

JAMES

Introduction:

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states: “The Epistle of James is the most Jewish writing in the New Testament. The Gospel according to Matthew was written for the Jews. The Epistle to the Hebrews is addressed explicitly to them. The Apocalypse is full of the spirit of the Old Testament. The Epistle of Jude is Jewish too. Yet all of these books have more of the distinctively Christian element in them than we can find in the Epistle of James. If we eliminate two or three passages containing references to Christ, the whole epistle might find its place just as properly in the Canon of the Old Testament as in that of the New Testament, as far as its substance of doctrine and contents is concerned. That could not be said of any other book in the New Testament. There is no mention of the incarnation or of the resurrection, the two fundamental facts of the Christian faith. The word ‘gospel’ does not occur in the epistle. There is no suggestion that the Messiah has appeared and no presentation of the possibility of redemption through Him.”

Douglas J. Moo, in his commentary on *James*, writes about the background of the epistle: “The epistle of James has had a controversial history. Along with 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude, it belongs to that category of New Testament epistles called ‘general’ or ‘catholic’ (in the sense of ‘universal’). This designation was given to these seven letters early in the history of the church because each appears to be addressed to the church at large rather than to a single congregation. These letters also shared an uncertain status in many areas of the early church. Along with Hebrew and Revelation, several of them were the last to achieve generally recognized canonical status. In the case of James, it was not until the end of the fourth century that both eastern and western Christendom acknowledged it as Scripture.

The first mention of the epistle of James by name comes early in the third century. But since ancient authors did not always cite their sources, it is possible that earlier writings made use of James without acknowledgement. [One Bible scholar] discerned allusions to James in most of the New Testament epistles and in many late first and early second century non-canonical Christian writings. In many of these cases, however, dependence on James cannot be confirmed. The difficulty is that most of these parallels involve widespread traditional teaching. Very often, then, the relationship between James and these other books is indirect: both have made use of this traditional body of teaching. This is almost certainly the case for the two New Testament books that have the most in common with James – Matthew and 1 Peter. Among non-canonical early Christian writings, the Shepherd of Hermas (early middle second century) has the greatest number of parallels to James. In the section of that book called the ‘Mandates,’ several of James’ characteristic themes are found; the encouragement to pray with faith and without ‘double-mindedness’ in Mandate 9 is particularly close in wording and emphasis to James 1:6-8. Probably this section of Hermas is dependent on James. It is also possible that 1 Clement (AD 95) and the Epistle of Barnabas (written some time between AD 70 and 132) show dependence on James, but this is not certain.

The earliest clear references to James in the west come in the middle of the fourth century, when Hilary of Poitiers (writing in 356-358) and Ambrosiaster (d. 382) each quote James once. Jerome's influence was important in leading to the final acceptance of James in the western church. He included the epistle in his Latin translation, the Vulgate, and cited it often in his writings. And, in argument which was to have considerable importance, Jerome identified the author as the 'brother' of the Lord mentioned in Galatians 1:19. At about the same time, Augustine added his weight of authority, and no questions about James were again raised in the western church until the Reformation.

It was at the time of the Reformation that doubts about James were again expressed. Erasmus, impressed by the good quality of James' Greek, questioned the traditional view that the letter was written by the Lord's brother. Luther, too, questioned the apostolic authorship of James, but his criticism went much deeper than Erasmus'. For Luther, the sticking-point was the theological tension that he perceived between James and the 'chief' New Testament books over the matter of justification by faith. James, said Luther, 'mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture' ... and he characterized the letter as 'an epistle of straw.' Along with Jude, Hebrews and Revelation, therefore, Luther consigned James to the end of his German translation of the New Testament. But, while Luther obviously had difficulties with James and came close to giving the letter a secondary status, his criticism should not be overdrawn. He did not exclude James from the canon and, it has been estimated, cites of half the verses of James as authoritative in his writings. Even 'the epistle of straw' reference must be understood in its context: Luther is not dismissing James as worthless, but contrasting it unfavorably with the 'chief books' (John's Gospel, 1 John, Paul's epistles [especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians] and 1 Peter), which show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salutary for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine.' Therefore, Luther says of James elsewhere, 'I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him.'

Few of the other reformers followed Luther in his criticism of James. Calvin, for instance, while admitting that James 'seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behooved an apostle to be,' notes that 'it is not surely required of all to handle the same arguments.' He accepted the apostolic authority of James and Paul on the issue of justification. Calvin's approach is surely the correct one. In hindsight, we can see that Luther's excitement over his 'discovery' of the doctrine of justification by faith and its polemical context prevented him from taking a balanced approach to James and some other New Testament books. With greater knowledge of the Jewish background of James, and at a distance of several centuries from the battles Luther was fighting, we can appreciate the way James and Paul complement one another. Their opponents are different, and their arguments accordingly different, but each makes an important contribution to our understanding of faith."

This rather lengthy quotation from Douglas Moo's commentary should suffice to give us insight in the different character of emphasis placed on the truth of the Gospel in Paul's epistles and in James' writing. To put it simply, while Paul looks closely at the root of the Gospel tree, James focuses primarily on the fruit it is bearing. A closer look at Paul, however, reveals that Paul speaks also of fruit and James blames the lack of fruit on

the death of the root. The confusing part in the controversy is that both authors use similar terms to which they each give different meanings. It is good to read Paul and rejoice in God's grace, but bearing in mind what Dietrich Bonhoeffer has stated about "cheap grace," we acquire more appreciation for the way James presents the way God's grace ought to become evident in the life of a believer. Paul states that grace is free and James does not deny this point when he adds that it may be free but it is not cheap.

The author:

James identifies himself in the opening verse as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." The Greek text actually reverses the order, emphasizing the worth of the persons mentioned: "of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, a servant. The Greek word *doulos* literally means "slave." James was the kind of servant of God, who had declared: "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free."¹

Much has been written about the identity of this James, who presents himself as the author of this epistle. A brother by that name is mentioned in the protest the people in Nazareth uttered, saying about Jesus: "Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?"² And Paul reveals that this James occupied an important place in the leadership of the early church in Jerusalem. Shortly after his conversion, going to Jerusalem, he wrote: "I saw none of the other apostles — only James, the Lord's brother."³

James appears to have been the chairman of the church council at Jerusalem that dealt with the question of circumcision for Gentiles who had accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was the one who formulated the final decision which the whole church accepted.⁴ That fact alone would make any writing attributed to this man an important document to be dealt with.

The fact that he was not the James who was one of Jesus' original disciples is obvious because James was executed by King Herod before the church council ever took place.⁵

Date and place of writing:

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, puts the date of writing before AD 62, which was the year James was martyred. Moo actually argues for an earlier date of AD 45-47, stating that James may have misunderstood Paul's teaching about justification, which was not cleared up between the two until they met at a later date. That assumption is difficult to prove or disprove. The supposition that the letter was written before the Jerusalem council may carry more weight; the argument being that James would undoubtedly make some reference in his epistle to the council's decision about the position of the Gentiles in the church.

Since we have no indication that James did any traveling as an evangelist, the most natural place of writing would be Jerusalem, where we find him in Scripture.

¹ Ex. 21:5

² Matt. 13:55

³ Gal. 1:19

⁴ Acts 15:13-23

⁵ See Acts 12:2.

Outline of the epistle:

For an outline of the epistle, we follow the one given by Douglas J. Moo in *James*:

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I. ADDRESS AND SALUTATION (1:1)

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

As we saw earlier, James identifies himself only as the slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no mention of any blood relationship between him and Jesus. Much can be said about what James does not say. He does not claim to be an apostle, nor does he refer to his position of leadership in the church in Jerusalem, which was the mother church of all Christianity. As *Barnes' Notes* states: "This is only one instance out of many, in the New Testament, in which it is regarded as a higher honor to be the 'servant of God,' and to belong to his family, than to sustain any relations of blood or kindred."

The Pulpit Commentary states about the term "a servant": *Doulos* is similarly used by St. Paul in ... Romans 1:1; ... Philipians 1:1; ... Titus 1:1 by St. Peter in ... 2 Peter 1:1; and by St. Jude ver. 1. It is clearly an *official* designation, implying that his office is one 'in which, not his own will, not the will of other men, but only of God and of Christ, is to be performed.'"

About the addressees, "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations," *Barnes' Notes* writes: "Greek 'The twelve tribes which are in the dispersion,' or of the dispersion *en tee diaspora*. This word occurs only here and in 1 Peter 1:1, and John 7:35. It refers properly to those who lived out of Palestine, or who were scattered among the Gentiles. There were two great 'dispersions;' the Eastern and the Western. The first had its origin about the time when the ten tribes were carried away to Assyria, and in the time of the Babylonian captivity. In consequence of these events, and of the fact that large numbers of the Jews went to Babylon, and other Eastern countries, for purposes of travel, commerce, etc., there were many Jews in the East in the times of the apostles. The other was the Western 'dispersion,' which commenced about the time of Alexander the Great, and which was promoted by various causes, until there were large numbers of Jews in Egypt and along Northern Africa, in Asia Minor, in Greece proper, and even in Rome. To which of these classes this Epistle was directed is not known; but most probably the writer had particular reference to those in the East ... The phrase 'the twelve tribes,' was the common term by which the Jewish people were designated, and was in use long after the ten tribes were carried away, leaving, in fact, only two of the twelve in Palestine."

Although *chaírein*, "greetings," may have been a customary Greek salutation, it is an unusual word at the beginning of an apostolic epistle. None of the other New Testament writers used it in an opening of their epistles. The literal meaning is "rejoice." We find the word in *The Beatitudes*, where Jesus says: "*Rejoice* and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."⁶

⁶ Matt. 5:12

II. TRIALS AND CHRISTIAN MATURITY (1:2-18)

a. Letting trials accomplish their purpose (1:2-4)

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

To say that James' opening statement is surprising is an understatement. It is an opening salvo, calculated to get our full and immediate attention. To consider trial a source of joy is not a normal or natural reaction to adversity. We all prefer smooth sailing to storms and high waves. If James would have been among Job's friends and had offered this advice, he would have been thrown out. Superficial reading of James' advice would make us conclude that he was supremely insensitive to human suffering.

It is worthwhile to read J. B. Phillips' paraphrase of this text: "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends!"⁷

The first thing that ought to catch our attention, rather than the words "joy" and "trials" is the term "brothers." Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states: "He calls his readers *my brethren*, an address which he uses fourteen times (three times with the qualification 'beloved'), often to introduce a new section. This affectionate address sets a strong pastoral tone for the many exhortations of the letter." This pleads strongly against an accusation of insensitivity.

We know almost nothing about James' personal life and his experience with suffering. Tradition has it that he was martyred. It is, however, natural to assume that James would not make statements like these without having had personal experiences of trials and temptations. His advice to consider them, not only positively instead of negatively, but to receive them as means for spiritual growth, suggests deep insight into the purpose of life experiences. The eighteenth century German poet Goethe said: "A talent is formed in quietness; a character in the storms of life." C. S. Lewis states: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Many Christian can testify to the fact that they experienced the presence of the Lord most deeply in their darkest hour. It was when they were in prison, in the middle of the night, with bleeding backs and shackled, that Paul and Silas sang their songs of praise.⁸

The Apostle Paul also preached what he practiced. In his letter to the Romans, we read: "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; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured

⁷ *The New Testament in Modern English*

⁸ Acts 16:25

out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”⁹ So, we must conclude that James’ exhortation was part of the early church’s theology.

There are in the Greek text of these verses several words that merit a closer look. The Greek text reads literally: “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trial of your faith works patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

The Greek word, rendered “temptations,” is *peirasmos*, which has the root meaning of “putting something to the proof.” It is, however, the same word that Jesus uses in the Lord’s Prayer, in “And lead us not into *temptation*, but deliver us from the evil one.”¹⁰ And Luke uses it for the temptations of Christ, in: “When the devil had finished all this *tempting*, he left him until an opportune time.”¹¹ It appears that the concept covers even the role the Evil One may play in our lives, when he tries to keep us away from fellowship with God. Obviously, James does not mean that we ought to rejoice when we give in to Satan’s tempting and fall into sin, but that we must realize that when the devil begins to pay closer attention to us, it is because the Holy Spirit has begun to work in us. Jesus was not tempted until the Holy Spirit filled Him at His baptism.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states about joy in temptation: “What is remarkable about this joy command is that it applies to a situation in which a joyful reaction would be most unnatural: when you meet various trials. The word translated ‘trial,’ *peirasmos*, has two basic meanings in the New Testament. It can refer to the inner enticement to sin, as in 1 Timothy 6:9: ‘But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.’ At other times it denotes external afflictions, particularly persecution (cf. 1 Pet. 4:12). In several verses it is possible that both meanings should be included (e.g. Mt. 26:41 and parallels).”

The next important word is *hupomone*, “patience.” Jesus uses it in *The Parable of the Sower* to describe the seed that produces a harvest. We read: “But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by *persevering* produce a crop.”¹² The seed that produces a full ear of corn simply does what it is created for. We could say that our perseverance stands for allowing the Spirit of God to do what He set out to do in our lives. In a sense it is not our perseverance that wins the day, but God’s.

The third word is *teleios*, “complete,” in the sense of mature. Paul uses it in this way in the verse: “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the *mature*, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.”¹³ But the meaning goes deeper than maturity that is the result of a healthy growth. Jesus uses the word in His Sermon on the Mount: “Be *perfect*, therefore, as your heavenly Father is

⁹ Rom. 5:2-5

¹⁰ Matt. 6:13

¹¹ Luke 4:13

¹² Luke 8:15

¹³ I Cor. 2:6

*perfect.*¹⁴ In Old Testament terms: “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.”¹⁵

There is, therefore, in the way James uses the word, an idea that God intends to draw us into His own holiness and perfection, which is the ultimate reason for which He created man in the beginning.

b. Wisdom, prayer and faith (1:5-8)

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

6 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.

7 That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;

8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

These verses must be seen in the context of the growth into maturity. The Greek word used is *sophia*, “wisdom,” which James uses three more times in the chapter that deals with the sin of the tongue.¹⁶

In everyday life, wisdom is the art of using knowledge in a practical and effective way. We tend to think that wisdom is related to experience, which would lead to the conclusion that it belongs exclusively to the elderly. But in *The Book of Proverbs*, the father speaks to his son when he says: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.”¹⁷

In the context in which James uses the concept, wisdom is what is needed to look at the trials of life and interpret them in the way God wants us to look at them, as means for spiritual growth and advancement on the road to intimacy with God.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states about “wisdom”: “One of the most important virtues that a Christian may *lack* is wisdom. Wisdom (*sophia*) plays a central role in the Old Testament book, Proverbs, and in many intertestamental books such as The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus. These books, with their terse, hortatory style and practical emphases, have exerted a significant influence on both James’ style and content. In the tradition found in these works, wisdom is above all a practically-oriented virtue that gives direction for the life of the godly person. ‘Insight’ into the will of God and the way it is to be applied in life are both given by wisdom (See Pr. 2:10-19; 3:13-14; 9:1-6) ... Particularly relevant to James 1:5 is the way in which wisdom is said to produce in its possessor a full-blown godly character. According to Proverbs 8:35, the one who finds wisdom ‘finds life and obtains favor from the LORD.’ Wisdom of Solomon 10:5 says that wisdom preserved Abraham ‘blameless before God’ when he obeyed the terrible command to sacrifice his son Isaac. In light of this tradition, it may well be that James introduces the subject of wisdom in verse 5 because he regards it as having the power to

¹⁴ Matt. 5:48

¹⁵ Lev. 11:44

¹⁶ See James 3:13,15,17.

¹⁷ Prov. 1:7

make the believer ‘perfect and complete’ (v.4b). A further connection with verses 2-4 is discerned by some commentators (e.g. Calvin ...), who suggest that wisdom is needed so that believers can take the perspective on trials commanded in verses 2-3. The fact that wisdom is sometimes said to enable the righteous to endure testing ... lends plausibility to this hypothesis. On the other hand, James does nothing to draw attention to these connections. Therefore, while the relationship of wisdom to completeness and testing may have influenced James’ order of topics, we should probably not tie verses 5-8 too closely to verses 2-4.” On this point I humbly disagree with Mr. Moo. The members of the early church soon understood the reason for which God allowed hardship in their lives. When the apostles were maltreated and beaten by the Sanhedrin, we read: “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”¹⁸ And Paul writes to the church in Philippi: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.”¹⁹

James says that if we ask God for wisdom, He will give it to us “liberally.” The Greek word is *haplos*, which is only found in this verse in the New Testament. *Strong’s Definitions* states that it is derived from a word that means “folded together.” It is like a neatly wrapped package God gives us as a birthday present. And in giving it, the Lord does not “upbraid” us, chiding us for not having what we are supposed to have to begin with. If Adam had not sinned, we would all be full of divine wisdom. In giving to us what we ask for, God does not remind us of the fact that we are not what He intended a human being to be. He gives us our presents with a hug and expression of His love. “Without finding fault” is the translation of the Greek verb *oneidizo*. It is a strong expression that means “to defame,” or “to reproach.”

What James states about faith in this context, could be applied to all prayer, not only a prayer for wisdom. The classic example of a prayer for wisdom is the one prayed by the young Solomon when he inherited the throne of his father David. God came to Solomon in a dream, in which He offered him an inauguration present. Solomon said: “I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?” We read that God was pleased with Solomon’s request and gave him a bonus of wealth and fame that would make him unequalled in the history of mankind.²⁰

Faith stands for simple confidence in God. If we do not look up at God with an attitude of trust, we imply that God cannot be trusted. A lack of faith means that we project our own unreliability upon God’s character. This is illustrated in what Moses said to God about the opinion other nations may have had regarding God’s plan with Israel, which thought some of the Israelites seemed to have shared: “It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the

¹⁸ Acts 5:41

¹⁹ Phil. 1:29

²⁰ See I Kings 3:5-14.

earth.”²¹ Sometimes we accuse God of motives that are baser than anything we could conceive of ourselves. Faith is not only the opposite of doubt; it is the antipode of mistrust.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states about the subject of faith: “God’s meeting of our requests, while not limited arbitrarily to a select number (he gives ‘to all,’ v.5), is limited by the manner in which we ask. It is not any request, made however selfishly and foolishly, that God grants, says James (see 4:1-3), but the request that is made *in faith, with no doubting*. This same combination of words occurs in Jesus’ teaching about prayer, given in response to the amazement of the disciples when, at his command, the fig tree had withered before their eyes: ‘Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith’ (Mt. 21:21-22). The key terms, *faith* and *doubting*, have similar meanings in the two passages. *Faith* means more than a belief that God will give what we ask; it also includes confident, unwavering trust in God. *Doubting* translates a word (*diakrinō*) that means basically ‘to differentiate.’ From this root idea it was extended to include the ideas of ‘judging’ (1 Cor. 14:29) and ‘disputing’ (Acts 11:2), and hence, in the middle voice, ‘to dispute with oneself,’ ‘to waver,’ ‘to doubt.’ James uses the same word in 2:4 to describe the ‘distinctions’ or ‘divisions’ which an undue attention to rich people can create in a church. The word suggests, then, not so much intellectual doubt as a basic conflict in loyalties – as for instance between God and ‘mammon’ (Mt. 6:24) or God and ‘the world’ (Jas. 4:4).”

James seems to trace the tendency to doubt to a flaw in a person’s character. He compares doubt to the instability of a wave of the sea that changes its form and course according to the way the wind blows. Paul uses the same image of spiritual immaturity when he writes: “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.”²² James may be suggesting here also that a lack of trust in God, based on the knowledge of God’s character, can lead to susceptibility toward false teaching.

James uses two Greek words to describe the character of the doubter, *dipsuchos*, “double-minded,” literally: “two psyche,” and *akatastatos*, “unstable,” literally “inconstant.” Both words are uniquely James’ and they are found twice in this epistle. “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you *double-minded*”²³ and “but no man can tame the tongue. It is a *restless* evil, full of deadly poison.”²⁴ In order to pray the prayer of faith, one needs a new heart.

c. Poverty and wealth (1:9-11)

9 The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

²¹ Ex. 32:12

²² Eph. 4:14

²³ James 4:8

²⁴ James 3:8

10 But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.

11 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.

The Greek text of v.9 reads literally: “Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted.” The two Greek words used are *tapeinos*, “depressed,” or “humiliated,” and *hypsos*, “elevation,” or “dignity.” The first word is used by Jesus to describe Himself in “I am gentle and *humble* in heart.”²⁵ James uses the same word in “But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the *humble*.’”²⁶ The difference between the low degree and exaltation is in the eye of the beholder. The low degree is the way one human being, or society may consider a person; the exaltation is how God looks at the person He created in His own image, whom He has saved and sanctified.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “The description of *the brother* in verse 9 as *lowly (tapeinos)* suggests a Christian who is low down on the socio-economic scale – one who is relatively poor and powerless. This sense of the word *tapeinos* is warranted both because the Old Testament frequently uses the term with this meaning (*cf.* Pss. 10:18; 34:18; 102:17; Is. 11:4; Am. 2:7), and because *tapeinos* is here contrasted with *plousios*, ‘rich’ (v.10). If James is writing to Jewish-Christians in Palestine and Syria, many, if not most, of his readers would have been poor. We know of a famine that struck at about this time and it is probably that Christians, ostracized by much of the populace, would have suffered particularly severely (see Acts 11:28–29). In the midst of such afflictions, the Christian, whose position in worldly terms is low indeed, is to *boast in his exaltation*. *Boast* (NEB ‘be proud’) means in this context not the arrogant boasting of the self-important, but the joyous pride possessed by the person who values what God values. The word *exaltation (hypsos)* is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the heavenly realm to which Christ ascended (Eph. 4:8) and from which the Holy Spirit descends (Lk. 24:49). By faith believers now belong to that heavenly realm as citizens (Phil 3:20) and also await from heaven the Lord Jesus who will transform our ‘bodies of humility’ into ‘bodies of glory’ (Phil. 3:21). We may suggest, then, that *exaltation* includes the believer’s present enjoyment of his exalted spiritual status as well as his hope of participation in the glorious eternal kingdom inaugurated by Christ. It is just this combination of present status and future inheritance that James singles out in a verse that is almost a commentary on the meaning of *hypsos* (2:5); ‘Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?’”

Generally speaking, James did not like the rich. He mentions them three times in his epistle. In the verse before us, he is the most positive and, in a way, compassionate towards them. In the other two references in this epistle, he condemns them rather harshly. We read: “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

²⁵ Matt. 11:29

²⁶ James 4:6

love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?"²⁷ And: "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."²⁸

James does not elaborate on what is meant by the "low position" in which the rich ought to take pride. We could see in it a reference to the cross and its shame with which all believers in Christ must identify themselves. Paul emphasizes this in his testimony to the Galatians, saying: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."²⁹

Interestingly, the expression "take pride in," *kauchaomai*, which occurs in v.9 in reference to the poor, is not repeated in v.10. It is as if James wants to emphasize the poverty of the rich in that they must even borrow their boasting from the poor.

The image of the fading of the wild flower is borrowed from the Old Testament where it is found twice. David uses it to describe man's condition in one of his psalms: "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."³⁰ And we find it in Isaiah: "A voice says, 'Cry out.' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.'³¹

James had known the initial outburst of joyous giving that the Holy Spirit created after Pentecost in the early days of the young church, when people with property sold their belongings and gave to the poor. Evidently that outpouring of brotherly love had not lasted long. Just a few years later, the dividing line between rich and poor was drawn where it always had been in the history of mankind.

d. Trials and temptations (1:12-18)

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

13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

²⁷ James 2:5-7

²⁸ James 5:1-6

²⁹ Gal. 6:14

³⁰ Ps. 103:15,16

³¹ Isa. 40:6

14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.

15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

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

18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

These verses are, in a way, a further commentary on the opening statement of this chapter, about the way we ought to accept trials and temptations. In the first verses of this chapter, James described the fruit of perseverance in the life of the believer; in v.12 he shows the recompense of perseverance at the end of life on earth when God rewards the one who has stood the test. James' beatitude resembles the one Jesus gave as the last of His beatitudes in *The Sermon on the Mount*: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."³²

Two other crowns are mentioned in the apostolic epistles. Paul writes to Timothy: "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."³³ And Peter states: "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."³⁴

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes: "A reward is promised to the Christian who successfully meets the test: *the crown of life*. The word *crown* (*stephanos*) sometimes refers to a royal crown, but is more frequently used of the laurel wreath given to the victorious athlete (see 1 Cor. 9:25) and, figuratively, symbolizes glory and honor. It is this last meaning that fits best here. The *crown* is the emblem of spiritual success, given by the King of the universe to those who 'keep their faith' in the midst of suffering and temptation. *Life* should be taken as identifying the reward – 'the reward that is life.' This *life* is, of course, not physical life, but eternal life, the enjoyment of God's presence on into eternity. Revelation 2:10, a word of Jesus addressed to suffering Christians, closely parallels the thought here: 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.' Even when enduring the trials means physical death, life is the reward for those who love God. This love for God is demonstrated by, and perfected in, our willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ.

³² Matt. 5:10-12

³³ II Tim. 4:8

³⁴ I Peter 5:4

There are those who react against the notion of a ‘reward’ for faithful Christian living. And, indeed, service to God that is motivated by a calculated desire for reward is the very antithesis of Christian spirituality. But the New Testament consistently invites the Christian to contemplate the inheritance that awaits him. The contemplation of this glorious inheritance can be a marvelous source of spiritual strength and sustenance as we realize ‘that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us’ (Rom. 8:18). By fixing his gaze on this inheritance, the believer is able to find sustenance and strength in trial, recognizing that the suffering of this present time is not long. This inheritance cannot be earned and it is unattainable by those who do not serve God from a heart of love and devotion. Moreover, as [one Bible scholar] aptly says, ‘the rewards are of a kind that only a true Christian would be able to appreciate.’”

There is an obvious connection between the statement in v.2 about trials and the one in v.13. In the first instance James uses the noun *peirasmos*, “trials,” and in v.13 the related verb *peirazo* is used. The same verb is found in the verse: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be *tempted* by the devil.”³⁵

James states that God cannot be tempted, neither does He tempt anyone. In the case of Jesus’ temptation we understand that the devil did the tempting and God allowed it to happen. Satan’s purpose in temptation is to make a person fall into sin. God’s reason for allowing temptation is to strengthen a person’s resolve not to give in. This is probably best illustrated in Jesus’ admonition to Peter on the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion and Peter’s denial: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”³⁶ Jesus uses the image of sifting wheat to show that what Satan was after was the chaff in Peter. He hoped to demonstrate that chaff was all there was. Jesus assured Peter that there was wheat and that Satan was only allowed to shake Peter so that the husks would be blown away and the kernel would remain.

There appears to be a line drawn between vv.12 and 13, as far as the kind of temptation is concerned. The temptation in v.12 is, as we saw, related to the trials that we should accept with rejoicing because of the fruit of perseverance they bear in our life. The tree ought to be grateful to the wind because the wind stimulates the growth of the tree’s roots. It is the kind of temptation Jesus withstood. But the temptations in v.13 are the ones that are the fruit of our inner corruption, our sinful nature. One problem is that the same Greek word is used in both verses. The temptations in v.13 are described by Jesus in: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”³⁷ We cannot rejoice in the fact that we have a sinful nature that responds to any kind of enticement to commit sin.

What James is saying is that we must not blame God for our tendency to sin. We must not put all the blame on the devil either, although he is the one who initiates the tempting. Our problem is that our sinful nature is not ours by choice; we were born with it. That is why we tend to put the blame on anyone but ourselves. There is a whole block of theology behind James’ reasoning, that is left unsaid. The point he brings out is that we

³⁵ Matt. 4:1

³⁶ Luke 22:31,32

³⁷ Matt. 15:19

must take responsibility for our sinful acts. That in itself is a compliment to our humanity. The poison of sin is that it carries in it a built-in tendency to cover up. When Adam sinned, he blamed his wife; when Eve sinned, she blamed the serpent. But when David sinned, he blamed himself, saying to God: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”³⁸ David recognized the sinful nature he inherited from his parents, but he blamed himself for the sinful acts he committed. A person who takes responsibility for his faults is an honorable person. It is the cover-up of sin that is the most harmful part of it. The Dutch statesman Abraham Kuiper once said: “Wearing the penitential garment does not disgrace a person.”

It seems that the reason for James’ emphasis on the way our sinful nature operates and leads to sinful acts is to make us aware of our problem so we can do something about it. We cannot change the fact that we have a sinful nature, but our awareness of it can keep it in check. What we have to watch is our desire. The Holy Spirit is able to cleanse our desires, but we have to allow Him to do so. The choice for Eve was not between eating from the tree of knowledge or not eating, but between eating from the tree of life or from the tree of knowledge. Once she chose the wrong tree, her desire for its fruit went haywire.

Bible scholars have debated James’ statement that God cannot be tempted. The problem is the Greek word *apeirastos*, “not to be tempted,” which only occurs here in the New Testament. Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states that Bible translators consider it to be “a passive verbal adjective with the meaning ‘unable to be tempted.’” Moo mentions the rendering of *The New English Bible* that reads: “inexperienced.” Some other translations are: *The Amplified Bible*: “God is incapable of being tempted by [what is] evil and He Himself tempts no one.” *Williams*: “God cannot be tempted to do evil, and He never tempts anyone to do so.” *Beck*: “God can’t be tempted to do wrong, and He doesn’t tempt anyone.” Eugene H. Peterson’s *The Message*: “God is impervious to evil, and puts evil in no one’s way.” *Contemporary English Version*: “God cannot be tempted by evil, and he doesn’t use evil to tempt others.” *New Living Translation*: “God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else.”

Although there is a difference in wording, the overall meaning remains the same. The emphasis is on the character of God. The Apostle Paul defines sin as falling short of the glory of God.³⁹ This means that everything that does not measure up to God’s glory, that is God’s character, is basically sinful. God’s glorious character is the measuring stick. It would be a sheer impossibility for sin to be introduced into that which is the ultimate standard of all. It is, therefore, God’s character that makes it impossible for Him to use sin as a means to achieve His goal. That doesn’t mean that sin would be able to prevent God from reaching His goal.

The Greek text of v.14 reads literally: “But every man is tempted of his own lust, when he is drawn away and enticed.” There are three important Greek verbs in this verse that merit a closer look: *epithumia*, “longing for what is forbidden,” *exelko*, “to drag away,”

³⁸ Ps. 51:4,5

³⁹ Rom. 3:23

and *deleazo*, “to entrap.” *Epithumia* is the common word for “lust,” used frequently throughout the New Testament. *Exelko* is found in this verse of James and Peter also uses *deleazo* in his Second Epistle.⁴⁰ Interestingly, James only mentions here that God does not tempt, but he does not mention the one who does. He only emphasizes the human reaction to temptation. There is no need to point out that Satan is the author of sin. Satan finds a receptive heart in all of us. We provide him with a strong sounding board for his whisperings. That is the point we must be aware of. There is an untamed animal in each of us that must be kept under control. Martin Luther is credited with saying: “We think we drowned the animal inside us, but the beast can swim.” Only the Holy Spirit can keep things under control inside us. We do well to pray David’s prayer after him: “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”⁴¹ Our sinful nature will eventually lead us to death, to both physical and spiritual death. There is nothing we can do to prevent the end of our physical life, but whether or not, we will be eternally separated from God, is up to us.

James warns us not to be deceived. The Greek word used is *planao*, which means “to err.” It is the word Jesus uses in the parable about the sheep that wanders away from the flock.⁴² We lose our way if we do not understand who God is and what He does.

The Greek text of v.17 reads literally: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, [and] comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

The New Living Translation renders this: “Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.” J. B. Phillips’ *The New Testament in Modern English* reads: “But every good endowment and every complete gift must come from above, from the Father of all lights, with whom there is never the slightest variation or shadow of inconsistency.” According to Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, one difficulty in the text is the punctuation. We read: “A ... difficulty is the punctuation of the verse. RSV, along with most translations, places a comma after ‘from above,’ making the participial phrase ‘coming down ...’ an additional, independent description. But the NEB joins together ‘from above’ and ‘coming down’: ‘All good giving and every perfect gift comes from above ...’ Probably the RSV rendering is better, because the alternative leaves the prepositional phrase (‘from the Father of lights’) hanging somewhat awkwardly.”

Jesus’ words: “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”⁴³, may have been in James’ mind when he wrote this.

Our greatest problem in life is often that God’s perfect gifts do not always come to us in a form that looks perfect to us. Joseph, for instance, suffered immensely at the hands of

⁴⁰ II Pet. 2:14,18

⁴¹ Ps. 51:7,10

⁴² Matt. 18:12-14

⁴³ Luke 11:11-13

his brothers. God’s perfect gifts did not come to him in recognizable form. Yet, at the end he could say to his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”⁴⁴ It is when we can place our personal experiences in a global context that we may be able to recognize God’s gifts to us as perfect and complete.

James’ calling God, “the Father of lights” is unique. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The word must refer to the heavenly bodies, of which God may be said to be the Father, in that he is their Creator (for ‘Father,’ in the sense of Creator, cf. ... Job 38:28). From him who ‘made the stars also’ comes down every good and perfect gift, and with him ‘there can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning.’” *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “From God, the source and fountain of all light. Light, in the Scriptures, is the emblem of knowledge, purity, happiness; and God is often represented as light. ... There is, doubtless, an allusion here to the heavenly bodies, among which the sun is the most brilliant. It appears to us to be the great original fountain of light, diffusing its radiance over all worlds. No cloud, no darkness seems to come from the sun, but it pours its rich effulgence on the farthest part of the universe. So it is with God. There is no darkness in him (1 John 1:5); and all the moral light and purity which there is in the universe is to be traced to him. The word Father here is used in a sense which is common in Hebrew ... as denoting that which is the source of anything, or that from which anything proceeds.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* adds: “Although there is considerable question as to the correct reading of the last part of verse 17, the meaning is clear enough: God is completely consistent; he does not change.”

James expresses the same thought as the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he compares God’s physical creation with His creative act of salvation: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” A similar thought is conveyed by Isaiah: “‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One. ‘Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God’? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.’”⁴⁵

The birth mentioned in v.18 is the new birth caused by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states: “As an outstanding example of God’s good gifts, James cites the fact that God has *brought us forth by the word of truth*. This he did out of his own ‘gratuitous and spontaneous determination’ (*boulētheis*). But what ‘birth’ is this? The birth of humankind by the sovereign fiat of God’s word? The birth of Israel, his

⁴⁴ Gen. 50:20

⁴⁵ Isa. 40:25-31

people (*cf.* Dt. 32:18)? Or the birth of Christians through the word of the gospel? In favor of the first are the clear creation references in verse 17, Philo’s use of the verb ‘give birth to’ (*apokyeō*) of creation and the argument that *creatures* (*ktismata*) probably refers to non-human creation. The second can appeal to Old Testament references to Israel as God’s *first fruits*. However, there are decisive considerations favoring the third interpretation. First, *first fruits* (*aparchē*) is a customary New Testament designation of Christians (see especially 2 Thes. 2:13; Rev. 14:4). And the idea of Christians as the *first fruits* of a redeemed creation is paralleled in Romans 8:19-23. Secondly, the first ‘give birth to’ in verse 18 clearly parallels by contrast its use in verse 15 (these are the only two occurrences in the New Testament). But this favors a reference to *spiritual* life as a contrast to spiritual death in verse 15. Thirdly, and most decisively, is the overwhelming probability that *the word of truth* refers to the gospel. The phrase means this in its four New Testament occurrences (2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:15) and is connected in James to the phrase ‘which is able to save your souls’ in verse 21.

We take it, then, that James appeals to the spiritual ‘new birth’ of Christians as a particularly striking illustration of the good things God gives. This new birth is motivated by the sovereign determination of God, whose *will*, unlike the creation he made, is unvarying. The instrument through which God accomplishes this spiritual birth is the gospel, *the word of truth*. And the purpose of this birth is that Christians should stand as the ‘first installment’ (*first fruits*) in the universal redemptive plan of God – ‘good gifts’ that he has yet to give.”

The mention of “first fruit” suggests that the time for the harvest is close. If born-again believers are called “first fruit,” it means that all of mankind, or all of creation constitutes the harvest. Paul expresses this in Romans with the words: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”⁴⁶

III. TRUE CHRISTIANITY SEEN IN ITS WORKS (1:19 – 2:26)

a. An exhortation regarding speech and anger (1:19-20)

19 *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,*

20 *for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*

Having established the position of the believer in relationship to God and to the world, James now turns to the practical implications of this position. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are called the firstfruit of God’s creation. James makes us take a closer look at

⁴⁶ Rom. 8:19-25

what that fruit is supposed to look like. We are God’s firstfruit if we bear the fruit of God’s grace in our everyday life.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, introduces this section with: “The first major section of this letter (1:2-18) has a loose coherence centered on the theme of trials/temptations. 1:19 – 2:26 is more closely focused on the command expressed in 1:22 *be doers of the word*. This command is the centerpiece of 1:21-27, which argues for ‘doing’ as indispensable to any genuine Christianity. 2:1-13 introduces love for poorer brethren as a specific instance in which this obedience is to be manifest. The relationship between this obedience and faith is then explored in 2:14-26. Four words are particularly characteristic of the section: ‘word’ (*logos*), prominent especially in 1:21-27; ‘law’ (*nomos*), mentioned in 1:25 and highlighted in 2:8-13; and ‘works’ (*erga*) and ‘faith’ (*pistis*), which carry the weight of the argument throughout 2:14-26.”

The pattern of behavior James traces is a vital one. He does not particularly mention to whom we ought to be listening, but the inference is obviously that we must, first of all, listen to the word of God, although listening to others is not excluded. We become “good listeners” if we listen to God first.

The Greek word translated “quick” is *tachus*, which only occurs in this verse in the New Testament. The Greek word for “slow” is *bradus*, which, in a sense, is also particular to James, although Luke uses it once in the verse: “He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how *slow* of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’”⁴⁷

Listening to God stands for obeying Him. Obedience to God’s word must be the leading principle of our life. We must place ourselves in the position of approaching God with the predetermined attitude that we will obey whatever He tells us. In most cases, unless God speaks to us in a direct and undeniable way, this means that we must read the Bible and do what it tells us to. D. L. Moody is reported to have said that if he had to do his life over again, he would pray less and read his Bible more.

Barnes’ Notes comments: “[Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak] That is, primarily, to hear God; to listen to the instructions of that truth by which we have been begotten, and brought into so near relation to him. At the same time, though this is the primary sense of the phrase here, it may be regarded as inculcating the general doctrine that we are to be more ready to hear than to speak; or that we are to be disposed to learn always, and from any source. Our appropriate condition is rather that of learners than instructors; and the attitude of mind which we should cultivate is that of a readiness to receive information from any quarter. The ancients have some sayings on this subject which are well worthy of our attention. ‘Men have two ears, and but one tongue, that they should hear more than they speak.’ ‘The ears are always open, ever ready to receive instruction; but the tongue is surrounded with a double row of teeth, to hedge it in, and to keep it within proper bounds.’”

The Greek word for “wrath” is *orge*, which has the primary meaning of “passionate desire,” “vengeance,” or “wrath.” It is used in the New Testament for the wrath of God, God’s judgment of sin. Generally speaking, we are not to take vengeance, because

⁴⁷ Luke 24:25,26

vengeance is God's prerogative. We read: "'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."⁴⁸ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "When a Christian gives vent to wrath, he is incapable of acting justly or righteously; and in addition, he prevents, or at least hinders, the vindication of God's righteousness in the world."

James, however, links vengeance to our speaking. The emphasis seems to be on our choice of words, which could either appease people or make them angry. "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up."⁴⁹ It may also refer to angry talk, blaming God for injustices carried out by fellowmen. James does not condemn anger as such, as if it were something that never ought to occur in our lives. We may be angry, as long as we are angry about the right thing. Jesus was angry when He drove the merchants out of the temple court and turned the tables of the money changers upside-down. The Apostle Paul admonishes: "'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."⁵⁰ Holding on to anger for more than a brief period of time, may give us some emotional satisfaction, but it leads into the enemy camp.

The anger James speaks about, however, is not righteous anger, similar to the wrath of God; it is anger that is connected to immoral behavior, that is sinful anger. It is the anger that is contrary to "the righteous life that God desires." This is a rather free translation of the Greek text, which reads literally: "For [the] wrath of man does not work [the] righteousness of God." This is generally interpreted as the righteousness God demands in human life. J. B. Phillips paraphrases this: "For man's temper is never the means of achieving God's true goodness." The Living Bible reads: "For anger doesn't make us good, as God demands that we must be."

Finally, Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: "The prohibition of unrestrained anger is based on the fact that anger does *not work the righteousness of God*. Considerable difficulty is involved in rightly identifying *the righteousness of God* here. Three main possibilities should be considered. First, the phrase may refer to 'the righteous status that God confers on us' (taking the genitive *theou* as subjective.) This meaning of righteousness is well attested in Paul's letters (*cf.* Phil. 3:9) and James appears to use 'righteousness' and the cognate verb 'justify' with this general meaning in 2:14-26. Secondly, the word 'righteousness' might mean 'justice' (*cf.* NEB), in which case James would be warning his readers against thinking that man's anger can somehow be excused because it is a tool of God's own just judgment (in this cause the genitive *theou* would presumably have a loose possessive force). This meaning of 'righteousness' is well attested in the Septuagint and the phrase 'work righteousness' may have this meaning in Hebrews 11:33 (*cf.* RSV). A third possibility is to understand 'righteousness' as 'the righteous activity that meets God's approval' (taking the genitive *theou* as objective; *cf.* NIV). The phrase 'do' (*poieō*) or 'practice' (*ergazomai*) righteousness consistently has this meaning in biblical Greek (see with *ergazomai*, Ps. 15:2; Acts 10:35; Heb. 11:33 may also fit here). This last consideration seems decisive, particularly in view of the fact that James' only clear use of 'righteousness' to refer to status before God (the first

⁴⁸ Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30

⁴⁹ Prov. 12:25

⁵⁰ Eph. 4:26,27

alternative above) comes in a quotation (of Gn. 15:6). On this understanding, then, to ‘work righteousness’ would be the antithesis of ‘working sin’ (2:9). Hasty, uncontrolled anger is sin, because it violates the standard of conduct that God demands of his people. Though probably coincidental, it is striking that, in the only place where ‘work’ (*ergazomai*) and ‘righteousness’ are used together in the Septuagint (Ps. 15:2), the context has to do with sins of speech.”

b. ‘Be doers of the word’ (1:21-27)

21 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.

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror

24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.

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.

27 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.

It is up to us to rid ourselves of “all moral filth and the evil.” The Greek text speaks of “filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness.” The Greek words used are *rhuparia* and *perisseia kakia*. The first word is particular to James. It only occurs here in the New Testament. *Kakia* is generally rendered with “malice.”

The question, however, is whether it is possible for a person to rid himself of the evil in his soul without outside help. The answer is, obviously, “no!” Paul’s exclamation: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” can only be answered: “through Jesus Christ our Lord!”⁵¹ One cannot rid one’s house of darkness by throwing out darkness in a bucket. Darkness is defeated by letting in the light.

James suggests that it is the Word of God that will clear up the darkness in our soul. The NIV’s rendering “the word planted in you,” would remind us of Jesus’ Parable of the Sower.⁵² “The farmer sows the word.”⁵³ But the verb used in the parable is *speiro*, “to scatter.” James uses *emphutos*, a word that is only found in this verse, meaning “implanted.” The thought is clear, however, that it is the Word of the Gospel that can do what we are unable to do ourselves. “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than

⁵¹ Rom. 7:24,25

⁵² Matt. 13:3-9

⁵³ Mark 4:14

any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”⁵⁴

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “In this case, *emphytos* would refer to something that has *become* implanted. This striking conception of the Word may be dependent on the famous ‘new covenant’ prophecy in Jeremiah, where God promises: ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts’ (Je. 31:33) ... What James is suggesting by describing the Word in this way is that the Christian must not think he is done with the Word of God after it has saved him. That Word becomes a permanent, inseparable part of the Christian, a commanding and guiding presence within him. The command to *receive the implanted word*, then, is not a command to be converted (‘receive the word’ means this elsewhere in the New Testament), but to accept its precepts as binding and to seek to live by them. Christians who have truly been ‘born again’ (v.18) demonstrate that the Word has transformed them by their humble acceptance of that Word as their authority and guide for life. Or, to use the imagery our Lord used to make the same point: the believer is to prepare ‘good ground’ in his heart in order that the ‘seed’ of the Word that has been planted there might produce much fruit (cf. Mk. 4:3-20). James speaks of ‘the salvation of your souls’ as this fruit. In accordance with Old Testament usage, ‘soul’ here simply means ‘oneself,’ and the salvation is regarded as future: ‘receiving the word’ leads to deliverance in the day of judgment.”

We may also interpret the saving influence of the Word upon our soul as the means of sanctification. The theme, after all, is the cleansing of filth. That process of cleansing will not be complete until our body dies and our sinful nature dies with it. But fruit is only produced when the kernel dies, and that dying process takes a lifetime.

The Word of God comes to us primarily by hearing it. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”⁵⁵ But hearing God’s Word without obeying it makes the Word meaningless. In some Germanic languages the verbs “to hear” and “to obey” are derived from the same root. In German, for instance “hören,” “to hear” and “gehörchen,” “to obey,” are akin.

The revealing aspect of the Word is well illustrated in the image of the mirror. Some people look in a mirror to admire themselves, but that is not the general reaction. We look at our reflection to see if there is anything that must be cleaned, brushed, corrected, or changed. We want to be sure that others will not see anything like smudge, wrinkle or disorder. To be sure, fashion has changed habits and some people spend considerable time in front of a mirror to arrange their hair in a way that would give the impression that it has not been touched by a comb in several days. Belonging to an older generation and not having much hair, I do not fit in that category.

The point of James’ illustration is that the Word of God reveals our flaws for the purpose of confession and correction. Looking in the mirror of God’s Word and not obeying what it says, makes us into people whose short-term memory is failing. People, who forget what they look like, refuse to look at themselves as they are. They lack the honesty necessary to confess and ask for God’s help to change. As *The Wycliffe Bible*

⁵⁴ Heb. 4:12

⁵⁵ Rom. 10:17

Commentary observes, “Christianity is a religion of action. As important as it is to listen (cf. James 1:19), one must not stop there. Doing must follow listening. To be a hearer only is a form of self-deception.”

It has been pointed out that the mirror only reveals the need; it does not cleanse or purify. When the mirror reveals our smudges, we take recourse to water and soap to do the cleaning part. Spiritually this translates into the revelation of sin the Word of God produces in our heart, which will lead to confession and assurance of forgiveness and cleansing by the blood of Christ. That is where the image breaks down. The Word of God both shows our shortcomings and provides the means of cleansing. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”⁵⁶

In v.25 we learn that the mirror represents “the perfect law of liberty.” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The conception of the gospel as a ‘law’ is characteristic of St. James (cf. ...James 2:8, ‘the royal law,’ and ... James 4:11.”

The question arises as to what part of the law James has in mind. The Mosaic law consisted in commandments and rituals. The ritual part was meant to compensate for the transgression of the commandments. The commandments were the expression of the character of God, which was shown as a measuring stick for human behavior. But, as the Apostle Paul stated: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”⁵⁷ It was the ritual part of the law, which provided relief from death by the death of a sacrificial animal that substituted for the sinner.

The word used for looking in the mirror is *esoptron*, “glass.” It is derived from the verb *optanomai*, “to see.” The Apostle Paul uses the same word in: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a *mirror*; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”⁵⁸

We would get the impression that James takes a different stand towards the law than the Apostle Paul. Paul speaks about the law as if it is our enemy, out to kill us. We read: “Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.”⁵⁹ James calls the law, “the perfect law of liberty.” He may have thought of Jesus’ words: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”⁶⁰ It is when the law of God becomes our heart’s desire that we obtain total freedom. That is what the Lord said to Jeremiah: “‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in

⁵⁶ I John 1:9

⁵⁷ Rom. 3:20

⁵⁸ I Cor. 13:12

⁵⁹ Rom. 7:9,10

⁶⁰ John 8:34-36

their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”⁶¹

The chapter ends with two illustrations of practical implication of the law of freedom. If the will of God becomes the essence of our desire and motivations, it will, first of all, have an impact upon our personal behavior and we will share in God’s concerns and compassion. For each part of this, James uses only one illustration. That does not mean that this is all that matters, or that the illustration covers the whole. More is involved in the process of our sanctification than our speech, and compassion does not limit itself to orphans and widows only.

The Greek text of v.26 reads literally: “If any man [among you] seems to be religious, and not bridles his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion [is] vain.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The word religious (threskos) means ‘given to religious observances.’ In this context it refers to attendance at worship services and to other observances of religion, such as prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. A man who is scrupulous in these observances but fails to control his speech in everyday life deceives himself, and his religion is vain.”

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments on the last verse of this chapter: “We must keep in mind that James is not attempting here to summarize all that true worship of God should involve. As Calvin says, ‘he does not define generally what religion is, but reminds us that religion without the things he mentions is nothing ...’ Religious ritual, if done from a reverent heart and in a worshipful spirit, is not wrong – and God’s Word cannot be ‘done’ unless it is first ‘heard.’ But James is concerned about an over-emphasis on the ‘hearing’ to the neglect of the ‘doing.’ Two other areas of life that are to reveal evidence of our reverent ‘listening’ to the Word are introduced in the verse: social concern and moral purity. Care for *orphans and widows* is commanded in the Old Testament as a way of imitating God’s own concern for them – he is the ‘Father of the fatherless and protector of widows’ (Ps. 68:5). In a text that bears many similarities to this passage in James, Isaiah announces that God will no longer recognize the worship his people offer him (their ‘religion’); they must ‘wash themselves ... learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow’ (Is. 1:10-17). The orphan and widow become types of those who find themselves helpless in the world. Christians whose religion is *pure* will imitate their *Father* by intervening to help the helpless. Those who suffer from want in the third world, in the inner city; those who are unemployed and penniless; those who are inadequately represented in government or in law – these are the people who should see abundant evidence of Christians’ ‘pure religion.’

Moral purity is another hallmark of pure religion. *To keep oneself unstained from the world* means to avoid thinking and acting in accordance with the value-system of the society around us. This society reflects, by and large, beliefs and practices that are un-Christian, if not actively anti-Christian. The believer who lives ‘in the world’ is in constant danger of having the taint of that system ‘rub off’ on him. It is important and instructive that James includes this last area, for it penetrates beyond action to the

⁶¹ Jer. 31:33

attitudes and beliefs from which action springs. The ‘pure religion’ of the ‘perfect Christian’ (v.4) combines purity of heart with purity of action.”

If our fellowship with God does not result in being thoughtful and compassionate toward those who are less privileged than we are, we must check and see if our line with God is unbroken and functional. We read about Jesus’ reaction toward human suffering: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”⁶² If we are genuinely saved and live in fellowship with Jesus Christ, His compassion will be ours.

c. Impartiality and the law of love (2:1-13)

1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.

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.

3 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,"

4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 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?

6 But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?

7 Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right.

9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

11 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.

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,

13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

The Greek text of v.1 reads literally: “My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, [the Lord of glory] with respect of persons.” The keyword in these verses is “favoritism,” *prosopolepsia* in Greek. The word means literally “to lay hold of someone’s face,” or “to be a respecter of persons.” J. B. Phillips gives the interesting paraphrase: “Don’t ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our glorious Lord

⁶² Matt. 9:36

Jesus Christ!” As *The Pulpit Commentary* points out, there are several possibilities of translation. We read: “R.V. margin and Westcott and Hort, ‘Do ye, in accepting persons, hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory? According to this view, the section commences with a question, as does the following one, ver. 14.’” Other possible renderings are: “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.”⁶³ “My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?”⁶⁴ “Dear brothers, how can you claim that you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, if you show favoritism to rich people and look down on poor people?”⁶⁵

James adds an illustration to show what he has in mind. The setting is a church service, which in James’ day would probably be in a private home, or, if referring to the background from which most of his readers would have come, a gathering in a synagogue. The word *synagogue* is actually in the Greek text. The distinction between one person and another is made on the basis of possession. The underlying thought is that money means power. But that power is not the power of God; it is the power that runs human society. The mentality James refers to is what brings the world into the church. It is believed that people who are important in human society would be more important to God also. The fact that, in this context, Jesus is called “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,” puts things in perspective. In comparison with the glory of Jesus, the glory of our gold and silver is dull and moldy. James will later on in his epistle make the statement: “Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.”⁶⁶

If we judge people by the way they can afford to dress, we are using the wrong value system. Jesus says: “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”⁶⁷ Our value is determined by the way we reflect the image of God in which we are created.

In James’ illustration it seems that the two kinds of people are new to the group, although that is not necessarily the case. The important feature of the story is not the condition of the people, but the way we judge.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “This paragraph is the first in James that develops a single idea at any length. The prohibition of partiality in verse 1 clearly governs the entire section. Verses 2-4 illustrate the problem James is concerned about, with reference to discrimination against the poor. This discriminatory action is ascribed to ‘evil thoughts.’ Two reasons why Christians must shun this sort of favoritism are given in the rest of the paragraph. First, preferential treatment of the rich stands in stark contrast to the attitude of God, who has chosen the poor to be ‘rich in faith’ (vv. 5-7). Secondly, any manifestation of favoritism is condemned by the ‘royal law’ that demands love of the neighbor (vv. 8-13). The amount of space James devotes to this topic suggests that the problem was a very real one among his readers. Apparently the oppression they were experiencing at the hands of the rich (*cf.* vv. 6-7) had led not to a retaliation in kind, but

⁶³ *New King James Version*

⁶⁴ *The New Living Translation*

⁶⁵ *The Living Bible*

⁶⁶ James 5:3

⁶⁷ Luke 12:15

to an excessive deference towards the rich and powerful that resulted in a slighting and demeaning of poorer people. Such behavior manifests a failure to ‘do’ the royal law that they have heard (*cf.* 1:22-25).”

The seating arrangement mentioned, a good seat for the rich person and a place on the floor for the poor, suggests the love-meal at the end of the church service. The question remains who is James addressing in this admonition. It could hardly be a poor or rich individual. The leadership of the synagogue consisted probably of people of average means. Another question is whether we can say that God has a preference for poor people. It is true that Jesus singled out a poor widow, but the context there is not poverty or riches, but generosity.⁶⁸

Barnes’ Notes observes: “The meaning is not that he is not as willing to save the rich as the poor, for he has no partiality; but that there are circumstances in the condition of the poor which make it more likely that they will embrace the offers of the gospel than the rich; and that in fact the great mass of believers is taken from those who are in comparatively humble life. The fact that God has chosen one to be an ‘heir of the kingdom’ is as good a reason now why he should not be treated with neglect, as it was in the times of the apostles.” The Apostle Paul concurred with this when he wrote to the Corinthians: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are.”⁶⁹

As Douglas J. Moo observed, James’ reference to the court cases in which the rich challenged the poor, probably refers to some specific incidents that occurred at that time. This could certainly not be taken as a general practice. The rich would not profit financially in taking people, who would be unable to pay to court. But a sentence that would result in slavery could be a possibility.

The commandment “love your neighbor as yourself” is found in Leviticus in the context of seeking revenge.⁷⁰ Jesus links it to the first commandment of loving God, saying: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”⁷¹ James calls it “the royal law,” probably meaning that it is the law of the kingdom of heaven. The Apostle Paul states: “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”⁷² Lack of neighborly love, therefore, constitutes a transgression of the law. According to James, the breaking of the law at on point means breaking all of the law. The person who lacks in neighborly love stands guilty of all the commandments, murder, adultery, etc.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “The specific citation of the love commandment enables James to accuse those who ‘play favorites’ of ‘committing sin.’ Discriminating

⁶⁸ Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

⁶⁹ I Cor. 1:26-28

⁷⁰ Lev. 19:18

⁷¹ Matt. 22:37-40

⁷² Rom. 13:10

against people, whether on the basis of their dress, nationality, social class or race, is a clear violation of the unbounded love to which Jesus calls us. And since the command to love is at the very heart of the ‘royal law,’ we become *transgressors* of that law when we show partiality. Verses 8-9, then, stand in clear antithetical relationship. We *do well* when we obey the law, with its summons to love, but we *commit sin* when we transgress that law by showing partiality.”

The fact that partiality constitutes sin must have been a shocking revelation to James’ readers. They probably considered themselves to be people who kept the law meticulously, but now they find themselves condemned as breakers of the law, as criminals.

V.12 reads literally in the Greek text: “So speak and so do as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.” The law of liberty is, obviously, the law of love. It is the law Jesus spoke about when He said: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”⁷³

V.13 reads literally in Greek: “For he [shall have] judgment without mercy, that has showed no mercy; [and] mercy rejoices against judgment.” The Greek verb used for “rejoice” is *katakauchaomai*, “to exult against, or “to boast against.” Paul uses this verb in Romans, in “do not *boast* over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.”⁷⁴

James’ statement should be considered in the context of the preceding illustration of partiality. Our judgment of people could affect the judgment God will pronounce over us. What would happen to us if God would choose to be partial? If God would judge us merely on the basis of our outward appearance, what guarantee would we have that we would be accepted? God’s mercy means that we are accepted in Jesus Christ. And if that is the basis of our judgment, we ought to use the same criterion in our inter-human relationships.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, observes: “This relationship between mercy and concern for the poor is explicit in Zechariah 7:9-10: ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor. ...’ If James’ readers continue to discriminate, they place themselves in danger of facing a harsh judgment. The reciprocal relationship between man’s mercy and God’s is brought out repeatedly by Jesus, most strikingly in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18:21-35; *cf.* also Mt. 6:14-15).”

d. The faith that saves (2:14-26)

14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

⁷³ John 8:34-36

⁷⁴ Rom. 11:18

16 *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?*

17 *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

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.*

19 *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder.*

20 *You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?*

21 *Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?*

22 *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.*

23 *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.*

24 *You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*

25 *In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?*

26 *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.*

Here begins the section that, supposedly, separates James from Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. It is this section that made Luther, erroneously classify James' epistle as "a straw letter."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: "James, passing from the particular 'mercy' or 'love' violated by 'respect of persons,' notwithstanding profession of the 'faith of our Lord Jesus' (James 2:1), combats the Jewish tendency (transplanted into Christianity) to substitute a lifeless acquaintance with the letter of the law for change of heart to holiness, as if justification could be thereby attained (Rom 2:3,13,23). It seems likely that James had seen Paul's letters, because he uses the same phrases and examples (cf. James 2:21,23,25 with Rom 4:3; Heb 11:17,31; and James 2:14,24 with Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16). At all events the Holy Spirit by James combats, not Paul, but those who abuse Paul's doctrine. The teaching of both alike is inspired, and to be received without wresting of words; but each has a different class to deal with: Paul, self-justiciaries; James, advocates of a mere notional faith. Paul urged as strongly as James the need of works as evidences faith, especially in the later letters, when many were abusing the doctrine of faith (Titus 2:14; 3:8). 'Believing and doing are blood relatives.'"

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: "By works James does not have in mind the Jewish doctrine of works as a means of salvation, but rather works of faith, the ethical outworking of true piety and especially the 'work of love' (cf. James 2:8)."

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states correctly: "This passage is the climax of James' plea for a 'pure religion' that vindicates itself in action. It is a text that sustains a single theological argument throughout.

Clearly we have here a passage that lies at the very heart of James' concern. He is deeply troubled by an attitude towards 'faith' that sees it mainly as a verbal profession – such as the confession that 'God is one' (v. 19). This is a faith that is 'apart from' works (vv. 20, 26), and James views this *faith* as 'dead' (vv. 17, 26), 'barren' (v. 20); it does not have the power to save (v. 14) or to justify (v. 24). James assumes the necessity of faith. He claims to have faith (v. 18). But the faith *he* has, 'real faith,' 'has works' (vv. 14, 17), is 'complete by works' (v. 22), is 'active along with works' (v. 22). It is the kind of faith exhibited both by the revered 'father' of faith, Abraham (vv. 21-23), and Rahab, the immoral outcast (v. 25). It is absolutely vital to understand that the main point of this argument, expressed three times (in vv. 17, 20 and 26), is not that works must *be added* to faith but that genuine faith *includes* works. That is its very nature."

The main difference between Paul and James in the debate about faith and works is not which of the two is needed in order to save one's soul, but where either fits in the process of salvation. The best example is found in Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus in John's Gospel.⁷⁵ There can be no doubt about it but that Nicodemus had faith in God, but that faith had not given him a new heart. It has been said that, in the salvation of a person's soul, faith moves from the head into the heart. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be "born again" and that this new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit. That is the doctrine Paul zooms in upon, saying that no one can be born again by working himself up to it. As is clear from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, it is the faith that made the Israelites look at the brass serpent Moses had put up, that makes one look at the crucified Christ, believing that His death means the atonement for human sin. James argues that this faith is a life-changing experience, as does Paul. If no change of life occurs, faith is evidently absent, whatever profession is made. Paul states that works do not produce salvation; James maintains that salvation produces works. As stated above, it is the point at which works come in that constitutes the difference in the argument. On this point there is no disagreement between the two apostles.

James applies to believers in general what Jesus said about false prophets: "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."⁷⁶

Growing up in the Netherlands in an environment of a Christian Reformed church, I was exposed to biblical and orthodox preaching. The habit of going to church and listening to preaching made me take for granted that I was a Christian. But my habit did not bring about a life-changing experience. A personal encounter with Jesus during a youth retreat caused a spiritual revolution that changed the course of my life. In the first stage I could see myself as saying I had faith, but I did not produce any fruit to prove it. I had no assurance of salvation. That was never a topic I had heard anyone preach about. I was the kind of person James speaks about in these verses.

⁷⁵ John chapter 3

⁷⁶ Matt. 7:16-20

Without a change of heart there is no love for God and without love for God there is no love for people. James proclaims here, what John writes: “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother,” and “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”⁷⁷

James illustrates brotherly love with an example in which only words of comfort are given to a person in need, without the need being met. Words do not keep a person from freezing to death, but clothing and blankets do.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “That James is particularly concerned about the person whose faith consists in words only is clear from the illustration he uses in verses 15-16. He pictures one who has at least an external relationship to the church, since it is his *brother* or *sister* who is in need. The need is for basic, life-sustaining provisions: adequate clothing (the Greek word *gymnos*, ‘naked,’ *ill-clad*, often refers to the lack of the outer garment, the *chitōn*) and *daily food*. How does this ‘believer’ respond? He dismisses the person in need with pious words: *Go in peace, be warmed and filled*. Go in peace is a familiar Jewish form of dismissal; NEB and Phillips capture the sense well: ‘Good luck to you.’ The verbs *thermainesthe* (*be warmed*) and *chortazethe* (*be filled*) could be either middle or passive. If the former, the ‘believer’ would be encouraging his needy fellow-Christians to provide for themselves, ‘to make their own way’: ‘keep yourselves warm, and have plenty to eat’ (NEB). If the verbs are passive, the dismissal would take the form of a prayer: ‘May you be warmed and well fed.’ In either case, the point is the same: confronted with a need among his own brothers and sisters, this ‘believer’ does nothing but express his good wishes. *What does it profit?* James asks. Within the sense of the illustration, this ‘profit’ refers primarily to the situation of need that has gone unprovided for: words, however well meant, have not profited these needy people much. But the attentive reader cannot miss the way these words reproduce the phrase with which James introduced verse 14. Not only do the empty words of this ‘believer’ do no good for these others; they bring no spiritual ‘profit’ to himself either.”

James must have been familiar with the preaching of John the Baptist, who said to those who came to be baptized by him: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”⁷⁸

A problem in v.18 is to determine who says what. It seems that James’ argument would be clearer if the statement made were turned around and the speaker would say: “I have faith; you have deeds.” But that is not what James says. More important, however, than finding out who the speakers are, is the principle that faith, in order to be evident, must result in certain acts of faith. Evidence that is not shown is not evidence. The underlying principle is that our convictions determine what we do.

⁷⁷ I John 3:10; 4:20,21

⁷⁸ Matt. 3:8-10

The Apostle Paul stated in his defense before Governor Felix: “I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.”⁷⁹ It was Paul’s faith in life-after-death, which would involve judgment, that governed his behavior and made him strive for a clear conscience.

James uses a very powerful example to illustrate the folly of assuming that faith can exist without any demonstration. The demons also believe in God, but their “faith” does not result in a life changing experience. Although James does not say that the opponents of his view are in the same category as the devil, he comes close to it.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “It is not at all unusual ... that James should commend assent to this doctrine. *You do well*. But the fact that James goes on immediately to ascribe the same belief to *demons* suggests that more than a little irony is intended in the commendation. James may also intend irony by mentioning the demons’ reaction to their belief. The word *shudder* (*phrissō*) was used in some ancient magical tests ‘of the effect that the sorcerer wished to bring about by means of his magic.’”

It is particularly what James states in vv.20-24 about Abraham’s justification that has given rise to the thought that James opposes Paul about the doctrine of justification.

This is what Paul writes about Abraham’s justification: “What then 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.’ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.’”⁸⁰ Paul’s argument is based upon the verse in Genesis that reads: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”⁸¹ James combines two verses from Genesis to indicate that the righteousness God credited to Abraham when he believed God’s promise demonstrated itself in an act of faith when he sacrificed Isaac. At that time, the angel of the Lord said: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”⁸²

The point that could be considered to be a problem is that God knew how righteous Abraham was when He imputed righteousness to him. But the fact that it was imputed means that it was not original with Abraham; it was something God credited to him, without Abraham’s own doing. That is the fact that Paul highlights to indicate that our salvation is not something we work ourselves up to; it is credited to us by an act of God’s

⁷⁹ Acts 24:14-16

⁸⁰ Rom. 4:1-8

⁸¹ Gen. 15:6

⁸² Gen. 22:12

grace. James states that in sacrificing Isaac, Abraham’s imputed righteousness became his own. The point James wants to make is that God’s righteousness must become our righteousness. James’ argument is reflected in God’s demand for holiness of His people. We read in Leviticus: “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy” and: “I the Lord am holy — I who make you holy.”⁸³

James combines two scripture references about Abraham. The first one is the same Paul used, but the second in which God calls Abraham “My friend” is not found in the record of Abraham’s life, but in Isaiah, where God says to the nation of Israel: “But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend.”⁸⁴ King Jehoshaphat also used the term in his prayer before his battle against the Moabites and Ammonites. He said: “O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?”⁸⁵

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, observes: “It is at this point that James’ argument becomes problematic. For in claiming that Abraham was *justified by works* he appears to be in contradiction with Paul, who claims equally clearly that Abraham was justified by faith and *not* by works (Rom. 4:1-3). While many scholars claim that the contradiction cannot be resolved, a careful examination of the way in which the crucial term *diakairoō* (*justify*) is being used will show that Paul and James are not in conflict. This term is associated above all with Paul, who makes ‘justification by faith’ the centerpiece of his argument in Galatians and Romans. But what is important to recognize is that Paul gives to the term justification a very distinct meaning, one that is closely related to his whole theological perspective. He designates with this language the initial transfer of a person from the realm of sin and death to the realm of holiness and life. This transfer takes place by virtue of the sinner’s identification, by faith, with Jesus Christ, ‘the righteous one.’ For Paul, then, justification is a sovereign, judicial act in which God, apart from any human ‘work,’ declares the sinner to be innocent before him (Rom. 4:5).

There is some difference of opinion over the precise meaning James gives to *diakairoō*. A significant number of scholars think that James is using the word in a demonstrative sense. Abraham and Rahab ‘were justified by works’ in the sense that they demonstrated their righteous status by performing good works. Any conflict with Paul would then be removed, because, while he stresses that faith is the only condition for the *declaration* of righteousness, James would be arguing that works are the only way in which that righteous status can be *demonstrated*. However, while there is some precedent for this meaning of *diakairoō* (cf. Gn. 44:16; Lk. 7:29 ...), it is not its usual meaning. More importantly, this meaning does not fit very well in James 2, where the question is not ‘How can righteousness be demonstrated?’ but, ‘what kind of faith secures righteousness?’ Therefore James is probably using *diakairoō* in a declarative sense, but he differs from Paul in applying the word to God’s ultimate declaration of a person’s righteousness rather than to the initial securing of that righteousness by faith. In other words, James uses ‘justify’ where Paul speaks of judgment. It is this distinction, between

⁸³ Lev. 11:44; 21:8

⁸⁴ Isa. 41:8

⁸⁵ II Chron. 20:7

what Wesley calls ‘initial justification’ and ‘final justification,’ that explains the apparent discrepancy between Paul and James.”

In looking at the apparent discrepancy between Paul and James and the way they use the word “justification,” we must bear in mind that both were facing a different audience. Paul addressed people who believed that they had to work their way up to heaven. They thought that God would weigh their acts in His balance and if they measured up to His concept of righteousness, they would have reached the goal. To those people, Paul would say that the goal was God’s glory, which is a state of perfection that is unreachable by any creature. Paul’s definition of sin is to “fall short of the glory of God.”⁸⁶ Sin is the poison that kills all human life. In the Old Testament this death was dealt with by substitution. A sacrificial animal would take the place in undergoing death for the human being. In the New Testament this substitution was done by “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”⁸⁷ In the Old Testament rite of sacrifice, the sinner would lay his hand on the head of the sacrificial animal as a sign of identification. He would say that what happened to the animal ought to have happened with him. The animal died in his place. The person who sacrificed expressed faith in the fact that his sin had been covered and that God would not hold his transgression against him on the Day of Judgment. That was Old Testament justification by faith.

The only difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament believer was in the object of the substitution: an animal or a living person. That Person turned out to be God who had become a human being. The Word became flesh in order to pay the ransom for all of mankind. Identification with this Person, claiming what He has done as being done for me, makes me a justified individual. The only act to be performed in this is saying “yes!”

James’ audience consists of people who claim to have accepted the New Testament order. They say that they have identified with the sacrifice of Christ for their sins. But in some of them their claim has not brought about a change of mentality, or a change of heart. Although James does not specifically mention love in this context, that is an important factor. To understand some of Christ’s personal experience in going to the cross, in taking upon Himself the sin of the world, in going through intense physical, emotional and spiritual agony, in giving up His soul, ought to result in an expression of love on our part. To love God means to understand what Jesus Christ has done for us and to express appreciation for it. Those who do not show any form of understanding and express no gratitude for Jesus’ death in our behalf, have, obviously, not laid their hand on the sacrificial object and identified with Him. They may claim to have done so, but their claim turns out to be a lie. Truth is expressed in evidence. That is the kind of people James addresses in his epistle.

Rahab’s act of faith speaks even louder than Abraham’s because of her obvious lack of spiritual background. Rahab’s confession, which she proved by her act of hiding the spies, is in the words: “the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.”⁸⁸ The fact that God accepted Rahab’s confession as genuine is obvious from the

⁸⁶ Rom. 3:23

⁸⁷ John 1:29

⁸⁸ Josh 2:11

fact that He incorporated her in the line that would bring forth the Messiah.⁸⁹ As in the case of Abraham, it was one single act that put them in the Hall of Fame of heroes of faith in Hebrews, Chapter Eleven.

Writing about Rahab's faith, *Barnes' Notes* states: "It may be observed here, that we are not to suppose that everything in the life and character of this woman is commended. She is commended for her faith, and for the fair expression of it; a faith which, as it induced her to receive the messengers of the true God, and to send them forth in peace, and as it led her to identify herself with the people of God, was also influential, we have every reason to suppose, in inducing her to abandon her former course of life. When we commend the faith of a man who has been a profane swearer, or an adulterer, or a robber, or a drunkard, we do not commend his former life, or give a sanction to it. We commend that which has induced him to abandon his evil course, and to turn to the ways of righteousness. The more evil his former course has been, the more wonderful, and the more worthy of commendation, is that faith by which he is reformed and saved."

James' conclusion is given in a final brief illustration of the difference between a corpse and a living person. In our present day, death is proved by more sophisticated means of registration of brainwaves. Among the Stone Age tribes of Papua, a person who went into a coma, even though he was still breathing, was considered to be dead. The absence of the spirit in a dead person was indicated by a lack of action.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes: "James concludes the passage by restating its central theme: *faith apart from works is dead*. Just as the body without its invigorating spirit, or 'breath' of life (*cf.* Gn. 2:7), is nothing more than a corpse, so faith without the works that give it vitality is dead. Again we see that James is concerned not that works be 'added' to faith, but that one possess the right kind of faith, 'faith that works.' Without that kind of faith Christianity becomes a barren orthodoxy and loses any right to be called faith.

Somewhat ironically, no-one captured the basic message of James 2:14-26 more forcefully than Luther (from his preface to Romans):

O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words about faith and good works."

IV. DISSENSIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY (3:1 – 4:12)

a. The harmful effects of the uncontrolled tongue (3:1-12)

1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

2 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.

⁸⁹ Matt. 1:5

3 *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.*

4 *Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.*

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.*

6 *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.*

7 *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man,*

8 *but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

9 *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.*

10 *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*

11 *Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?*

12 *My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

The Greek text of v.1 reads literally: "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that [the] greater condemnation we shall receive." The Greek word, translated "condemnation," is *krima*, which has the primary meaning of "a decision." Jesus uses it in the verse: "Do not *judge*, or you too will be *judged*. For in the same way you *judge* others, you will be *judged*, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."⁹⁰ It does not mean condemnation in every instance, although that is implied in the way James uses it here.

J. B. Phillips renders the opening verse with: "Don't aim at adding to the number of teachers, my brothers, I beg you! Remember that we who are teachers will be judged by a much higher standard."

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "The warning is parallel to that of our Lord in Matthew 23:8, *seq.*, 'Be not ye called Rabbi; for one is your Teacher' ... The readiness of the Jews to take upon them the office of teachers and to set up as 'guides of the blind, teachers of babes,' etc., is alluded to by St. Paul in ... Romans 2:17, *seq.*, and such a passage as ... 1 Corinthians 14:26, *seq.*, denotes not merely the presence of a similar tendency among Christians, but also the opportunity given for its exercise in the Church."

The reference to First Corinthians indicates that there is an office of "teacher" that is established by God. We read: "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers..."⁹¹ But there is a human tendency to elevate oneself above others and tell the ones below what to do and how to do it. That is a carnal inclination of many people.

⁹⁰ Matt. 7:1,2

⁹¹ I Cor. 12:28

In his introduction to the chapter, Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states: “These verses, more than any other in the epistle, reveal the breadth of James’ background. The problem of uncontrolled speech is a frequent theme in Proverbs and other Old Testament and Jewish Wisdom literature. But James illuminated this problem of the tongue with a series of illustrations popular among Greek and Hellenistic-Jewish moralists. These illustrations are of a type that would have been widely known among those with even a minimal acquaintance with Hellenistic culture. The picture of James that emerges is of a reasonably well-educated Jew who knows his Old Testament thoroughly and who is well acquainted with Hellenistic-Jewish culture, language and literature.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes correctly: “These words do not forbid doing what we can to direct and instruct others in the way of their duty or to reprove them in a Christian way for what is amiss; but we must not affect to speak and act as those who are continually assuming the chair, we must not prescribe to one another, so as to make our own sentiments a standard by which to try all others, because God gives various gifts to men, and expects from each according to that measure of light which he gives.”

Since teaching is a gift, it carries with it responsibility. We will all be judged by what we do with our talent.⁹² The crucial point in teaching, as James puts it, is accountability, not skill. We must not teach others what we do not practice ourselves. If we do not practice what we preach, we will stand condemned before the judgment seat of Christ.

Paul wrote this to his fellow-Jews: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”⁹³

In a sense this chapter in James is more about self-control than about speech and teaching. It is not so much the use of the tongue, but the tendency to lord over others that is condemned. Some people cannot help themselves in the wagging of their tongue. But that is not the topic James is concerned about here. It is more the point that Jesus illustrates in *The Sermon on the Mount*: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank

⁹² Matt. 25:14-18

⁹³ Rom. 2:1-3, 17-24

in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”⁹⁴

James includes himself as a person who struggles with the responsibility of being a teacher. In saying: “We all stumble in many ways,” he confesses of being guilty like the rest. And in mentioning that a perfect control of the tongue would mean control of the whole person, he does not preach Christian perfection. All he is saying is that our speech is the key to moral behavior. James agrees with Solomon, who wrote: “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.”⁹⁵

The Adam Clarke's Commentary states about v.2: “Some have produced these words as a proof that ‘no man can live without sinning against God; for James himself, a holy apostle speaking of himself, all the apostles, and the whole Church of Christ, says, ‘In many things we offend all.’ This is a very bad and dangerous doctrine; and, pushed to its consequences, would greatly affect the credibility of the whole Gospel system.” *Clarke* continues to argue that James' inclusion of himself in “We all ...” does not imply that victory is impossible. He writes: “Were we to suppose that where he appears by the use of the plural pronoun to include himself, he means to be thus understood, we must then grant that himself was one of those many teachers who were to receive a great condemnation, James 3:1; that he was a horse-breaker, because he says, ‘we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us? James 3:3; that his tongue was a world of iniquity, and set on fire of hell, for he says, ‘so is the tongue among our members,’ James 3:6; that he cursed men, ‘wherewith curse we men,’ James 3:9. No man possessing common sense could imagine that James, or any man of even tolerable morals, could be guilty of those things. But some of those were thus guilty to whom he wrote; and to soften his reproofs, and to cause them to enter the more deeply into their hearts, he appears to include himself in his own censure; and yet not one of his readers would understand him as being a brother delinquent.”

James' focus on the tongue does not mean that the tongue is the source of all human sin. Jesus points to the heart as the breeding ground of all evil and to the tongue as proof of what is inside. We read: “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”⁹⁶ And: “The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”⁹⁷

Without the healing and cleansing ministry of the Holy Spirit, no human being would be able to stand before God. We do well to regularly pray David's prayers after him:

⁹⁴ Matt. 7:3-5

⁹⁵ Eccl. 7:20

⁹⁶ Luke 6:45

⁹⁷ Matt. 15:18-20

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”⁹⁸ And: “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.”⁹⁹

That James does not point to the solution of our problem with the tongue, does not mean that he did not believe there was one. His purpose, at this point in his epistle, is to issue a warning, so that we would realize along which lines we can expect the enemy of our souls to attack. If the tongue is the member Satan uses to “set the whole course of his life on fire,” we know where we must be on guard. Solomon understood what the core of the human problem was when he wrote: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.”¹⁰⁰

In using two illustrations, one of bridling a horse and one of steering a ship, James reverses the issues. The point he wants to make is that we succeed in controlling horses and ships, but we fail in becoming controlled. In the illustrations man does the controlling; in the reality of human life, man is the one who loses control and is controlled by his own tongue. Yet, the horse’s bridle and the ship’s rudder are only tools used to control direction. They are only functional when someone handles them. When man lets go of the horses’ bridle or of the ships’ rudder, things go haywire. A human body in which the person does not control the tongue is a body out-of-control. In most instances where man loses control of the tongue a demonic power takes over. In which case hellfire breaks lose.

The connection between the admonition in v.1 not to presume to be teachers and the illustrations about the horse and the ship in the following verses is in the control. Trying to control others, which is part of teaching, will lead to judgment if we fail to control ourselves. Since speaking is one of the ways in which lessons are taught, the tongue becomes the focus of the caution.

We must keep in mind that James does not condemn teaching in general. As observed earlier, God has appointed teachers to the body of Christ. The warning is against the inconsistency of not practicing what one teaches. The Apostle Paul concurs with James when he writes: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”¹⁰¹

Again, James does not say that the tongue in itself is always wrong, as if it would be better not to have a tongue than to have one. He admits that the tongue can be an instrument of praise. It is the duplicity of function of the tongue that praises and curses at the same time, that stands condemned.

⁹⁸ Ps. 51:10

⁹⁹ Ps. 141:3

¹⁰⁰ Prov. 4:23,24

¹⁰¹ I Cor. 9:24-27

James makes quite an issue of the small size of the human tongue and of the immeasurable effect the use of it can have. He repeats basically Jesus' warning, who, after stating that the tongue reveals what is in the human heart, said: "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."¹⁰² It is particularly the carelessness of speech that endangers us. This is clearly illustrated in the picture of the forest fire. It only takes a spark to burn acres and acres of forest. Implied in this picture is the warning that we must realize the consequences our carelessly spoken words can have.

Paul offered the solution to the problem James presents here, when he wrote to the Romans: "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness."¹⁰³ The only solution to the human control problem is a takeover of our body by the Spirit of God. When the Holy Spirit takes control over our life, we enter into a stage of liberty we have never known before. Paul gives us the list of fruit the Spirit of God produced in us upon our surrender: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and *self-control*."¹⁰⁴ The Greek word used is *egkrateia*, which consists of *ego* (self) and *kratein* (rule). *The King James Version* uses the word "temperance," suggesting boundaries beyond which not to venture. The Spirit does not operate within us as an autocrat or a dictator. When we surrender the members of our body to Him, He puts us in control and enables us to carry out our responsibility in a dignified manner. Control of the tongue is described in Proverbs as the greatest strategic victory imaginable: "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city."¹⁰⁵

The uncontrolled tongue is the greatest hindrance to our Christian testimony. If we praise God and curse our neighbor, we are guilty of duplicity. Everyone knows that if the love of God is in a person's life it demonstrates itself in love for fellowmen. If brotherly love is absent it means that there is no divine love either. It is what one man does to another that effects the credibility of love divine. When, at the end of World War II the allied troops in Germany discovered the Nazi concentration camps and saw what human beings had done to fellowmen, some people lost their faith in a God of love. In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes how God died when he saw a young angel-faced boy being hanged by the Nazi camp guards. We tend to blame God for that which breaks God's own heart in what we do to one another.

When David confessed his sin of having committed adultery with Bathsheba and of having murdered her husband, the prophet Nathan told him: "By doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt."¹⁰⁶ People blamed God for what David had done!

¹⁰² Matt. 12:36,37

¹⁰³ Rom. 6:13

¹⁰⁴ Gal. 5:22,23

¹⁰⁵ Prov. 16:32

¹⁰⁶ II Sam. 12:14

The human tongue, the human mouth and the human heart are the only parts of God's creation that manage to show duplicity in producing fruit that is inconsistent to their own nature. We pronounce blessings and curses; we spout fresh and salty water; we bear olives and grapes on the same branch. We tear asunder what God had conceived as one.

b. True wisdom brings peace (3:13-18)

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.

14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.

16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

17 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.

18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

It is here, at last, that James directs us to the antidote for the poison that was revealed in the preceding verses. Healing for our condition is found in Old Testament wisdom of which *The Book of Proverbs* is full. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."¹⁰⁷

There is a touch of humor in the question "Who is wise and understanding among you?" Those who would raise their hand in answer, could hardly be said to be wise and humble. As *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "The pride of knowledge has always been the besetting sin of professional teachers."

In introducing this section, Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states: "What gives this section and the next its unity is the problem of jealousy (*zēlos*, 3:14, 16; 4:2) and the related ideas of 'selfish ambition' (3:14, 16), 'selfish desires' (4:2, 3) and arrogance (3:14). The first paragraph (3:13-18) describes this sinful attitude and sets it in contrast with the 'wisdom from above.' The second paragraph (4:1-3) describes the effects of this attitude: fighting, quarrels, murder, unanswered prayer." On v.13, Moo continues with: "The question introducing this section – *Who is wise and understanding among you?* – is in fact a challenge if you claim to be wise, demonstrate your wisdom in the works that true wisdom produces. Many commentators think that James' question is directed particularly to the teachers who were mentioned in verse 1. But neither *sophos* (wise, 'wise person') nor *epistēmōn* ('knowledgeable,' 'full of understanding') is regularly used as a title for the teacher. They occur together several times in the Septuagint, once with reference to the qualities leaders should possess (Dt. 1:13, 15) but also with application to all of Israel (Dt. 4:6; Dn. 5:12 applies them to the prophet). Clearly James considers 'wisdom' a virtue available to all (1:5), and even 3:1 is not really directed to teachers, but to those who would *become* teachers. Therefore James' exhortation is better taken as directed

¹⁰⁷ Prov. 1:7

generally to all believers, but especially to those who pride themselves on their superior understanding.”

James states particularly that humility is one of the important features in the demonstration of wisdom. The Greek word used is *prautes*, which is sometimes translated “mildness,” or “meekness.” It is important to note that, in this context, humility is the fruit of wisdom, that is from knowledge gathered by experience. Humility comes from the discovery of the limitations of our knowledge. The older we get, the more we realize how little we know. Compared to the omniscience of God, our knowledge is like a grain of sand on the beaches of the world. That understanding should be enough to keep one humble.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary states: “True wisdom does not lie in good notions or speculations so much as in good and useful actions. Not he who thinks well, or he who talks well, is in the sense of the scripture allowed to be wise, if he do not live and act well. True wisdom may be known by the meekness of the spirit and temper: *Let him show with meekness*, etc. It is a great instance of wisdom prudently to bridle our own anger, and patiently to bear the anger of others. And as wisdom will evidence itself in meekness, so meekness will be a great friend to wisdom; for nothing hinders the regular apprehension, the solid judgment, and impartiality of thought, necessary to our acting wisely, so much as passion. When we are mild and calm, we are best able to hear reason, and best able to speak it. Wisdom produces meekness, and meekness increases wisdom.”

It is interesting to note the characteristics James identifies as opposites of wisdom: “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” The Greek words used are *zeélon pikrón*, “envy bitter,” and *eritheían*, “strife.” Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes: “*Eritheia*, translated *selfish ambition*, is a comparatively rare word. It is tempting to define it with reference to the similar *eris* (‘strife’) which Paul uses three times in close conjunction with *zēlos*. But this derivation is unlikely. In its only pre-New Testament occurrences (in Aristotle), the word refers to the selfish ambition, the narrow partisan zeal of factional, greedy politicians. This meaning makes excellent sense here in James. Some who pride themselves on their wisdom and understanding are displaying a jealous, bitter partisanship that is the antithesis of the meekness produced by true wisdom.”

The fact that James contrasts “bitter envy and selfish ambition” with “wisdom,” suggests that wisdom provides inner healing. One cannot be wise, that is one cannot fear the Lord, and, at the same time harbor envy and selfishness in one’s heart. Neighborly love eliminates those emotions from our inter-human relationships. We cannot love God with all our heart, love our neighbor as ourselves and, at the same time, be selfish and envious of others. The truth that sets us free will govern our human relations also.

“The wisdom that comes from heaven” is the wisdom that is given in answer to the prayer James suggested in Chapter 1:5. If there is wisdom that comes from heaven, it means that there is also wisdom that comes from below, that is demonically inspired. Eve was confronted with that kind of wisdom, the acquisition of which was obtained when she took the fruit of the tree of knowledge and ate it. We read that when she looked at the fruit of that tree it seemed to be “desirable for gaining wisdom.”¹⁰⁸ Eve chose the wisdom

¹⁰⁸ Gen. 3:6

from below and we are given the opportunity to choose the wisdom from above. As Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge, we can pick the fruit from the tree of life. Jesus says to the church of Ephesus: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”¹⁰⁹ The wisdom from above is for those who overcome temptation “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; [and who do] not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”¹¹⁰

James gives us eight features that characterize heavenly wisdom. It is “pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states: “James has described what *the wisdom from above* is not (v.15); now he tells us what it is, with a series of seven adjectives. Or, more properly, he tells us what effects divine wisdom should produce – for almost all of these adjectives describe what wisdom does rather than what it is. It is again clear that James does not view *wisdom* as a series of correct propositional statements, but as a quality that motivates certain kinds of behavior. James’ description of *the wisdom from above* reminds us inevitably of Paul’s description of ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ in Galatians 5:22-23. While there is little verbal resemblance, the emphasis in both texts is on humility, peaceableness and upright behavior. What Paul says the Spirit produces, James says wisdom produces. This similarity, coupled with the fact that James never (except perhaps in 4:5 ...) mentions the Holy Spirit, may point to the equivalence of wisdom and spirit in James’ thinking. Certainly, the two were frequently associated in Jewish literature. However, we must be cautious in speaking of ‘equivalence’ – because what is produced by James’ wisdom and what is produced by Paul’s Spirit are similar does not mean that the two can be seen as equivalent concepts.

The first, and overarching, attribute of wisdom is *purity*. The word *pure* (*hagnos*) connotes more blamelessness, such as the unsullied chastity of the virgin bride (*cf.* 2 Cor. 11:2). Wisdom which is free from any stain or blemish would be incapable of producing anything evil (*cf.* v. 16). James has arranged the following series of adjectives in such a way that a pleasing auditory effect is achieved. The first four (*peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy*) all begin with an ‘e’ sound – *eirēnikē, epieikēs, eupeithēs, eleous* – and combine to produce an alliteration. The last two also involve an alliteration – this time with an ‘a’ sound – and in addition, have an almost metrical, rhyming similarity – *adiakritos, anypokritos* (*cf.* also *agathōn*).

That the list begins with *peaceable* is completely appropriate, since James criticizes those who falsely claim to be wise for the contentiousness and the disputes they spawn (3:14; 4:1-2). According to the Old Testament also, wisdom produces peace (Pr. 3:17) and Paul lists ‘peace’ as fruit of the Spirit. Why is wisdom *peaceable*? Because it is also *gentle* and *open to reason*. To be *gentle* (*epieikēs*) is to be kind, willing to yield, unwilling ‘to exact strict claims.’ With such an attitude, the believer, motivated and empowered by wisdom, will follow in the footsteps of his Lord, who also was characterized by ‘meekness and gentleness’ (2 Cor. 10:1). The person who is *open to reason* (*eupeithēs*) is one, literally, who is ‘easily persuaded’ – not in the sense of a weak,

¹⁰⁹ Rev. 2:7

¹¹⁰ Rev. 12:11

credulous gullibility, but in the sense of willing deference to others when unalterable theological or moral principles are not involved. Wisdom is also *full of mercy and good fruits*. James provides his own definition of ‘mercy’: it is love for the neighbor that shows itself in action (2:8-13). It is not surprising, then, that James couples *mercy* so closely with *good fruits* – acts of mercy are those ‘fruits’ which genuine wisdom, like genuine faith, must produce.

The second to the last attribute, *adiakritos*, is the most difficult to define. It may mean ‘impartial’ (NIV, cf. AV, GNB), in the sense of not exhibiting prejudice; ‘straightforward’ (NEB), simple (cf. also RSV(?), *without uncertainty*); or ‘unwavering’ (NASB), not doubting or being divided. Either of the latter two suggestions makes good sense in the light of the use of *diakrinō* (related to the word used here) in 1:6 and, possibly, 2:4 – and we have seen the importance which James gives to the need to be ‘undivided,’ ‘not of two minds.’ On the other hand, James also stresses the incompatibility of Christianity and partiality (2:1-4) and mentions mercy in that context, as he does here. Probably the former meaning ‘impartial’ should be accepted. Finally, the ‘wisdom from above’ is *without insincerity* – it is genuine, ‘without show or pretence.’ In a society that tends to elevate intelligence and cleverness, Christians need to assert that the values James lists here are the truly enviable, enduring ones.”

The Greek text of v.18 reads literally: “And [the] fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.” Bible scholars agree that this verse presents some difficulties in interpretation. Our thought, inevitably, goes to the seventh beatitude in Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”¹¹¹ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Calvin, stating: “Those wise toward God, while peaceable and tolerant toward their neighbors, make it their chief concern to sow righteousness, not cloaking, but reproving, sins with such moderation as to be the physicians, rather than the executioners, of sinners.”

There is, in biblical theology, a definite correlation between righteousness and peace. The author of *Hebrews* seems to establish an order of priority in describing the meaning of Melchizedek, stating: “First, his name means ‘king of righteousness’; then also, ‘king of Salem’ means ‘king of peace.’”¹¹² The same sequence is maintained in the verse: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”¹¹³ We find the same sequence in *The Sermon on the Mount*, where “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” precedes “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”¹¹⁴

In order to discuss terms we need definitions. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “righteous” as “acting or being in accordance with what is just, honorable, and free from guilt or wrong.” This definition suggests that there are standards according to which “acting” or “being” is judged, but it does not tell us what those standards are. We know

¹¹¹ Matt. 5:9

¹¹² Heb. 7:2

¹¹³ Heb. 12:11

¹¹⁴ Matt. 5:6,9

that right or wrong are determined by the character of God. He is the ultimate norm of all. Sin or unrighteousness consists of rebellion against the Person of God.

Before peace can be established, reconciliation with God's righteousness must be brought about. A classic example of a failed effort to have peace without righteousness is in the events that led to the Second World War. When the British Prime Minister, Chamberlain, came back from a conference with Germany's Hitler, he proclaimed "peace in our time!" But no efforts had been made to stop or undo Hitler's unrighteous acts of occupying Austria and Czechoslovakia. The result was one of the greatest slaughters of human beings in the history of the world. Peace cannot be sown or harvested where claims of righteousness are not met.

c. Evil passions are the source of dissensions (4:1-3)

1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

2 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.

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

James uses the Greek words *polemos* and *mache* to describe matters that hinder answers to prayer. *Polemos* refers to warfare. We find it used in the warning Jesus gives about the future: "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars."¹¹⁵ The word is used nine times in Revelation, referring to literal wars. In the context in which James uses it here, it refers more to verbal disputes in the same sense as we use the word "polemic" in English. *Mache* can be seen as an equivalent of *polemos*. The Apostle Paul uses it in the verse: "For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn — conflicts on the outside, fears within."¹¹⁶ It seems, therefore, that James is referring to infighting, a lack of unity, rather than to physical conflicts.

Lack of unity in the body of Christ, James says, comes from a lack of inner harmony. It is when we have peace with God and with ourselves, that we can love our neighbor as ourselves. There is a relationship between brotherly love and answered prayer.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes: "It is deplorable that the Christian church has so often been characterized by such bitter controversies. The seventeenth century Jewish philosopher Spinoza observed: 'I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion – namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men – should quarrel with such rancorous animosity, and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.' Some battles are, to be sure, worth fighting; but even then they must be fought without sacrificing Christian principles and virtues. We do not know what the disputes that James refers to were. At any rate, James seems to be bothered more by the selfish spirit and bitterness of the quarrels than by the rights and wrongs of the

¹¹⁵ Matt. 24:6

¹¹⁶ II Cor. 7:5

various viewpoints. It is suggestive that James has used a word connoting political ‘factions’ (*eritheia*) in 3:14 and 16.”

Barnes’ Notes comments: “Some have supposed that the apostle refers here to the contests and seditions existing among the Jews, which afterwards broke out in rebellion against the Roman authority, and which led to the overthrow of the Jewish nation. But the more probable reference is to domestic broils, and to the strives of sects and parties; to the disputes which were carried on among the Jewish people, and which perhaps led to scenes of violence, and to popular outbreaks among themselves. When the apostle says ‘among you,’ it is not necessary to suppose that he refers to those who were members of the Christian church as actually engaged in these strives, though he was writing to such; but he speaks of them as a part of the Jewish people, and refers to the contentions which prevailed among them as a people-contentions in which those who were Christian converts were in great danger of participating, by being drawn into their controversies, and partaking of the spirit of strife which existed among their countrymen. It is known that such a spirit of contention prevailed among the Jews at that time in an eminent degree, and it was well to put those among them who professed to be Christians on their guard against such a spirit, by stating the causes of all wars and contentions. The solution which the apostle has given of the causes of the strives prevailing then, will apply substantially to all the wars which have ever existed on the earth.”

In spite of what *Barnes* notes about the group of people James is referring to, we believe that James is addressing professing Christians, rather than Jews who were outside the body of Christ. Carnal Christians seem to be the object of his admonition.

On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that the people James addresses were killing each other because they did not get what they wanted. James may have wanted to warn his readers that a lack of inner peace can lead to political tensions and riots against the government.

As a solution to the problem, James suggests prayer. But prayer must be made from a pure heart. As the Psalmist sang: “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.”¹¹⁷

What James says about prayer that is not answered is relevant for Christians in every age. Wrong motives will not result in answered prayers. In some cases, however, God does give us what we ask for to teach us a lesson. We read in the Psalms: “But they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel. In the desert they gave in to their craving; in the wasteland they put God to the test. So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them.”¹¹⁸ The Apostle John gives us the key to prayer that receives answers when he writes: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”¹¹⁹ It is a horrendous thought that God could give us what we ask for as a punishment.

¹¹⁷ Ps. 66:18,19

¹¹⁸ Ps. 106:13-15

¹¹⁹ I John 5:14

d. A summons to repentance (4:4-10)

4 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.

5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?

6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James calls the people he addresses “adulterous.” The Greek word used is *moichalis*, which is the feminine form of *moichos*, “apostate,” or “adulterous.” In some cases in the New Testament the word is used for marital infidelity, but it is also used in the spiritual sense, in which it appears often in the Old Testament, to describe Israel’s apostasy in leaving God and getting involved in idolatry. Jesus used the term in addressing the people of His time: “A wicked and *adulterous* generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”¹²⁰ Obviously, James uses it in the latter sense.

The term “the world” is introduced by Jesus to describe people who are in rebellion against God. They are those who reply to God’s love with hatred. The Apostle John writes in the prologue of his gospel: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.”¹²¹ Jesus said to His brothers: “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil.”¹²²

The world is the system that is governed by Satan, who is called “the prince of this world.”¹²³ The best definition of “the world” is found in John’s First Epistle: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world.”¹²⁴

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “James’ use of ‘adulteresses’ thus serves to characterize his readers as the unfaithful people of God. By seeking *friendship with the world* they are, in effect, committing ‘spiritual adultery,’ and making themselves enemies of God. In the light of the Old Testament background, this must mean not only a hostility of the believer towards God, but of God towards the believer. God must judge those who

¹²⁰ Matt. 12:39

¹²¹ John 1:10

¹²² John 7:7

¹²³ John 12:31

¹²⁴ I John 2:15,16 - NKJV

break their covenant vows to him. Certainly James' readers were not overtly disclaiming God and consciously deciding to follow the world instead. But their 'jealousy,' 'selfish ambition' and 'unrestrained passion,' exhibiting as they did 'earthly, unspiritual and devilish' attitudes (3:15), amounted to just that. God will brook no rival, and when the believer behaves in a way characteristic of the world, he demonstrates that, at that point, his allegiance is to the world rather than to God. By drawing out the ultimate consequences of worldly behavior in this way, James seeks to prick the consciences of his readers and stimulate their repentance. They need to recognize that their selfish, quarrelsome behavior is a serious matter indeed."

V.5 is rather difficult to translate and interpret. The Greek text reads literally: "Do you think that in vain, the scripture says the spirit that dwells in us lusts to envy?"

Different translations prove the difficulty: "Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?'" (NKJV).

"Or do you suppose it is in vain that the scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us?'" (RSV).

"Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: 'He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us?'" (NASU).

"Or what do you think the Scripture means when it says that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, watches over us with tender jealousy?" (TLB).

"What do you think the Scriptures mean when they say that the spirit God has placed within us is filled with envy?" (New Living Translation).

"Or do you think what the scriptures have to say about this is a mere formality: Do you imagine that this spirit of passionate jealousy is the Spirit he has caused to live in us?" (J. B. Phillips).

The Adam Clarke's Commentary observes: "This verse is exceedingly obscure. We cannot tell what scripture James refers to; many have been produced by learned men as that which he had particularly in view. Some think Gen 6:5: 'Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.' Gen 8:21: 'The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.' Num. 9:29: 'Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake?' and Prov 21:10: 'The soul of the wicked desireth evil.' None of these scriptures, nor any others, contain the precise words in this verse and therefore James may probably refer, not to any particular portion, but to the spirit and design of the Scripture in those various places where it speaks against envying, covetousness, worldly associations, etc., etc.

Perhaps the word in this and the two succeeding verses may be well paraphrased thus: 'Do ye think that concerning these things the Scripture speaks falsely, or that the Holy Spirit which dwells in us can excite us to envy others instead of being contented with the state in which the providence of God has placed us? Nay, far otherwise; for He gives us more grace to enable us to bear the ills of life, and to lie in deep humility at his feet, knowing that his Holy Spirit has said, Prov 3:34: God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble. Seeing these things are so, submit yourselves to God; resist the Devil, who would tempt you to envy, and he will flee from you; draw near to God and he will draw near to you.'

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary adds: “A further reason why a Christian cannot be a friend of the world is adduced from Scripture. There are a number of possible translations of the words that follow, but it is in keeping with the context to follow the RSV, which makes God, not spirit, the subject of the verb: He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us. God is a jealous God (cf. Ex 20:5; 34:14; Deut 32:16; Zech 8:2; 1 Cor 10:22), and hence he will not tolerate divided allegiance. No specific OT passage contains the words of this verse, but many passages express a similar sentiment.”

The safest way to determine what James means to say is in looking at the context. In the preceding verse James refers to the influence of the world in which we live, which can draw us away from wholehearted dedication to God. In the following verse, he mentions pride as the opposite of humble surrender. The point James must be trying to make is how we respond to God’s love for us personally.

We bear in mind that the epistle is addressed to believers. James does not speak of the initial step needed to bring about conversion and regeneration. His intent is not to remind us of how it began, as Paul does in Romans: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”¹²⁵ He speaks to people who have pledged fidelity to God in the same way as marriage partners exchange their vows. Now being in that kind of relationship, other affections come in and tempt one of the partners. Jealousy is a natural part of genuine love. In the Old Testament, God blamed Israel for abandoning her relationship with Him and turning to other gods. That kind of idolatry was no longer prevalent in James’ day. But other forms of loss of first love have come in. That which John defines as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” are the main factors to be reckoned with.

If we maintain that man is a trinity of body, soul and spirit, we understand the human spirit to be the organ of fellowship with God. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, their fellowship with God was broken off. God had said: “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”¹²⁶ For “when,” the Hebrew uses the word *yowm*, which literally means “a day (from sunrise to sunset).” We know that the first human couple did not die physically that day; they kept on living for several hundred years. Their soul became damaged by sin, but it did not die. Instead of enjoying fellowship with God they experienced fear, which indicates that the soul had not stopped functioning. Spiritually, however, they were dead. That is why the Apostle Paul can say: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.”¹²⁷ It is through the regeneration by the Holy Spirit in us, which God brings about at our conversion, that our spirit is brought back to life and we can again experience fellowship with God.

¹²⁵ Rom. 5:8

¹²⁶ Gen. 2:17

¹²⁷ Eph. 2:1-5

If James, therefore, refers to “the spirit he caused to live in us,” he speaks of born-again people. God longs for fellowship with man whom He created in His image and likeness and whom He loves with an everlasting love. If we do not recognize that love and respond to it, God experiences jealousy. “We love because he first loved us.”¹²⁸ But it is possible to lose our first love, or to lose intensity in our relationship with God. This occurs when our realization of God’s love for us diminishes. God’s love never ceases, but our understanding of it may dim. We read the deep sorrow in God’s heart in His reproach to Israel: “What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.”¹²⁹ And in Jeremiah, we read: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.”¹³⁰

On v.6, “But he gives us more grace,” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The difficulties of living wholly for God in a wicked world are many, but he giveth more grace, which here seems to mean ‘gracious help.’ And this gracious aid God makes available, as Prov 3:34 declares, not to proud, self-sufficient persons, but to humble, dependent men.”

The Greek text of the verse reads literally: “But he gives more grace. Wherefore he says, God resists the proud, but unto the humble he gives grace.”

Barnes’ Notes comments: “[Wherefore he saith] The reference here is to Prov 3:34, ‘Surely he scorneth the scorners; but he giveth grace unto the lowly.’ The quotation is made exactly from the Septuagint, which, though not entirely literal, expresses the sense of the Hebrew without essential inaccuracy. This passage is also quoted in 1 Peter 5:5.”

James’ observation about the increase of grace reminds us of Paul’s statement: “The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹³¹ We don’t know if James was familiar with Paul’s writing at this point. If he was, he may have used Paul’s words as a model. It could also be, of course, that Paul was inspired by James.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, observes about v.6: “The interpretation of verse 5 will determine the meaning of the mild contrast found in verse 6a: *But (de) he gives more grace*. If verse 5b is taken as a statement about the sinfulness of the human spirit, the *more* or ‘greater’ (*meizona*) *grace* will suggest the ability and willingness of God to overcome sinfulness: ‘he gives us grace potent enough to meet this and every other evil spirit’ (Phillips). If, however, verse 5b depicts the jealousy of God for us, verse 6a will emphasize that God’s grace is completely adequate to meet the requirements imposed on us by that jealousy. Our God is ‘a consuming fire’ and his demands on us may seem terrifying. But our God is also merciful, gracious, all-loving, and willingly supplies all that we need to meet his all-encompassing demands. As Augustine has said, ‘God gives what he demands.’

¹²⁸ I John 4:19

¹²⁹ Hos. 6:4

¹³⁰ Jer. 31:3

¹³¹ Rom. 5:20,21

There is, however, a requirement for the experience of this grace: humility. This is the force of the quotation from Proverbs 3:34 and it becomes the dominant motif in the commands in verses 7-10. God's gift of sustaining grace can be received only by those willing to admit their need and accept the gift. The *proud*, on the other hand, meet only resistance from God. This is a theme that sounds throughout the Old Testament (*cf.* Pss. 18:27; 34:18; 51:17; 72:4; 138:6; Is. 61:1; Zp. 3:11-12). It is worth noting that 'pride' (*hyperēphania*) is often associated with jealousy; perhaps James would want us to see here an implicit condemnation of these jealous and selfish people whom he has criticized in 3:13 – 4:3."

The Greek verb in "Submit yourselves, then, to God," is *hupotasso*, which means "subordinate." In the reflexive mode, it means, "to obey." We find it in the verse about Jesus submitting Himself to His parents' authority: "Then he went down to Nazareth with them and *was obedient* to them."¹³² In that case it means a willing recognition of the natural order of authority. In the verse: "The seventy-two returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons *submit* to us in your name,'"¹³³ it means yielding to superior force. In the way James uses the word it suggests a willing submission, but also recognition that resisting God's authority would lead to a disastrous end.

Resistance is recommended in connection with the influence the Evil One tries to exercise over us. The devil works with fear tactics. He threatens people with death, forcing them to commit sin in order to prolong life. Those tactics are evinced in the way the author of Hebrews describes Jesus' victory over him: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."¹³⁴ The only way the devil can be resisted is by submission to God's authority and using the authority of Jesus' Name against him. Trying to use any other power, natural or spiritual can be harmful. We read about the sons of Sceva, in Acts: "Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, 'In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.' Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. [One day] the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding."¹³⁵

James does not seem to indicate how one resists the devil. It is obvious that this cannot be done by human means alone. Satan is stronger than we are. In the case in which the disciples reported enthusiastically that demons submitted to them, it was because they used the Name of Jesus, that is His authority. Although James makes it sound as if resisting the devil and coming near to God are opposites, they are actually identical. It is by our drawing near to God that the devil will flee. As we begin to take the first step toward God, God takes multiple steps in our direction. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son,

¹³² Luke 2:51

¹³³ Luke 10:17

¹³⁴ Heb. 2:14,15

¹³⁵ Acts 19:13-16

Jesus says about the father: “his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”¹³⁶ God draws near to us with greater eagerness than we can ever approach Him.

James gives a list of eight actions to perform in restoring our relationship with God: submit yourselves, come near, wash your hands, purify your hearts, grieve, mourn, change your laughter to mourning and humble yourselves. He makes it sound as if everything depends on our initiative. In a way it does. The father of the prodigal could not have run toward his wayward son if the son had not decided to leave the pigsty and start going home. James does not mention the part the Holy Spirit plays in this kind of repentance. We know, however, that, according to Jesus’ words, “No one can come to [Jesus] unless the Father who sent me draws him.”¹³⁷ We often come to realize, after we have started drawing near to God, that it was God’s drawing that made us start.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “The series of commands in verse 7-10 flow from the quotation of Proverbs 3:34: if God, indeed, gives grace to the humble, it is clearly man’s responsibility to *submit* to God. This imperative stands almost as a ‘heading’ over the following series of commands, and is matched by the command to ‘humble yourselves’ which concludes the series in verse 10. This latter command picks up the word ‘humble’ from the quotation of Proverbs, thereby giving a strong coherence to the paragraph. Between these two basic commands are three couplets: *resist the devil ... Draw near to God* (vv. 7b-8a); *Cleanse your hands ... purify your hearts* (v. 8b); *Be wretched ... Let your laughter be turned to mourning ...* (v.9). The aorist tense is used throughout, perhaps suggesting that these attitudes are to be entered into while the previous sinful behavior is discarded. The whole context, from verse 6 on, is strikingly similar to 1 Peter 5:5-9; a quotation of Proverbs 3:34 (5b) is followed by commands to ‘Humble yourselves ... so that in due time he [God] may exalt you’ (v. 6) and to resist the devil (v. 9). James and Peter seem to use independently a traditional teaching that connected Proverbs 3:34 with the need for humility and resistance of the devil.

While James has earlier stressed the person’s own evil tendency as being responsible for sin (1:14), he recognizes here the role of a supra-personal evil being. The word *diabolos* is used in the Septuagint to translate *śtn*, the Hebrew word which gives us the title ‘Satan.’ The two titles are thus identical in meaning (*cf.* Rev. 20:2), both suggesting that one of the devil’s primary purposes is ‘to separate God and man.’ This separation the Christian must resist. When he does, James promises that the devil *will flee from you*. Whatever power Satan may have, the Christian can be absolutely certain that he has been given the ability to overcome that power.

Instead of succumbing to Satan’s desire to separate us from God, we should *draw near* to him. God, James promises, graciously responds by drawing near to us in turn. It should, of course, be obvious that James is not here talking about salvation, but about the repentance of those who are already Christians. Those who sincerely repent and return to God will find him, like the father of the prodigal son, eager to receive back his erring children.”

¹³⁶ Luke 15:20

¹³⁷ John 6:44

We must not conclude from James' admonition that the Christian life is a gloomy existence in which a person does nothing but lament his sinful condition. James is addressing people who are like some Calvinists, who believe that, since they are part of God's covenant, their actions cannot change God's predestination of them, and, therefore, whether they commit sin or not will not change anything as far as their salvation is concerned. The everyday life of a Christian should rather be marked by Paul's advice to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"¹³⁸ As we rejoice in being washed in the blood of the Lamb, we realize what we have been cleansed from.

e. A prohibition of critical speech (4:11-12)

11 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.

12 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?

The Greek word James uses is *katalaleo*, "to speak against." James uses the same verb three times in v.11. There is some inconsistency in the NIV's rendering it once with "slander" and twice with "speak against." "Slander" means speaking maliciously, but "speaking against," can simply mean opposing someone on legal grounds.

James addresses this admonition also to "brothers." He is not referring to people outside the realm of Christianity, who make disparaging remarks about Christians. Peter uses the word in connection with the slander some Christians had to endure from a Gentile community. He advised them to keep "a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."¹³⁹

It seems that James makes a jump from speaking against a brother to speaking against the law, unless we understand that the reference is to the law of loving one's neighbor as oneself. The Mosaic Law stated: "Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord."¹⁴⁰

The context suggests that James warns against the tendency to be judgmental or critical in our relations with members of the body of Christ. When James says that one who judges his brother judges the law, we must interpret this as meaning that the one who judges is, himself, subject to the law.

Jesus issued a similar warning in *The Sermon on the Mount*, saying: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time

¹³⁸ Phil. 4:4

¹³⁹ I Peter 3:16

¹⁴⁰ Lev. 19:16

there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."¹⁴¹

The law is the expression of God's character. In judging the law we place ourselves above God. That is the ultimate consequence of being critical. He who has a critical mind becomes not only critical of his neighbor, but also critical of God.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF A CHRISTIAN WORLD-VIEW (4:13 – 5:11)

a. A condemnation of arrogance (4:13-17)

13 *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."*

14 *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.*

15 *Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*

16 *As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.*

17 *Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, introduces this section with the following: "The fourth general grouping of James' exhortations has as its unifying theme the Christian perspective on the period of time in which the church lives. This perspective is the touchstone for each major topic in 4:13 – 5:11. 4:13-17 prohibits an arrogant, boastful attitude that neglects to take into account the transitoriness of this life. In 5:1-6 James pronounces judgment on rich oppressors because they have lived lives of self-centered luxury 'in the last days' – days that are quickly moving towards a climactic day of judgment. Christians, on the other hand, must exercise patience as they wait for this day to dawn, and should remain steadfast in their faith as they encounter trials (5:7-11)."

Looking at these verses, we could ask the question, "Who is in charge of my life? God or I?" James' warning against presumption does not mean that we should not plan ahead. There is no virtue in floating aimlessly upon life's ocean waves. But the realization "My times are in your hands"¹⁴² makes planning realistic and healthy.

Moo continues his comment on v.13 with: "*Come now (age nyn)* is not used here as a true imperative, as its singular form (with plural *legontes*, 'saying,' following) demonstrates. It is a form of address that is found elsewhere, particularly in 'popular' Greek style. Combined with *you who say*, it gives to James' language a rather brusque tone. These businessmen whom James addresses are characterized as deliberate and self-confident planners. They decide where they will go, when they will go, how long they will stay, and they are absolutely certain that they will gain profit from their venture. The picture James paints here would be familiar to his readers. The first century was a period of great commercial activity, and especially the Hellenistic cities of Palestine (the Decapolis, for instance) were heavily involved in commerce of various kinds. Many Jews were active in these business coming-and-goings; large numbers had settled in cities

¹⁴¹ Matt. 7:1-5

¹⁴² Ps. 31:15

throughout the Mediterranean world for commercial reasons. It need hardly be said that the people James pictures are easily recognized also by the modern reader. The distance between cities may be greater, the means of transportation quicker and the business activities different, but in James' day, and ours, the 'bottom line' is the same – profit. As the following verses demonstrate, however, it is not the desire to make profit that James criticizes. He is concerned rather about the exclusively this-world context in which the plans are made – a danger, it must be said, to which business people are particularly susceptible.”

There is a fine line between being a responsible provider for one's family and having love of money. The author of Hebrews warns that it is easy to lose sight of God in trying to keep one's head above the water. We read: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”¹⁴³

Jesus adds to this: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”¹⁴⁴

There is wisdom in involving God in our planning, both in daily and long-term planning. Our problem is, as James puts it, we “do not even know what will happen tomorrow.”

James had several Old Testament quotations to fall back on when he compared life to “a mist.” Job said: “Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath.”¹⁴⁵ David observed in several of his Psalms: “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.”¹⁴⁶ And: “For my days vanish like smoke; my bones burn like glowing embers.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Heb. 13:5,6

¹⁴⁴ Matt. 6:24-34

¹⁴⁵ Job 7:7

¹⁴⁶ Ps. 39:5

¹⁴⁷ Ps. 102:3

Of course, if all that could be said about life is what James states here, our human existence would have no value; it would hardly be worth living. The Bible has more and better things to say about life than what James mentions here. James addresses people who decided to do their own planning. There is, on the other hand, the possibility to turn to God and ask Him what His plan is for our life. Those, who have put their trust in the Lord, can believe that they are not the product of a haphazard collision of molecules, but human beings God allowed to be born into this world, for whose lives He has definite plans. If, instead of doing our own planning, we hand God a blank sheet of paper, so to speak, and ask Him to draw His plan on it, we will live a life that is successful because it is lived according to the will of our Creator.

The Apostle John makes the rich statement: “the man who does the will of God lives forever.”¹⁴⁸ David wrote: “And I — in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.”¹⁴⁹ Life on earth may be like a breath or a vapor as far as duration is concerned, if it leads into eternity and fellowship with God, it is totally meaningful and satisfying.

But that is not what James is talking about. He speaks about those who do not take God into account, let alone plan for eternity. They are the people to whom Jesus said: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”¹⁵⁰

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes about v.14: “In laying their plans with reference only to this world, these business people have failed to reckon with a fundamental fact – the insubstantial and transitory nature of ‘this world.’ For such people as they are (a paraphrase of the indefinite relative *hoitines*) to plan so confidently is the height of foolishness. This, the main point of verse 14, is clear, although the precise way in which James expresses it is debated. The RSV (along with AV, NIV and NEB) divides the first part of the verse into two parts: a statement, *you do not know about tomorrow*, and a question, *What is your life?* Other versions combine these into a single statement: ‘you do not know what your life will be tomorrow’ (NASB; *cf.* also GNB and the punctuation of the Nestle-Aland (26th edition) and United Bible Societies (3rd edition Greek texts). The situation is complicated by the presence of several variant readings. Without rehearsing all the arguments, the decisive consideration seems to be the placement of *poios* (*what*), which is most awkward if it is construed as the object of *epistasthe* (*know*). It is more naturally taken as the introduction to a separate question, as in the RSV translation.

The answer to this question, then, is given in the last part of the verse, in which life is compared to *a mist* (*atmis*). This word could also be translated ‘a puff of smoke’ (GNB, Phillips; *cf.* Acts 2:19), and has some affinity with the ‘vanities’ of life that Ecclesiastes talks so much about. Whatever the exact meaning, James obviously intends to emphasize the extremely short duration of life. Illness, accidental death, or the return of Christ could cut short our lives just as quickly as the morning sun dissipates the mist or as a shift in

¹⁴⁸ I John 2:17

¹⁴⁹ Ps. 17:15

¹⁵⁰ Matt. 6:19-21

wind direction blows away smoke. This realistic reckoning with the brevity and uncertainty of life, and even the images used to describe it, are found frequently in Scripture. Proverbs 27:1 warns: ‘Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.’ Job 7:7, 9, 16 and Psalm 39:5-6 describe life as a ‘breath.’ Particularly close to James’ teaching are, as so often, some words of Jesus. In Luke 12:15, he warns the crowds about covetousness and reminds them that ‘a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. In a brief parable, he illustrated his point with a rich man, who, like James’ businessman, made definite plans for acquiring more goods, but who was prevented from executing his plans by his death (Lk. 12:16-20). This passage contains several themes that James utilizes both here and in 5:1-6 and it is quite possible that it has furnished the stimulus for his own exhortations.”

Whether James means that we ought always to pronounce the words “If it is the Lord’s will” is doubtful. The Latin term *Deo Volente* (D.V.) has made its way into the English language. Muslims use *Insha Allah* as proverbial. It is not so much the use of the words as the attitude that determines the way we plan.

A problem with the Lord’s will is that it is not imposed upon us. God will leave us the opportunity to do what we want, even if it is not God’s will. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the exodus of Israel from Egypt is an example. It can be objected that the Scripture states: “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses.”¹⁵¹ We read six times that Pharaoh hardened his heart¹⁵² before we read for the first time that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart!

James uses two verbs to describe the wrong attitude of those who do not involve God in their planning: *kauchaomai* (to glory) and *alazoneia* (to boast). The first can be used in a positive sense also as in the verse: “Not only so, but we also *rejoice* in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance.”¹⁵³ The Apostle John uses the second in the verse: “For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the *boasting of what he has and does* — comes not from the Father but from the world.”¹⁵⁴ The NKJV renders this: “the pride of life.”

The trouble in doing our own planning is that we are proud of it. We are usually proud of our successes in life. If we end up bankrupt, we rarely blame ourselves; if we become rich, we consider it to be the result of our own efforts. That is where the bragging comes in.

The closing verse of this chapter, “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins,” seems to say “You know better!”

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “Commentators are nearly unanimous in viewing this verse as a traditional saying that circulated independently of this context. Not only does the sudden shift to the third person suggest this, but the verse fits somewhat awkwardly in the paragraph. Nevertheless, James does connect it to the preceding verse with an *oun* (‘therefore,’ omitted by the RSV), thereby indicating that he sees some point

¹⁵¹ Ex. 9:12

¹⁵² (ch. 7:13,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7, (34))

¹⁵³ Rom. 5:3

¹⁵⁴ I John 2:16

of contact. ... He has told his readers *what is right*; if they now *fail to do it*, they are sinning. They cannot take refuge in the plea that they have done nothing positively wrong, as Scripture makes abundantly clear, sins of *omission* are as real and serious as sins of *commission*. The servant in Jesus' parable who fails to use the money he was entrusted with (Lk. 19:11-27); the 'goats' who failed to care for the outcasts of society (Mt. 25:31-46) – they are condemned for what they failed to do. Another teaching of Jesus reminds us very forcibly of James' words here: 'that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating' (Lk. 12:47)."

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "It is sin to doubt whether a thing be right, and yet do it. It is also sin to know that a thing is right, and yet to leave it undone"

b. A condemnation of those who misuse wealth (5:1-6)

5 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.

2 Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes.

3 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.

4 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.

5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

6 You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

In introducing this section, Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes: "This section is closely related to 4:13-17 both in style – the two are introduced with the imperatival *age nyn*, *Come now* – and in content – a pursuit of wealth that disregards God and his purposes in history is condemned in both. But the prominence of the eschatological consummation ties 5:1-6 closely to 5:7-11 also. If 4:13-17 is directed both to the church and to the world, and 5:7-11 clearly to the church, 5:1-6 unmistakably addresses non-Christians. This is clear from the many biblical and extra-biblical traditions concerning unrighteous wealth that James utilizes, and from James' failure to hold out any prospect of deliverance for those whom he condemns in this paragraph. The rich people pictured are clearly wealthy landowners, as class accused of economic exploitation and oppression from early times. In James' surroundings, we may think particularly of Palestinian Jewish landlords, who owned large estates and were often concerned only about how much profit could be gained from their lands. James proceeds to announce the condemnation of these rich landholders (v. 1) and justifies their condemnation on the grounds of their selfish hoarding of wealth (vv. 2-3), their defrauding of their workers (v. 4), their self-indulgent lifestyle (v. 5) and their oppression of 'the righteous' (v. 6).

Why does James preach this message of denunciation of non-Christians in a letter addressed to the church? Calvin appropriately isolates two main purposes: James '... has a regard to the faithful, that they, hearing of the miserable end of the rich, might not envy

their fortune, and also that knowing that God would be the avenger of the wrongs they suffered, they might with a calm and resigned mind bear them.”

Several of the images James uses to describe worldly riches are borrowed from Jesus’ words in *The Sermon on the Mount*. We read there: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”¹⁵⁵ The characteristic of precious metals is, of course, that they do not corrode. That is why they are considered precious. There is, however, a kind of spiritual rust and mold that affects the soul. The corrosion that eats the flesh, about which James speaks, reminds us of the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus.¹⁵⁶ It was that corrosion that was the flame that caused the rich man’s agony. It is said about money that “you can’t take it with you.” There is, however, a sense in which people do take with them into eternity that which was considered their wealth on earth, and that turns out to be rotten and moth-eaten junk.

James accuses the rich of self-indulgence “in the last days.” What he wants to express is probably similar to what the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if 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 the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.”¹⁵⁷

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “James summarizes this first indictment of the rich at the end of verse 3: *You have laid up treasure for the last days. Ethēsaurisate* (‘lay up treasure’) may have as its object ‘fire’ or a word to be supplied, such as ‘wrath’ (cf. Rom. 2:5), but a more striking image is yielded if, as in Luke 12:21, the verb is taken absolutely: ‘laying up treasure,’ the hoarding of material things in itself is what James condemns. It may be, as the RSV translation suggests, that this laying up of treasure is semi-ironical; the rich has assiduously ‘stored up’ for themselves, all right, but what they have stored up is the ‘misery’ that will be theirs when *the last days*, the time of judgment, arrive. But the preposition James uses before ‘last days’ (*en*) is more naturally translated ‘in,’ and it is the pervasive belief of New Testament Christians that they were themselves living in the last days (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 2 Pet. 3:3 (?); 1 Jn. 2:18; Jude 18). The application of this expression to their own time testified to the early Christians’ belief that they were living in that era where God’s promises were coming to fulfillment; an era of indefinite duration immediately preceding the climax of history. James shares this perspective, as his conviction about the nearness of the *parousia* makes clear (5:8). What James is saying, then, is that those who are avidly accumulating wealth in his day are particularly sinful, because they utterly disregard the demands made upon people by the display of God’s grace in Christ, and especially foolish, because they ignore the many signs of the rapidly approaching judgment. Like the rich fool, they failed to reckon with sudden judgment (Lk. 12:15-21). ‘It is in *the last days* that you are laying up treasure!’

¹⁵⁵ Matt. 6:19,20

¹⁵⁶ Luke 16:19-31

¹⁵⁷ I Cor. 7:29-31

As those who live in these ‘last days,’ we, too, should recognize in the grace of God already displayed and the judgment of God yet to come a powerful stimulus to share, not hoard, our wealth.”

The picture James paints in vv.4-6 is capitalism at its worst. There is on the North American continent the thought that Christianity is identical to free enterprise, as opposed to socialism. The fact that socialism, as preached by Marx, has atheistic roots, has something to do with this. The problem, however, is not the system but the human heart. It is covetousness that makes all systems fail.

James must have had in mind the years of the early church in which “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”¹⁵⁸ We do not know how long that lasted, but we do know that the fire died down because the Apostle Paul, having been told by the apostles in Jerusalem, made it a point to collect money for the poor in the mother church.¹⁵⁹

James refers probably to particular situations in which wealthy landowners withheld wages from their day-laborers. Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, states: “First-century Palestine, before AD 70, witnessed an increasing concentration of land in the hands of a small group of very wealthy landowners. As a result, the smallholdings of many farmers were assimilated into these large estates, and these farmers were forced to earn their living by hiring themselves out to their rich landlords.”

The Mosaic Law contained specific articles that protected hired hands and demanded that day-laborers be paid promptly and on a daily basis. We read: “Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.”¹⁶⁰ And: “Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.”¹⁶¹ That law was given even before the Israelites had entered Canaan and there were landowners and laborers.

The Babylonian captivity did nothing to change conditions on this point, because after the return of the remnant, the prophet Malachi said: “‘So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,’ says the Lord Almighty.”¹⁶²

James’ accusation is that the rich landowners feasted and pampered themselves, while their hirelings suffered abuse and starvation. The Greek text of v.5 reads literally: “You have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; you have nourished your heart [as] in a day of slaughter.” There are two verbs that catch the attention because of their similarity: *Etrufeésate*, “you have lived in pleasure,” and *ethrépsate*, “you have

¹⁵⁸ Acts 4:32

¹⁵⁹ Gal. 2:10

¹⁶⁰ Lev. 19:13

¹⁶¹ Deut. 24:14,15

¹⁶² Mal. 3:5

nourished.” The picture of David and Nabal comes to mind. Nabal refused to show generosity to David and his men as he feasted during sheep shearing.¹⁶³

The picture is painted in very sharp and vivid colors. We can see heavily overweight landowners sitting in the seat of the accused and the emaciated laborers standing in the courtroom. The latter are not the ones who do the accusing. The voice that is heard is the cry of wages withheld. Like the blood of Abel that cried from the ground,¹⁶⁴ accusing Cain, so the money raises its accusing voice.

The One presiding over the case is God Himself, the Lord Almighty. James uses the Greek and Hebrew words *Kurios Sabaoth*, “the Lord of Hosts,” the commander-in-chief of the heavenly armies.

James seems to suggest that what was slaughtered on “the day of slaughter” was not animals but humans. That is the reason he states: “You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.” This does not necessarily mean that the rich physically murdered the poor. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “Moffatt ... points out that the word murdered had a wider range of meaning in Jewish ethics than it has today. Particularly relevant are the statements in the apocryphal Ecclus 34:21,22: ‘The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbor’s living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood.’ Here the reference in James is probably to ‘judicial murders,’ since the statement follows the word condemned. Poor people are hauled into court (cf. James 2:6) and can do nothing to defend themselves. They are completely at the mercy of the unscrupulous rich men. Despite all of this mistreatment, the poor do not resist.”

c. An encouragement to endure patiently (5:7-11)

7 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.

8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.

9 Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

11 As you know, we consider 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.

From angrily accusing the rich landowners, James turns to the oppressed farmhands with a word of encouragement and mild rebuke.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, introduces this section with the following: “Psalm 37 is a marvelous song of encouragement directed to the righteous. They are described as ‘poor and needy’ (v. 14) and as suffering persecution at the hand of the wicked (vv. 12-15, 32-33). They are tempted to be envious of the prosperity and well-being of the wicked (vv.

¹⁶³ I Sam. 25:1-11

¹⁶⁴ Gen. 4:10

1, 7) and, somewhat paradoxically, also to be impatient for the wicked to receive judgment. In this situation, the psalmist encourages the righteous to ‘be still before the LORD’ (v. 7); to ‘refrain from anger’ (v. 8), for God will certainly vindicate the righteous and destroy the wicked (vv. 34-40). James writes to righteous people, mainly poor, who were suffering from similar circumstances. His advice is the same as the psalmist’s: ‘be patient,’ for the ‘coming of the Lord,’ when the wicked will be judged (5:1-6) and the righteous delivered, ‘is near.’”

It is on the basis of Scripture portions like this one that Carl Marx condemned religion as “opiate for the people,” particularly the working class. He proclaimed that a new world order would come when proletarians of all nations would unite and rise up against the rich. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the communist takeover in China, as well as in other parts of the world, were the result of that proclamation.

James preaches patience instead of revolution. The keyword in this section is “patience.” James uses the Greek word *makrothumeo* three times in two verses. Patience involves waiting and waiting takes time as well as courage. David sings in the Psalms: “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.”¹⁶⁵ And: “Wait for the Lord and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it.”¹⁶⁶ And the pilgrims who were going up to Jerusalem sang: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.”¹⁶⁷

James uses three examples of patience to illustrate his admonishment; one from nature and two from Scripture. The farmer who has planted his crop waits for it to grow. All growth takes time.

James may have been thinking of Jesus’ parable about the farmer who waits for the harvest after he has sown his crop. “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”¹⁶⁸ The person, who plants a seed and digs it up from time to time to see how the roots are growing, will never reap anything. All growth takes patience. And growth is a principle upon which the Kingdom of God is built.

The climate in Palestine may have required more patience than at any other place. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* explains: “In Palestine the early rain (October-November) came after the crops were planted, and the latter rain (April-May) when they were maturing. Both were crucial for the success of the crops.”

The prophets, who are part of the next illustration, also prophesied about the climate mentioned in the first. Isaiah prophesied: “He will also send you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. In

¹⁶⁵ Ps. 27:14

¹⁶⁶ Ps. 37:34

¹⁶⁷ Ps. 130:5,6

¹⁶⁸ Mark 4:26-29

that day your cattle will graze in broad meadows. The oxen and donkeys that work the soil will eat fodder and mash, spread out with fork and shovel.”¹⁶⁹ And we read in Zechariah: “Ask the Lord for rain in the springtime; it is the Lord who makes the storm clouds. He gives showers of rain to men, and plants of the field to everyone.”¹⁷⁰

The Greek text of v.11 reads literally: “You have heard of the patience of Job, and the end of the Lord; have seen that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy.” The Greek word rendered “patience” is *hupomone*, which, in most modern translations is rendered “perseverance.” Some ancient scholars, such as Augustine and Luther, understood the phrase “the end of the Lord” to refer to the death of Christ, instead of the goal God intended to achieve in the life of Job.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “As the prophets received this reward because they were faithful in tribulation, so, says James, did *Job*. Many have wondered at James’ allusion to Job as a model of faithful endurance of suffering; particularly since the AV translated ‘the patience of Job.’ Yet even when we translate, more accurately, the steadfastness or ‘perseverance’ of Job, the illustration seems to be less than appropriate. Did not Job grumble about his circumstances, self-righteously proclaim his innocence and generally question God’s way with him? The seeming incompatibility between the canonical portrait of Job and James’ description of him has led some to think that James is dependent on the apocryphal Testament of Job, where Job is presented in a much more positive light. Yet there is still a sense in which the Job of the Old Testament can be seen as a great example of steadfastness. For although Job did complain bitterly about God’s treatment of him, he never abandoned his faith; in the midst of his incomprehension, he clung to God and continued to hope in him (*cf.* Jb. 1:21; 2:10; 16:19-21; 19:25-27). As [one Bible scholar] says, ‘Job’s is no groveling, passive unquestioning submission; Job struggled and questioned, and sometimes even defied, but the flame of faith was never extinguished in his heart.’”

It seems that James assumes his audience to have a deep understanding of the lesson for all, contained in the story of Job. He makes no effort to explain or interpret this lesson. His overall conclusion is “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” It is implied that it was not the Lord who afflicted Job, but Satan. Why God allowed Satan to do so is not explained, but it is understood that the purpose and meaning of the suffering of those, who are the victim of abuse by the rich, is the same as of Job. The end of Job’s life is held up as an encouragement for those who are suffering.

VI. CONCLUDING EXHORTATIONS (5:12-20)

a. Oaths (5:12)

12 Above all, my brothers, do not swear — not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

James admonition is obviously based upon Jesus’ words in *The Sermon on the Mount*: “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either

¹⁶⁹ Isa. 30:23,24

¹⁷⁰ Zech. 10:1

by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."¹⁷¹

The word "swear" has acquired a different meaning in modern language. Nowadays it rarely refers to an invocation of God or the Name of God or Jesus Christ, in order to affirm the reliability of a statement. There is still use for oath in a legal setting, as in a court case or upon the entering into certain forms of employment in which upholding of the constitution or the law is required. But swearing in everyday life consists in the use of vulgar, profane or obscene language. The average Jew in James' day would, most likely, never be guilty of using that kind of speech. The prohibition in the Decalogue against using the Name of the Lord in vain was so implanted in their minds that the Jews would never even pronounce the Name of Yahweh, but use the substitute Adonai.

The introduction "above all things," indicates that the topic is of foremost importance. It is not so much a person's use of language as his reliability that is the issue. The question is, how reliable are we in keeping our promises? The Apostle Paul belabors the point rather extensively in his second epistle to the Corinthians. He wrote: "When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no'? But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not 'Yes' and 'No.' For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not 'Yes' and 'No,' but in him it has always been 'Yes.' For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God."

What Paul is saying is not merely that he practices what he preaches, but that his reliability is anchored on the trustworthiness of God. It is our Christian testimony that is at stake. Jesus introduced most of His statements with "I tell you the truth"; the Greek text uses the Hebrew word "amen." In the Greek text of John's Gospel this is given as "amen, amen."

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary states about the word "amen": "(True, faithful'). A word used to affirm and confirm a statement. Strictly an adjective, meaning firm, metaphorically faithful, it came to be used as an adverb by which something is asserted or confirmed. Used at the beginning of a sentence, it emphasizes what is about to be said. It is frequently so employed by our Lord and is translated 'truly.' It is often used to confirm the words of another and adds the wish for success to another's vows and predictions. 'The repetition of the word employed by John alone in his gospel (twenty-five times) has the force of a superlative, most assuredly' ...

Among the Jews the liturgical use of the word is illustrated by the response of the woman in the trial by the water of jealousy (Num 5:22), by that of the people at Mt. Ebal (Deut 27:15-26; cf. Neh 5:13; see also 1 Chron 16:36). It was a custom, which passed over from the synagogues into the Christian assemblies, that when he who had read or discoursed had offered up a solemn prayer to God the others in attendance responded Amen, and thus made the substance of what was uttered their own (1 Cor 14:16). Several

¹⁷¹ Matt. 5:33-37

of the church Fathers refer to this custom, and Jerome says that at the conclusion of public prayer the united voice of the people sounded like the fall of water or the noise of thunder.”

James may have intended to say more than just that we ought to be reliable. He may have had in mind also that there are principles and issues in life to which we say “yes” and other to which we say “no.” A German philosopher has said: “He who says a strong “no” must also say a strong “yes.”

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments on James’ prohibition of swearing: “The *swearing* that James here prohibits is not ‘dirty’ language as such, but the invoking of God’s name, or substitutes for it, to guarantee the truth of what we say. In the Old Testament, God is frequently presented as guaranteeing the fulfillment of his promises with an oath. The law does not prohibit oaths, but demands that a person be true to any oath he has sworn (*cf.* Lv. 19:12 – yet another instance in which James includes a topic also mentioned in that chapter). Concern about the devaluation of oaths because of their indiscriminate use and the tendency to try to avoid fulfilling them by swearing by ‘less sacred’ things (*cf.* Mt. 23:16-22) led to warnings against using them too often. . . . Jesus, it appears, went even further than this, when he commanded his disciples not to swear ‘at all’ (Mt. 5:34).

The question remains whether Jesus and James intended to prohibit *all* oaths. At the time of the Reformation, many in the Anabaptist tradition believed this was the case and refused by consequence to take oaths in the courtroom or anywhere else – a belief that many sincere Christians continue to hold. However, it is questionable whether either Jesus or James intended to address the issue of official oaths, oaths that responsible authorities ask us to take. What both have in mind seems to be *voluntary* oaths. Even with these, it is argued, the intention is not to forbid *any* oath, but only oaths that would have the intention of avoiding absolute truthfulness. This would seem to be the problem that Jesus addressed (*cf.* Mt. 23:16-22) and the evidence from Paul’s epistles show that he, for one, continued to use oaths (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; 11:11; Gal. 1:20; Phil 1:8; 1 Thes. 2:5, 10). Nevertheless, caution is required. The repetitions of Jesus’ teaching by James, where the polemical context of Matthew 5 is lacking, warns us against assuming that the prohibition of oaths was related only to that false teaching. And it may be questioned whether Paul’s ‘witness’ formula really fits into the category of an oath or not. It is possible that Jesus and James do intend to prohibit any voluntary oath.”

b. Prayer and healing (5:13-18)

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

14 Is any one 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.

15 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.

16 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.

17 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.

18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Although these verses are often quoted or read during prayer and anointing for sick people who have asked for prayer, James says more here than merely that sick people should be prayed for and anointed with oil. He mentions three conditions that we all encounter with frequency in daily life: trouble, happiness and sickness. Since sickness pertains particularly to a physical condition, “trouble” must refer to other difficulties that we encounter in daily life. The Greek word used is *kakopatheo*, which is derived from a word meaning “hardship.” Paul uses the word describing his imprisonment: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am *suffering* even to the point of being chained like a criminal.”¹⁷²

When, however, we look at the context in which “trouble” is mentioned, “trouble–happy–sick,” it seems that the emotional reaction to circumstances is focused upon, rather than the circumstances themselves. A better reading of the text might be “Is anyone troubled?” What James seems to be saying is that, when our circumstances overwhelm us to the point where they affect us emotionally, we must turn to the Lord in prayer. Whatever makes us unhappy should be what leads us to look to the Lord and cry out to Him. Like the Psalmist, we ought to say: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.”¹⁷³

We must involve God in every experience we have, whether good or bad, realizing that He is the One who orchestrates our circumstances in order to observe our reaction. As Moses said to the people of Israel as they came to the end of their desert journey: “Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”¹⁷⁴ And Job said: “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”¹⁷⁵

To turn to God in times of trouble is a natural reaction. A Dutch proverb says: “Need teaches praying!” It is less normal to always praise in times of happiness. Praise in adversity, which is what Paul and Silas practiced when in prison is even more abnormal. If there is intimacy in our relationship with God, if Jesus is our “friend,” we share with Him all that concerns us.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes: “Perhaps even more than when suffering, we must be reminded in times of happiness of our glad obligation to acknowledge God’s supreme role in our lives. We are to do this, James says, *singing praise*. The word he uses, *psallō*, is easily recognized as related to our English ‘psalm.’ Taken from a Greek word that designated a kind of harp, the word was used in the Septuagint to describe certain types

¹⁷² II Tim. 2:8,9

¹⁷³ Ps. 130:1,2

¹⁷⁴ Deut. 8:2,3

¹⁷⁵ Job 2:10

of songs, especially songs of praise. This singing in praise was closely related to prayer (*cf.* 1 Cor 14:15); indeed, it can be regarded as a form of prayer.”

Much has been written about James’ advice regarding prayer for the sick. Where trouble and happiness were dealt with in a personal relationship with God, sickness involves the church. The elders should be seen here as representative of the whole church. From fellowship with God, we come to fellowship with the saints. One can deal with trouble and happiness and still remain in control of daily life. But when sickness enters the picture there is a loss of control, both in the physical and emotional domain. At times of serious illness our ability to commune with God is often affected also. It is sometimes difficult to pray when one has a high fever. That is when outside help must be called upon.

What makes James’ advice unique is not so much the call for intercession as the anointing with oil. Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, comments: “This anointing is to be carried out *in the name of the Lord*, signifying the divine authority with which the anointing is done (see Acts 3:6, 16; 4:7, 10). But what is the purpose of this anointing with oil? The practice is mentioned only one other time in the New Testament: Mark tells us that the twelve ‘cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them’ (6:13). Unfortunately no more explanation of the practice is given there than here in James. In general, there are two main possibilities for the purpose of the anointing.

First, it may have a practical purpose. Oil was widely used in the ancient world as a medicine. In Jesus’ parable, he tell us that the Samaritan who stopped to help the man who had been robbed and beaten ‘went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine’ (Lk. 10:34). Other ancient sources attest to its helpfulness in curing everything from toothache to paralysis (the famous second-century physician Galen recommended oil as ‘the best of all remedies for paralysis,’ ...). What James may be saying, then, is that the elders should come to the bedside of the sick armed with both spiritual and natural resources – with prayer and with medicine. Both are administered with the Lord’s authority and both together can be used by him in healing the sick. The difficulty with this view is twofold. First, evidence that anointing with oil was used for any medical problem is not found – and why mention only one (albeit widespread) remedy when many different illnesses would be encountered? Secondly, why should the elders of the church do the anointing if its purpose were solely medical? Surely others would have done this already were it an appropriate remedy for the complaint.

As a different kind of practical purpose, others suggest that the anointing may have been intended as an outward, physical expression of concern and as a means to stimulate the faith of the sick person. Jesus sometimes used physical ‘props’ in his healings, apparently with just such a purpose. But when Jesus did so, the physical action was specifically appropriate to the illness, such as rubbing the eyes of a blind man (Mk. 8:23-26) and placing his finger in the ears of a deaf man (Mk. 7:33). There is simply no evidence that anointing with oil was generally used with such a purpose.

It is probable, then, that anointing with oil has a religious purpose. This second main explanation of the practice can be further subdivided into two types, according to whether the anointing is seen to have sacramental or merely symbolic significance. A sacramental understanding of this practice arose early in the history of the church. On the basis of this

text the early Greek church practiced what they called the *'euchelaion'* (a combination of the words *euchē*, 'prayer,' and *elaion*, 'oil,' both used in this text), which had the purpose of strengthening the body and soul of the sick. The Western church continued this practice for many centuries, as well as using oil for anointing on other occasions. Later, the Roman church gave to the priest the exclusive right to perform this ceremony and developed the sacrament of 'extreme unction.' This sacrament has the purpose of removing any remnant of sin and of strengthening the soul of the dying (healing is considered only a possibility). The Council of Trent ... found this sacrament 'insinuated' in Mark 6:13 and 'promulgated' in James 5:14. Clearly this developed sacrament has little basis in James' text: he recommends anointing for any illness and associates it with healing rather than with preparation for death. Nevertheless, the oil could be considered to have a sacramental function in that it acted as a 'vehicle of divine power.' Much as partaking of the Lord's Supper conveys to the believing participant a strengthening in grace, so anointing may be mandated by God as a physical element through which he works the grace of healing in the sick believer. One's attitude toward this view will depend considerably on one's view of the 'sacrament' in general. But it may also be asked whether a practice mentioned only once in the New Testament (although *cf.* Mk. 6:13) can possess the importance which this view gives to anointing.

It is best, then, to think of the anointing with oil as a symbolic action. Anointing frequently symbolizes the consecration of persons or things for God's use and service in the Old Testament. And while *chriō* is usually used in these texts, James has probably chosen *aleiphō* because of the physical action involved ... As the elders prayed, they would anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that that person was being 'set apart' for God's special attention and care. While Calvin, Luther and other expositors think that the practice of anointing, along with the power to heal, was meant to be confined to the apostolic age, it is doubtful that such a restriction can be maintained. James' recommendation that regular church officers carry out the practice would seem to imply its permanent validity in the church. On the other hand, the fact that anointing a sick person is mentioned only here in the New Testament epistles, and that many healings were accomplished without anointing, shows that the practice is not a necessary accompaniment to the prayer for healing. Elders who pray for the sick *may* do it, and James clearly recommends the practice; but they do not *have* to do so."

In all this no mention is made of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and anointing. As Jesus presented Himself in the synagogue of Nazareth, He said, quoting Isaiah's prophecy: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."¹⁷⁶ We see this relationship between anointing and the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of David. We read: "So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power."¹⁷⁷ The Apostle Paul clearly indicates that there is a physical aspect to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us. We read: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to

¹⁷⁶ Luke 4:18

¹⁷⁷ I Sam. 16:13

your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”¹⁷⁸ There is no reason to limit this statement to the resurrection of the dead. Life is given to our “mortal bodies.”

Although James seems to state categorically that everybody who receives this unction will be restored to perfect health, that does not appear to happen regularly in practice. In connection with this I remember my friend in Holland, Cees, who had been partly paralyzed by an attack of polio and spent his life in a wheelchair. With some friends we gathered money to send Cees to a place in Germany where revival meetings took place and many miraculous healings were reported. Cees went and came back without being healed physically, but thoroughly converted and praising the Lord. He had been healed spiritually.

Some people are healed physically but bear no spiritual fruit as a result of it. Jesus healed ten lepers, one of whom returned to thank Him; the other nine never showed any sign of gratitude.¹⁷⁹

Then, there is the factor of faith, which James mentions. Even in cases where Jesus performed the miracle, He credited healing to the faith of the person healed. In the case of a blind man, who came to Jesus and asked for healing, we read: “When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith will it be done to you’; and their sight was restored.”¹⁸⁰ Jesus’ statement about the power of faith knows no limitations. We read that He said to His disciples: “I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”¹⁸¹ Jesus was the only one who ever demonstrated this kind of faith while living on earth as a human being. We must conclude that the possibilities of faith have never been researched in full. Evidently our sinful nature, which makes us doubt, is the only factor that limits the power of God in and through us.

James does not even mention the will of God in this context. He must have considered that healing, as well as forgiveness, is provided in the atonement, as seems to be implied in Isaiah’s prophecy: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... by his wounds we are healed ... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”¹⁸² The Apostle John writes in his epistle: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”¹⁸³ What James seems to say is that healing is always the will of God for us. But the experience of Paul contradicts this. Evidently, there are circumstances in which God uses our human frailty for His purpose. We read what Paul wrote: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in

¹⁷⁸ Rom. 8:11

¹⁷⁹ Luke 17:12-19

¹⁸⁰ Matt. 9:28-30

¹⁸¹ Matt. 17:20

¹⁸² Isa. 53:4,6

¹⁸³ I John 5:14

weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”¹⁸⁴

Another important truth that is conveyed in James’ statement is that there is a connection between sickness and sin. This is generally true in the sense that, if sin had not entered the human race, there would have been no sickness and death at all in creation. There are instances in which specific sicknesses can be traced to particular sins. If someone suffers from a headache after an excessive use of alcohol, we do not have to ask for the reason. In the case of the Apostle Paul, the danger of pride was the reason for his affliction. We must state, however, that, although there is a definite link between our spiritual and physical condition, not all sickness can be traced to specific sins committed. On the other hand, receiving pardon for sin will have an invigorating effect upon our body. *The Book of Proverbs* says: “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”¹⁸⁵ Confession of sin is good for our health.

Confession of sin, as practiced in the Roman Catholic Church, has been criticized much by non-Catholics, but apart from the fact that it is limited to the ministry of a priest, there is great spiritual and emotional value in confession on a one-to-one basis. Having a prayer partner with whom we can be intimate and to whom we can unburden ourselves, is to be highly recommended. And James says that it is good for our health.

One obvious element in the matter of the prayer of faith must not be overlooked: total surrender of all personal ambition to the will of God. Only those can exercise faith, who have “offered the parts of their body to him as instruments of righteousness.”¹⁸⁶

The second part of the Greek text of v.16 reads literally: “[The] effectual fervent prayer of a righteous [man] avails much.” The Greek for “effectual fervent” is the single word *energeo*, “to be active,” “to be efficient.” The English word “energy,” is derived from it. We could say that it is the energizing prayer that is effective. Or rather that prayer is effective when it is energized by the Holy Spirit.

As an example of this kind of prayer, James uses the prophet Elijah and the role he played in single-handedly uprooting the Baal worship in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Douglas J. Moo, in *James*, writes: “As an example of a righteous man whose prayers had great effect James cites *Elijah*. The prophet, whose exploits were so spectacular and manner of ‘death’ so remarkable, was one of the most popular of all figures among Jews. He was celebrated for his powerful miracles and his prophetic denunciations of sin. Most of all, however, he was looked for as the helper in time of need whose coming would pave the way for the Messianic age (Mal. 4:5-6; ... Mk. 9:12; Lk. 1:17). But it is not Elijah’s special prophetic endowment or unique place in history that interests James, but the fact that, though he was *a man of like nature with ourselves*, his prayer had great power in its effects. James highlights the fervency of Elijah’s prayer with the use of a Semitic influenced ‘cognate’ construction: literally, ‘in prayer he prayed.’ He wants his

¹⁸⁴ II Cor. 12:7-10

¹⁸⁵ Prov. 17:22

¹⁸⁶ Rom. 6:13

readers to recognize that this power of prayer is available to all who are sincerely following the Lord – not just to a special few.

The situation James describes is recorded in I Kings 17 – 18. The drought was proclaimed by God through Elijah as a means of punishing Ahab and Israel for their idolatry. Although the Old Testament does not state that Elijah prayed for the drought, I Kings 18:42 does picture him praying for the drought to end, and it is a legitimate inference to think that he prayed for its onset, also. Similarly, we should probably take the three and half years specified by James (*cf.* also Lk. 4:25) as a more specific figure for the rounded-off ‘three years’ in I Kings 18:1. Perhaps the figure ‘three and a half’ was suggested by its symbolic associations with a period of judgment (Dn. 7:25; *cf.* Rev. 11:12; 12:14). But in the light of the fact that the Old Testament never specifically mentions Elijah’s prayer for drought, why has James chosen this as his example – particularly since other examples of his praying were much better-known (that the fire consume the sacrifice on Mount Carmel) or appropriate to James’ context (raising the widow’s son to life)? Perhaps James intends us to see in the deadness of the land brought back to life an analogy to the illness of the believer restored to health ... On the other hand, evidence exists of a tradition that associated the drought with Elijah’s praying (Ecclus. 48:2-3; 2 Esdras 7:109) and it is probable that James has chosen this simply as a familiar illustration.”

In spite of Moo’s last observation about James’ choice of example from the life of Elijah, we observe that Elijah’s prayer for drought affected the nation as a whole and brought the Israelites en masse to shout: “The LORD-he is God! The LORD -he is God!”¹⁸⁷ None of the other miracles Elijah performed had that effect nationwide.

Apart from the fact that we can draw a lesson about faith from the example James gives, we may conclude that God wants us to pray for our country, its government and its spiritual and moral condition. The prayer of faith is more powerful for a nation’s wellbeing than any political campaign can be. And if it was Elijah’s prayer that initiated the drought, we may draw the conclusion that God wants us to be creative in our prayers. It is true that God brought about the drought, but it was Elijah who prayed and presented the idea to the Lord for its execution.

c. A closing summons to action (5:19-20)

19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back,

20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

In his closing remarks James moves from the national to the personal, from the salvation of a nation to the salvation of a single soul. To deny any logical relationship between both subjects, as some Bible scholars do, means overlooking the fact that the conversion of a nation does not happen without the conversion of individuals. People consist of persons!

¹⁸⁷ I Kings 18:39

It seems that in bringing up the subject of wandering from the truth and restoration, James opens a can of worms. The old controversy between Calvinist and Armenians about eternal security seems to be the topic. It is, however, obvious that if believers cannot stray from the truth, James' remarks have no meaning. The question is whether those who wander lose their salvation, which is what James seems to suggest.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: “The statement, *Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth*, and the two references to bringing him back (cf. RSV) seem clearly to indicate that the man under discussion is a Christian. *Convert* is misleading. If a fellow Christian sees that his brother has left the great doctrines of the Christian faith and the moral responsibilities that spring from these, and is able to bring him back into fellowship with Christ and His Church, the consequences will be twofold: (1) *he shall save a soul* (the sinner's) *from death*, and (2) *shall hide a multitude of sins*. Since the NT teaches the security of the believer in Christ, it is best to take the reference to death as physical death. The early church believed and taught that persistence in sin could cause premature physical death (cf. 1 Cor 11:30). The sins that are hidden are not those of the reclaiming brother (this suggests the Jewish doctrine that good works offset bad ones) but of the erring man. They are hidden from the sight of God, which is simply another way of saying they are forgiven.”

The best way to look at James' remark may be to take it in the sense of the lesson the book of Hebrews gives us. Hebrews is addressed to Jewish believers who are confronted with the claims of Christianity that Jesus is the Messiah. There were some the author of Hebrews addressed that were sitting on the fence and were considering going back to the Old Testament order of ceremonial sacrifices or accepting Christ as the fulfillment of them. That may be the “wandering from the truth,” the objects of James observation were liable of doing.

It seems that James says what John also mentions at the end of his first epistle: “If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.”¹⁸⁸ Much depends as to how we interpret “death” in this context. If it is physical death, as *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* suggests, there is little difficulty, if we think of eternal death, we are trying to touch upon things that God so far has kept hidden from us.

Whatever the implications are, it is obvious that we have a responsibility to pray for one another. That is commendable whether there is sin in the other's life or not.

The closing sentence of James' epistle leaves open several questions the answers to which are difficult to find. “Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” The Greek text of this verse reads literally: “Let him know, that he which converts the sinner from the error of his way shall save his soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.” The way James speaks about forgiveness is in using the Old Testament concept of atonement. The Greek word used in this text is *kalupto* “to cover up.” The Apostle Peter uses the same term in: “Above all,

¹⁸⁸ I John 5:16,17

love each other deeply, because love *covers over* a multitude of sins.”¹⁸⁹ The Old Testament Hebrew word for atonement is *kaphar*, “to cover.” The word describes what Noah was supposed to do while preparing the ark. God said: “So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and *coat it with pitch* inside and out.”¹⁹⁰ The same word is used for certain rituals the priest had to perform to make atonement. We read: “Once a year Aaron shall make atonement on its horns. This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering for the generations to come. It is most holy to the Lord.”¹⁹¹

The word James uses has a much wider sense as is obvious from its use in the verse: “And if someone wants to sue you and *take* your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.”¹⁹² All this suggests that what James has in mind is not what happens to human sin from God’s perspective. As far as God is concerned, forgiveness of sin means being washed by the blood of the Lamb.¹⁹³ This makes us conclude that the covering up of sin is seen from a human perspective with what happens to a person who is brought back from error to truth. The truly converted will give evidence of their spiritual renewal by a drastic change of behavior. They have made a complete turn about on the way to certain death and walk toward the dawn of a new day. “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ I Peter 4:8

¹⁹⁰ Gen. 6:14

¹⁹¹ Ex. 30:10

¹⁹² Matt. 5:40

¹⁹³ Rev. 7:14

¹⁹⁴ Prov. 4:18