;  
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,  
And make me love Thee as I ought to love

## THE ROYAL LAW OF SCRIPTURE

### James 2:1-13

So often when I go to the Bible, I'm looking for comfort and cheer, for passages that will boost my faith and strengthen my attitude and disposition. Well, when you come to the book of James, you can find some wonderful verses to comfort you. But James is an instructional book, full of commands to follow. He especially wants to give us verses that correct us, convict us, reprove us, and help us to become better people. In chapter 1, he talked to us about resisting temptation and keeping our temper and reining in our tongues and getting rid of moral filth and helping widows and keeping ourselves unspotted from the world.

Now today we're coming to chapter 2 of James, and he's continuing with his list of corrections that need to be made among Christians and in the church—and in my heart and yours. In the first part of chapter 2, he's going to talk about this area of discrimination, prejudice, and favoritism. That's something we read about every day in the headlines, and so I invite you to read with me what the Bible has to say about it, from James 2:1-13:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of Him to whom you belong?

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

The Principle: Don't Show Favoritism (v. 1)

In verse 1, James states his principle: Don't show favoritism. He says, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism." Our Lord Jesus is glorious; He is the King of Glory. Compared to Him, we're all down here on dusty level ground. So we shouldn't consider ourselves better than one another. And look down at verse 4 where you'll see the word "discriminated." Jesus Christ is the Lord of Glory, and He is glorious beyond belief. In the light of His glory, all humanity is flawed and marred and wanting and needy. What right do we have to judge one another on external things when all of us fall so far short of the glory of Jesus Christ?

There are a lot of different ways of defining favoritism and discrimination, but let me give you a simple way of looking at it. It is when something that we notice on the outside of a person keeps us from loving the inside of that person. This is the principle that James is laying down. It's very similar to what the Lord told Samuel in 1 Samuel 16, when Samuel was comparing Jesse's sons. The Lord said, "Do not consider his appearance or his height... Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Favoritism and discrimination is when something that we notice on the outside of a person keeps us from loving the inside of that person. It might be skin color or it might be body piercing or tattoos. It might be age or size. It might be related to health and disability issues. It might be style of clothing or language or accents or dialects. It might be how handsome or beautiful or how repellent or unattractive someone is. But anytime we let something we notice on the outside of a person keeps us from loving the inside of a person, that's wrong.

The Application: Economic Status (vv. 2-7)

Now, James has a particular application in mind. Look at verse 2: Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing the fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but you say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

And he's going to go on to tell us that the Lord doesn't look at people based on their economic status or their affluence of clothing.

God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith, and we should treat people the same whether they have one dollar or one million dollars. The writer of this book, James, was the Bishop of the Church in Jerusalem, and we know from Paul's writings that the churches in Judea were full of poverty-stricken, needy people. In fact, during his third missionary journey, Paul took up a special offering from the Gentile churches of Greece to help the desperate church of Judea. But here and there were some Judean Christians with money, and throughout the Roman Empire were some Gentile Christians with money. But James was saying that no one's love and acceptance and leadership and status in the church should be based on his or her economic status.

Sometimes the poorest saints are the greatest of Christian leaders. Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised to those who love Him?

So James is applying the principle of discrimination to economic discrimination, but the principle is equally applicable to other areas.

His principle is transferable to every external situation in life. In our own nation—the most enlightened nation in history and a nation that is based on Judaeo-Christian ethics—it has taken us 200 years to come to grips with racial discrimination, and we still have a long way to go. I want to confess to you that I'm been a little naïve about the level of racial discrimination that we face in our

country. I'm ashamed to admit it, but there it is. I just haven't realized how badly some people are treated.

But I want to tell you something that happened to me last September. I drove over to the Green Hills to meet someone at a coffee house. I arrived early, so I started browsing in one of the stores across the street. I was the only customer in the store, and the old fellow who owned the store approached me. I told him I had just a few minutes and wanted to browse.

He was eager to show me a particular product he carried, and that was okay with me, so I listened to his sales pitch. But as he was showing this item to me, another customer entered the store. The new customer was African-American, and he walked up to the counter and waited. We were about a dozen feet away.

I told the owner, "Why don't you go ahead and wait on that man. I'm just browsing." But the owner said, "He can wait." I looked over at the other man, and, addressing the owner, he said, "Sir, I just have a question." The owner said, "I'll be with you in a moment. I'm talking to this customer."

I said, "You go ahead and help that man. I'm just killing time." But the owner said, "I'm going to finish with you first. He can wait."

The other gentleman said, "I only have a quick question; it'll take a second." The owner turned to the man and said angrily, "I told you that I will wait on you when I am finished with this man," pointing to me.

The customer protested, "But he just said he didn't mind if you took a moment to answer my question." The old man flared up and said, "Look, don't you see I'm waiting on this man? I'll get to you when I want to."

Well, these two men got into a heated argument, and I just stood there bewildered. Finally the black man looked at me and said, "This is why Nashville is still simmering with racism, even after all these years. This is what I have to put up with all the time." And he stormed out of the store.

Now, as I said I'm a little naive about these things. I thought to myself, "I'm not sure if it was racism or if this man is just a rude angry man." He turned back to me in an agitated shape and tried to resume his conversation, but my mind was trying to process what I'd just seen. Was it just plain rudeness or was it rudeness based on racism?

Just then, two older white women who looked like they had a lot of money came into the store, and the old man dropped me like a biscuit and went running after them. And suddenly I saw just as clear as crystal that it was all about the color of that man's skin. I realized that this sort of thing goes on all the time; and if I had it to over again, I would have rebuked that man to his face; and I would have gone over and shaken the other man's hand and walked out of the store with him.

The Royal Law: Love Your Neighbor (vv. 8-11)

Now in the next paragraph, James is going to explain why discrimination and favoritism is so terrible. In verse 1, he states his principle. In verses 2-7, he applies it using economic status as an example. But in verses 8-11, he's going to explain it. Favoritism is a terrible thing because violates what James calls "The Royal Law of Scripture."

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

And then he says in verse 12: Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

If we did a survey and asked people in an average church, "What is the Royal Law of Scripture"—what would they say. We know the Golden Rule. We know the Ten Commandments. We know the Great Commission. But what is the Royal Law of Scripture? It's the command: Love your neighbor as yourself. When we begin loving people regardless of what they look like on the outside, when we begin loving others as ourselves, it will make a difference and we'll see more and more souls who are saved.

Today I'd like to end my message by showing you a picture on the screen. It was painted about a hundred years ago by a popular artist named "Thomas Hemy," and the title of the painting is "And Every Soul Was Saved." It's about a group of immigrants who sailed on the Danmark from Copenhagen in March of 1889. Over 700 people were on board, including 65 children and 22 babies. A couple of weeks into the voyage, disaster struck. The main shaft of the ship broke and knocked a hole into the ship's bottom. They were stranded in the middle of the ocean in rough waters. The sea was churning, and the immigrants were facing a terrible death. For 24 hours no one slept. They prayed and sang hymns and whispered together in groups.

And then out of nowhere another ship was spotted. It was a British cargo ship, the Missouri. Captain Hamilton Murrell and his crew spotted the disabled vessel, which was flying a flag of distress. Captain Murrell's ship was loaded with cargo bound for Philadelphia, and so he offered to tow the Danmark to the nearest port. A tow line was attached, and the Missouri changed direction toward the nearest harbor. But the winds were tremendous and the seas were rough. Progress was slow.

Suddenly word came that the Danmark was taking on more water and appeared to be sinking. The seas were rough, but instantly Captain Murrell ordered the cargo be thrown overboard and the lifeboats dispatched. The woman and children were rescued first, especially 22 babies who were packed into a large basket, secured in the lifeboat, taken to the enormous sides of the Missouri, and hauled up by rope-bearing sailors. When the babies reached the deck, they were lifted out of the basket and started rolling around the pitching deck like bowling balls, all mixed up; and they all looked exactly alike to Captain Murrell, who was a bachelor, and he wondered how the mothers would ever sort them all out again. But then the mothers were hauled up, and each one quickly identified her own baby without a single dispute as to ownership.

Then came the rest of the women, and then the men, and finally the crew of the Danmark, just as it was sinking into the turbulent waters. Every passenger's story was a miracle because of the stormy conditions and the mountainous swells of the ocean. But over 700 people were saved by a Captain who instantly and willingly threw his cargo overboard to save them.

When the Missouri arrived in Philadelphia with its incredible news, the story was flashed around the world, and it was the subject of every conversation and the headlines of every newspaper. In his painting, you can see the basket of babies being lifted upward while the anxious mothers watch and pray.

And the artist, Thomas Hemy, called his painting, "And Every Soul Was Saved."

We're in a world of sinking ships, and if we're going to save souls, we've got to throw our favoritism and prejudice and discrimination overboard. Every one of us in this room has some area of prejudice in our lives. There are some people that I avoid just because of how they look. But every soul is precious in God's sight and Jesus went to the poor, to the aged, to the diseased, to the infirm, to the lepers, to the needy, to the downcast, to the outcast, to the castaways, and he drew them into the ship of salvation.

Let's come to the foot of the cross and rediscover the royal law of Scripture—and love our neighbors as ourselves

## **FAITH THAT'S WORTH SOMETHING**

### **James 2:14-26**

Recently we've been greatly encouraged by the reports of what our LifeGroups and our members have been doing in a benevolent way to touch this world by meeting needs in human lives. Recently, for example, three members of our church returned from a ten-day trip to the Ivory Coast of West Africa with The Hannah Project, the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) that we support.

This trip involved three members from our church and a number of people from other churches, including doctors, nurses, emergency personnel, builders, and volunteers. The stories of what they did are incredible. They treated one boy who had been crippled by a fall from a tree and who was suffering from large bedsores and infected feet and toes. They treated a woman who actually had a broken rib protruding from her skin. They operated on an elderly man who had been injured in a car wreck ten years ago and was still suffering from a severely twisted leg and knee problem. They removed a cyst from the face of a feisty little boy.

Day after day in primitive conditions they performed operations, administered first aid, treated patients, diagnosed eye problems, gave out glasses, and even painted a local school and built a basketball court. And during all of it, they shared the Gospel and saw souls won to Christ.

It was Faith in Action, and this is the kind of faith the New Testament talks about. We're in a series of messages from the book of James, and today we're coming to the last half of chapter 2 of this book. What James has to say in this chapter is that the faith that saves us must be an active faith, a real faith, a faith that demonstrates itself in good works. We aren't saved by good works. We're saved by faith alone; but the faith that saves us is a faith that demonstrates itself every day. The passage we're studying this morning is at the very core of the book of James, chapter 2, verses 14-26:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his

physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteousness for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Now, it’s not hard to spot the main point that James is driving home. It’s the main point of this paragraph, and it’s the main point of the entire book. Notice how James repeats himself to make sure we don’t miss his emphasis:

- What good is it if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?—v. 14
- Faith by itself if not accompanied by action, is dead—v. 17
- Faith without deeds is useless—v. 20
- Faith without works is dead—v. 26

Now, James is not saying that we are saved by works; we are saved by faith alone. The point James is making is that true saving faith will manifest itself by works. We are not saved by works, but we are saved by a faith that is active enough to produce works. We aren’t saved because we feed the poor and come to church and keep the ordinances. We can never work our way into God’s favor by our own efforts, for our very hearts are sinful beyond measure. We are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ, which He accomplished when He died on the cross and rose from the dead. We are saved by the blood of the Crucified One. But it’s got to be real faith, and real faith is not passive faith; it’s an active one. Look at the way James unfolds this.

It’s Not Enough to Verbally Believe (vv. 14-17)

First, in verses 14-17, he tells us that it’s not enough just to claim that we believe: What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

There’s the principle—it’s not enough just to claim that we believe. Lots of people call themselves Christians. Lots of people go to church and claim to be followers of Christ. But that’s not enough. If we have true saving faith, it will be demonstrated by our compassion for others, by our love, by our concern for the needs of others, by our charity and willingness to help those in need. Let’s read on:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

To most of us, this seems like common societal sense. We may not always live up to this standard, but it seems reasonable to us. It seems Christian, Christlike, and compassionate. But when James wrote this, his words represented a radical change from the prevailing attitude of Roman society.

Many of us don’t realize how Christianity transformed western society into a culture of compassion. In the days of Jesus and of James, the world was a brutal place and human life cheap. The Greco-Roman world was cruel, and life was expendable. For example, the killing of babies was widespread. If a child was deformed or physically frail, that child would typically be killed. The Roman statesman Seneca wrote, “We drown children who at birth are weakly and abnormal.” They had no sense of compassion on a child who could not grow up to be, in their view, a productive member of society.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world of Jesus and the apostles, there was no compassion or charity for the sick and dying. If you had a disease, it was better to perish and get out of everyone’s way, or else you’d be a burden to society. Even Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, said that when a poor man—especially a slave—was no longer able to work because of age or sickness, he should be left to die.

In those days without sanitation and with crowded conditions in the cities, there would be terrible outbreaks of the plague, but there was no one willing to care for the sick. The wealthy would flee to their homes in the country and the sick would be isolated so as not to contaminate the rest of the population.

And then there was the brutality of gladiatorial games. Great crowds of Romans gathered in their stadiums and watched people mauled and mangled and gored to death. One writer said that these games illustrate the complete pitiless spirit and carelessness of human life. The agonizing deaths, the flow of human blood, and the barbaric cruelty didn't bother the crowd at all. Instead the crowd would cry, "Lash him! Brand him! Kill him!" And the crowds cheered to see people stabbed to death or torn apart by wild animals.

Several years ago, Katrina and I visited Rome and we toured the ancient Coliseum that was built in the days immediately following the deaths of Peter and Paul. When that Coliseum was inaugurated by Emperor Titus in AD 80, 5000 wild animals were killed in one day along with an unknown number of gladiators whose blood saturated the sand.

Slavery was so widespread that the entire Roman economy was dependant on it. Torture was a way of life in the Roman legal system, and Josephus tells of mass crucifixions. The Roman roads were lined with crosses on which people were slowly writhing in agony, sometimes for days, before they died.

And into this compassionless, corrupt, cruel world, Jesus Christ came caring for the sick, the aged, the lepers, the downcast, the outcast, and the castaways. He said that if we perform an act of compassion for the least individual in human society, we've done it unto Him. James drove home the advice by telling us repeatedly in his book to care for the widows and orphans, and to respond to those who approach us in need.

This was a new way of thinking. The early Christians shocked the world by bringing to it a care and a concern for widows and orphans and the sick and aged and needy and dying. Roman society was astounded that when the plague hit and the black death came that Christians would enter infected houses to care for the sick. In fact, one writer has suggested that this had much to do with the growth of Christianity.

"The care Christians showed often did result in their succumbing to the plague themselves. But paradoxically, their compassion did not deplete Christian ranks in the long term—quite the reverse. Tending to the sick increased the disease survival rate by as much as two-thirds, and this witness attracted many new converts. By acting on the teachings of Christ, without regard to their own welfare, these Christians, against all expectations, progressed from being a small sect to the dominant cultural force." (Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), p. 17.)

We have the story of one Roman soldier in the army of Emperor Constantine, a man named Pachomius, who had been swept up and drafted against his will. All he had ever seen was brutality and hardness of heart. And then he observed some Christians bringing food to his fellow soldiers who were afflicted with famine and disease. He asked about these people and was told they were Christians, and that their faith caused them to care for those in need. He had never heard of such a thing. He had never seen such a thing. He had never imagined such a thing. He investigated these people, learned about their faith, and became a Christian himself.

One of the most interesting statements about this that I've ever read is in Dr. Alvin J. Schmidt's book, *How Christianity Changed the World*: "When modern secularists show compassion today upon seeing or hearing of some great human tragedy—for example, massive starvation, earthquake, disasters, mass murders—they show that they have unknowingly internalized Christianity's concept of compassion. Even so-called objective news reporters often find it difficult to hide their emotions when they report major calamities on radio or television. But had those reporters not grown up under the two-thousand-year-old umbrella of Christianity's compassionate influence, they would probably be without much compassion, similar to the ancient Greeks, Romans, and others. As Josiah Stamp has said, 'Christian ideals have permeated society until non-Christians who claim to live a "decent life" without religion, have forgotten the origin of the very content and context of their "decency."'" (Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 131. I am indebted to Professor Schmidt for some of the insights I relate in this section of the message.)

In Charles Colson's new book, *The Faith*, he tells about his organization Prison Fellowship, which is devoted to reaching prisoners who are incarcerated in prisons around the world and to caring for their families. One of the adjuncts of their ministry is what they call their Angel Tree program, which is very much like the one we sponsor here every Christmas, but with a difference. They ask volunteers to buy gifts for the children of men and women who are locked away in prison. Up in Oregon there was a small church that participated in this program, and one Sunday the pastor opened his study door and there were three small children: a five-year-

old old boy, with his three-year-old brother, and his two-year-old sister. The oldest looked up and asked shyly, “Mister, can we see the church that brought us those Christmas presents?”

The pastor immediately knew who these children were. Their father was locked up in prison and their mother was involved in drugs and prostitution. “Of course you can see the church,” he said. “Come on in.” He gave them a tour of the building and the children seemed happy and were on their way.

But fifteen minutes later, they were back at the door. “What time does church start?”

“In an hour.”

“We’ll be back.” And the kids scampered away once more.

Fifteen minutes later they were back again, this time with another question: “Is it okay for a person to come to church if his socks don’t match?”

“Of course,” said the pastor.

“What about if he doesn’t have any socks? Mine don’t match. My brother, he don’t have any.”

“You look more than fine to me,” said the pastor. “Let me find you a seat.” A couple sitting nearby helped the children through the service, but they were puzzled by a brown paper bag the oldest boy was clutching. It turned out to contain one hot dog. The children were worried the service would last too long and had brought a lunch. They had planned to split the hot dog among the three of them. Well, the church informally adopted those children and they became a permanent part of the congregation. Christians found them in their need, reached out in love, and gave them a structure and a message of hope in their lives. (Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), p. 157.)

So James says, “It’s not enough just to claim to believe; but how do you treat someone who’s sick? How do you respond to a legitimate need? How do you endeavor to meet the needs of others? How do you care for the sick, the orphans, and the widows.

*It’s Not Enough to Intellectually Believe* (vv. 18-19)

Second, it’s not enough just to intellectually believe. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe there is one God. Good!

Monotheism—the belief in one God—is at the core of both the Jewish and the Christian faith. It’s good to believe in one’s mind that there is one God. So far so good. But it is not enough.

Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

From time to time we read of surveys in the newspaper or magazines trying to chart the religious trends of the nation. A surveyor will ask a sampling of people, “Do you believe in God? Do you believe in Jesus?” And a large percentage of Americans will say, “Yes, I believe in God and I believe in Jesus.”

If our surveyor asked that question of the devil or of any of the innumerable hosts of demons, the answer would be, “Yes. We believe in God. We believe in Jesus.” In fact, there are illustrations of that in the Gospels. Do you remember reading about times when Jesus would approach someone who was demon possessed, and the demon would cry out in fear, as in Mark 1:24: What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

The devil and the demons are very religious in terms of their intellectual beliefs. But when the Bible talks about true faith and saving faith, it’s talking about more than the mere intellectual assent or acknowledgement.

*It’s Not Enough to Passively Believe* (vv. 20-26)

Third and finally, James said that it’s not enough to just passively believe. Look at verse 20: You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

And now he’s going to use two examples from the Old Testament, and he chooses two people from opposite ends of the social and

spiritual spectrum—a patriarch and a prostitute. One is a Jew; in fact, he's the father of Judaism. The other person is a Gentile. One is a man and the other is a woman. But both people were heroes of the faith, and neither had a passive faith. They had a faith that was demonstrated by their courage and actions.

First, James brings us Abraham, who was also Paul's great example of faith in Romans 4: Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

In other words, when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham believed that God knew what He was doing. Abraham believed that God had a plan. Abraham believed that God would fulfill His promises made to and through Isaac. And Abraham believed that God could raise the dead, if necessary. And so Abraham acted on his faith, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

His second example is Rahab, from the book of Joshua, chapter 2. I don't have time to tell the story, but suffice it to say that Rahab believed God and she believed that God was going to give the Promised Land to the descendants of Abraham as He had said. She also believed that God could save her and her family. And so at great personal risk, she hid the two spies and later tied a scarlet cord to her window as instructed.

It's not enough to say that you believe. It's not enough just to call yourself a Christian. It's not even enough to intellectually believe. It's not enough to have a quiet passive faith that never manifests itself in obedience or good works. We need a faith that shows itself in courage, in obedience, in charity, and in good works.

And it begins when we take a concrete step of making Jesus Christ the Lord and Master of our lives. Perhaps you've thought that you had faith in Christ, but it's been a verbal faith, an intellectual faith, a passive faith, but not an active faith of trust and obedience. The Lord Jesus bids us come, to follow Him, and open the door of our hearts, and to say, "Now, Lord Jesus, out of sheer faith, I follow You; I commit myself to a life of obedience and service."

That's a faith that's worth something!

## WHATEVER YOU DO

### James 2:26

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. James 2:26

Today we're coming to the end of our series of messages entitled 365: Obedience for Everyday Living, from James 1 and 2. Next Sunday is Easter and I'm planning to preach an evangelistic message from John 3:16, so I hope you'll bring your friends with you. And then two weeks from today, on the Sunday after Easter, Lord willing, I'd like to begin a new series of messages from James 3, 4, and 5 entitled Faith in Action. And in that way we'll complete our study through the book of James.

It's taken us ten Sundays and ten messages to look at chapters 1 and 2 of James, but we can say that the theme of the book is summarized in the verse we're looking at today: For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. James is interested in making sure that our faith is not just a verbal faith, or an intellectual faith, or a passive faith. He wants our faith to be the determining force in our lives; it should permeate whatever we do.

The message of the book of James is that our Christian faith cannot be compartmentalized. It can't be relegated to church or to Sunday mornings. It's got to kick in on Mondays and Tuesdays and every day of the week. It's got to work in a demonstratable way at school and on the basketball court and on the golf course and at home.

In America today, there is still a very high percentage of people who believe in God and who go to church, and yet all of us see the corruption of our society and of our culture. There is a disconnect for many people in our society between their belief in God and their everyday values and words and actions. But the core teaching of the book of James is that our faith should be pervasive, that it should radiate into every area of our lives.

Now today's message is a little different. Instead of giving you an exposition of the passage as we've been doing week after week in James, I'd like to show you a phrase that occurs repeatedly in the Bible. I want to read a series of verses from a number of

translations so you'll see the preponderance of this emphasis in Scripture, and then we'll focus on the three verses in the New Testament. Listen to these passages and notice how all-inclusive the Christian faith should be in our lives:

If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully keep all His commands that I am giving you today.... Wherever you go and whatever you do, you will be blessed.

Deuteronomy 28:1, 6 (NLT)

This book of instruction must not depart from your mouth; you are to recite it day and night, so that you may carefully observe everything written in it. For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do.

Joshua 1:8 (HCSB)

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.

Proverbs 16:3 (NIV)

Plan carefully what you do, and whatever you do will turn out right.

Proverbs 4:26 (GNT)

Work hard at whatever you do.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 (GNT)

...do faithfully whatever you do...

3 John 5 (NRSV)

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Colossians 3:23 (NIV)

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Colossians 3:17 (NIV)

Remember that God is going to judge you for whatever you do.

Ecclesiastes 11:9 (GNT)

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)

The Bible says, Whatever you do... whatever you do... whatever you do... The life of faith is not confined to an hour on Sunday morning; it isn't merely a verbal or intellectual or passive faith. It is pervasive, it radiates through whatever we do. Now, let's just take three of those verses and apply them with an emphasis on total-life faith. The apostle Paul used the phrase whatever you do on three occasions, and two of those were in one chapter, Colossians 3:17:

Whatever You Do, Do It Thankfully

(Colossians 3:17)

First, whatever you do, do it thankfully. Look at Colossians 3:17: And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Whatever we do—whether it's a word that we say or some action that we undertake—we're to do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, as Christ's ambassador, as though Christ Himself were doing it, as a Christian. And we should speak that word or perform that task with a spirit of thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving transforms every word and deed and day into something special.

Recently at a used book store I picked a volume of poems by Helen Steiner Rice, and I've enjoyed them so much. I didn't know much about Mrs. Rice, but let me tell you a little about her story. Helen Steiner was born in Ohio in 1900, and in high school she dreamed of going on to college and of running for Congress—lofty ideas for a woman in the early years of the twentieth century. But her father's death in the flu epidemic of 1918 changed all that, for she had to become the family breadwinner. She eventually became the spokesperson for an electric light and power country and traveled across America giving speeches on the advantages of

having electricity in the home.

After several years, she opened her own speaker's bureau and became a popular motivational speaker. While on a gig in Dayton, Ohio, she met her future husband, banking executive Franklin Rice, and the two were married in 1929, just in time to lose everything in the stock market crash and Great Depression. While Franklin, having lost his job, sank into despair, Helen went out and found a job as the "Ambassador of Sunshine" for the Gibson Art Company in Cincinnati. One day in October of 1932, as she was at work in Cincinnati, Franklin committed suicide and left her a widow at age 32.

Shortly afterward when the greeting card editor at Gibson died suddenly, Helen applied for the job, and for the next forty years she churned out cards, verses, and poems like an assembly line—over two million of them by one estimation. There were poems for every occasion—Christmas, birthdays, Easter, graduation, funerals, weddings, and holidays. Since Gibson frowned on religious sentiments, most of Rice's poems were sentimental and secular. But in the 1960s, she began writing poems expressing the truths of Scripture. When one of them, "The Priceless Gift of Christmas," was read nationwide on the Lawrence Welk Show, Helen Steiner Rice became a household name, and she was soon known as "America's Poet Laureate of Inspirational Verse." Books of her poems hit the shelves of bookstores around the world, and her time was consumed in writing poems and in responding personally to her reading public.

Late in life, Helen suffered from increasingly painful and crippling arthritis, and at about age eighty she had to give up her work. "I'm ready to go be with the Lord," she told one visitor in her convalescent home. "I can't wait to shed this aching body.... I'm ready for heaven." She passed away on April 23, 1981.

One of her poems is entitled Make Every Day Thanksgiving:

Thank you, God, for everything—  
the big things and the small,  
For every good gift comes from God—  
the giver of them all,  
Too often we accept  
without any thanks or praise  
The gifts God sends as blessings  
each day in many ways,  
O, make us more aware, dear God,  
of little daily graces  
That come to us with sweet surprise  
from never-dreamed-of places,  
And help us to remember  
that the key to life and living  
Is to make each prayer a prayer of thanks  
and every day THANKSGIVING.

(Helen Steiner Rice, Poems of Faith (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 1981), 143.)

That's a life of faith; that's faith in action. Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, so it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Whatever You Do, Do It Wholeheartedly  
(Colossians 3:23)

Second, whatever you do, do it faithfully, wholeheartedly, and enthusiastically. Glance down the page and look at Colossians 3:23: Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

The remarkable thing about this passage is that it was addressed originally to those in the Roman Empire who were slaves. You see, this is the section of Colossians in which Paul is giving instructions to various groups. In verse 18, he speaks to wives. In verse 19, he speaks to husbands. In verse 20, he speaks to children. In verse 21, he speaks to fathers. And in verses 22 he speaks to slaves, and then in chapter 4, verse 1, he addresses masters. So in verses 22 and following, he wrote: Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence to the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

The Romans practiced slavery, and widespread segments of the population were in the bondage of slavery. But the Apostle Paul said, "Even if you're a slave, do your work with enthusiasm. Do it the best you can. Do it for the Lord, not for your earthly master, and God will reward you with a rich inheritance."

This is a phenomenal message: Wherever you find yourself, do it with all your heart. If you're a student, be the best student you can be. If you're a homemaker, be the best homemaker you can be. If you're a factory worker, or a white collar worker, or a sales representative, or a choir member, or a nursery worker, or a professional athlete—whatever you do, do it with enthusiasm. Do it wholeheartedly. And do it for the Lord, and not for men, for it is the Lord Christ you are serving; and from Him you will receive an eternal inheritance.

Maybe you're saying, "I hate my job. How can I be enthusiastic about it?" Well, one way is to start acting as if you were enthusiastic. When we think of enthusiasm as it relates to American presidential history, we think of Teddy Roosevelt, who tackled whatever he was doing with a burst of enthusiasm and courage that was just spectacular. Where did that come from?

Roosevelt grew up as a sickly and awkward boy who suffered terribly from asthma. But as a boy he read a passage in a book that made a deep impression on him. In that passage, the captain of some small British man-of-war ship explained to one of his sailors how to acquire the quality of strength and fearlessness. In this story that TR read, the captain said that at the outset almost every man is frightened when he goes into war and into action, but "the course to follow is for the man to keep such a grip on himself that he can act just as if he were not frightened. After keeping this up long enough, it changes from pretence to reality, and the man does in very fact become fearless by sheer dint of practicing fearlessness when he does not feel it."

Roosevelt said, "This was the theory upon which I went. There were all kinds of things of which I was afraid at first, ranging from grizzly bears to 'mean' horses and gun-fighters; but by acting as if I was not afraid I gradually ceased to be afraid." (Quoted by Dorothy Carnegie in Dale Carnegie's Scrapbook (Garden City, NJ: 1959), 15.)

The same theory holds true with enthusiasm, and it is a faith-action for Christ. The Bible tells us that when we're in the will of the Lord, we should work at whatever we do with all our heart as working for Christ. We should do it wholeheartedly and enthusiastically, and so by faith we plunge in. And we work hard. And we work faithfully. And we work enthusiastically. And we work for the Lord Christ. And from the Lord Christ comes the strength and the enthusiasm and the fearlessness and the reward.

So here are two qualities—enthusiasm and thanksgiving—that are the most powerful psychological and spiritual attitudes known to us. Enthusiasm and thanksgiving can alter any personality, improve any life, and transform any home. But there's a third quality, a third "whatever you do" statement in the writings of the apostle Paul.

Whatever You Do, Do It Worshipfully

(1 Corinthians 10:31)

Look at 1 Corinthians 10:31: So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Whatever we do, we should do it worshipfully. All of life is an act of worship. Even the smallest things we do every day—eating a snack, having a drink at the water fountain, sitting down for supper—whatever we do, we should do it for God's glory. All of life is doxology.

That means that upon awakening in the morning, we praise God from whom all blessings flow. We bathe and dress that we might be presentable in our service for the Lord. We eat and drink, asking God to bless the food for our bodies, and our bodies for His service. As we go about our housework or labor at office, factory, or school, it's as His ambassador. Our exercise and entertainment is purposeful—that we might remain healthy and happy in our service for Him. Crawling into bed at night, it's another day finished for Jesus and we fall asleep praising Him the goodness and mercy that follows us all our days.

Worship is a lifestyle, and our every moment and movement is for Him. This is, in Charles Spurgeon's phrase, the art of holy and happy living.

This was one of the great discoveries of the reformation. One of the great Reformation phrases that will ring throughout the church as long as the church endures was *Soli Deo Gloria*—To God Alone Be the Glory. When Martin Luther and the Reformers launched the Reformation in 1517, at that time there was a Latin word that was used to designate the ministry. It was the *Latinvocat*io, which meant calling. Our English word vocation is the exact transliteration of this word.

In the Middle Ages, when someone talked about vocation (vocation), it was always referring to the calling to fulltime church work.

Priests, nuns, and monks had a special calling, a special task, a vocatio. But Luther said, in effect, that whatever vocation God leads us into, whatever our calling in life, whatever our work, it is a holy calling. If God calls you to be a teacher or builder or accountant or plumber or truck driver, that's where He wants you to serve Him, to bear witness for Him, and that is a holy and an honorable calling. That is your vocatio, your vocation, your calling. All of life should be lived for the glory of God alone—Soli Deo Gloria.

That's why, later, another German, the musician Johann Sebastian Bach, considered his musical skills as a gift from God and his vocation as a musician as a holy calling. And if you go to the British Museum in London and you look at Bach's original scores, you'll notice that at the end of his pieces—whether they were spiritual or secular in nature—are the letters SDG—Soli Deo Gloria—for the glory of God alone.

Stephen J. Nichols, in his excellent little book on the Reformation, observed: "Luther and Bach, both significant figures from the pages of history, remind us that in our seemingly ordinary work and life we are doing something extraordinary. Francis Schaeffer said it well, 'There are no little people, no little places.' When we live life, all of it, for the glory of God, we are engaged in the most profound of activities. We are doing something that matters truly and ultimately. In the service of the glory of God there is nothing little at all." (Stephen J. Nichols, *The Reformation: How A Monk and a Mallet Changed the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 33.)

The English poet George Herbert wrote:

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things Thee to see,  
And what I do in anything  
To do it as for Thee.  
George Herbert

This is what James is talking about in chapters 1 and 2 of his book. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead. Our faith—if it's real—must be pervasive in life. Jesus Christ should be Lord of every day, every moment, every word, and every activity.

And whatever we do, we work at it with all our hearts, as working for the Lord, not for men, since we know that we will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ we are serving.

And whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

And whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do it all for the glory of God

## THE POWER OF OUR WORDS

### James 3:1-12

There has never been a circus on earth like American Presidential campaigns. We're in the middle of one right now. Barack Obama has dazzled audiences with the eloquence of his words, but then his long-time pastor speaks some other words that cause a lot of problems. Hillary Clinton talks about her experiences in Bosnia, but then she has to admit that she misspoke and exaggerated and maybe even lied. John McCain is famous for his straight talk, but his words about being in Iraq for 100 years and not knowing much about the economy have come back to haunt him.

Politicians and their surrogates speak thousands of words every day, and the cameras are just waiting for them to say something wrong—and then it is played over and over and over again on television.

These Presidential campaigns are simply a massive media amplification of our own daily lives. We can do a lot of good with our daily conversations, but we can also cause a lot of problems, and that's the subject we're coming to this morning.

Today we're beginning a new series of springtime messages entitled Faith in Action, from the New Testament book of James,

chapters 3, 4, and 5. And let me take just a moment to remind you of who the writer is. The James that wrote the book of James was very likely the son of Joseph and Mary, the brother (or half-brother) of our Lord Jesus Christ. After the day of Pentecost, he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and when the apostles spread out to various parts of the world, James stayed in Jerusalem and held down the fort until he himself was martyred in AD 62 (according to Josephus). It's possible that this book was written in the 40s, perhaps around AD 45, so it would be among the earliest of the New Testament books, perhaps the earliest of all of them.

The primary point of the book of James is this: The Christian life is a life of faith, but it must be a valid and vital faith. It is not enough to have merely a verbal faith and claim to believe; it isn't enough to have an intellectual faith and to know in your mind that these things are true; it isn't enough to have a passive faith. We've got to have an active faith that demonstrates itself in various ways.

In chapter 1, James said that our faith should demonstrate itself by persevering in trials, getting rid of moral filth, caring for the widows and orphans, and keeping ourselves unspotted from the world.

In chapter 2, James said that our faith should demonstrate itself by treating others without prejudice and discrimination.

Now in chapter 3, he is going to say that our faith in Jesus Christ should have an appreciable effect on the way we speak and the way we use our tongues in daily conversation, and that brings us to our Scripture reading today—James 3:1-12:

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his own body in check.

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider that a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

As we've said earlier in our studies through James, this is a subject that he addresses in every chapter of his book. He is very concerned about what happens when Christians get together and open their mouths. So in every chapter, he warns Christians about their words. I'm not going to trace this theme through the whole book, but I would like to show you how this paragraph unfolds and develops.

The Tongue is an Indicator of our Maturity  
(vv. 1-2)

First, James tells us that our tongue is an indicator of our maturity. James wrote: Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

Notice that word perfect. If we are never at fault in what we say—if we always say the right thing and if we always avoid saying the wrong thing—then we are perfect — τέλειος. The Greek word that James used here means mature. It occurs many times in the New Testament to describe someone who is mature.

James is saying that we shouldn't be teaching others until we've arrived at a certain maturity level ourselves, and our maturity is seen by the way we use our tongues in speaking.

A number of years ago, I was traveling overseas and I became upset at the front desk of the hotel over a particular charge on my bill. The conversation got heated, especially on my side, and I just ranted and raved and gave the man behind the counter fits. As I turned to leave, I saw in the corner of my eye that someone whom I respected had seen the whole thing. I was crestfallen, because I knew that I had acted like an immature child having a temper tantrum.

When you go to a doctor—at least, this was true in the old days—they would tell you to stick out your tongue. The idea was that the appearance and color and coating of your tongue were key indicators of your overall health. Well, James seemed to have felt the same was true of a church or of a family. He could listen in for awhile to the conversations taking place and eavesdrop on the words coming from the mouths of the members of that church, and it would give him a pretty good indication as to the overall health and holiness of that home or of that church.

And in these two verses he is saying two things.

First, you can measure people's maturity by listening to them speak. Second, you need those who are more mature to be teachers; and you can determine that by listening to their words.

#### The Tongue is an Agitator of our Relationships

(vv. 3-8)

In the next series of verses, James is going to tell us that the tongue is an agitator of our relationships. Look at verses 3ff. James is going to use three analogies to tell us that the tongue is a little object but it has enormous power. James compares the tongue to a bit, a rudder, and a spark.

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very strong rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

My wife and I took our daughters to Yellowstone National Park not long after the terrible fires of 1988, and we could not believe the devastation. We drove mile after mile through the valleys and over the mountains and everything was charred. According to an article I later read on this subject, there was one day during this terrible fire season—August 20, 1988—which is now known as Black Saturday because more land burned in that one 24-hour period than had burned in any decade since 1872. Five of these major fires were caused by lightening, but eight of them were caused by humans. For some reason, the manmade fires progressed faster and were harder to contain.

The Bible says that one spark set a whole forest on fire.

James was not the first person in the Bible to compare the words we speak to sparks of fire. There is a very interesting cross-reference to this in the book of Proverbs. Look at Proverbs 26:18: Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, "I was only kidding." Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.

When James tells us to consider what a great forest is set on fire by a tiny spark, here's what he is saying: Consider how many wars have been caused, how many churches have been divided, how many homes have been damaged, how many marriages have been ruined, and how many friendships have been hurt because of careless, thoughtless words.

There was an article this week in the New York Times about bullying, but it wasn't talking about the school yard but the work place. The article said that the dismissive snort, the rolling the eyes, a belligerent tone, challenging words, the harsh sentences—these are the techniques of bullying. The article talked about how widespread this was, especially in academic circles and in the medical profession. I followed the article and the responses to it. Within just a few days, there were nearly 500 stories posted on the New York Times website by people who had been harassed by bullies at work. I want to read you just one of the comments, which was typical of most of them:

As an assistant professor at a nondescript liberal arts college, I was relentlessly bullied by one of my higher ranked colleagues. She harassed me with phone calls to my home about my failings, egged students on to challenge my grading system, ranted at me in the corridors about trivial matters, and unleashed her temperamental disapproval of me in front of my pupils. I complained to an administrator, who told me to forget it. It turned out that the colleague and the supervisor were having an affair. Needless to say, I resigned as soon as I could.

This kind of verbal abuse has proliferated through our society. It's present in the home, at school, in the workplace, and just notice how the pundits and commentators on television tear into one another and get into shouting matches and try to have the last word.

This passage has one message. It tells us not to be that kind of person. James has one instruction for us here, and it's in verse 5: Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

Consider this, think about it, meditate on it, and learn from it. He goes on to warn: All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Only God can tame it. Only Christ can subdue it and use it for good, and that brings us to the last emphasis.

The Tongue is a Revealer of our Hearts  
(vv. 9-12)

The third thing that James says is the tongue is a revealer of our hearts. Look at verses 9ff: With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

James is saying that olives come from olive trees, grapes come from grape vines. You can tell the origin by looking at the produce. And good words come from a good heart. He's really simply restating our Lord's sermon in Matthew 12.

Jesus said in Matthew 12:33: Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

Now, there's one phrase here that I think is extraordinary. It says: The good person brings good things (words) out of the good that is stored up within him.

There we have the answer we need. There we have the secret. How do we tame the tongue? How do we learn to say the right words? How do we learn to keep our mouths shut?

We store up good in our hearts. We store up wisdom. And that's what James is going to say, too. Look at the way he ends the chapter: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done (and words spoken) in the humility that comes from wisdom.

He's going to go on to talk about the wisdom that comes from above, which we'll look at next week.

But for now, let me close with three suggestions.

First, consider what damage your tongue can do. James tells us to consider that and think about it in verse 5. This is especially true for parents. Your children will remember one bitter, harsh, cutting remark that you say to them for years and years and years. But there's a chance they might also remember a compliment or an affirmation. So be aware of the incredible power of the tongue.

Second, study your Bible every day and work on Scripture memory every day. When our minds are filled with Scripture, our words will be wiser and our mouths will be more likely to help and to heal.

Third, think before you speak. Let me close with a positive example. I read an article recently in the magazine, Marriage Partnership. The title of the Article was: "\$30 Changed My Marriage." The writer was a woman named Nancy. She had been married to Kyle for only a few weeks when she ventured out for a day of shopping. "I'm going to the mall," she shouted. Kyle came through the door and smiled at her. Then he said, "You can spend 30 dollars."

Nancy didn't respond well to that instruction. "Thanks," she said. "What does that mean?"

He smiled and said, "It means you can spend 30 dollars. On whatever you want. I've just worked up the budget, and you've got 30 bucks all to yourself."

Nancy was incredulous. She had a long list, and in her mind lunch itself would take a good portion of that 30 dollars. She needed new jeans, a new skirt, a couple of tops, a pair of boots, some new earrings, and a new pair of pajamas.

She clenched her jaw, muttered something, and went out the door for the car. But she spent the afternoon moping through the mall, angry and annoyed. Before she'd married, she could spend whatever she wanted on herself. She was so upset that she left the mall empty-handed and drove home ready to tell Kyle what she thought of his lousy budget.

When she came home, Kyle was nowhere in sight. She rehearsed again what she would say to him, and then she noticed a stack of papers on the kitchen table. The top one was neatly titled "Monthly Budget." She skimmed over it, noticing the utilities and monthly expenses. Finally there was a line that said "Extra Spending Money." Only one item was listed: "Nancy—\$30."

That amount was the only extra spending money they had for the month, and Kyle had given it all to her. Suddenly Nancy felt ashamed of her behavior and sulking, and she regretted all the things she had almost said to him. She knew that Kyle had a long list of things that he would have liked, but instead he had given it all to her.

Nancy grabbed her purse and in fifteen minutes was back at the mall. Making her way to the camping section, she picked out a contraption of some sort that Kyle had been eyeing for several months. That evening, Kyle asked Nancy what she had bought at the mall, and she pulled out her purchase and gave it to him. He was stunned. "This is amazing," he said, "but what did you get for yourself?"

She said, "I got to bless my husband."

She later wrote in the article that it's easy to be selfish in a relationship; that comes naturally to us. But it leads to arguments and fights and bitter words, and those words are sparks that can set the entire home on fire. She was ashamed of her grumbling, but so very thankful that she hadn't said any more than she did, for it would have damaged something that was very precious.

Our tongues are an indicator of our maturity, an agitator of our relationships, and a mirror of our hearts. Let's learn to pray with the man who said, "Lord, set a watch before my mouth and keep the doors of my lips." And let's agree with the Psalmist who prayed: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer

## **WISDOM FROM ABOVE**

### **James 3:13-18**

I want to begin by showing you a picture of a little town in Southwest Montana, a village of just over 100 people. I've never been there, but I like the name of the town and I think I'd like to visit it. This is Wisdom, Montana. It's situated along the trail explored by Lewis and Clark; and, in fact, this town was named "Wisdom" because it grew up beside a river that Meriwether Lewis dubbed the "Wisdom River" in honor of the purported wisdom of President Thomas Jefferson.

Well, this world would be so much better if everyone lived in the town of Wisdom and drank the waters of Wisdom River. Let's think about you and me for a moment. Can you look back over your life and think of something stupid that you said or did? "Oh my goodness, I can't believe that I did anything so stupid!" you might say. "I did a lot of damage. I hurt myself, I hurt others, I made a bad decision, I really messed up."

Or can you think of a time in your life when you really did something smart? "I don't know where I got the wisdom to make that particular decision, but I'm so glad I did. I praise the Lord that I didn't blow it. I acted wisely. I spoke wisely; and looking back I'm thankful a good decision well made."

When we live in the town of Wisdom and drink from the waters of Wisdom River, we make bad decisions less frequently, and we increasingly develop the reputation of being wise, prudent, smart, and trustworthy—people who make good decisions and exhibit good traits.

How do we grow into that? That's the subject of the passage we're coming to today in our ongoing study of the book of James. The first part of chapter 3 is all about the tongue, about the words we speak. James says that our tongues are very small, but capable of doing great damage, like a spark, like a match that we toss in some leaves or a cigarette that someone tosses out a window. What

we need is wisdom in speaking. And so, having dealt with the subject of our words in verses 1-12, he is now going to deal with our wisdom in James 3:13-18:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

One thing that I’ve noticed about James is that his paragraphs are clear, very logical, and easy to follow. For example, in this paragraph, he’s going to give us three notions about wisdom. Let me give you the outline in advance so you can see how it develops in this passage. He’s going to talk about...

- The Embodiment of Wisdom – How can you recognize a wise person
- The Opposite of Wisdom – What happens when wisdom is missing from a person’s life.
- The Qualities of Wisdom – What characterizes a wise person

#### The Embodiment of Wisdom (vv. 13)

Verse 13 opens the paragraph by giving us the embodiment for wisdom, and it begins with a rhetorical question: Who is wise and understanding among you? This letter was written to be read in the first century churches, and so James is making a rather blunt implication. In any given congregation, there are some who are wise and understanding, and there are others who are not. How do you tell one from the other?

Well, that’s a very important question, and so he proceeds to answer it for us: Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Now, I want you to notice this phrase “good life.” Wise people show their wisdom by good living. Here in America we talk about the “Good Life.” I looked up this phrase “the good life” in a Google search and it’s everywhere. It has been used over and over again as the title for songs and television programs and movies and books and plays. It seems to be an ambiguous term for the kind of life that people would like to live. But only the Christian can really live the Good Life, but not even all Christians do. It takes wisdom. Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life.

The Greek word James used was *ναστροφή*. Let him show his wisdom by his good *ναστροφή*. And this is a word that occurs over and over in the New Testament, and especially in the writings of the apostle Peter. It has to do with our lifestyle, our habitual conduct. Let me give you some examples:

- Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; literally, in all your conduct or lifestyle—anastrophe—1 Peter 1:15
- For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life—anastrophe—handed down to you from your forefathers—1 Peter 1:18
- Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us—1 Peter 2:12
- Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives—1 Peter 3:1-2
- Keep a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander—1 Peter 3:16
- He rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men—2 Peter 2:7
- Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives...—2 Peter 3:11

The idea contained in this word has to do with our daily conduct, our lifestyles, our daily demeanor and behavior. Wisdom shows up in our lifestyle. And what kind of lifestyle does James have in mind? Well, let's read on: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Humility is the most elusive of our virtues, because once you recognize you have it, it's gone. I read about the pastor of a large church who went into the church sanctuary one day and threw himself down before the altar and proclaimed, "Lord, I'm nothing!" The associate pastor saw him do that, and he likewise threw himself on the altar and exclaimed, "Lord, I'm nothing!" In the back of the room, the janitor witnessed the scene and right where he was he threw himself down on the floor and cried, "Lord, I'm nothing." The pastor looked over at the associate pastor with a cynical expression and whispered, "Ha! He thinks he's nothing, too!"

Well, we have a better example of good deeds done in humility in the book of Acts, chapter 9:

In Joppa there was a woman named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"

Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

I think that Dorcas is one of the most appealing characters in Scripture and she perfectly embodies what James is saying about wisdom—someone who humbly does deeds for others, who is a servant, who is an encourager, who manages their own lives so well that they become a blessing to others.

The Opposite of Wisdom (vv. 14-16)

Now in the next set of verses in James 3 we have the opposite of wisdom. Look at verse 14: But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

It seems that James might have been concerned about conflicts in the various congregations and churches that he was addressing. There were no chapter divisions in the original text, and you'll notice that this passage goes right on in chapter 4 to say, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" We'll look at this passage next week, Lord willing, but notice that word envy.

We think of envy and jealousy as more-or-less synonyms, but they are actually distinct emotions. Jealousy is the fear of losing something that we have to someone else. If you have a jealous husband, he's afraid of losing you to another man. Envy is when you notice what someone else has and feel frustrated because of it. Aristotle defined envy as "the pain caused by the good fortune of another."

We all battle this sometimes, but James gives us a three point corrective.

First, recognize this as a sin. Don't deny it: But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. I remember reading the memoirs of John W. Peterson, the Christian composer who wrote the song, "It Took a Miracle." At one point in his career, he noticed that other composers and Christian songwriters were gaining prominence and it would frustrate him terribly when their music became as popular (or more popular) than his own. He had this insecure, frustrated feeling down in his heart. But when he finally recognized and identified this feeling as envy and jealousy, he was able to confess it to the Lord for what it was. It was wisdom from below that needed to be replaced with wisdom from above. James warns us not to deny the truth about envy. Be honest and confess it to God when you encounter this emotion.

Second, recognize its source. It's from the devil. Verse 15 says: Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.

Third, recognize the destructive nature of jealousy and envy. Verse 16 says: For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there

you find disorder and every evil practice. I am convinced that if we could trace most of the problems we have in our homes and churches back to their roots, we'd find a streak of jealousy or envy in some heart—and it might be our own. This is the wisdom that comes from below. But now, James wants to go on and describe the wisdom from above. In verses 17-18, we have the qualities or characteristics of true, godly wisdom.

#### The Qualities of Wisdom (vv. 17-18)

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

Literally, this verse says “The wisdom that is coming down from above,” as though it were a stream always flowing from above—Wisdom River. Remember in chapter 1, James said that we can access this stream of wisdom in prayer: “If any of you lack wisdom, ask of God!” And in chapter 1, verse 17, he wrote that every good and perfect gift is from above, from the Father of heavenly lights.”

This kind of wisdom is first of all pure. It's not a polluted stream. It is morally and mentally pure.

Second, it is peace-loving. It doesn't lead to conflict, but it makes relationships harmonious.

Third, it is considerate. Recently there was a letter to an advice columnist in the newspaper. A woman wrote in and said, “I'm 19 and dating a guy who is 23. We've been dating for about six months. I care for this man, but there are times when his behavior bothers me. One minute he is sweet, kind, and considerate. Then something triggers him off and he threatens me, uses bad language toward me, and calls me an idiot. It's almost like he has a split personality.”

Well, that young man isn't drinking from Wisdom River, and that girl had better think twice about continuing in that relationship. The wisdom from above is habitually considerate and kind and gentle.

And then wisdom is submissive. It puts the needs of others first.

It is full of mercy and good fruit. Like Dorcas, it finds ways of helping others and goes around committing random acts of kindness.

It's also impartial. This goes back to his theme in chapter 2 about prejudice and discrimination.

It is sincere. It's not an act, not a put-on. It's the real thing. And it leads to peacefulness.

I read this week the story that was heard on NPR (National Public Radio) about a man named Julio Diaz, who lives in New York City. He's a 31-year-old social worker, and his daily routine is pretty established. He has an hour-long commute each evening from work on the subway, and he typically gets off one exit early to stop by his favorite diner for supper. And then he walks home.

One night not long ago, he stepped off the Number 6 train and the platform was empty. As he was walking toward the stairs, a teenage boy approached him and drew a knife. Julio calmly took out his billfold and handed it to the boy and said, “Here you go.”

As the boy walked away, Julio did something totally unexpected. “Hey, wait a minute,” he said. “You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm.”

The boy turned and said, “What's going on here? Why are you doing this?”

Something told Julio that this boy needed and wanted help. So Julio said, “If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome.”

The two men went to the diner together and sat in a booth. The manager came over and said, “Hi, Julio.” The waiters came by and greeted him, and the dishwashers, and everyone. The boy said, “You know everybody here. Do you own this place?”

“No,” said Julio, “I just eat here a lot.”

“But you're even nice to the dishwasher.”

Julio replied, “Well, haven’t you taught you should be nice to everybody?”

“Yes,” said the boy, “but I didn’t think people actually behaved that way.”

Julio asked the boy what he wanted out of life, and the young man had no answer, just a sad face. The two of them ate together and when the bill came, Julio said, “Look, I guess you’re going to have to pay for this bill ‘cause you have my money and I can’t pay for this. So if you give me my wallet back, I’ll gladly treat you.”

The boy reached into his pocket and handed Julio back his billfold. Julio paid for the bill and gave the boy \$20. But he asked for something more—the young man’s knife, and he gave it to him. Julio later said, “I figure, you know, if you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It’s as simple as it gets in this complicated world.” (<http://www.helpothers.org/story.php?sid=8870>; also <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89164759> )

Well, this being NPR, they didn’t tell us anything about Julio’s spiritual condition or whether or not he was a Christian; but as I heard the story I couldn’t help thinking of our Lord’s words in the Sermon on the Mount, that if someone compels us to go one mile, let’s go two. If someone asks for our coat, let’s give our cloak also.

This obviously isn’t the way to react every time someone pulls a knife on us, but in this case, this young man had the wisdom to know how to react at that particular moment in that particular incident, and it is a perfect example of someone who lives in the town of Wisdom and drinks from Wisdom River.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

## **FIGHTS AND QUARRELS**

### **James 4:1-7**

Today we’re continuing our series of messages, Faith in Action, from the book of James, and we’re coming to the subject of “Fights and Quarrels.” Have you ever been in one of those? James begins chapter 4 of his book by asking, “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” I have a little video here to introduce the subject.

[Following video]: There you have the whole problem with this world—two boys and one remote control. That is a story that has been played out over and over again on the sands of the lands of the Bible, throughout history, and in our modern world today. We’re selfish by nature and even vindictive by nature; and our inner nature leads to endless conflict. Well, let’s read what James had to say on this subject in James, chapter 4:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely? But He gives more grace. That is why Scripture says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God. (James 4:1-7a).

#### **1. Improper Desires Attack Our Souls (v.1)**

One of the things that I have noticed in studying through the book of James is the writer is very concerned about the conditions within the congregations that he is addressing. James wrote this letter because he wanted to have healthy churches and holy

churches. He began his book in chapter 1, verse 1, by saying: James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

Now, we believe that James was the Bishop or the leader of the congregations in Jerusalem and throughout Judea, and so he worked primarily with Jewish people who had accepted Christ as the Messiah. I think that this letter was especially addressed to various churches that were largely Jewish in their ethnicity. He had a burden for the Jews and for Jewish evangelism and for the health of Jewish Christians as they assimilated into Christian congregations. And one of his trademark words is “Brothers.” He keeps addressing his readers as “Brothers” and “Sisters.” And he warns them about attitudes and behaviors that will damage fellowship and harmony in the church.

So in chapter 1 he talked about charity. In chapter 2 he dealt with prejudice and discrimination. He devoted chapter 3 to the damage that can be wrought by the tongue and by foolish words. Here in chapter 4, he’s going to talk about how the unity and love of our homes and churches and relationships can be damaged by improper desires. And the first thing he says is that as Christians we battle improper and inappropriate desires that are warring within us.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from the desires that battle within you?

The word “desire” that James uses here is the Greek term “δὀνη” (he’do-na), from which we get our English word “hedonism.” Every one of us has desires and lusts and passions and feelings and temptations that are inappropriate and unhealthy. James talked about this in chapter 1, if you remember. He said:

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.

Now, here in chapter 4, he picks up the same theme, talking about the desires that battle within us and how it can hurt others. Every one of us has some drives and desires and addictive behaviors in our lives that are unhealthy.

Even the apostle Paul battled this problem. He spoke in Romans 7 about the battles he had with his desires. He said, in effect, “What I want to do, I don’t do; and what I don’t want to do, that’s what I do. There is a war raging within me. It’s as if there’s another person inside me, battling against my better self. Oh, wretched man that I am.”

Paul said in Galatians 5, “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want....”

He goes on to say, “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (The problem, of course, is that our entertainment industry is feeding all these things.)

Paul goes on to say, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control....”

So our hearts and minds are battlefields, and we all struggle with unhealthy desires that war within us. Think for a moment of any unhealthy and inappropriate desires that are battling within you. It may be some desire or lust that is clearly wrong. Or it might be some innocent or commendable desire that just isn’t right for you at this time and which doesn’t represent God’s will for your life.

James begins here with the presupposition that we have improper desires that battle within us, and that’s a presupposition that few of us would debate. We know it’s true.

## 2. Improper Desires Cause Our Quarrels (v. 1-2a)

Now, here is his second point. These improper internal desires are at the root of most of our quarrels and fights. Look again at James 4:1-2: What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight....”

I read this week in the newspaper about a couple who got into an argument about an engagement ring. The man had given her a ring, and she had accepted it; but he was sort of hotheaded, and she began having second thoughts. They went out for dinner and

on the way home he noticed that she wasn't wearing the ring. When they got back to the apartment, they got into a terrible fight about it and he picked up a pair of scissors and now she's dead and he's behind bars.

Well, I think this one passage explains why we have so many prisons in this country. In his book, *The Faith*, Charles Colson talks about visiting a prison in Orange County, California. Huge roles of razor-sharp barbed wire surrounded the facility, which is made up of a complex of one-story buildings, like so many chicken coops. It is California's primary correctional drug rehab facility. As Colson entered the complex, his mind went to the hundreds and thousands of jails and prisons and correctional institutions across our country and he wondered how it could be that a nation as advanced and educated and prosperous as ours could be packing so many men and women into prisons every single day. He went inside where three or four hundred excited inmates were jammed into the chapel. Five minutes into his talk, Colson asked a question that had struck him this morning: "Okay, now, you fellows that are in here, you are the experts. Why is it that we as a nation are filling so many prisons?" Almost immediately a chorus of shouts came back, but it was the same word. All the inmates had the same answer. The one word response was: Sin! Colson was stunned. He said, "I can't imagine any other audience where, if I asked that question, I would get that answer. These men have lived it, though. They know the truth." (Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 75.)

This passage tells us why we have so many broken homes in the world today. It explains why we have so many broken relationships today.

The whole history of the world is explained in these verses. But we can bring it down to our own lives. When I was a student at Columbia International University, I took a course on marriage and family life taught by James Hatch, who was the greatest professor I ever knew. He talked about what a miraculous thing marriage is. You take a man who is intrinsically selfish and self-centered and has been that way all his life; and you take a woman who is the same; and you put them together under the same roof with the understanding that they are to love each other and to care more for the needs of the other than they do for themselves. It's only by the grace of God that this works!

Some years later, after I had taken that course, I read an interview with Professor Hatch in a magazine and he said something that I had never heard him say in class. He was asked about his own marriage, and he said, in effect, "When my wife and I have a problem, it's usually not really a problem between her and me. It's usually a problem between me and the Lord. And if I can get my own heart straightened out toward God, my problem with my wife disappears."

Well, that's the point of this passage in James. First, he tells us that we all have improper desires that battle within us, and then he says that these same improper desires cause problems for us in our relationships and in our world. They cause wars and quarrels among us.

### 3. Improper Desires Hinder Our Prayers (vv. 2b-3)

So our improper desires will battle within us, they will cause quarrels and hurt our relationships, and, third, they will hinder our prayers. Look at the passage again: What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

One of the most enlightening Bible studies you can pursue is the subject of what the Bible says about hindered prayer. Prayer is the most powerful force in the world, but there are some things in our lives that can hinder our prayers and render them powerless. There are a number of verses about this:

Psalm 66:18-20 says: If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld His love from me!

Isaiah 59:1-2 says: Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.

According to Peter, not treating your wife in a considerate way will hinder your prayers. We read in 1 Peter 3:7: Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

But no one in the Bible deals with this subject like James. If ever there was an authority on prayer, it was James. He is known in church history as "Old Camel Knees" because he reportedly had knees as callused as a camel's due to his prayer life. Well, James

gives us three reasons for an ineffective prayer life.

The first is lack of faith. That's in chapter 1: If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given 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.

The second reason for unanswered prayer is lack of asking. James 4:2 says, You do not have because you do not ask. Maybe you have a need in your life, but somehow you have never really thought to bring that need before the Lord and to make it an earnest matter of prayer. You have not because you ask not.

The third reason for unanswered prayer is asking for the wrong motives. James 4:3 goes on to say: When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

#### 4. Improper Desires Destroy Our Spirituality (vv. 4-6)

And that leads to the fourth problem with our unworthy desires—they battle the soul, they harm our relationships, they hinder our prayers, and finally they destroy our spirituality.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely?

That last sentence is a little perplexing. What did James mean by that—The spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely? Commentators agree that this might be the most difficult sentence in the whole book to translate and interpret correctly.

There are two basic possibilities:

The Holy Spirit that God has placed within us is jealous for our godliness and intensely yearns for us to live godly lives; and as we humble ourselves we can draw from the grace of God and overcome these sinful desires.

The human spirits that God placed within us have fallen into sin and are full of envy and jealousy; and we need to humble ourselves and draw on the grace of God to overcome them.

The NIV comes down on the side of the second option. Notice that the word spirit begins with a small s. God made us body and soul. We have a spirit within us. It was created by God who placed it with us. In the book of Genesis, we read that God created Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living soul.

But this spirit within us—our human spirit and our human nature—is full of envy and jealousy and evil desires. But God gives more grace! How do we access it? How do we win the victory? How do we mature and grow in Christ? James gives us a wonderful process here, which we'll look at in greater next Sunday. But let me just outline it for you.

1. Humble yourself
2. Submit to the Lord
3. Resist the devil
4. Draw near to God

That is why Scripture says: God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you.

Someone was talking to me about this passage this week, and he said, "How can I do that? I know these verses, but I still keep giving into those desires that war against my soul. I know I should submit them to God, but I keep falling into sin. How can I get this passage from my head down into my heart and my life?"

Well, you have to come to Christ and give yourself fully to Him. You have to claim these Scriptures and ask God to make them real to you. But I think it also helps to visualize this passage and see yourself in your mind's eye obeying this passage. Meditate on it and visualize yourself as the kind of Christian that you want to be.

I told my friend about Laura Wilkinson, who is a dedicated Christian with a very public testimony. She's also an athlete, a diver from Texas who wanted to be an Olympic champion. For many years, she worked hard to be able to qualify for and to compete in the

2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. And then, as she prepared for the event, she broke three bones in her foot in a training accident and was in a cast for months. She was unable to dive or to be in the water. Being unable to work out, she did the next best thing. Several times a day, Laura used mental imagery to practice her dive. She visualized herself climbing up to the 10-meter platform and walking through the motions of her complex high dives. She would see each split-second of her approach, posture, position, dive, entry into the water, and swim to the side of the pool. Her cast came off just before the Sydney Games, and she went on to compete and to win the first Gold Medal for a female American platform diver in nearly 40 years.

I believe that God expects us to take this passage from James 4 and to visualize it and to personalize it and to make it real in our minds and in our hearts. See yourself a winner for Christ. I believe the Lord Jesus can give us victory, for He gives more grace. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you

## **DRAWING NEAR**

### **James 4:1-10**

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely? But He gives more grace. That is why Scripture says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up (James 4:1-10).

\*\*\*

I don't know if you've ever been over to Athens, Tennessee, but it's a little East Tennessee town between Knoxville and Chattanooga. It's a nice, quiet little place, but they had just a bit of excitement this week. It seems that two men were driving down the road and they ran out of gas. Both of them got out of the car and started walking to the gas station, but along the way they got into a quarrel about who should pay at the pump. The argument became so heated, they got into a terrible fight and one of them stabbed the other with the pocket knife and now both of them are in the Athens jail.

I read another story in the newspaper this week about a couple in Colorado who got into a fight over which gang their son should join. The boy was only four years old, but his unmarried parents belonged to different gangs. The dad belonged to one gang, but the mother wanted her son to belong to a gang she was associated with, because the leader of that gang had written a children's book before he had been executed in prison. The boyfriend stewed about this until he stormed into the video store where his girlfriend worked and flew into a rage. He knocked over displays and sent a computer crashing to the floor and threatened to kill his girlfriend. And now the man's in jail.

And then there was the story out of California about two vagrants who got into a vicious fight over their empty beer cans. They both wanted to take them to the recyclable center and get a little money for them, and now one man is in the hospital with multiple stab wounds and the other's in prison.

Every day we can find stories like these, but in an odd sort of way we can all relate to them. Sometimes the smallest things can set off our temper. My wife and I have never had many arguments and I can't remember the last one we had. But I do remember one or two of them from early in our marriage, and one was a terrible argument over hot chocolate.

There's one psychologist and marriage counselor who calls these things "tremendous trifles." He says that many times our arguments are touched off by minor things—like a tube of toothpaste or a towel on the floor or a minor misunderstanding. But these little incidents are like pricking a balloon. We're all filled with a certain amount of hot air—a certain amount of selfishness or anger or resentment or fatigue or antagonism. And when the right pinprick unleashes all those emotions, it can cause an enormous

amount of damage.

I dare to say that there are some people in this room today who have had a terrible argument recently—maybe with a loved one or maybe at work or school—and it wasn't really about any big issue; it was a small issue, but it tapped into something deeper.

Well, the Bible addresses the subject in the book of James, chapter 4. It's one of the best treatments of this in the Bible. The subject is fights and quarrels. As we saw last week, James blames our fights and quarrels on our internal drives and passions. He approaches this subject in four ways

First, he says that our passions and drives battle within us. They are at war with our souls. And, second, these passions and lusts and drives and desires lead to fights and quarrels with others. Look at verses 1 and 2:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.

Nothing kills a marriage faster than angry and unwise words spoken by angry and unwise people. When a couple gets into an argument, and they both get mad, and they say things that are hurtful to the other person—that always makes things worse. When you say things like, "You're just like your mother.... If you really loved me you'd do this or that... I wish I'd never met you... I don't know if I want to be married to you... Maybe we'd be better off to split up... If that's the way you feel, just leave.... I'm moving out... You're good for nothing... This is all your fault... I hate you..."—those words can never been unsaid. They are spoken out of our wrath, not out of our wisdom, and they can cause damage that takes years to correct.

Third, our passions and drives cause problems with our prayers, too. James goes on to say:

You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Fourth, our passions and drives can diminish our spirituality and make us unspiritual, ungodly people. The passage goes on to say:

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely?

So here you have a summary of what's wrong with our homes, what's wrong with our churches, what's wrong with our society. It reminds me of the famous quote by G.K. Chesterton. When he was asked, "What's wrong with the world?" he answered, "I am."

Well, there's an answer to it, and the great answer is given in Verse 6: But He gives us more grace.

We're saved by grace, but then He gives us more grace so we can grow and be mature and gain wisdom and reflect our Lord Jesus Christ. It takes grace to be saved and to be made right with God, and then it takes more grace to really live for Christ every day. It takes grace to grow to maturity. It takes grace to control our tempers. It takes grace to get along with others. It takes grace to treat people with patience and forbearance and respect. It takes grace and it takes more grace, and He gives more grace.

O to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,  
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.

Do you have a problem with lust? With your temper? With an addiction? With a weakness? Are your internal weaknesses causing external problems? The answer is More Grace. He giveth more grace! So how, then, do we tap into it? How do we claim this grace and activate it in our experience? Well, this passage goes on to give us four vital "To Do's." There are four processes that unleash God's grace in our lives.

#### 1. Humble Yourself (v. 6)

The first is to humble yourself. Verse 6 says: But He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

That means we have to disavow the old Frank Sinatra song that says, “I did it my way.” It means that you have to admit that you’re powerless to change yourself. You have to admit that you are not the greatest thing in the world. You have to admit that the universe doesn’t center on you. You have to admit that your opinion is not infallible. You have to admit that sometimes your husband or wife is right. You have to admit that the Lord is always right. And you have to say, “I’m willing to do it His way.”

Now, I’d like to show you how important this is by taking you on a little tour through the book of 2 Chronicles, which tells the story of the kings of ancient Judah. A year or two ago, as I was studying the book of 2 Chronicles, I came to realize that this book is the Bible authoritative manual on the subject of revival. It’s a book that shows us how a society moves between spiritual revival and moral degradation—and the key thought has to do with the humbling of the heart.

Let’s begin with 2 Chronicles 7:14, which is the Bible’s primary text on the subject of revival: If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

The first step toward healing and revival and spiritual vitality is learning to humble ourselves. Now look at 2 Chronicles 12. Notice how this chapter begins by telling us about a king named Rehoboam: After Rehoboam’s position as king was established and he had become strong, he and all Israel with him abandoned the law of the Lord. Because they had been unfaithful to the Lord, Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem in the fifth year of King Rehoboam....

You see, they got away from the Lord, they got away from the Bible, and their drives and urges and sins and lusts took over, and it led to fights and quarrels and wars. And suddenly they found themselves in a terrible conflict with Egypt. What did they do? Look at verse 6: The leaders of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, “The Lord is just.” When the Lord saw that they humbled themselves, this word of the Lord came to Shemaiah: “Since they have humbled themselves, I will not destroy them but will soon give them deliverance.”

And look down at verse 12: Because Rehoboam humbled himself, the Lord’s anger turned from him, and he was not totally destroyed. Indeed, there was some good in Judah.

Four times the writer says that the king and his advisors humbled themselves, and as they did so the Lord gave them grace. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Now turn over to 2 Chronicles 26, and let me show you another king—Uzziah. It says about him in verse 16: But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. There’s no indication that he humbled himself.

Later, something similar nearly happened to good King Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 32. Look at verse 24-25: In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to the Lord, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah’s heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride in his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the Lord’s wrath did not come upon them during the days of Hezekiah.

Chapter 33 of 2 Chronicles tells the story of the most wicked man in the Bible, King Manasseh. I don’t have time to describe this man to you, but here’s the end of the story. The Lord brought judgment on him and he humbled himself. Look at the way it’s put in 2 Chronicles 33:18ff: The other events of Manasseh’s reign, including his prayer to his God and the words the seers spoke to him in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, are written in the annals of the kings of Israel. His prayer and how God was moved by his entreaty, as well as all his sins and unfaithfulness, and the sites where he built high places and set up Asherah poles and idols before he humbled himself—all are written in the records of the seers.

Continue reading about his son who ascended to the monarchy after Manasseh’s death, in the next paragraph, 2 Chronicles 33:21: Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem two years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshipped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the Lord; Amon increased his guilt.

Now, turn to the next chapter, to 2 Chronicles 34:27. This is the story of King Josiah. As they repaired the temple during his reign, they discovered a copy of the Law of God, and it brought about a revival. There was a prophetess named Huldah and look what she told the king in verses 26ff: Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my

presence, I have heard you, declares the Lord.

And that brings us to the last chapter in this book, to 2 Chronicles 36 and to the terrible story of the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, and to the defeat and destruction of the whole nation. Look at verses 11ff: Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the Lord....

And he was led away in chains, blinded, and came to an ignoble end. This book of 2 Chronicles is a biblical microcosm of this teaching in Scripture. Listen to these other related verses.

- You save the humble—2 Samuel 22:28
- He guides the humble in what is right—Psalm 25:9
- The Lord sustains the humble—Psalm 147:7
- He crowns the humble with salvation—Psalm 149:4
- He mocks the proud but gives grace to the humble—Proverbs 3:34
- With humility comes wisdom—Proverbs 11:2
- Humility comes before honor—Proverbs 15:33
- Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life—Proverbs 22:4
- This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at My word—Isaiah 66:2
- Whoever humbles himself will be exalted—Matthew 23:12
- He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”—James 4:6

## 2. Submit to God

Our second obligation in this process is to submit to God. Going back to James, our text says: He gives more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God.

This has to do with what we sometimes call the Lordship of Christ—letting the Lord Jesus take over and have charge of your life.

Many years ago, when I was just a teenager, I suppose, I came down here to Nashville and attended some meetings at the BibleCollege. I don’t remember the occasion, but I do remember the speaker. It was Dr. Oswald J. Smith, who was pastor of the People’s Church in Toronto. He was a powerful missionary pastor and I still remember parts of his message on that occasion. Well, recently I read his testimony. As a young man, he had taken a missions trip and a number of people had professed faith in Christ. Smith was so overcome and so thrilled that he shortly afterward he knelt down and prayed and wrote these words in his diary: “I am determined that God shall have all there is of Oswald J. Smith.”

As I read those words, it reminded me of something William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, had said years before. Queen Victoria had asked him about the secret of his ministry, and he replied simply, “I guess the reason is because God has all there is of me.”

Does the Lord have all there is of you? Do you belong to Him through and through? Is He the Lord of your life?

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.” Paul said, “I urge you, then, brothers, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies as living sacrifices....” And nothing really goes as it should in our lives until we humble ourselves, draw from God’s grace, and say, “Jesus, be the Lord of all the kingdoms of my heart.”

## 3. Resist the Devil

The third directive is to resist the devil. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

The word “resist” is a Greek word that literally means to be hostile toward. It’s translated three ways in most of our Bibles—to withstand, to oppose, and to resist. This is the same word that Paul used in Ephesians 6, which is really an amplification and an exposition of James 4:7. In other words, Paul takes what James said in James 4:7 and expounds on it:

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground—this phrase about standing your ground is the same Greek word that James translates as resist—and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can

extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

One thing we can say about this is that it takes a whole-hearted effort. We have to really mean it. We have to make up our minds to do or die.

One of the reasons America and the Allies won World War II is they weren't half-hearted in the war effort. The entire American manufacturing industry was mobilized for the war effort. In nine months, for example, a remarkable transformation took place in Detroit in America's automotive factories. Instead of turning out cars, the factories began turning out tanks and planes. The brightest engineers in America figured out how to turn the automobile assembly lines into assembly lines for fighter planes and jeeps and army trucks. It was that way across the nation.

This was even true in my little town of Elizabethton. We had some friends over the other night for supper and they told us the story. In the years prior to World War II, some German engineers and industrialists came to Elizabethton and opened some factories for the manufacture of rayon. They came because the cold mountain water from the rivers was perfect for the manufacturing process, and in these two factories employed 3000 people. It saved the town during the worst years of the Great Depression. When World War II broke out, the factories were conscripted into the war effort and the synthetic fiber was used for parachutes, and from what I've been told every parachute worn by an American serviceman during World War II was made in Elizabethton.

As a result of all this, there were tremendous shortages of domestic goods during World War II. Everything was rationed and very hard to get. But it was an all out effort against the Nazi threat to the world.

You can't win against the devil with a half-hearted attitude. You have to say, "By God's grace and with His help, I'm going to win this battle. I'm going to overcome this temptation. I'm going to fight this addiction or this weakness. God helping me, I will not be defeated by it."

There was a story in the newspaper this week about a young lady from Ohio, an 18-year-old, who won a famous equestrian event in Florida. This race had a \$30,000 prize, and the course involved a set of twisting and turning tracks with several jumps. There were 36 competitors, but this young lady won. Later they asked her how she did it, and she said that she really wanted to win and she had the attitude, "I'm going to do it or die trying."

Have you heard that old expression: Do it or die? It implies an intensity of effort. It implies will power, determination, guts, grit, and an all-out effort. That's what it means to resist the devil.

Peter makes this same point in 1 Peter 5:8-9: Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

Another way we do it is by getting the Scriptures inside of us. Jesus resisted the devil by quoting to him from Deuteronomy.

Another way we do it is by cultivating the practice of praise and worship. Amy Carmichael suggested that when we sing hymns of praise and worship, the devil leaves the room because he cannot stand them.

Another aspect of this is clearing out the trip wires. For example, look at Ephesians 4:

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin." Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

In other words, when you allow resentment and anger to build up, you're giving the devil a foothold in your life.

Let me show you another illustration. In 2 Corinthians 2:10, Paul warns us that if we don't forgive others, the devil will use that unforgiving spirit as a tripwire to defeat us: If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

Let me give you another interesting example in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 7:5, we're told that if we don't have a healthy relationship

with our spouse, the devil will use that to tempt us:

Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

So resisting the devil involves an all-effort coupled with God's help, a determination to withstand him, the judicious use of Scripture, the cultivation of a life of praise and worship, and daily diligence in keeping the tripwires cleared out of our pathway.

But there is a promise attached to it. If we resist the devil, he will flee from us. This isn't because he wants to or because he's afraid of us. It's because of the victory of Jesus Christ, won on the cross and in the tomb. Satan is a defeated enemy, and it's very encouraging to us if we remember that.

#### 4. Draw Near to God

The fourth directive in this passage is to draw near to God. How do we do that? In one sense, we do it through a humble, repentant attitude. James goes on to say: Wash your hands, you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.

But there are other passages in the Bible that gives us additional insights.

Several years ago, I noticed a verse—Deuteronomy 4:7—that, it seemed to me went perfectly with James 4:8. It says:

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?

In other words, God is near to us whenever we pray to Him. Prayer is the means by which we draw near to God. Someone once defined prayer as they way of actualizing God's presence. They said, "The chief purpose of prayer is to recognize the presence of God."

Brother Lawrence said in *The Practice of the Presence of God*: We should establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with Him... Prayer (is) nothing else but a sense of the presence of God.

Psalm 145:18 says this, too: The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call on Him in truth.

And the phrase "in truth" reminds us of the Bible. Nothing is more powerful in helping us draw near to God than the prayerful reading of Scripture.

So James 4 tells us to draw near to God, and Deuteronomy says, "Our God is near us whenever we pray to Him," and Psalm 145 says that the Lord is near to all those who call on Him.

Another aspect of drawing near to God is trusting Him with our concerns. There are a couple of Scripture references that tell us this.

Psalm 75 says: But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge...

And Hebrews 10 says: Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith....

Drawing near to Him involves a life of repentance, prayer, and faith.

#### Conclusion

So here's the conclusion of the whole passage. We have harmful drives and desires that battle against our soul. These also cause fights and quarrels, they hinder our prayers, and they diminish our spirituality. But God has an answer. He gives us overcoming grace. We need grace and we need more grace. And the way to access God's grace is to humble ourselves, submit to His Lordship, resist the devil, and draw near to God.

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!  
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!  
All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near;

Praise Him in glad adoration.

## **FUSSIN', FEUDIN' AND FIGHTIN'**

### **James 4:11-12**

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? James 4:11-12

This is a difficult passage. To me, it's the hardest that we've come to thus far in our study through the book of James. But it's very important, and I'd like to work our way through this word-by-word this morning.

Notice how he begins: Brothers....

That is a special term that James uses over and over again, and it reminds us that he is speaking here to Christians. This passage is not addressed to the unsaved. It isn't for those outside the church. This is a passage for church members.

As I've studied this book week by week for months now in preparation for these messages, the thing that has impressed me the most is how concerned James is for the health of the New Testament churches. Now, remember, it is very likely that James is the first and the earliest of all the New Testament books. The Gospels had not yet been written, so people couldn't read the Sermon on the Mount. The letters of Paul had not been written, so Paul's instructions to the churches weren't available. The apostle John had not yet written his Gospel, his epistles, or his book of Revelation.

So you had many people coming to Christ. You had churches being established. You had congregations being formed. But there was not yet a written body of information or instruction about how these new Christians should relate to one another or conduct themselves in the church.

So James, who was the leader of the churches in Jerusalem, wrote this letter about how these earlier Christians should be putting their faith in action on a daily basis and within the context of the church.

I think that's why he uses the word adelphoi over and over—brothers and sisters.... And every time he uses that word, he goes on to talk about how we should relate to one another as brothers and sisters in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...
- The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position...
- Don't be deceived, my dear brothers...
- My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry...
- My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism...
- Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith...?
- What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?
- Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food...
- Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers....
- Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.
- My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives...?

And now, we come to another passage that opens with this word adelphoi—brothers and sisters, and once again, it has to do with the tongue, with the things that we say, with the words that we speak. You may have noticed that James brings this up again and again. Healthy churches are filled with people who know how to use their words wisely. They draw from wisdom from above. The same is true for homes, families, marriages, work environments. James is desperately concerned that Christians have tongues that speak with wisdom from above, not with wisdom from below.

Now in this paragraph, he's going to be specific. Verse 11 says: Brothers, do not slander one another.

Now, I have a little problem with that word "slander" because I don't think that it really encapsulates all that James intended, based

on the word that he actually used when he wrote this in the Greek language. Our English word slander implies that we are saying something about someone that isn't true. We are spreading a false report. We are defaming someone.

But the word James used is here the word καταλάλω, and it has a broader meaning. For example, look at the very next sentence here in James 4. Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges the law.

Do you see the two words speak against? Anyone who speaks against. That's the very same basic Greek word. In one sentence the translators used the word slander and in the other they used the term speak against.

It has to do with critical, mean, negative talking. It literally means to say bad things against.

Do you remember when you were little and your mother gave this advice to you: "If you can't say something good about someone, don't say anything at all." Well, that's kind of what James is saying here. None of us are perfect, and all of us are open to criticism in multiple ways, but none of us should be running down one another, or speaking critically of our brothers, or spreading false reports.

#### 1. This Does Not Mean....

This does not mean that we should not make moral evaluations or we shouldn't rebuke sin. When he wrote this passage, James was perhaps thinking of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7, in the latter part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged." Now, that statement needs to be studied in its context and interpreted in the light of the whole paragraph that Jesus spoke. But frequently nowadays those words are used against Christians. Let's say you have a militant homosexual who wants to condemn Christians as being intolerant of his sexual activities. He might say, "How dare you judge me? How dare you question my lifestyle or my sexual habits?" Jesus said, 'Judge not, that you be not judged.' You have no right to judge me."

But when Jesus and when James warned us against judging others, they did not mean to say that we could not make moral evaluations and condemn sin. You can go anywhere in the Bible and find preachers and prophets making moral judgments and condemning sin.

Let me give you some simple examples from the Pastoral Epistles. We call 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus the Pastoral Epistles because they were written by Paul to a couple of his fellow-workers, Timothy and Titus, and these letters have to do with pastoral and church-related areas. In all three of them, Paul told his co-workers to be on the lookout for certain people who might worm into the congregation and harm the churches.

Look at the way 1 Timothy begins: As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myth and legend....

Paul was telling Timothy to evaluate and to judge the teachings of the false prophets and to rebuke them.

Look at 2 Timothy 4:9: Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.

This is really a remarkable verse, because it tells us that we can not only evaluate a person's actions, but we can often see into the human heart and discern motives. Paul says something harsh about Demas: "This man has deserted me, and the reason he deserted me is because he loved this present world more than he loved God and more than he loved me." There is a sense in which Paul was judging; he was making a judgment.

Look at the book of Titus, chapter 3, verse 10: Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful.

Paul told Titus to look at this person, to notice that he is divisive, and to warn him; and if the divisive person didn't correct his attitude to have nothing to do with him in the future, for he is a warped and sinful man. That is clearly a case of looking at someone, making a judgment, and confronting a sin.

Now, I could have taken you anywhere in the Bible—to the teaching ministry of Moses, to the sermons of the Old Testament prophets, to the words of Peter and Paul in the book of Acts, or to any of the letters or epistles of the New Testament and given you examples of this. But all the way through the Bible, we're told to make moral evaluations, to condemn sin, and to rebuke sinners.

## 2. This Does Mean...

So clearly James is not forbidding us from doing that. What James is telling us is to avoid the kind of slander and gossip and criticism and harsh words that can damage our relationships and our homes and our churches.

I read a number of commentaries about this, and I was a little surprised at the one I liked the best. It was the old Matthew Henry Commentary. Matthew Henry was a great Bible student who lived 300 years ago and was a popular preacher in London. He started working on a devotional commentary through the Bible, but died in his early 50s before it was completed, and it was later finished by a number of other ministers. I've never used Matthew Henry very much to be honest with you, but sometimes I do check out what he has to say. Let me read you his comments on this passage:

The Greek word... signifies speaking anything that may hurt or injure another. We must not speak evil things of others, though they be true, unless we be called to it, and there be some necessary.... Our lips must be guided by the law of kindness, as well as truth and justice... Since Christians are brethren, they should not defile nor defame one another. It is required of us that we be tender of the good name of our brethren; where we cannot speak well, we had better say nothing than speak evil; we must not take pleasure in making known the faults of others, divulging things that are secret, merely to expose them, nor in making more of their known faults than really they deserve, and, least of all, in making false stories, and spreading things concerning them of which they are altogether innocent.

This is advice that we need in our homes as well as in our churches. I read a story recently about the Christian motivational speaker Zig Ziglar. One day he was scheduled to speak to inmates in a prison in Dallas. He was going to talk about his faith. He took one of the Dallas Cowboys with him, knowing the inmates would be more willing to listen to a professional athlete. During a break Zig asked the football player how he rose to the ranks of professional, and the ball player said, "I can remember my dad telling me when I was just a kid that I was going to be a professional football player. All through my high school career he kept telling me, 'You're going to be a pro some day. I just know it.' Even in college when I had a rough junior year, my dad was still there telling me I was going to make the pros. I never really thought about it, but I became exactly what my dad said I would be."

Zig Ziglar said that without hesitation an inmate, who had been listening in on the conversation, muttered under his breath, "Yeah, so did I."

Here's the question—will my words help or harm that other person? If your words will help the situation or help the other person, then you should probably speak them. If your words will harm the other person or make the situation worse, you should probably keep quiet.

## 3. This Is Important Because...

In the second half of this paragraph, James tells us why this is important: Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

What does this mean? The clearest explanation of James 4 is found in Romans 14, and I hesitate to turn over to that passage because it could take too long, but I'll hurry. Romans 14 is Paul's version of James 4. Paul's subject here is what to do when people in the church disagree over certain issues. What do you do about church disagreements? He lists two of them. The first is eating meat. Some Christians in the first century were vegetarians, probably because the meat in the meat markets back then had likely come from the pagan temples where animals were sacrificed to the gods. Some Christians had very tender consciences, and they could not bring themselves to eat meat from these pagan temples. The other issue was holy days. Some of the Christians believed that the Jewish festivals should still be observed, and others said, "Why should I get off work just to go to the Feast of Tabernacles?"

These had become divisive issues in the early church, but notice what the apostle Paul had to say about it: One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant?

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind...

You then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? We will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Therefore stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way....

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification....

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God....

Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up....

So let's put what Paul said together with what James said. Here's what we have: Do not gossip, slander, or speak evil of your brother or sister in Christ, because they belong to Jesus Christ and both you and they will have to give an account to Him. He is the Judge and you are not the Judge and I am not the Judge. We have a certain delegated authority from Him to make moral evaluations and to condemn sin, but we must not speak evil of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead, we must build them up for the edifying of the body.

#### 4. One Last Word...

I'd like to end with one last word. Look at this terrible warning in verse 12. If we aren't careful, we'll overlook it, but the words are critically important: There is one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy....

Instead of using our tongues to gripe and complain about our brothers, we should use them to share the Gospel and warn this world of the coming judgment of Jesus Christ who is able to save and to condemn.

One day in 1953, Rev. Francis Dixon was traveling and preaching in Bournemouth, England, when he met a British sailor with an unusual story. While on shore leave in Sydney, Australia, this sailor was approached by a man on George Street who asked him, "Young man, if you were to die tonight, where would you be, in heaven or hell?" After pondering that question for several days (and actually, I think, after he was back in London) the sailor eventually gave his life to Christ. The story of the sailor thrilled Rev. Dixon.

Shortly afterward, Dixon was amazed to hear a similar story coming from another sailor. While on shore leave in Sydney, this man, too, had been approached by a soul-winner on George Street who had asked him, if he should die that night, if he would go to heaven or hell. This sailor, too, had later been saved.

When Rev. Dixon visited Australia on a preaching tour, his first sermons were in the city of Adelaide, and during one of the meetings, he told the story of the two sailors. A man suddenly jumped to his feet and said, "I'm another! I'm another!"

Going on to Perth, Dixon again told the story. This time he was approached by the leader of the Christian Endeavour Society for Western Australia, who told him he had come to Christ through the witness of a street evangelist on George Street in Sydney who had asked him about his eternal destination.

By this time, Rev. Dixon was eager to get to the bottom of the story. Arriving in Sydney, he finally tracked down the man. The evangelist's name was Frank Jenner. As Dixon related the testimonies of these converts, Jenner's eyes filled with tears and he began praying and thanking the Lord.

Jenner confessed to Dixon that though he had been witnessing to ten people a day for sixteen years, this was the first time he had ever heard of any lasting results coming from his ministry. Earlier in life, he'd been addicted to gambling, a habit he'd acquired as a sailor. He'd also suffered a number of physical problems. But God had saved him and called him to the ministry of soul-winning. After coining his heaven-or-hell question in 1937, he had asked it to over 10,000 people. Now, after 16 years, he learned for the first time that God had blessed his efforts.

The story doesn't stop there. A month later while Dixon was preaching in a Methodist Church in Keswick, England, another man approached him, saying, "I, too, was challenged by Mr. Jenner and now I am in a soul-winning work myself." Four years later,

in India, Dixon found another convert from George Street. All in all, Francis Dixon personally learned of ten people who had come to Christ as a result of Frank Jenner's ministry—though the street evangelist himself had known nothing of the results. (This story is told more fully in "The Frank Jenner Story" by Stephen Tucker, and in Jenner of George Street by Dr. Raymond Wilson.)

There is coming a day of judgment, a day of reckoning, a day of heaven and hell. Let's not use our tongues to judge others in an unbiblical way, but let's use them to evangelize the lost and to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

## **"LORD WILLING"**

### **James 4:13-17**

There's a little town in Missouri called Kirksville, and last week a man there was arrested for trying to steal a television set from Wal-Mart. Here's what he did, according to the newspaper account. He found a water bottle in the store worth \$3.16, and then peeled off the bar code and attached that sticker to a television set that he wanted to buy. And then he took the television to the checkout counter and tried to buy the TV for \$3.16. When the clerk questioned the \$3.16 price on the TV, the shopper insisted that the UPC code was correct. He was so determined to buy the TV for the price of a water bottle that the store called the police and the man was arrested, charged with attempted theft through deceit.

Well, if you're like me, you're saying to yourself, "Why in the world would this man think that the checkout clerk would be dumb enough to sell him a television for \$3.16?" To pull a stunt like that, you'd have to think that everyone was as foolish as you were."

And yet, somehow the devil manages to pull off that scheme with remarkable success. He plays this same trick regularly on us and on our fellow human beings. He changes the value of things. He switches the price tags. He makes us think that the really important and valuable things in life are cheap, and that the cheap things in life are really valuable. Somehow he gets people to invest their whole lives in something that has no enduring value while, at the same time, neglecting the things that are eternal.

Now, the Bible is constantly telling us this; but James comes at it with a different sort of slant in his fourth chapter, which brings us to our Scripture reading today. We're in a series of messages entitled Faith in Action, and as we study through the book of James, we're coming today to this passage in James 4:13-17:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins (James 4:13-17).

\*\*\*

When James begins this paragraph with the words, Now listen! he is being very emphatic. In the Greek it's very strong. He is grabbing his readers by the lapels and saying, "Now, you to listen to me. You listen to what I'm about to say." And, of course, it isn't just James talking to his readers; it is the Lord speaking to us. And He wants to talk to us about money and business and the economy.

Everyone's worried about the economy right now, and many people are afraid that we may be on the verge of a recession or even a depression. Some people are afraid that we may be on the verge of a prolonged global economic crisis the likes of which we cannot even imagine. There's a popular book called The Coming Economic Earthquake. I haven't read it, but I've read a summary of it. It warns people how to prepare for perilous economic times ahead. So far this year, as you know if you have a retirement account or a mutual fund, the stock market hasn't been encouraging. I read one stockbroker who set this report to his clients:

Helium was up. Feathers were down. Paper was stationary. Knives were up sharply. Pencils lost a few points. Hiking equipment was trailing. Elevators rose, while escalators continued a slow decline. Light switches were off. Mining equipment hit rock bottom. Shipping lines stayed at an even keel. Balloon prices were inflated. Batteries exploded in an attempt to recharge the market, and diapers remained unchanged.

Well, I have news for you. It doesn't matter how the economy does or how the stock market performs—none of us are going to be able to keep what we're accumulating. The richest person in the world right now is reported to be Warren Buffet, who is worth \$62

billion. He's 77 years old, and sometime in the not-so-distant future, he's going to leave every penny and go into eternity and stand before God; and I have no idea about his spiritual condition or his eternal destination; but one thing is certain. He's not going to take a single dollar with him.

James is concerned about this. He talked about it in chapter 1 of his book, when he said:

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Now, here in chapter 4, James is going to make the same point. In fact, he says basically the same thing, and we can summarize his teaching here in three statements.

#### Tomorrow is a Mystery

First, tomorrow is a mystery: Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money."

Let's stop there for a moment. What's wrong with that? James lists four things here that people do—they go to a city, spend time there, carry on business, and make money. Is there anything wrong with going to a city? This week, Katrina and I were in Atlanta. I had a couple of appointments there, and we made a little mini-holiday out of it and we went out to eat and I conducted some interviews. Some of you have been to other cities this week. Perhaps you've been to New York or Chicago or Los Angeles on business. Perhaps your work takes you out of town each week or several times a month. Is there anything wrong with that? No. There's nothing wrong with going to a city

Is there anything wrong with spending a year there? No. Some of you are in Nashville for this year. Perhaps you're in college. Perhaps your company has located you here for a certain period of time. Nashville isn't your home and you'll probably end up living somewhere else, but you're here for a period of time. Is there anything wrong with that? No.

Is there anything wrong with carrying on business? Some of you own your own business. Some of you represent some other business. All of us, in one way or another, carry on business. Is there anything wrong with that? No.

Is there anything wrong with making money? No, we all want to make money and we all need to make money. Deuteronomy 8:18 says that God gives us the power and ability to gain wealth. Paul said that we need to provide for the needs of our families. The book of Proverbs tells us that we need to lay up for the future. There's nothing wrong with making money. But there is something wrong about it being the main focus of our lives.

Look at this passage again: Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.

Tomorrow is a mystery. Let me ask you a question. Is there anyone here who can predict what the headlines of tomorrow's newspaper will say? Maybe there will be a terrorist attack on our nation. Maybe there will be a stunning political assassination. Maybe there will be a devastating earthquake. No one can possibly know. We don't even know whose names will be on the obituary page, but it might be our own names there.

When I was a little boy, I remember my mother would sometimes sing as she did her work around the house. Usually she sang hymns and songs from church, but there was one song I remember her singing from the radio. It was a popular song in the late 1950s, and it had been sung by Doris Day in, of all things, an Alfred Hitchcock movie. In the song, a little girl asks her mother what she will be when she grows up and what life will be like in days to come. Will I be pretty, will I be rich, will I be happy, will I be sad? And the mother's answer was:

Que Sera, Sera,  
Whatever will be, will be.  
The future's not ours to see,  
Que Sera, Sera.

Interestingly, no one knows exactly where that phrase "que sera, sera" comes from. It roughly resembles some phrases in various European languages, but for the most part it seems to have been made up by the songwriter. And it doesn't represent a Christian

perspective at all. We don't believe that whatever will be, will be. We believe that whatever God wills will be. But there is some truth in the phrase that says the future's not ours to see. Even that's not completely true, because we do have a pretty good glimpse into the future given to us by means of biblical prophecy. But on a day-by-day basis, the future is a mystery. Tomorrow is a mystery.

Proverbs 27:1 says, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."

#### Life is a Mist

The second observation that James makes is that our life is a mist. Look at verse 14 again: Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

The older translations said that our lives are like a vapor that appears for a little while and then disappears. This is one of many biblical analogies that speak of the brevity of life. Let me take you back one more time to James 1 and show you another analogy that he uses to illustrate the same thing.

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

So our lives are like flowers that spring up then quickly fade. They're like a vapor or mist that appears in the cool of the morning and then quickly disappears. Let me give you some other biblical symbols in the book of Job, given to illustrate for us the brevity of life.

- Job 7:6: My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle. Have you ever been to a craft fair and watched weavers working at their looms? There's a shuttle that flies back and forth, and Job compared the brevity of his life with the speed of a weaver's shuttle.
- Job 7:9: As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so he goes down to the grave and does not return. When you look up into the sky, sometimes you see beautiful cloud formations. But they don't last long. The wind alters them and quickly blows them away.
- Job 8:9: We were born only yesterday and know nothing, and our days on earth are but a shadow.
- Job 9:25: My days are swifter than a runner; they fly away without a glimpse of joy. They skim past like boats of papyrus, like eagles swooping down on their prey.

Now look at Psalm 39:4ff: Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro; he bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it. But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in You.

Psalm 103 says: As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him.

So the Bible compares the length of our lives with:

- Flowers that spring up (James 1:10-11)
- Grass that wilts (Psalm 103:15)
- Water that is spilled on the ground (2 Samuel 14:14)
- A mist that vanishes (James 4:14)
- A weaver's shuttle that flies through the loom (Job 7:6-7)
- A cloud that is swept away by the wind (Job 7:9)
- A shadow that appears and disappears (Job 8:9; 1 Chronicles 29:15)
- A runner who sprints across the landscape (Job 9:25)
- A boat that disappears down the river (Job 9:26)
- An eagle that swoops down on its prey (Job 9:26)
- A little space the width of our hand (Psalm 39:5)
- A breath that we exhale (Psalm 39:5)
- A phantom that comes then goes (Psalm 39:6)

Now, for someone without Christ, this is the ultimate tragedy in life, and it truly leaves us with nothing but despair. The Russian

writer, Vladimir Nabokov said, "Our existence is a short circuit of light between two eternities of darkness."

The Christian has a different way of looking at it, and the whole subject of the brevity of life is rather of a good thing. The Bible says to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. But in this passage, James is warning us that as we go to this or that city and stay a day or a week or a year and conduct business and make money, we need to remember three things. First, that tomorrow is a mystery. Second, that life is a mist. And third, that God's will is a must.

#### God's Will is a Must

Look at the passage again: Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

Earlier this year, Corey Hawkins and I attended a conference in San Diego, and I stayed in Southern California for a couple of extra days just for sight-seeing and relaxation. I had a couple of meetings, but for the most part I was just taking a little R & R. One of the things I wanted to do was to spend a day at Knott's Berry Farm. I was there when I was a child, and I still had happy memories of it. It's the nation's oldest theme park, and it's a lot of fun for children and for grownups who occasionally want to revert back to their childhood. So I spent a day at Knott's Berry Farm.

Now, they have a roller coaster there called the Xcelerator. I love roller coasters, but I like the old fashioned kind, the old wood roller coasters with the big dip. These new extreme roller coasters are pretty intimidating to me. And the Xcelerator shoots you out of the platform area at something like 82 miles an hour, and then you shoot straight up at 90-degrees, you drop over 200 feet in about a second, and then it whips you around like a flea on a rocket ship.

It took me two hours to build up enough courage to ride it. But when the ride came to a stop, as I was getting off, I noticed an old fellow who stayed in his seat. He didn't look very well, and he seemed to have some strange ticks and jerks. I thought he'd had a stroke, and I watched to see what the attendants would do, but they didn't do anything. People boarded for the next ride, and it took off again like some kind of supersonic rocket.

I rode the Xcelerator several times that day, and this man was always in one of the cars. Finally my curiosity got the best of me and I asked one of the employees. "Oh, yes," they said, "we all know him. That man has ridden the Xcelerator over 25,000 times. When he passed 20,000 times we had a little celebration for him and gave him a certificate and a season pass and a leather jacket with the Xcelerator logo on it."

Well, I didn't really want to ride the Xcelerator again, but I wanted to meet that man, and so I went around again—there weren't many people at the park that day and you could just walk onto the rides—and I sat beside him. He still had the tick and the jerk and he didn't seem to be very well; and I could certainly understand. After riding that thing just a few times, I was starting to suffer from the same symptoms. But I sat down beside him and said, "They tell me that you hold the world record for riding this roller coaster."

"Yes," he said, "I've ridden it 27,527 times. This is my 44th time today."

"Why do you do it?" I asked.

"It's my favorite ride here at the park," he said. "My goal is to ride it 30,000 times."

I would have liked to have talked to him more, but right then we were blasted off again, and by the time we rolled back to the platform I wasn't in any shape to talk to anyone. But I've thought of that old fellow many times. I actually did an internet search and he's been written up in the local papers.

His purpose and his goal in life is to ride the Xcelerator 30,000 times. That's what he lives for. Now, I don't want to be critical, but may I suggest there is something better to do with our lives. Too many of us just go around in circles. We have our ups, we have our downs, we blast off, we spin around, we accumulate records, maybe we accomplish something, but James said that anyone who knows to do good—to do God's will, to follow God's call in Christ Jesus, to accomplishing something for the Lord—and doesn't do it sins. Our slogan in life should be: The will of God: Nothing more, nothing less. Because tomorrow is a mystery, life is a mist, but God's will is a must. This whole passage in James 4 is summarized in that little couplet that says:

'Tis one life, 'twill soon be past;

## THE JUDGE IS AT THE DOOR

### James 5:1-11

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we considered blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy (James 5:1-11).

\*\*\*

As we begin our study of this last chapter in the book of James, notice that James turns his attention to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's still dealing with the same subjects that he has previously addressed. He's still talking about economic discrimination. He's still talking about the peril of riches. He's still talking about grumbling and the unwise use of the tongue. He's still talking about persevering in times of struggle. All these issues we've already encountered in his book, and now he is bringing them up again. But now, here in this passage in chapter 5, he is looking at them against the backdrop of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice these phrases that we come across in this paragraph:

- The misery that is coming—v. 1, referring to a future event, the Judgment
- The last days—v. 3, a vital New Testament phrase for the days leading up to the Lord's return
- The day of slaughter—v. 5, which has to do with the return of Christ and the Judgment
- The Lord's coming—v. 7
- The Lord's coming is near—v. 8
- The Judge is standing at the door—v. 9

So here is James' treatment of the subject of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, which he treated as imminent. For the last year or so I've been intrigued with the subject of the imminent return of Christ and with the questions, "Will the church be raptured before the Great Tribulation? What is the next event on the prophetic calendar? Is the return of Christ really at hand? Is the rapture the next event on God's timetable?" Later this year, perhaps this fall, I would like to preach a series of sermons on that subject. As I've done some preliminary preparation for those messages, I have been gripped by the urgency of the times in which we're living. The spread of Islam (especially the Islamification of Europe), the transfer of wealth from the Western World to the Islamic Petroleum producing nations, the increasing isolation of Israel, the nuclear threat in the Middle East, the growing alliance between Russia and Iran—all these things are signs of the times.

There are many passages that I'd like to look at. There's the book of Daniel and his vision of the 70 Weeks. There's Ezekiel and the Battle of Gog and Magog. There's Zechariah 12-14. There's Matthew 24. There's 1 and 2 Thessalonians. There's the whole book of Revelation. All these passages present a reasonably clear picture of the signs of the times and of the sequence of events that will signal the end of the world as we know it. The Bible devotes a massive amount of material on this and that material is remarkably consistent.

Well, this is the subject that James brings us, but he does so in his own way. In this passage, James does not say a word about the unfolding of the prophetic events. His whole system of eschatology and his entire philosophy of the end of the world are summed up in these phrases that I've just shown you, and especially at two phrases found in verses 8 and 9:

Verse 8: The Lord's coming is near!

Verse 9: The Judge is standing at the door!

That's James' eschatology. He doesn't say anything about the rapture of the church, or the Great Tribulation, or the Battle of Gog and Magog, or the Two Witnesses in the book of Revelation. He's going to leave that to the other New Testament writers. What he is saying here is this: Jesus is coming, He is coming soon, the Judge is standing at the door. Therefore, you had better put into practice the instructions I am giving you in this book while you still have the opportunity to do so. You'd better put your Faith into Action now, because the Lord's coming is at hand.

James isn't concerned with the collateral events around the Second Coming, but with the implications that the reality of the Second Coming should have on our daily life. He's taking the instructions he has previously given in chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4, and showing how they are all the more imperative because the Judge is coming and the entire world is accountable before Him.

In particular, James is going to go back now and address three issues he has been bringing up during the course of his book.

#### 1. Because Christ is Coming, the Rich Shouldn't Hoard

Verses 1-6

First, because Christ is coming, the rich should not hoard their wealth. They should be generous. They should treat others with the kind of generosity and honesty as befits God's people.

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

A couple of weeks ago I spent a very unusual morning, following a group of surveyors around in the mountains, up one ridge and down the other. I was absolutely fascinated by the way they did their work, and at one point they had to make a judgment decision about where to establish a property boundary. I asked the chief surveyor, whose name was Todd, if he had seen many disputes about property lines. He laughed and said that I wouldn't believe the disputes he has seen. Then he told me about two brothers. After their father died, they were heirs of a large piece of property—many acres. Everything was decided and divided except for one little strip of land in which there was a fifty-foot dispute. These two brothers got into a fight about that fifty foot strip of land. Todd, who was the surveyor, suggested they split it right down the middle—25-feet each. But they couldn't agree to that, and so they went to court and spent thousands upon thousands of dollars. Finally the judge split it down the middle and awarded 25-feet to each brothers. These two brothers were so angry at each other they built a fence down the middle of their property, posted no trespassing signs, and haven't talked to each other in many years—all over a 50-foot strip of land.

Well, throughout the book of James we find warnings against greed, and James isn't very complimentary of the rich people of his day. The economic divide between rich and poor was very much on his mind.

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Listen, my dear brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him?

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

And now we have this passage in chapter 5. Notice especially the last part of verse 3: You have hoarded wealth....

#### 2. Because Christ is Coming, the Righteous Shouldn't Grumble

Vv. 7-9

Second, because Christ is coming, the righteous shouldn't grumble. Look at verses 7-9: Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

In the first paragraph, James was talking to people who had money, but in this passage he seems to be talking to people who were having trouble getting by. The wealthy weren't treating them well, and they were prone to grumble.

What's wrong with grumbling?

Do you know that the word grumble occurs 28 times in the New International Version of the Bible, and 28 out of 28 times it is a negative thing. It is condemned. There is not a single time when this word is used in a commendable way.

- Numbers 14:27: The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: "How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites.
- Psalm 106:25: They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord.
- John 6:41: The Jews began to grumble against (Jesus) because He said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." (And Jesus said): Stop grumbling among yourselves.
- 1 Corinthians 10:10: And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.
- 1 Peter 4:9: Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

And here in James 5, he tells us that we shouldn't grumble or we will be judged, because the Judge is standing at the door. Instead we're to be patient. Patience is the opposite of and the remedy for grumbling. Patience means that we're going to wait for the Lord to work out some of these things. We're going to pray and put it in His hands and trust Him with the issues that displease us and with the people that displease us.

### 3. Because Christ is Coming, the Discouraged Shouldn't Despair

Vv. 10-11

The third thing James says is this: Because Christ is coming, the discouraged shouldn't despair.

Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we considered blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy (James 5:1-11).

Those first words are so instructive: "As an example...." We learn so much through godly examples. And one of the reasons the Bible is so biographical is in order to give us a lot of examples to follow. The Lord could have given us a theology book full of truth—and, of course, He did. But it's not like a systematic theology book you'd buy in a seminary bookstore. This is a collection of biographies. We have stories here about men and women whose lives are given for our examples, and James is particularly interested in reminding us that the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs are examples of perseverance in the face of suffering.

He could have mentioned Abraham, who waited many years for God's promises to be fulfilled. He could have mentioned Joseph, who was enslaved and imprisoned from the time he was 17 until he was 30. He could have told us about Moses and all his challenges. He could have talked about Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Daniel. But he pinpoints one man in particular as an example—the man Job, whom we studied last year.

In our study through Job, the thing that grabbed my attention was the fact that Job was very honest and open about his trials, but five times he affirmed his faith in the darkness.

- In chapter 1, Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.
- In chapter 2, he told his wife, "Shall we accept good from God and not bad." And he refused to curse God for his disasters.
- In chapter 13, he made one of the greatest declarations of faith in the Bible: Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.
- In chapter 19, he declared, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

- In chapter 23, he said, “He knows the way I take... I will come forth as gold.”

James points to this and tells us to follow Job’s example. His whole point is that when we’re facing pressures and problems and persecutions, we shouldn’t give up. We should persevere and keep facing forward. We should trust God and go on. We should banish discouragement and look ahead to better days and to the New Jerusalem. This is the same point he made at the beginning of the book when he said: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.... Blessed is the person 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.

Here in chapter 5, James is saying the same thing, but this time it’s against the backdrop of the return of Christ. He is saying, in the words of that old song, “It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.”

In his classic systematic theology textbook, Wayne Grudem wrote: The more Christians are caught up in enjoying the good things of this life, and the more they neglect genuine Christian fellowship and their personal relationship with Christ, the less they will long for His return. On the other hand, many Christians who are experiencing suffering or persecution, or who are more elderly and infirm, and those whose daily walk with Christ is vital and deep, will have a more intense longing for His return. To some extent, then, the degree to which we actually long for Christ’s return is a measure of the spiritual condition of our own lives at the moment. It also gives some measure of the degree to which we see the world as it really is, as God sees it, in bondage to sin and rebellion against God, and in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1093.)

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and as the news reports started coming in the nation was electrified and the whole world was in crisis. In Washington, President Franklin Roosevelt called an emergency cabinet meeting. The presidential historian, Doris Kearns Goodwin, later wrote about it.

At eight-thirty on Sunday night, the Cabinet began to gather in the president’s study. A ring of extra chairs had been brought in to accommodate the overflow. The president...was sitting silently at his desk; he was preoccupied, seemed not to be seeing or hearing what was going on around him. “It was very interesting,” Perkins observed, “because he was always a very friendly and outgoing man on the personal side. He never overlooked people... But I don’t think he spoke to anyone who came in on that night. He was living off in another area. He wasn’t noticing what went on on the other side of the desk. He was very serious. His face and lips were pulled down, looking quite gray...”

Finally, he turned around and said, “I’m thankful you all got here.” He went on to say this was probably the most serious crisis any Cabinet had confronted since the outbreak of the Civil War....

By 10 p.m., congressional leaders had joined the Cabinet in the overcrowded study. The president told the gathering that he had prepared a short message to be presented at a joint session of Congress the following day. The message called for a declaration by Congress that a state of war had existed between Japan and the United States from the moment of the attack....

[FDR went on to describe the details of the attack]

“The effect on the Congressmen was tremendous... They sat in dead silence and even after the recital was over they had very few words. Finally, Senator Tom Connally of Texas spoke up, voicing the question that was on everyone’s mind. “How did it happen that our warships were caught like tame ducks in Pearl Harbor?” he shouted, banging the desk with his fist, his face purple. “How did they catch us with our pants down? Where were our patrols? They knew these negotiations were going on. They were all asleep.”

“I don’t know, Tom,” the president muttered, his head bowed. “I just don’t know.”[1]

One day soon, Jesus Christ is going to return with a shout, with the voice of the archangel. The clouds will gather in battle formation. The winds will whip around the world as though turning the sky into a global cyclone. The angel will shout with the voice of a trumpet, and believers around the world will shout as if in unison, “He’s back!”

And some of those left behind will ask themselves in terrible and anguishing amazement, “How is it that we were caught unawares, unprepared, not ready for His coming. After all the warnings, after all the predictions, after all the opportunities—and now the rapture has come, the summer is past, the harvest is over, and we are not saved.”

The Judge is at the door, the Lord is coming soon. So the rich shouldn't hoard their money, the righteous shouldn't grumble, and the discouraged shouldn't despair.

Jesus is coming to earth again, What if it were today?  
Coming in power and love to reign, what if it were today?  
Coming to claim His chosen bride,  
All the redeemed and purified,  
Over this whole world scattered wide,  
What if it were today?

## THE SICK AND THE AFFLICTED

### James 5:13-16

When I was a boy, I went to a church that had prayer meetings on Wednesday nights, and at some point during every prayer meeting we would come to a portion of the hour when we prayed for "the sick and the afflicted." That was the common phrase. It was never the "sick and suffering" or the "sick and hospitalized" or the "sick and the dying." It was always the "sick and afflicted." "Now, dear friends, let's pray for the sick and afflicted."

Well, until I was preparing for today's message I didn't know where that phrase came from. But now I realize it comes from the old King James Version of James 5. Today I'd like to read this phrase—James 5:13-16—from the New International Version, but I'll show you what I mean. The passage says:

Is anyone of you in trouble (afflicted—KJV)? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

The first thing to notice is that every single verse here includes a mention of the subject of prayer. And according to these first verses, there are three times when we should especially pray. Of course, the Bible teaches us to pray continually and faithfully and at all times. But James has three particular occasions that call for prayer.

#### Pray Earnestly When You're Troubled

First, he tells us we should pray earnestly when we're troubled. Look at verse 13: Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. The word trouble here is very broad and covers all kinds of trouble, and that's why the old versions translated it as "afflicted." It means "suffering in difficult circumstances." It refers to calamities; it refers to bad news; it refers to persecution; it refers to physical and financial and family problems.

In the story of missionary Darlene Deibler Rose, she and her husband Russell were working in the city of Macassar in Indonesiawhen the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The entire Pacific realm exploded in war, and the whole area was subjected by the invading Japanese shock troops. The missionaries followed radio reports with great tension. One island after another fell to the Japanese in the Pacific; and finally the Philippines fell, and then Southeast Asia, and then finally Japanese shock troops swept through Indonesia, and Macassar fell to the enemy. The missionaries were rounded up. Russell was dragged away, and Rose never saw him again. That night the remaining missionaries, amid much fear and great danger, gathered for prayer. One of them opened his copy of Daily Light and read the verses for that particular day. For Darlene, one verse leaped off the page from that day's reading, and it was this one, James 5:13: Is any one of you in trouble. He should pray.

What is it about this particular verse that is so powerful? I think it's a powerful verse because it gives us a strategy to follow when no other strategies are available. It gives us leverage. It gives us a weapon, something to do when we don't know what to do.

In 2 Chronicles 20, the nation of Judah was invaded by a coalition of brutal enemy nations, and they were absolutely helpless in the face of these invaders. King Jehoshaphat called all the people together and they assembled in front of the temple. He had only one

weapon to offer, the weapon of prayer. And in his prayer, he said, “O our God... we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

That’s a great illustration of James 5. When we’re in trouble, when we don’t know what to do, we have a secret strategy. The great fourth century preacher, John Chrysostom wrote:

The potency of prayer has subdued the strength of fire; it has bridled the rage of lions, hushed anarchy to rest, extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, expanded the gates of heaven, assuaged diseases, repelled frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course, and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt. Prayer is an all-efficient panoply, a treasure undiminished, a mine that is never exhausted, a sky unobscured by clouds, a heaven unruffled by the storm. It is the root, the fountain, the mother of a thousand blessings.

So pray earnestly when you’re troubled.

#### Pray Joyfully When You’re Cheerful

Second, James tells us to pray joyfully when we’re cheerful. Look at verse 13 again: Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Now, this is very interesting to me. Let me give you a little lesson in Greek. Notice this entire sentence: Let him sing songs of praise. Six words in the English—but only one word in Greek: Ψάλλετω (Psalleto), from the verb ψάλλω (Psallo). We get our English word Psalm from this word, and it’s in the imperative form here, so it literally means: Sing psalms. Sing hymns. Sing songs of praise. Let him sing songs of praise. It’s one word in the Greek but it takes six words in English to adequately convey its meaning.

One of the things I’ve noticed this year is how loudly and constantly the birds are singing in the morning. I think all the rain and the foliage have helped, especially after last year’s drought. When I step onto my front porch each morning, the sky is just full of the sounds of the birds singing. Wouldn’t it be odd if there was nothing but silence there instead?

Likewise, when we come to our worship services here at , we fill this place with music. We sing together as a church, and we sing old songs and new ones. We have various choirs that sing. We have various groups that sing. We have soloists and instrumentalists who make music unto the Lord. Wouldn’t it be odd if we came here on Sunday and there was no music?

Likewise, there should be music in our hearts and homes and houses. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

So pray earnestly when you’re troubled, and pray joyfully and melodiously when you’re cheerful.

#### Pray Corporately When You’re Sick

Finally, James tells us to pray corporately when we’re sick. Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Now, this is a difficult passage and I’ve never been absolutely sure how to best interpret it, and, having studied it afresh for this message, I’m still not completely sure. There are three basic ways to approach it, and I’m going to share all three with you and then you can choose for yourself.

1. The Literal Interpretation: This refers to literal sickness and to a literal anointing with literal oil.

First, there’s a literal interpretation. The terminology here is interesting. When James says that the sick person should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over him, that seems to imply that the sick person is really very, very sick, that he is bedfast, that he cannot go to church or come to the elders. He must send someone to ask them to come to his bedside. Perhaps he is sick unto death. The other phrase is to “pray over.” He should call the elders of the church to pray over him.... This is the only time in the New Testament that the verb “pray” is followed by the preposition “over,” and it again implies that this man or woman is lying in a bed of sickness and the church leaders are standing over him, praying.

But then there’s this instruction about anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. Why would the elders do that? There is a very

important cross-reference to this in the Bible. In fact, this is the only direct cross-reference that I can find in all of the Scripture. In Mark 6, Jesus sent out his Twelve Disciples to preach and teach in His name, and it says in verses 12-13: They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Now, this is very intriguing to me. This was not an Old Testament practice. We don't really read anything like this in the Old Testament law, but it had apparently developed as a Jewish habit. The commentator William Barclay says that when a Jew was ill, he went to the Rabbi rather than to the physician. And the rabbi anointed him with oil, which the Greek doctor Galen called the best of all medicines, and prayed over him.

There is no record in the Gospels of Jesus Himself ever using oil in performing a miracle of healing, but from this one verse in Mark 6, we know that the disciples did so, and apparently the habit was practiced in the time of James.

In early Christian history, this was practiced and it came to be known as the sacrament of unction, or anointing. And in the 9th century it became the Roman Catholic sacrament of Extreme Unction, administered to the dying.

We don't practice it as a sacrament; but in the church I grew up in, our pastor, Winford R. Floyd, kept a small vial of olive oil inside the pulpit, and from time to time I would recall him telling of doing this. And here at TDF throughout my ministry we've done this when requested. The deacons and staff and leaders will gather around someone, anoint them with oil, and pray for their healing.

So this is a viable interpretation and is the most literal way of looking at this passage.

2. The Medical Interpretation: This refers to literal sickness and to the application of prayer and medicine.

There's another view that this refers to literal sickness and to the application of prayer and medicine. As I just mentioned, olive oil was used in the ancient world for medicinal purposes. Let me give you two examples in the Bible.

In Isaiah 1:5-6, the Lord was calling the people of Judah to repentance. He said: Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart is afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.

In those days they did not have much in the way of physicians, and they had little in the way of medicine. But olive oil was a wonderful, almost magical substance. It can be taken internally or it can be applied to the skin and it wonderfully cleanses and soothes wounds and injuries.

Now, look at Luke 10. This is the story of the Good Samaritan. Here Jesus told of a man who was traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among thieves who stripped him and beat him and threw him in a ravine. But a good Samaritan came along and found him. Look at verse 34: He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.

The wine served as an antiseptic and the oil soothed and lubricated the damaged flesh. So we know that olive oil was one of the prime medicines of antiquity. In fact, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the old man Herod the Great was once "immersed in a bath full of oil," which reportedly gave him relief from some of his problems.

I suffer from psoriasis, and sometimes I put a tablespoon of olive oil in my bath and it seems to help my skin a little. And, of course, nutritionists tell us that moderate use of olive oil in our diets is very good for us.

So perhaps James 5 means that the elders came and prayed for him and took care of him medically. So this passage is recommending the application of prayer and medicine. I think that's a very viable interpretation, and that's probably the way many expositors today would understand this passage.

3. The Spiritual Interpretation: This is referring to spiritual illness and moral weaknesses.

There is a third interpretation, too. Some people don't believe James is talking about someone who is physically sick, but someone who is spiritually sick. There are two reasons for this.

The first is the phrase: Is any one of you sick? The word that James used here is *σθενέω*, which means to be weak. It can mean physical, literal illness, or it can refer to spiritual or moral weakness. For example, the apostle Paul used this word to describe the time when Epaphroditus became sick in Rome and he nearly died. But on other occasions, Paul used this word to describe

someone who was spiritually weak or weak in his faith. In Romans 14, he told us how to deal with those who are weak in their faith, and this is the word he used.

The other reason is the context having to do with the confession of sin. The verses go on to talk about confessing our sins and being forgiven. So some people believe that it's referring to a person who is morally or spiritually weak, perhaps in the grips of an addiction, perhaps in the grip of depression. And this view would translate this passage this way: Are any of you having vicious spiritual struggles? Call for the elders of the church. Ask them to pray over you and to anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord. Oil, after all, is a biblical symbol for the Holy Spirit. And if in your spiritual struggles you have fallen into sin, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

So there's the literal interpretation, the medical interpretation, and the spiritual interpretation. Perhaps the best interpretation is somewhere among these three. The main point, however, is that if you are sick of body or sick of heart, you must find someone who is spiritually strong and have them to pray for you earnestly. It is advocating the power of corporate prayer. Pray for each other, it says.

Now regardless of how you interpret this passage, there's a promise attached to it and it's in verse 15: And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.

Now, if this were the only verse in the Bible on the subject of prayer and if we took it with utmost literalness, it would seem to be a universal, carte blanche promise for total healing. But in my Bible all I have to do is to look at the verse beside this one in the previous column that says, "We ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will we will live and do this or that."

The promises connected with prayer in the Bible are always conditioned by our asking according to God's will. And we have to compare Scripture with Scripture so that we understand this. Let me give you an example from the writings of John.

- John 14:14 is a wonderful promise about prayer. Jesus said: "If you ask Me for anything in My name, I will do it." That seems to be a universal, carte blanche promise." But later, when John wrote his book of 1 John, he added an important phrase.
- 1 John 5:14: This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

All the promises in the entire Bible on the subject of prayer—and there are many of them—are conditioned by our praying according to God's will. And we know that it's not always God's will to grant us physical healing. If it were, and if we prayed in faith, we would never die. We'd never get to heaven. We'd keep being healed over and over and over again.

Now, I think God normally heals us. I've been sick many times in my life, and so far God has healed me every time. I have not yet died. I believe that God often heals us in answer to prayer. But at some point God gives us ultimate healing by taking us to heaven.

So I don't want to under-interpret this paragraph or water down the passage, but I think what it's saying is—if you are in trouble, pray earnestly. If you are happy, pray melodiously. If you are sick, pray corporately—get some strong Christians praying for you. And it will make a difference!

When I was in my first pastorate, I was teaching one night in a nearby church, and someone came to the door and gave me the word that my dad had suffered a heart attack. Katrina, I think, was on her way to get me. We raced to the Johnson City hospital at such a speed that I almost had an accident. My mother and sister were already there, and we gathered at the door of the intensive care unit. We couldn't go into the ICU, but neither could bear to go to the waiting area, so we just stood there in the hallway near the elevators outside the door. The doctor had been grave and had sent word that my dad wasn't expected to live. It was the worst moment I'd ever experienced up to that time.

Suddenly the elevator doors opened, and the pastor of our church, Winford R. Floyd, came toward us. I still remember that he was wearing a black overcoat and he just seemed to exude strength and calm. He spoke with us briefly, got the latest news, and then he started to pray. He prayed so earnestly and so specifically and so powerfully for John Morgan that a tremendous peace and strength came to us there on one side of the door. He said to us, "I feel in my heart that John is going to pull through this." And as a measure of divine strength came to us, a measure of divine healing took place on the other side of the door, and my father was given a long extension of his life. I'm pretty well convinced that the prayers of Winford Floyd saved the life of John Morgan that night. The two of them were the best and deepest and dearest of friends, and today they're both in heaven. But that night is one of those moments that is etched in my mind forever.

So is anyone in trouble? Pray earnestly. Is anyone happy? Pray melodiously. Is anyone sick? Pray corporately. Pray for one

another. For the earnest prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

## PRAYING UP A STORM

### James 5:16-18

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops (James 5:16-18).

\*\*\*

As we broach the subject of prayer in today's message I'd like to tell you about a story I read in the newspaper this week. Perhaps you saw it, too. It was carried by the Associated Press on Tuesday, and it was about two pilots in New Zealand who were flying a home-built, micro-light airplane. They were high over a sloping valley near a rugged section of New Zealand when their engine started sputtering, and it coughed, and it died. They evidently had run out of fuel.

The newspaper quoted one of the men as saying, "My friend and I are both Christians, and so our immediate reaction in a life-threatening situation was to ask for God's help." The two men prayed that somehow they would glide over the ridge and find a safe landing place on the other side.

Well, somehow they did make it over the ridge and somehow they did find a grassy strip, and they managed to land their plane safe and sound. It was an almost miraculous answer to prayer. But as they rolled to a stop, they looked up and there in front of them was a giant billboard, a twenty-foot tall sign, and the words on it said: "Jesus is Lord!" ("Sign from God: Pilots' Prayers for Safe Landing Are Answered" by Associated Press, CNS News. Com, May 21, 2008, accessed at <http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewCulture.asp?Page=/Culture/archive/200805/CUL20080521b.html>.)

That's where all prayer starts and stops, isn't it? In our desperation and need, we cry out to the Lord in earnest prayer; and as He works in the midst of our need and as He answers our prayers, we discover afresh that Jesus is Lord. The Bible has much to say about prayer, but the last part of James 5:16 is my favorite sentence on prayer in the Bible. I'd like to take a moment to study it out as it appears here. It says: "The prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective."

#### The Prayers...

First notice the phrase, "The prayers...." One of the surprising observations about the book of James is that the writer originally wrote this in a very excellent Greek. Of course, as I've said in previous messages, I'm convinced that the writer was James the Just, the half-brother of our Lord Jesus and the Bishop of the church in Jerusalem. Just from the internals of the letter, we can tell that the writer of James was a thoroughly Jewish man who had really mastered the techniques of writing in first-rate Greek.

If you were to read this in the original Greek, the first word would be *δέησις*, which is not the general Greek word for prayer but rather a word that focuses on the needs that we bring before the Lord. It comes from a root word meaning "to make known one's particular need." If I came to you and I said, "I want to tell you about a need that I have," this is the word that would describe that conversation. Sometimes this word is translated in the Bible as supplication. The lexicons use the terms: Plea, petition, entreaty. One commentator even translated it as "The beggings of a righteous man..." It's referring to a prayer request, to a prayer need; so we could accurately translate this verse by saying: "The prayers we pray in which we bring our needs before the Lord—those prayers are powerful and effective."

#### Of a Righteous Person...

The next word in the Greek is the word *δικαίος*, which means a righteous person. Some people have greater power in prayer than others. Not everyone's prayers are equally effective. The prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective.

Now, there are two ways in which we are righteous. First of all, there is our position of righteousness, which we experience through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the heart and soul of Christianity. God is purely and perfectly righteous, holy, pure, and good. We can only walk in fellowship with Him if we are the same, for nothing impure can exist in His presence. Since all of us are impure by nature and by practice, God Himself came into the world and offered Himself on the cross to die on our place. And when we receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are declared righteous in God's sight. That's what the book of Romans is all about. So

when God looks at those who are in Christ, He sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us. I read an illustration of this once. An Englishman in a foreign country was going to be shot for something or another. They took him to the execution grounds, but the British Ambassador showed up and wrapped a copy of the Union Jack around him—the British flag. By firing into the prisoner, the guards would literally be attacking the British Empire, which they were not willing to do. And the man's death was postponed until diplomats could work out his release. When we come to Jesus Christ, we're wrapped in the flag of His righteousness, and when God sees us He sees Jesus and we're protected from judgment. There's an old hymn that says:

Dressed in His righteousness alone,  
Faultless to stand before the throne.

But there's another way in which we use the word "righteous." We're not only righteous in position, but we're to be righteous in practice. It's possible to be a Christian, but to allow sins and distractions to crowd into our lives and to hinder our prayers.

Isaiah 59 says, "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear."

Psalms 66:18 says, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

That's why it's important to read the whole verse here in James 5:16. I love the last part of the verse, but it is inseparably linked with the first part of the verse. The whole thing says: Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

If I were to ask you, "Why should we live a holy life? Why should we remain pure? Why should we avoid those things that contaminate our minds? Why should we flush away those attitudes that sully the soul?"—well, there would be many answers. We want to please God. We want to be healthy people. We want to be good testimonies to others. But one of the greatest motivations toward holiness is so that our prayers will be powerful and effective. This verse says that the petitions, the beggings, the pleadings, the pleas, the entreaties of a righteous person are powerful and effective.

Are Powerful and Effective...

Now, let's look at those words "powerful and effective." There are a couple of ways that this verse can be translated, but I don't want to go into that because it's rather involved for a Sunday morning service, but the primary Greek word here is the word from which we get our English word "energy." The prayers of a righteous person produce a great and effectual energy. And somehow, in the design and wisdom of God, it's prayer that really accomplishes God's work on this planet.

Recently in my studies I came across the story of a woman named Pearl Goode, who lived in Pasadena, California. She was a private nurse who, in 1949, was taking care of a millionaire in San Marino. One day she picked up the newspaper and saw a little clipping about an evangelistic meeting taking place in downtown LA under a big tent at the corner of Hill and Washington Streets. After she got off work at five that afternoon, she drove down there, found a parking place, and went to the meeting. The tent was filled and running over, and Pearl Goode was greatly moved by the preacher, a young evangelist who was as yet largely unknown to the world. It was Billy Graham. Until the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade, he wasn't well-known, but that crusade catapulted him to the attention of the whole world.

Well, Pearl began to get involved in the prayers meetings that took place every day. Some of the participants in this crusade would meet for earnest prayer, and one day they had a great prayer meeting, which became a sort of confessional meeting. Pearl got up and she said, "I want to make a confession, that I've been accustomed down through my life since I was converted at seventeen to spend often nights in prayer and days in prayer and fasting. The old Methodists taught that, and I was trained that way and I saw it in the Bible. Now my children are married and I am alone, and I don't have such... quite the burden."

She was 65 years old at the time and she had been lulled by the thought that she'd just let up some on her personal all-night prayer meetings. Now she felt convicted that she had weakened in her ministry of intercession, so she confessed that to the group.

When she sat down a younger woman got up and said, "I closed my beauty salon today to come here to pray, to find God's help to find a good spiritual church to go. I want to go to a spiritual church. I've saved. Lady, would you pray with me all night."

And that night during the Los Angeles Crusade, thirty-eight people prayed together all through the night until sun up.

During that time, Pearl Goode—a 65-year-old nurse—developed a burden to pray for Billy Graham. "He was just a boy," she later

said. "He was just a boy.... God spoke to me about him. He showed me and told me that he would preach all over the world, and he was called as no other man was called in this age to preach the Gospel and he must preach all over this world. And my job was to pray for him."

For the next 23 years, until her death at age 88, Pearl Goode prayed for Billy Graham. During the early years, she paid her own way, traveled over 48,000 miles on Greyhound buses, traveling secretly to the city where he was preaching. There she rented a motel room and prayed night and day for the success of the meetings. She didn't do any sightseeing. She didn't let anyone know she was there. But she traveled in Billy's shadows, even to overseas locations. She missed her children's birthdays and her grandchildren's birthdays, but she was on divine assignment. She called it a hidden ministry.

Well, eventually it became known to members of the Graham team who happened to notice that this little old lady was always around the prayer tent during the morning hours, and they made contact with her and found out what was going on. And from that point on, they paid for her expenses but didn't interfere with her hidden ministry. (Based on the transcript of an interview in the archives of the Billy Graham Center between Dr. Lois Ferm and Pearl Good, conducted on October 23, 1970, and on the article "There's Nothing Like It," in Decision Magazine, November 1963, p. 6.)

But her prayers helped launch a ministry that spanned six decades and led thousands and perhaps millions of people to faith in Jesus Christ.

Elijah Was a Man Like Us... He Prayed Earnestly...

Well, James, too, has an example of a prayer warrior that he wants to give us, and it's the prophet Elijah. He goes on to say in the next verse: Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced her crops.

Notice that adverb, earnestly. Some translations say fervently. Elijah didn't just pray; he prayed earnestly. I think this is where many of us fall down in our prayers. When I was reading the story of Pearl Goode, I was impressed with one of the statements she made in an interview. She said, "Prayer is hard work."

What does earnest prayer look like? Well, according to James, we can see earnest prayer in action when we read the story of Elijah, so let's take just a moment and let me show you a couple of incidents in his life.

Look at 1 Kings 17. This is where the prophet Elijah is first introduced to us. It says: Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

Now, we aren't told in this particular passage that Elijah brought about this drought by his prayers, but James said that he did.

Sometime later, during the time of drought, Elijah went to live with a family whose son died. Look what happened down in verse 19:

"Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and he laid him on his back. Then he cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"

The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him.

There's an example of earnest, fervent prayer. It says that he cried out to the Lord, and it says that three times he stretched himself out over the problem. That's earnest praying. Sometimes we have to stretch ourselves out over a problem and cry out to the Lord repeatedly until He sees fit to answer.

Now look at the next chapter, 1 Kings 18. This is the story of Elijah's contest on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal, which I don't have time to talk about; but notice verses 36ff:

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

But then at the end of the chapter, we have given to us the incident that James referred to, the ending of the three-and-a-half years of drought. Look at verses 42ff:

Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground, and put his face between his knees. “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came, and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Praying up a storm”? It comes from this story. Elijah was a mighty man of prayer. His prayers shut up the heavens so there was neither rain nor dew. His prayers raised the dead to life. His prayers called down fire from heaven and rains from the skies. He prayed three times earnestly for the boy and seven times earnestly for the storm, and the power of his ministry was wrapped in the potency of his prayers.

And yet, he wasn’t a superman. He was a man just like us, James says; an example for all of us regarding the earnestness of our prayers and the power that we have on our knees.

I think that all of us want to learn to pray more earnestly, more powerfully, and more effectively. But how do we do it? Sometimes we think we have to use certain words and to pray beautiful prayers; and that can get us into trouble.

Jesus has something to say about that: When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Let me close today’s message with six suggestions.

1. First, memorize James 5:16b, and apply it to yourself. The verse says: The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. That’s only ten words. We can all learn ten words by heart. But I want to give you permission to change one of those words—the word “man.” Once several years ago when I was worried sick about one of my children, the Lord brought this verse to my attention and I claimed it this way. To me at that time, it said: The prayers of a righteous parent are powerful and effective. If you’re worried about your children, if you have a wayward one, this verse is saying to you: The prayers of a righteous mom/dad are powerful and effective. If you’re a schoolteacher with a burden for your students, this verse says to you: The prayers of a righteous schoolteacher are powerful and effective. If you’re a friend to someone who is in trouble, this verse says to you: The prayers of a righteous friend or buddy are powerful and effective. Memorize this verse, claim it, and apply it to your own situation in life.
2. Second, find a private place to pray—what Jesus called the inner room.
3. Pray out loud
4. Pour yourself into it. Pray earnestly.
5. Don’t worry about time. Don’t be in a hurry, but don’t feel you have to pray any certain amount of time.
6. Allow God to answer in His own way.

And when you’re out of fuel and your engine is sputtering and you come in for a landing as God answers your prayer, remember the words on the sign at the end of the runway of answered prayer: Jesus is Lord!

## **NOT A MOMENT TO BE LOST**

### **James 5:19-20**

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20).

This week there was an article in the London Daily Mail that I read very carefully. The headline said, “Bishop Says Collapse of Christianity is Wrecking British Society—and Islam is Filling the Void.” The article went on to explain:

“The collapse of Christianity has wrecked British society, a leading Church of England bishop declared yesterday. It has destroyed family life and left the country defenseless against the rise of radical Islam in a moral and spiritual vacuum. In a lacerating attack on liberal values, the Right Reverend Michael Nazir-Ali, the Bishop of Rochester, said the country was mired in a doctrine of endless self-indulgence that had brought an explosion in public violence and binge-drinking....”

The bishop said something momentous had happened in the 1960s. He quoted historians who point to a cultural revolution... (and he) warned that views not founded on Christianity would not produce the same values....” (“Bishop Says Collapse of Christianity is Wrecking British Society,” by Sean Poulter and Niall Firth, in The Daily Mail, online edition for May 29, 2008.)

The essence of the article is that since World War II and with the changing of social and moral norms of the 1960s, Christianity has become marginalized in Europe, with fewer and fewer people even going to church, let alone reading their Bibles and living according to Scripture. Society has become secularized, but when Western Society abandoned Christianity it also lost all basis for absolute morality and ultimate meaning in life. A void was created, and now, into that void, two great social forces are rising up with a vengeance. One is self-indulgence, and the other is Islam. The two of them are on a collision course and neither of them bodes well for the future.

The same patterns are at play here in the United States, and the only hope for our world is a rediscovery of authentic Christianity. And I think that’s what the book of James is all about. It’s about Faith in Action, a functional and active faith that changes our lives and the lives of those with whom we come in contact.

At the beginning of this year of 2008, I began preaching through the book of James, and today, twenty messages later, we are coming to the final paragraph. It’s taken us five full months to go through this book, and I really had expected that by the time I came to the end of the book I would understand more about its plan and outline than I did at the beginning, but I’m not sure that’s true.

#### Mapping James

I’d like to take a moment to discuss this with you. Years ago, I remember seeing a book by Dr. J. Sidlow Baxter, and the title was something about getting a strategic grasp on the Bible. I believe it’s important for us to get a grasp on every one of the 66 books of the Bible. Every one of these divisions of Scripture—all 66 of them—have a different plan and a different purpose. And one day I want to preach a series of 66 sermons on these books and go all the way through the Bible, devoting one sermon to each book.

Think of it this way. When you go to a theme park like Disneyworld or Knott’s Berry Farm or Six Flags, they give you a brochure when you go through the gate. When you open the brochure, there’s a map. It shows you the different sections, like Tomorrowland and Frontierland and Fantasyland; and that map shows you the major rides and attractions and tells you how to get around. You get a bird’s eye view, and I usually stick mine in my back pocket and refer to it all day until I pretty well have my bearings.

Well, every book has a plan with sections and divisions and special attractions, and it helps me to understand the whole Bible if I can get a strategic grasp on each of these books. But the book of James is notoriously hard to outline, and I am still not sure of its structure. So today, I’d like to suggest three different outlines for the book of James. You can jot these down and later study this out for yourself.

First, there’s always the possibility that this book doesn’t have any outline at all. One commentator that I consulted suggested that these were just snippets from James’ sermons that had been copied down and pieced together, and I think that’s a possibility. This book is very much like the Old Testament book of Proverbs. There are certain subjects that keep coming up again and again, but there’s not a highly discernable arrangement to the book. As you read through James, you find that he keeps bringing up things like:

- Persevering in Hard Times
- Treating the Poor with Dignity and Integrity
- Being Distrustful of Wealth
- The Use of the Tongue
- Keeping Peace within the Church
- The Importance of Genuine Faith

So it could be that James preached a great deal on these topics, and this book is sort of a “Best of James” compilation with no compelling arrangement.

Second, someone else has suggested to me an outline that I’ll share with you in just its broadest themes. According to this concept, the key verse that explains the book is James 1:19: My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to hear, slow to

speak, slow to become angry. These three instructions form the outline for the entire book. There is some introductory and concluding material, but in general, you have this simple outline:

1. Be Quick To Hear: Chapters 1-2 – This is the section that talks about hearing and obeying the Word of God, being like a person who looks into the Bible like he looks into a mirror and making the necessary changes to his life.
2. Be Slow to Speak: Chapter 3 – Which is devoted to the tongue.
3. Be Slow to Become Angry: Chapters 4 – 5 – About getting along with others without fighting and quarreling.

Third, here's the outline that I developed for the book, which I think does a reasonable job in providing a good map. Using this outline, I'd like to suggest that the key verse for the book James is 2:26: As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. The last paragraph of James 2 makes this point again and again, and when this key is inserted into the door of James, it seems to me that the book is unlocked. That becomes the theme that explains every paragraph, so we can see that active, biblical, James-like faith:

James 1:1-12	Meets Trials with Joy
James 1:13-27	Meets Temptations with Obedience
James 2:1-26	Treats People with Respect
James 3:1-4:12	Uses Words with Restraint
James 4:13-5:6	Relates Wisely to Money
James 5:7-12	Anticipates the Judgment
James 5:12-18	Grasps the Power of Prayer
James 5:19-20	Turns Sinners to the Lord

So there you have three different ways of looking at the book. The first is that James is a book very much like Proverbs with random, though somewhat recurring thoughts, that are compiled into a practical and helpful manual. The second is built around the theme that faith without works is dead, a theme that seems to show up in every paragraph, and the third is built around the three instructions of James 1:19.

#### Getting to the Final Paragraph

Whatever map you choose, you eventually end up at the same place, which is this final paragraph of the book, and let's look at it again. James doesn't have a normal conclusion here in which he sends greetings to various people or has a natural sign-off. He just finishes his book by giving one last admonition: My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins.

In verse 19, James tells us that it's possible for church members to drift away, and that we should all be diligent in helping each other spiritually—that we should seek to bring back those in the church who wander from the truth. And verse 20 states a general principle, which is the guiding maxim of evangelism: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins.

There was an article this week in the Tennessean about a church here in Middle Tennessee that baptizes over 500 people a year, and the article gave several reasons. The first is that this church is located in a booming demographic. The second is their emphasis on children and youth ministry, and the fact that their children and youth camps are designed to be evangelistic in nature, since most people who decide to follow Christ are younger when they make that decision. But a third reason is that the members of that church are active and passionate about inviting their friends. And as I read the article I thought once again about the old adage, that if everyone in our church invited and brought one person during the course of the next year, we'd double in size.

And James said that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins. Now, what would happen if we all became passionate about doing that?

This week I had a letter from a man named David Shibley who is the founder and president of an organization called Global Advance. He sent me his newest book, *Living as if Heaven Matters*. As I thumbed through the book, I happened to see a story that attracted my attention. It was about a woman who was meeting with her doctor. Dr. Judson said, "I want to be completely honest with you, Mrs. Thompson." He paused and then said, "We've discovered cancer in advanced stages through your body. We will treat it as best we can. But barring a miracle, your days are numbered."

Mrs. Thompson's life seemed to flash before her as she tried to absorb the news. In a few seconds, she sped through the roller coaster of emotions that anyone would experience, but a settled sense of peace came over her as she framed her reply.

"Dr. Judson," she said, "you say my days are numbered." Wiping away her tears she managed a smile and said, "Well, doctor, so are yours." (David Shibley, *Living as if Heaven Matters* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2007), 61-62.)

Her concern was to share a word for Christ and direct her doctor to salvation in Christ Jesus. If only we all realized that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins. That is—or should be—the greatest concern of all of us who know Christ as our Savior.

Recently we had an Australian gentleman at our church, Dr. David Cummings, who is a retired Wycliffe missionary. He is the former president of Wycliffe Bible Translators. He told us that recently he was introduced at a speaking engagement in a very unusual way. The minister who introduced him said, "Over forty years ago, I was a boy traveling on an airplane, and I was seated beside a young man. During the flight that young man shared with me the Four Spiritual Laws (the plan of salvation), and as a result of that I subsequently became a Christian and later a pastor. That young man never knew that I had accepted Christ, but tonight it's my joy to tell him that story as I introduce him to come and speak to you tonight."

We don't always see the results, and we don't always get to do the harvesting; but the Bible promises that as we share Christ with others and sow the seed, we'll reap a harvest at the end of the way. For whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

One morning this week, I sat down at my desk to tackle a little project that should have taken just a few minutes, and I ended up spending the morning on it because I became so fascinated by the subject. It was about a man named Daniel Draper, who was a 19th century Wesleyan Methodist preacher in Australia. He was born to an English carpenter and his wife in 1810, and his dad expected him to become a carpenter and apprenticed him for that profession. But Daniel came to know the Lord as his Savior and felt God calling him into the ministry. When he was in his mid-twenties, the Methodists of England sent him to Australia where he spent thirty years preaching the Gospel, planting churches, and establishing schools.

In January of 1865, Draper and his wife took a year's leave from the mission field to return to England, their first visit back home in thirty years. There he attended a great Methodist Conference in Birmingham, visited his old home town, and traveled about from church to church talking about the Methodist work in Australia. Then, a year later, on January 5, 1866, the Drapers boarded the steamship *London* to return to Australia. He told a friend, "I could spend another year in England very pleasantly, and should like to do so if my conscience would allow me, but I feel that I must get back to my work."

A day after they sailed from England, the sea became rough and by the following day a number of the passengers became very anxious. They were in the Bay of Biscay, and the wind increased in violence. Monday night was full of distress, and on Tuesday the ship was tossed around like a cork. Massive waves crashed over the entire ship. The sails were torn to shreds, the masts were broken, and the lifeboats were swept away. The engine room flooded with water. The crew and passengers worked incessantly at the pumps, but it was hopeless.

Early on Wednesday, the captain tried to turn the boat back to Portsmouth.

Thursday morning came and the storm was as fierce as ever, with wave after wave crashing over it. The ship was filling with water. The captain called everyone into the large meeting room and announced that there was no hope of being saved. There was no screaming or emotional outburst, but Rev. Draper was called upon to pray and to exhort the passengers. Mothers gathered their children around them and wept quietly, holding their little ones as tightly as possible. Some of the younger children, not fully aware of what was happening, asked why everyone was crying. Friends began taking leave of one another. Some retreated with their Bibles, but everyone tried to remain calm.

Rev. Draper went from person to person, evangelizing them, pointing them to Christ, praying with them, and leading them to Jesus. He preached the Gospel amid the gale and the storm, and he led virtually that whole ship to the Lord. The last words anyone heard him say were these: "Those of you who are not converted, now is the time; not a moment to be lost, for in a few minutes we shall all be in the presence of the Judge."

One small lifeboat was found and launched, though no one expected it to survive the storm. An Italian ship later picked up three passengers and a handful of the crew. The survivors said that as the ship was sinking beneath the rough waters of the ocean, the

sound of singing was heard: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me / Let me hide myself in Thee."

But as I researched this story, there was one statement that hit me between the eyes. When the terrible news reached Australia of the loss of this ship and so many men and women and children and the death of their beloved preacher, Daniel Draper, the leading Presbyterian minister in Melbourne made this comment: He said simply that God had known that the London would sink, and that accordingly, he had sent Draper as a passenger to support the Christians on board and to win the lost to Jesus and to the sure hope of eternal life. (Taken from various accounts of the sinking of the London and of the life of Rev. Daniel Draper, including *A History of Victoria* by Geoffrey Blainey, published by Cambridge University Press in 2006, page 115; the New York Times account of the disaster on page 5, February 1, 1866: "Foundering of the Steamship London—Loss of Two Hundred and Fifty Lives—Terrible Scenes;" and *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Online Edition, entry of Rev. Daniel James Draper;" and "An Account of the Last Days of Rev. Daniel Draper," chapter 9 of *South Australian Romance: How a Colony Was Founded and a Methodist Church Was Formed*," by Rev. John Blacket.)

There are things about it that I don't understand; but God in His omniscient wisdom knew that ship would sink, and so He strategically placed His man aboard the London to win the perishing to eternal life in the nick of time. It's a metaphor of you and me. We are stationed here aboard a perishing planet with dying men and women, and we have one message: "Those of you who are not converted, now is the time; not a moment to be lost."

And there are people whom we need to tell and people whom we need to save. For whoever turns a sinner from the error his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,  
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save