

THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week One: Consider It Joy (James 1:1-8)

In the first few verses, James quickly sets the tone for the rest of his epistle. In calling us to "consider it pure joy" when we face trials in this life, James lets us know that he will present a perspective on life that is markedly different from any viewpoint common in this world. He also establishes the importance of seeking the right kind of wisdom - the kind that comes from God.

Introduction to The Epistle (James 1:1)

Although it is generally understood that this epistle was written by Jesus' physical half-brother, known to the ancient church as James 'The Just', the author does not distinguish himself from the other well-known believers of his time who are also named James*. In fact, he gives only the briefest of salutations, and then proceeds quickly to the important points that he has in mind.

* Our name James is the same as the Hebrew name Jacob, which explains why it was so common amongst the ancient Jews. In Greek, the name is Ιακωβος ("Iakobos"), but by convention it is translated as 'James'.

The author identifies himself only by name, and calls himself merely a servant of God and of Jesus (1:1a). Since ancient times, Christians have attributed the book to James 'The Just', the physical brother (or half-brother) of Jesus Christ. That this James is the author is also likely because of the epistle's content, because of James's prominent position in the early church in Jerusalem, and because of the characteristic word for 'greeting'*, which is found only here, in the letter in Acts 15:23-29 (which was drafted by James), and in Acts 23:26.

* The Greek word is χαίρειν ("chairein"), literally meaning 'joy' or 'rejoice'. It was a common Greek greeting, just as "shalom" (peace) was a common Jewish greeting and "salve" ('be of good health') was a common Roman greeting. James seems to have become quite fluent in Greek, despite his firm loyalty to his Jewish heritage. Note also the important role that James played (at Jerusalem) in persuading the others not to force the Gentiles to follow the Law of Moses.

James metaphorically addresses his letter "to the twelve tribes, scattered among the nations" (1:1b). Because this expression (in Greek, διασπορα, "diaspora") was a common way of describing the dispersion of the Jews throughout the Gentile world, this form of address here is an elegant way of describing Christians as the spiritual heirs and embodiment of Israel.

Because James died in AD 62*, the epistle was written sometime before that time, with the most likely date of the epistle being in the late 50's or early 60's AD. This was, of course, a time during which Christianity was quite new everywhere outside of Judea. James wrote this epistle as a sort of tract or circular to exhort Christians, especially newer ones, to put the principles of the gospel into practice in their lives. James is noteworthy for the way that practically all of its teachings have close parallels in events or teachings in the gospels, particularly Matthew.

* When Porcius Festus, the Roman governor of Judea (who appears prominently in Acts 24:27-26:32), died in AD 62, his successor Albinus was delayed in assuming his position. The Sanhedrin took advantage of this period without direct Roman rule to convene an illegal trial, at which they condemned James and several others to death by stoning. When Albinus arrived, he and King Herod Agrippa II (Agrippa in Acts 25 and 26) deposed the high priest responsible.

Overview Of James

Even in a brief overview of the epistle, we can clearly see some of its main ideas. We can also see that most of these lessons closely relate to some of Jesus' own teachings in the gospel accounts. To a large extent, James simply teaches us how we can most directly apply the truths of the gospel to some of the most common areas of our lives.

An overview of James helps us to see some of the main themes that run through the letter and that tie the epistle's teachings together. James begins by calling his readers to consider it joy when they undergo trials and difficulties, because this will strengthen their faith (James 1:1-8, see below). He then gives several instances of the new perspective that we should develop in Jesus, as we come to see things differently from the world's viewpoint (1:9-18). This leads directly into the main lessons of the book.

James exhorts us to pay careful attention to God's Word, which he calls 'the perfect law that gives freedom' (1:19-27). He then expounds upon the principle that each of us should "love your neighbor as yourself", even when it is contrary to worldly practice (2:1-13), and he also discusses how our faith and actions should work together, since they are not meant to be separate parts of our relationship with God (2:14-26).

James sternly cautions us about the things we say, reminding us that no one can tame the tongue (3:1-12). He then provides some deep insights into the differences between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom, calling us to consider what it means to be wise and understanding (3:13-18). We must pull away from the world and draw near to God, as indeed he created us to do (4:1-10). For all life here is just a mist, and all of our worldly planning cannot change the impermanent nature of this world (4:11-17).

The writer then provides some solemn cautions for our lives, in view of the certainty that God, the eternal Judge, is practically 'standing at the door' (5:1-12). The epistle then closes with another series of practical thoughts, advising us on the proper spiritual response when we (or someone else in the body of Jesus) happen to be sick, weak, happy, and so forth (5:13-20)

Throughout the epistle we can see James's emphasis on seeking and following God's wisdom, regardless of what the world tells us. James does not hesitate to point out numerous ways in which the world is wrong in its beliefs and in its perspectives. This is done out of compassion, not anger, for the world's viewpoints and the world's preconceptions can become a great danger to our relationship with God.

The differences between godly wisdom and worldly wisdom run much deeper than mere ethical or moral concerns. They reach to the heart of what our hearts value, desire, and seek. James is thus an epistle that provides a needed exhortation for today's believers, calling us to put an end to spiritual complacency and to easy compromise with the world.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In studying James, in what ways might it be significant to remember who the author was? In surveying the contents of James, what general themes or trends stand out? What do these tell us about what we might hope to learn from James? Are there specific topics or teachings that might be especially important or relevant for you?

Perseverance & Wisdom (James 1:2-8)

Perseverance and wisdom are the common themes underlying many of the other teachings in the epistle. James constantly reminds us that our lives here will never be easy or simple, and that we thus should develop a sense of patient anticipation for what is to come afterwards. Likewise, we will have a constant need to seek the wisdom of God, rather than the lies of the world.

Immediately after his greeting, James surprises his readers with an exhortation for us to consider the trials in our lives to be 'pure joy' (1:2-4). This curious phrase, which would be translated literally as 'all joy', hardly implies that we are expected to enjoy trials or to have fun during them. But it does call us to see the importance and the spiritual value of undergoing the kinds of disappointments, temptations, frustrations, difficulties, and the like that we face in this life.

Developing perseverance is an essential part of our relationship with God, for it is inherent in God's covenant with us that we shall not receive our greatest and most lasting rewards until this life is completely over. This is why the epistle tells us that perseverance must finish its work in us. Perseverance is a virtue that can only be developed by practicing it, and it can only be practiced when there are trials and other difficult times.

One of the key themes of the epistle is the importance of seeking God's wisdom (1:5-8). Among the many things that we pray for, it is particularly important to remember to ask God to help us with the things that we do not understand. This might include questions about the teachings of Scripture, the reasons why God acted or did not act in a certain way in our lives, the reasons why God allowed something sad or painful to happen, the nature of God or of heaven, or many other such things. God is the one and only source of genuine wisdom on all of these matters.

In calling us to ask God for wisdom whenever we need it, James also reminds us that God does give generously to all those who ask him. He will not deny us wisdom when we need it, even if it is our own sinfulness or foolishness that has placed us in the position in which we desperately need wisdom. All God asks is that we humbly acknowledge him as the true source of all wisdom that matters, and that we ask him in faith.

It is noticeable that James emphasizes the importance of asking without doubting. Now, he and God both understand that no one ever asks for God's blessing in absolute certainty of receiving what he or she desires (indeed, to do so would be presumption, not faith). Yet he is reminding us of an entirely valid point, for it is all too easy for us to pray without reminding ourselves of God's generosity, God's power, and God's glory. Prayer can easily become a mindless ritual, so James is reminding us that our prayers should be offered in full awareness of the great God to whom we pray.

He likens those who pray without faith to waves of the sea, which are blown in all directions by stormy winds. Indeed, it is easy to allow ourselves to view God as only one of many sources of help and wisdom, and in this case we are indeed vulnerable to every 'wind' of the world. We do not need to have great faith to receive God's help, but we do need to put all the faith that we have in him, and not in things of the world. The world will never cease to bombard us with its opinions and attitudes. Many believers, unfortunately, constantly waver back-and-forth between what they hear from God and what they hear from the world. We do need to shut off and reject the world's input if we truly desire to discern what God is actually telling us.

The obstacle of double-mindedness* is far more of a hindrance than we often realize. We are so easily conditioned by the world to trust its leaders, its 'experts', and its majority opinions that we often end up considering them to be almost as reliable as God. This inevitably leads to instability in our relationship with God, and perhaps also in our lives, ministries, or relationships. James will have even more to say later about the importance of distrusting the world's wisdom, and of putting our confidence entirely in God.

* This word (διψυχος, "dipsuchos") was often used to describe those with divided loyalties, or who could not make up their minds between two alternatives. Less often, it could be used to describe hypocrites.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kinds of wisdom might we lack at certain times? Do we tend to follow James's advice? How can we make better use of God's willingness to give us wisdom? Why is it necessary to believe when we ask him? In what sense does James say we must not doubt when we ask? What does it mean to be double-minded? In what ways are we susceptible to this problem?

Sources & References

There are quite a few commentaries and other references on the epistle of James. Unfortunately, the quality of these varies considerably, with some by well-known commentators being rather unreliable. Here are a few possible references for those who would like to study James on their own. As always, let me know if you'd like some specific suggestions for your studies:

James B. Adamson, *The Epistle Of James*, New International Commentary
N. T. Caton, *Commentary On The Minor Epistles*, The Restoration Library
Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle Of James*, New International Greek Text Commentary
Frank E. Gaebelein (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12*
Douglas Moo, *James*, Tyndale Commentaries
Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary On The Epistle Of James*, Gospel Advocate

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2007*

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Two: The New Perspective (James 1:9-18)

The epistle of James develops at length the new perspective that Jesus taught in the gospels. In this passage, we are called to reverse worldly logic in the ways that we look at our position in life, so that we realize the ephemeral nature of material things. James also calls us to develop a Christ-like way of viewing the temptations in our lives and also the blessings we receive.

Review Of Last Week's Lesson

In his introduction (James 1:1), the author of the epistles identifies himself only by name and as a servant of God and of Jesus. The author is actually James 'The Just', the physical half-brother of Jesus. In addressing the epistle to the scattered twelve tribes, James draws a close parallel between the ways that the Jews had been dispersed and the ways that Christians were, at the time, just appearing in numerous cities across the world.

An overview of James shows us, amongst other important points, the writer's continuing emphasis on the difference between God's wisdom and the world's 'wisdom'. James frequently points out that a true belief in the gospel Jesus will affect our lives in numerous ways. Then, in the first main passage of James, we see his emphasis on perseverance and wisdom (James 1:2-8).

James tells us to consider trials to be 'pure joy', since they are how God produces in us important spiritual fruits such as perseverance and patience. He then exhorts us to seek God's wisdom whenever we need it. God gives his wisdom generously to those who ask for it, regardless of their faults or sins. Yet we must also ask in the knowledge that God alone can give us genuine wisdom. We must not be double-minded, giving the world's wisdom equal standing with God's.

High Positions & Low Positions (James 1:9-12)

To the worldly, it may seem indisputable that God has blessed the wealthy and has ignored or disregarded the poor. But James reminds us here that earthly poverty can accompany spiritual strength, while earthly wealth is at best short-lived and impermanent. Likewise, even the trials in our lives provide us with opportunities to receive blessings that transcend any worldly things.

The difference between the poor and the rich* means something different to God than it does to most humans (1:9-11). In another of his apparently paradoxical statements, James tells the poor man that he ought to 'boast' in his 'high position'. The implication here, as in Galatians 6:4, is that there is a positive kind of 'pride', or satisfaction, that we are allowed to feel when our lives properly reflect the things that God values. "The first shall be last, and the last first."

* In interpreting these verses, note that the context specifies the believing poor and the believing rich.

James later (2:5) reminds us that those who are poor and yet continue to place their trust in God are able to bring glory to God in a way that the wealthy cannot. They must have a deeper and truer faith, and a stronger sense of trust in God, since they are constantly reminded of their needs. This gains them no material advantage in this world, but only the knowledge of being a living proof that faith in God is always possible, even for those who are unjustly treated in this world.

This contrasts with the low position (*i.e.* from God's perspective) of the rich. Since the rich cannot demonstrate the same kind of depth of trust in God and reliance on God that the poor must of necessity display, the rich ought then to develop an even deeper and more sincere sense of humility and submission to God. Thus they can please God and glorify God in their own way. They can show by their way of life that they realize how little their possessions will matter in eternity, for soon they will all fade away like a flower whose time has ended.

Rich pagans tend by nature to consider that their wealth entitles them, their opinions, and their actions to receive special attention and respect. Our society itself has a tiresome tendency to fawn over the rich and powerful. Unbelievers often think that the wealthy and famous have done something to deserve what they have, and even believers have an unfortunate habit of assuming that material blessings are an indication of God's favor*. Thus Christians who find themselves in such positions can provide an eloquent testimony by living more simply and humbly.

* Under the Old Covenant, God's people were promised that faithfulness would bring earthly security and safety, not unneeded wealth. Under the New Covenant, even earthly security and safety are not promised to believers. Whatever else it may or may not signify that someone is wealthy or powerful, we should never assume that it is a reward for pleasing God in any way. Conversely, we ought not to assume that being poor or otherwise unjustly treated is an indication of God's disfavor.

One caution in applying verses 9-11 is that they must not be used as an excuse for not helping the poor, or for desiring to become rich. Neither of these pleases God. Rather, these verses speak to those believers who find themselves in these circumstances, advising them on how to develop godly attitudes and provide godly examples in their respective situations. Whether we are rich or poor in the world's eyes, we can always use our position to glorify and please God.

In a similar way, persevering under trial is, contrary to the thinking of the world, a blessed condition to be in (1:12). The Christian ought not to expect to avoid trials and disappointments, but instead should resolve to endure them in faith, as an example of godliness and as a demonstration of trust in God. Standing the test, regardless of the earthly result, is of great value in itself to God. Likewise, it is often in times of trial that we can see God most clearly.

It is wise to remember that our ultimate reward for faithfulness is what James here calls 'the crown of life'. Those who love God will receive spiritual blessings that not only will last through even the most harrowing of earthly troubles, but also will last for eternity.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why do the poor have a 'high position'? How should they 'take pride' in it? Does this affect the way that we should treat the poor? In what sense do the rich fade away like a flower? How should this affect our thinking and actions? How can we learn to have the attitude towards trials that James describes here?

Temptations & Blessings (James 1:13-18)

As he continues to develop the elements of a new, godly perspective on life, James reminds us not to make the mistake of blaming God for the temptations that we face. Instead, we need to take responsibility for our desires and our actions. Nor should we make the opposite mistake and credit the world with the blessings we receive. Everything truly good comes from God alone.

James offers some perspectives on temptations* (1:13-15) that, like some of his previous statements, correct and challenge the ways that we might naturally think. Most of all, we should

never blame God for any of the temptations that we face. Although this may seem like an obvious lesson whenever we have the time to think things over calmly, in the midst of a difficult period we can easily find ourselves reproaching God.

* It is significant to know that the same Greek word (πειρασμος, "peirasmos") can be translated as 'temptation' (as in this verse), 'trial' (as in the previous verse, above), or simply as 'test'. In most cases, translators must decide from context which of these is meant. For example, the difference between trials and temptations can be seen as lying in whether the source of difficulty is external or internal.

This verse reminds us that there are, contrary again to common misconceptions, a number of things that God cannot do*. Although it seems 'right' to say that 'God can do anything', it is in fact incorrect. James indicates here that God cannot possibly be tempted to commit any sinful act, and further, he is incapable of deliberately and overtly trying to tempt someone to do evil.

* This important and often-overlooked aspect of God's character is sometimes referred to as 'self-limitation' on God's part. Alternatively, it can be viewed as his inherent nature, which cannot be violated. Because so many believers have difficulty understanding this, it can be worthwhile to study or consider these and other limitations on God (for example, he also cannot lie, cannot die, &c).

James bluntly says that temptations only occur when we are 'dragged away' by our own desires. He does not even blame Satan, because all that the devil can do is to provide opportunities for sin, which have power over us only when they are combined with our own desires that are already inside us. Nor is the vivid metaphor of being 'dragged away' meant to excuse us from responsibility. Instead, James is convicting us of the way that we sometimes willingly allow our desires to become strong enough to pull the rest of our bodies and minds into committing sin.

James graphically describes the process by which sin takes hold of us. It all starts with desire, which we have the choice of nurturing or resisting. Left to grow, desire eventually leads to sin, at which point we have a clear warning of the spiritual problem caused by our desire. If we ignore this warning, and allow both the desire and the sin to proceed unchecked, spiritual death can result. Note the grim irony in James' phrase that full-grown sin "gives birth to death".

The epistle's perspectives on blessing (1:16-18) are equally important to consider. While we tend to consider anything pleasurable or profitable to be a 'blessing', James reminds us that not all apparent blessings are truly good or beneficial. He specifies then that every good and perfect gift comes from God, leaving as an open question the source of those things that we desire but that nevertheless are not really good.

God alone is the only source of true blessing, and he gives his blessings to each person according to his own will. Another unfortunate human tendency is the practice of ascribing whatever we consider 'good' to have come from the most visible or tangible possible source. This is true in any time and place, and indeed it is one reason why James prefaces his remarks here with the admonition 'do not be deceived'.

While earthly sources may indeed give us trivial 'blessings' that have no spiritual value, we should learn not to credit any society, any nation, any person, or any group of persons with any gift that is truly 'good and perfect'. For example, our nation's way of doing things, our culture's approach to things, or our family upbringing may sometimes result in certain apparent benefits that we like to experience, but James reminds us here that anything of genuine value comes in spite of worldly institutions, not because of them.

In this connection, James reminds us that God is an unchanging Father*. This is in contrast with the world around us, with its never-ending stream of whims and fads and its ever-changing sources of foolish panic and self-righteous posturing. We can count on God always holding the same values, always teaching the same truths, and always being patient with our same flaws. He ever blesses even those who do not deserve his blessings.

* The metaphor in verse 17 is difficult to translate neatly into English. It is meant to imply that God neither changes himself like a shadow nor is changed by the figurative 'shadows' (changing beliefs, opinions, fashions) that the world casts.

The blessing of spiritual birth (or rebirth) can be appreciated even more in connection with this. Through the gospel, we are reborn through Jesus, and we become a kind of spiritual firstfruits of the creation. This imagery is based on the idea that the creation itself does only what God created it to do, without a will of its own, while most of humanity rejects God. As believers, we are unique in this world, as the only beings who choose freely and voluntarily to do God's will. These 'firstfruits' foreshadow the time when all will be brought together in Jesus for eternity*.

* In connection with this, you might also want to consider the ideas that Paul discusses in passages such as Romans 11:13-24 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does James tell us that God can neither tempt nor be tempted? How do the teachings in this passage help us deal with temptation? Why is James emphatic in saying that only God gives genuinely good gifts? What is the distinction he has in mind by specifying 'good and perfect' gifts? How does this connect with the idea that God does not change? What does it mean to be part of the 'firstfruits'?

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Three: The Perfect Law That Gives Freedom (James 1:19-27)

These verses continue to develop the contrast between godly wisdom and worldly wisdom, as James now focuses on our perspective towards seeking and serving God. The phrase, 'the perfect law that gives freedom', is another of his paradoxical statements designed to provoke us into reconsidering our own preconceptions and unquestioned assumptions about God.

Review Of Previous Lessons

James opens the epistle with an exhortation for us to "consider it joy" when we face trials, and to seek God's wisdom whenever we need it (James 1:1-8). He then gives some examples of the new perspective to which Jesus has called those who believe in him (James 1:9-18). Here and throughout the book, we see a contrast between worldly perspectives and godly perspectives.

The world considers trials to be unpleasant and without value, but God uses them to build perseverance and other valuable qualities in us. The world seeks wisdom from unreliable 'experts' whom they themselves have appointed, but God is the source of true wisdom, and he is eager to give it to those who want it.

The world looks down on the poor, or at best feels sorry for them, but to God the faithful poor show an especially pure and tested faith. The world envies the rich, while the rich themselves feel that they deserve special treatment; but God calls the rich to be humble and to recognize the transient nature of their wealth.

When the worldly face temptations, they respond with excuses and rationalizations, but God reminds us that it is only our own desires that give temptations any power over us. The world feels that they deserve their blessings, and they give the credit for them to their own abilities or to earthly institutions, but as James reminds us, "every good and perfect gift comes from above".

Humble Acceptance (James 1:19-21)

The worldly often aim to control the events and persons around them by using anger and other such methods. In contrast, James urges us to resist the corrupting influences of the world, and humbly to accept the teachings of God. The world constantly tries to coerce us into adopting its values, but God waits patiently for us to recognize our need for him, and thus to come to him.

Advising us to 'take note of this', James makes several interrelated points about the ways that we respond to things around us (1:19-21). It isn't always easy to be quick to listen or to be slow to speak, for we invariably have things we would like to say about matters that affect us - and indeed there are also a lot of things that tend to make us angry. Yet the more we can listen, the more we can learn and the more we can help others. When we do speak, it ought to be with a purpose. This is one of several things that James will have to say about the tongue.

James gives particular emphasis to the hindrance that anger can be to those who seek to live in a godly way. Anger is simply inconsistent with godly living, for it clouds our judgment and perspective in ways that we may not even notice. Sustained anger* also can indicate an inability to trust God and/or a lack of gratitude towards God. In any case, it rarely leads to anything good.

* Compare this passage with others such as Ephesians 4:26. Allowing anger to grow and harden is the main spiritual danger that verses like these warn us against.

We weak humans shall often, of course, find ourselves feeling anger, and indeed it is often our first genuine expression of godly distress over the sin and folly we see in the world around us. We certainly should not be complacent or satisfied when we look upon a world that is full of injustice, oppression, violence, and deceit. But James warns us that anger in itself cannot lead to anything that will please God.

So, when we find ourselves becoming angry, we should first make sure that our anger is really over something worthwhile, and not over a matter of mere self-interest. And even if we are angry over something important, we should then try quickly to channel the anger into a more spiritually beneficial way of thinking, so that we can help, not harm, those around us.

We can also reduce the sources of provocation to anger by making a practice of shunning 'moral filth', for this will enable us to develop and reinforce a more godly perspective. It takes an active effort, though, to turn away from the ample opportunities that the world provides for us to indulge our desires and our fleshly senses. We can only counter the world's constant onslaught of filth by focusing on something better.

* The word in the Greek text comes from the Greek word for 'dirt'. Like our English word 'dirty', it can be used either in a literal sense or in a figurative sense, as it is here.

This leads to James's exhortation for us humbly to accept God's Word*. The Word and will of God can build inside us both a new perspective and a solid basis of belief. These then can come to our aid in situations when we are tempted by anger, envy, selfishness, and the like. Notice that James refers to the word as having been 'planted' in us. As he will imply again in verses like James 4:5, we all have had a seed of faith in us from the beginning, an innate awareness of God that we can choose either to acknowledge, to ignore, or to reject**.

* As the New Testament often does, James here uses the idea of God's word in a sense that includes, but is not limited to, the written Scriptures. See also the notes on verses 22-25 below.

** James himself took a considerable amount of time to come to a belief in his half-brother as the Messiah (see, for example, John 7:2-5). So he knows that it can take quite a while before we come to realize what God has put in our hearts.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is it appropriate for Christians to be good listeners? What practical benefits can this bring us? Why is anger inconsistent with godly living? How can we recognize when our anger is persisting for too long? How can we respond when this happens? How do we 'rid ourselves' of 'moral filth'? How do we humbly accept the word? What does it mean that it has been planted in us?

Listen & Do (James 1:22-27)

God's wisdom is certainly being spoken through James in these verses, for they describe a chronic struggle that at times practically every believer experiences. It is enough of a challenge to discern the teachings of God's Word without being side-tracked by our personal beliefs and desires; yet it can be even harder to put into practice the things that God's Word teaches us.

We already know that it is important for us not merely to listen to God, but also to do as he bids us (1:22-25). So James uses an illustration that is rather silly, at least on the surface. Since the whole point of looking into a mirror* is to check for any aspect of our appearance that may need to be dealt with, it would be illogical and pointless to look if we then forget what we have seen. Yet this is exactly what we can very easily do with the Word of God (whether spoken or read).

* Mirrors of the time were made of polished copper, bronze, or other metals. They were common household items even in the first century AD.

Rather than prolong his criticism of those who ignore what they learn from God, James instead points out the positive value of looking intently into God's Word and will. In so doing, he also re-emphasizes his plea (1:5) for us to seek God's wisdom. In both cases, he is calling for us to do more than merely learning a few commands and then obeying them out of a sense of guilt, fear, or obligation.

God wants us to delve into the things he says and thinks, because God wants us to know him. Unlike the world's 'experts', who want us to step back and accept without question that they are right, God wants us to ask questions, to ponder and meditate upon things, and to talk to him about the things we find confusing or disturbing. If we are willing to do this, and to do it sincerely, then neither God nor we will have to keep tabs on our 'obedience' to what he tells us.

"The perfect law that gives freedom" is one of several phrases that James uses to refer to God's Word in a general sense*, including the written Scriptures** but also encompassing other ways that God has spoken to his people. God's Word is certainly perfect, for it alone comes from a source of genuine wisdom, and it alone comes with real authority.

* In James, compare this with the terms used in 1:19, 1:21, 1:22, and 2:12. By contrast, note 2:8, where James refers specifically to the written Scriptures.

** Recall also that some portions of the New Testament had already been written, but others had not. At the time that James wrote, believers would be familiar with many teachings of the gospel that they had not yet seen in written form.

The term 'law' here does not mean a mere set of commands, but rather it reminds us that God's Word is law in a different sense (similar to the use of 'law' in a phrase like, 'the laws of science'). God's word is never wrong, never changes, and will never pass away. Understood in this way, it becomes clearer why this 'law' brings freedom. Accepting God's Word frees us from the lies of the world, and if we do as James advises, it can also free us from our own self-destructive desires. Thus we shall be blessed indeed for any and all efforts that we make to learn it.

Many believers realize the importance of learning and applying God's Word, and yet find it frustrating when they try to do so on their own. So perhaps a couple of practical suggestions would not be out of place here. Notice how James describes learning from God as a blessing, not a burden or an obligation. We do not need to meet a quota, nor do we need to 'make up' for past neglect. For example, it is usually better to read the Scriptures for a few minutes each day than it is to wait for an occasion that gives us lots of time to have a 'perfect' study.

Likewise, God knows that his teachings are often contrary to our fleshly ways of thinking, and that they thus can be confusing or even frightening. So we should never be afraid to talk to God as we study, telling him openly the things we do not understand, the things that we didn't want to hear, and the things that we don't want to accept. As long as we are sincere with our questions and feelings (which will almost invariably be the case when we are alone with God), God wishes us to express them honestly and openly. Handled properly, even our doubts and our confusion can give God opportunities to strengthen our relationship with him.

James follows this with a similar example of God's perspective on the ways that we serve him (1:26-27). Those who wish to please God with their religious* observance must remember to be self-controlled in what they say (and, for that matter, in what they do). As James will discuss in detail in the third chapter, the tongue must be used properly, or else our 'religion'* is worthless, and does not please God.

* Note that 'religion' is different than faith. The word James uses is θρησκεία ("threskeia"), which refers to acts of worship. It was the word commonly used by pagans to describe the sacrifices and rituals by which they worshiped their 'gods'. It thus refers to things done in order to please God, not to things done in order to obtain salvation itself.

Pure 'religion' thus puts into practice the truths of the faith. Rituals and even sacrifices cannot please God by themselves. James thus reminds us that caring for those who need help is a much truer way of worshiping God. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." When we practice what God values, it pleases God. Those who love God (and who are already saved) will want to please God solely for the sake of pleasing him.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does the mirror example illustrate the point that James is making? Why is it hard for us to look intently into God's Word? How can James's teachings help us? In what ways could we make it easier for ourselves to learn God's Word? What kinds of 'religious' observance are we likely to practice? How can we learn better to please God?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2007*

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Four: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself (James 2:1-13)

Jesus taught, both by lesson and example, how important it is for us to love one another without regard to worldly social standing or economic condition. As James discusses the same ideas here, he reminds us how easy it is for us to fall into the world's self-centered ways of treating others. He also gives some of the reasons why it is important for us genuinely to care for others.

Review Of Previous Lessons

Challenging worldly viewpoints from the beginning of the epistle, James calls us to consider it 'pure joy' to face the trials of this life, because of the spiritual fruit that they can produce (James 1:1-8). He proceeds to describe a similarly new perspective on matters such as poverty, wealth, temptations, and blessings (James 1:9-18).

James then discusses our attitudes towards God's word, which he calls 'the perfect law that gives freedom'* (James 1:19-27). He urges us humbly to accept God's ways, by being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. By rejecting the filth of the world, and accepting the word of faith planted already in us, we can receive the spiritual blessings God offers us.

* See also the notes below on James 2:12, where the writer uses a similar phrase.

Similarly, listening to God and doing his will ought to go together. Rather than forgetting what God teaches us, we should look into his Word with the intention of learning and applying it. James implicitly reminds us that God's word is a blessing, meant to help us live healthy lives, not meant to impose burdensome responsibilities on us. In a related example, James tells us that acts of worship (or 'religion') are of little worth unless they reflect the things that God himself values.

Don't Show Favoritism (James 2:1-4)

James illustrates his warning against favoritism with an example that is just as applicable now as it was when he wrote it. It is human nature to show special treatment to those who are rich, influential, or famous in this world. It is also human nature to show little regard for those who are none of these things. Yet Jesus called his followers to live in a much different way.

His description of two guests coming into a Christian assembly points out the practical significance of what he is saying (2:1-4). As believers in Jesus, who not only loved all persons equally but also died for all persons equally, favoritism is inappropriate if not hypocritical. Yet it is far from unlikely that we could find ourselves acting in the way that James depicts.

It is not hard to see that if a well-dressed, wealthy individual and a ragged-looking poor person both visit as strangers, it is quite likely that the prosperous person will receive special attention. This is especially true if he or she is well-known to the world. Indeed, celebrities of all kinds come to expect that they will be shown to the best seats, be paid extra compliments, and be allowed special privileges. Yet Jesus never practiced such behavior. Favoritism contradicts his teachings, and it also is not good spiritually even for those who receive its apparent benefits.

Conversely, those at the lower ends of society's social scale come to expect to be ignored and disregarded in favor of others, for indeed James's depiction of the poor man being told to "stand

over there" is a common kind of scenario. Once again, Jesus' own example, of treating everyone as an equal, should remind us that this is not right. This kind of disdain for others hurts not only those whom we ignore, but also ourselves.

This is why James says that favoritism equates to discriminating* amongst ourselves. When we divide others into an 'important' group and an 'unimportant' group, we are implicitly demeaning both them and ourselves. It can cause us to develop a narrow mindset that values worldly success over all else. This in turn clouds our spiritual judgment and makes us double-minded.

* The verb that James uses here is a compound form of the verb that means 'judge'. In this context, the word implies an act of judging between two options, rating one as superior and the other as inferior.

The rich and famous who get used to a lifetime of special treatment end up being only partly human, for they are perpetually playing a role rather than living. Worse, they end up being unable to appreciate what they have or what others do for them, for they come to take these things for granted. Material things that once excited them now bore them, for they acquire them too easily. Acts of kindness no longer encourage them, for they accept them as a right, not as a measure of grace and love.

James warns us that the practice of favoritism also turns us into "judges with evil thoughts". For the practice of favoritism is by its nature ill-intentioned and self-centered. We do not show special attention to 'important' persons out of any sense of care or compassion, but out of self-interest, knowing that they are especially situated so as to be able to help us if they wish to. Likewise, our disregard for the poor may be rationalized by various means, but in essence we simply ignore those persons whom we know are unable to give us things that we desire.

The world practices favoritism without questioning it, and the world expects us all to engross ourselves in the lives and activities of even the most useless parasites of society, simply because they have money, power, superficial talents, or an attractive physical appearance. Yet, as pervasive as this is, it takes only a little thought from a godly perspective to expose favoritism for the ugly practice that it is. Jesus calls us and enables us to live in a much better way.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does James select this example to make his point? Why is favoritism inappropriate for believers in Jesus? What example did Jesus set in this area? How can we learn to apply these teachings? In what sense do we 'discriminate among ourselves' when we show favoritism?

God's Perspective (James 2:5-7)

God's perspective is, of course, different. He wants us to look at those around us based on their spiritual needs and their relationship with God, not by the things they have of value in this world. Even believers in Jesus have a tendency to reinforce the world's disregard for the unfortunate and afflicted, as well as the world's inappropriate adoration of the prosperous and privileged.

Following his criticism of favoritism, James reminds us of the nature and source of true riches (2:5-6a). Thus he tells us that those whom we call 'the poor' may only be poor in the eyes of the world. For if they are rich in faith, then they are the heirs of a kingdom that will put those of this world to shame. And if the faithful poor are the truest heirs of the kingdom of God, ought we not to try to treat them as such?

Notice too that James reproaches us not for failing to give to the poor, but for having 'insulted'* them. It is entirely possible to make even large donations to the poor in a way that insults or dishonors them, for if we give solely in order to exalt ourselves, then we do not show true compassion for others. James has told us that the believing poor, in particular, have a high position in God's kingdom, and our treatment of them should reflect this. Jesus always showed more concern for the way we truly feel about others than for the things we do for them.

* The word can also be translated 'dishonored'. The King James translates it as 'despised', but this is in the older sense of 'despise' as in, 'treat with disdain', not the more recent sense of 'hate'.

The powerful and wealthy are usually, on the other hand, false heroes* (2:6b-7). James goes farther than that, reminding us that they are the sources of oppression and exploitation. Certainly, in our own society everything from our political system to our legal system to our economy is, despite possible appearances and the world's propaganda, set up for the benefit of those who already have more power and wealth than they need or deserve.

* Note that, in verses 5-7, James steps back a bit, and discusses the poor and the rich in a more general sense, as classes rather than as individuals. He recognizes that there are of course individual exceptions, such as resentful, faithless poor persons and humble, generous rich persons. But these exceptions should not make us forget the gospel's teachings about earthly wealth.

It is indeed rather bizarre when we look for help to those who have caused the problems in the first place, but then this is part of earthly human nature. The fleshly human nature's weird attraction to 'tough guy' leaders, superficial celebrities, ambitious egomaniacs, and the like, is simply a distortion of our innate need for God. Because God seems so intangible, we often seek instead to fulfill our need for him through these flimsy human substitutes.

Thus, James is not talking primarily about social revolution or even social reform, because he knows that true reform cannot happen without an acceptance of God. As believers, we can instead be a noticeable and convicting example that it is possible to live with an equal respect for all others, treating no one with special honor and no one with disdain. If we learn simply to do this, we have the chance to do more to bring about true, godly equality than all the world's riches, programs, and 'leaders' will ever be able to accomplish.

One of the saddest features of worldly society is that those who are already afflicted are treated in such a way as to bring them greater affliction, while those who are overly comfortable are given further comfort by a world that fawns on them. Jesus came to reverse this. As Richard Rogers used to preach, Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Jesus loves both the afflicted and the comfortable, and so he gives each what they truly need.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does it affect our understanding of these verses to know that James here discusses these groups in a more general sense? What ought our view of the poor be? Should our view of the believing poor be different? What kinds of ills does James blame on the rich as a class? Are these things still true today? How should this affect our viewpoint?

Law, Love, & Mercy (James 2:8-13)

James now points out that what he is saying is equally valid whether we look to the law or whether we look to God's grace. God denounces the practice of favoritism, because it stands in direct opposition to the command to love our neighbor - which is an essential feature of God's law. The practice of favoritism is by its nature alien to a life that is based on mercy and grace.

James calls God's plea for us to love our neighbors as ourselves the 'royal law' (2:8-11), indicating that it is especially important to God our King and to the Lord Jesus. Found originally in Leviticus 19:18, Jesus quotes it in Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31, calling it the second greatest commandment. This principle plus the call for us to love God tie together all of the other commands to be found in God's law.

James reminds us of this 'greatest commandment' because it is inherent in law that stumbling at any one point (*i.e.* breaking one law) makes us lawbreakers, as surely as if we had broken every law in the book. Certainly, we know the same to be true with the laws of our own society - a murderer cannot expect to be acquitted solely on the grounds that he is not a thief or an adulterer.

As Paul details at length in his epistles, under the law each of us is either completely innocent or completely guilty. Thus the believer who shows worldly favoritism stands convicted just as surely as a thief or a blasphemer, and is just as much in need of grace and repentance. James emphasizes this not because favoritism is 'worse' than these, but because we tend not to see it for the sin that it is. That is why we can commit it so lightly.

In this and in many other respects, we should think and act in the knowledge that someday we shall be judged (2:12-13). The awareness and the reality of judgment may not seem encouraging, but neither are they meant to be frightening. The inevitability of judgment ought simply to clear our minds of the distractions and lies of the world.

We shall be judged not by any human tribunal, and not by an arbitrary, unpredictable God, either. We shall be judged by the blessed God who gave us 'the law that gives freedom'. The powerful of this world will not be able to rig these heavenly proceedings in their favor, nor will the down-trodden have to fear the continuation of earthly injustices. On Judgment Day, we shall be freed once for all, not only from the world's outrageous lies and crude fleshly temptations, but also from its arbitrary uses of power and its twisted sense of right and wrong.

Moreover, we shall have nothing to fear if we remember that mercy triumphs over judgment. Whenever we fear judgment, we need only recall that mercy, not merit, is what can save us. Those who choose in this world to live in competition and rivalry with others will one day find themselves standing before a God who detests such behavior. But those who trust God's mercy, who respond to his call to accept his mercy, and who live lives of mercy, these will find reason to rejoice on the Day when we find ourselves before the great seat of eternal judgment.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is it a 'royal law' to love our neighbor? In this context, why does James remind us that to stumble at one point of the law is to break the whole law? How can it affect our lives to be conscious of the reality of eternal judgment? Why does mercy triumph over judgment? How can we learn from this?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2007

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Five: Faith & Actions Working Together (James 2:14-26)

James now focuses on a point that has been implicit in the topics he has discussed previously. Our faith and our actions cannot truly be separated, for our actions will always reflect the things that we believe and the things that we consider important. Godly actions neither replace faith nor earn credit with God - rather, they confirm or deny the things that we claim to believe.

Review Of Recent Lessons

James reminds us that God's Word is a perfect law that gives freedom (James 1:19-27). It is given to us as a blessing, not as a burden. It frees us from the confusion and lies in the world. We should humbly accept the word, and when we learn from God, we should put his teachings into practice. James has in fact already given us several good examples of how to do this.

It is challenging, yet essential, for believers to "love your neighbor as yourself" (James 2:1-13). To teach us not to show favoritism, James gives an example of two guests, one prominent and wealthy and the other poor, at a Christian assembly. It is, of course, human nature to show special attention to the rich, famous, and powerful - yet this is not the way that Jesus called us to live. When we show favoritism, we demean both others and ourselves.

God's perspective values everyone the same, and he knows that it is often the 'poor' who have true riches. The famous and powerful are usually false heroes, and as a class they are responsible for many problems in our world. Love, law (of God), and mercy come together. To love our neighbor as ourselves is a royal law, as important as any other we can find. We shall be judged by God someday, and should keep that in mind now. Mercy triumphs over judgment, and indeed God's mercy is the only thing that can save us from judgment.

What Good Is It? (James 2:14-19)

Characteristically, James states the issue in plain terms: is 'faith' by itself, with no accompanying action or change, sufficient to build a relationship with God? Two simple examples then establish a couple of basic points and clear away some basic misconceptions. Faith and actions are by no means in opposition to each other, but rather are meant to work together.

James brings up a 'hypothetical' example of a person who professes faith in God, but whose actions or deeds do not reflect it in any way (2:14-17). Is this kind of faith good enough to save* him? And if it does not, then another question often occurs to contemporary readers: is James contradicting what Paul and others say about salvation coming by grace through faith, with works not playing any role at all?

* The verb and the tense that James uses suggest that James intends for the word to imply everything that we usually associate with 'being saved', and the vast majority of commentators understand it like this.

Discussions about faith, salvation, and deeds, along with related topics such as justification, grace, and so forth, are inherently fraught with the danger of treating Scripture as if it were a constitution or a legal contract, to be interpreted by minute examination of the words and by a

forensic comparison of one text with another. Thus many analyses of this passage delve into elaborate definitions of 'faith', 'works' and so forth, and/or attempt some kind of encyclopedic discourse on how we are not saved by works, yet somehow they are still part of the "formula".

James does not intend to make things complicated, nor does one book of Scripture ever contradict another. James is not revisiting the role that faith plays in salvation, nor is he redefining the interactions between faith, grace, justification, and the like, nor is he updating the formula for the 'plan of salvation'. The context and content of the epistle help us to free ourselves from such tangled (and often anxiety-inducing) analysis. Rather, James is making a simple but powerful point as an important clarification.

In keeping with the provocative tone of the rest of the epistle, and in keeping within the context of the topics he has discussed, James is doing no more and no less than clarifying what constitutes faith. He is not asking us to reconsider the role that faith plays, but instead to gain a better understanding of what faith* actually is.

* Likewise, James's characterization of faith does not contradict Hebrews 11:1. Neither author gives (or intends to give) a comprehensive dictionary definition or legal definition of faith. Both are pointing out, in different ways, some of the important characteristics of faith as God recognizes it. Genuine faith is such a profound concept that no brief definition in human language could do it justice.

James uses an example of someone who has ample means, and who is faced with a brother or sister in desperate need. This is an opportunity to put faith into practice, and in such a way that relates directly to some of the epistle's previous topics. Someone who truly believes in Jesus would certainly make some kind of effort to help, even if he or she contributes only a small amount monetarily. To say instead, "Go in peace*, be warm and well fed**", and to do nothing of substance, is simply a transparent attempt to pretend to care without actually caring.

* This is a literal translation of the first half of the statement. At least one commentator has pointed out that this very phrase is still used as a brush-off to beggars in some areas of the Middle East.

** The Greek phrase implies something like, 'gorge yourself', emphasizing the callousness involved.

Such a weak expression of 'compassion' is dead - likewise, a profession of faith that is never expressed through any kind of action is also dead (and a dead faith is no faith at all). When we are told that we are saved by faith alone, not by actions, this does not entitle us to define 'faith' in any way that we please. Faith is not a mere verbal assent to the truths of the gospel, but a full acceptance in the mind and heart of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. James's next example will clarify this still further.

By the weak definition of faith that some persons use, even the demons could lay claim to having 'faith' (2:18-19). James knows that there are rival ideas about 'faith', in his era as well as in our own. He knows that some see faith only as outward actions, others only as mental acceptance of certain teachings. James, though, reminds us that we show our faith through what we do. While even the most sincere of persons will sometimes act inconsistently with his or her beliefs, in the long run it is never hard to tell what someone really believes in.

The example of the demons is given to convince us that the belief that there is one God does not, in itself, constitute faith. The demons know this to be a fact*, but they do not have faith in any meaningful sense of the word. Once more, James is not saying that the demons are unsaved

despite having 'faith' because they do not do enough to be saved, but rather that they are unsaved simply because they do not have any faith as God recognizes it. God doesn't just exist, he lives - and he seeks those with a living faith.

* James has already mentioned that each of us has a seed of faith planted in us, and other passages in Scripture also remind us that God's existence ought to be obvious from what he has done. The simple awareness of this fact constitutes neither faith nor a work - it is on the same level as the simple acceptance of any other basic fact, and earns no credit of any kind.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does the context of the epistle help us to understand that James is not teaching salvation, even in part, by works? Why does James need to correct some misunderstandings of what constitutes faith? What do we learn about faith from the simple examples in verses 14-19?

Illustrative Examples (James 2:20-26)

Abraham and Rahab are ideal examples for illustrating the points James wants to make. These two believers came to have faith in God via two quite different paths, and they expressed their faith in different ways. But they have in common a key characteristic of faith: they acted on what they believed, and thus showed that they truly had the faith they professed to have.

Abraham's faith is an example to believers in many respects, but being called God's friend is a particularly special blessing (2:20-24). It also illustrates what James is talking about - God wants relationships, not legal agreements, with his people. James's rhetorical question, "You foolish man*, do you want evidence . . .?" is meant to imply that Abraham and Rahab, the next example, will serve both as evidence and as explanations.

* Literally, empty (headed) person', emphasizing to the reader that the basic point ought to be clear.

Amongst Abraham's many acts of faith, James highlights his obedience to a most unpleasant command, when he offered Isaac on the altar. (Other New Testament writers use this same example in making similar points about faith.) Abraham was already recognized as a believer in God, and indeed had already received many promises from God. Yet James tells us that Abraham's faith was made complete* by what he did - that is, he already had the faith in his heart to obey God in all circumstances, and this gave him an opportunity to demonstrate it.

* Some versions translate the word as 'perfect', but the Greek verb here means perfect only in the sense of 'make complete', not in the other senses that the English word can imply.

As Paul explains more fully in his writings, Abraham was 'justified' by what he did, in that God credited his faith to him as righteousness. Abraham was as imperfect as you or I, but because he had the kind of faith that was obvious in the way he lived, God graciously gave him a status that Abraham could not have earned by any meritorious works.

Rahab's faith and righteousness provide a suitable second example, because she showed her faith in a different fashion altogether (2:25-26). The prime example of her faith is her willingness to help the Israelite spies in Jericho, even though they were considered 'the enemy' at the time (see Joshua 2:1-24 and 6:17-25 for the events involved, and see Matthew 1:5 and Hebrews 11:31 for other New Testament references to Rahab).

Rahab thus gave a completely voluntary demonstration of a faith that had been, up until then, seen only in her heart. She was not even commanded to help God's people, but she herself had carefully considered the evidence God had left among the Gentiles, and she came to belief in him entirely without human teaching or persuasion. Not being told how to act on her faith, she voluntarily took advantage of the first opportunity that she saw, and in so doing she illustrates the link between faith and action that James wants us to learn. This genuine faith enabled her also to receive generous portions of God's grace, in spite of her own sinful background*.

* In Joshua, the word describing Rahab's profession is ambiguous, and can refer to an innkeeper as well as to a prostitute. But the Greek word used by James unambiguously refers to sinful practices.

In applying James 2:14-26, we should keep things simple, and should be careful to apply the passage in an appropriate way. The main point of the passage is that a genuine faith will always be revealed by actions, and thus James silences those who, misusing the concept of grace, want to claim that faith need not involve anything other than verbal or mental acceptance that God and Jesus exist. Those with genuine faith will, like Abraham, humbly follow God's commands whether they are pleasant or not, and will also, like Rahab, find ways to demonstrate their belief without having to be commanded to do so.

One significant caution, though, is that James is calling us to look into our own hearts, not to interrogate or investigate others in order to evaluate their faith. James emphatically declares that faith will show itself in our lives, but this does not mean that it will show itself in the same way in every believer's life. Jesus lavishly praised the poor widow for giving two small coins, because he knew what it cost her. Take comfort then in knowing that Jesus is well aware of each and every small sacrifice you make, even if others are not.

We all ought then to look into our own hearts and ask ourselves whether our lives reflect, as far as our abilities and knowledge allow, the faith we claim to have. Any honest believer will quickly realize that there are many teachings of God that he or she could accept and practice to a much greater degree. We should help each other to nurture the faith in our hearts, not judge one another by a standard we ourselves have invented.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In this example, what aspects of Abraham's faith were revealed? Did he already have this faith before he was tested? How might we be called to demonstrate our faith in a similar way (not necessarily to the same degree)? What did Rahab's actions reveal about what she believed? What motivated her to act as she did? What does her example teach us? How should we apply this passage?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2007

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Six: No One Can Tame The Tongue (James 3:1-12)

The way that we use our capacity for speech is another area in which we can apply the Christ-like perspective that James has emphasized. In this passage, he reminds us of the surprisingly large influence that the tongue can have in our lives. He then goes on to discuss both why and how we ought to allow our speech to be guided by the principles of the gospel.

Review Of Recent Lessons

James teaches us to accept and study God's Word, which is "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:19-27). Christians should also remember to "love your neighbor as yourself (James 2:1-13). Jesus called this the second greatest commandment, and James calls it the 'royal law'.

As is often implied in James, our faith and our actions should work together (James 2:14-26). After asking if 'faith' can be effective without action, James gives two simple examples. These show first that a mere verbal assertion of faith can be meaningless, and second that a belief in God's existence does not, by itself, constitute faith (as even the demons believe that God exists).

Two further examples follow. Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend, because he demonstrated his faith through obeying an unpleasant command. When Rahab came to believe in the God of Israel, she did not wait to be told what to do, but rather found her own opportunity to demonstrate her faith through actions, and thus abandoned the sinfulness of her surroundings for a place with the people of God.

James, then, is not revising or contesting the teaching that we are saved by grace alone, through faith in Jesus. Rather, James is explaining what faith truly is, so that we do not deceive ourselves by accepting a weakened, worldly concept of 'faith' that does not please God.

A Small Spark In A Great Forest (James 3:1-6)

James is quite blunt in describing the tongue's potential for damage and destruction. His intent is not to frighten us into complete silence, but rather to make us more aware of the tongue's power. Indeed, the tongue is frequently an instigator or an accomplice in a wide variety of human sins. What God desires, of course, is for us to turn the tongue's influence in a positive direction.

The discussion on the tongue is prefaced by an initial caution (3:1-2), as James tells his readers not to be hasty in considering themselves to be qualified to teach the Word of God (remember also 2 Corinthians 2:16, "who is equal to such a task"). For, as is the case with those who hold other spiritual responsibilities, teachers too will be judged more strictly*. Worldly leaders who expect to be served, to receive privileges, to have their own way, and to have others take the blame for their mistakes have no place in the church of Christ.

* This phrase does not mean that they will be punished more severely, but rather that they will be placed under closer scrutiny (both by God and by humans) because of their potential influence.

James mentions teachers as a lead-in to a discussion of the tongue. We all, indeed, stumble in a great many ways, and this is true regardless of how many or how few responsibilities we may have. James indicates that speech is, in many respects, the area in which we are the most likely to stumble. In a bit of rhetorical hyperbole, he implies that anyone able to control the tongue at all times is probably able to exert self-control over any other area of his or her life.

The power of speech, for good or for ill, is such that it taxes the self-control of even the most faithful follower of Jesus. Many Proverbs remind us of the practical impossibility of being completely faultless in our speaking, *e.g.* "Where words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise" (Proverbs 10:19).

The only way to be certain of avoiding verbal sins is to remain silent at all times. Yet this is hardly God's desire for us, because verbal expression is important in so many areas of life and ministry. The challenge is, instead, to learn how to use the tongue in a positive way, just as James has previously taught us that many different situations and conditions in life can be used either in a worldly way or in a godly way.

To impress upon us the measure of influence that the tongue can have, James gives two everyday examples (3:3-6). A large, powerful horse can be controlled by the use of a small bit placed in his mouth, while the course of a massive sailing ship* can be governed by the comparatively small rudder found at its stern. These examples remind us that size is not a necessary condition for exerting a strong influence.

* Both of James's examples can also be found in secular ancient writings, as illustrations of the ways that something small can exert control over something much larger. Aristotle, in particular, used the ship example on a number of occasions.

Like a bit or a rudder, the tongue is (physically) a small part of our bodies. But it makes 'great boasts' that can have an enormous effect on the rest of our lives. Well-chosen words can ease tensions, calm anxieties, bring re-assurance, and teach valuable truths. Careless words, on the other hand, can lead to careless decisions, and violent words can lead to violent actions. Speech is so basic to our lives that we often forget just how pervasive its influence can be.

The tongue, then, can be like a fire among the parts of the body. At its best, it can motivate and encourage. At its worst, it can deceive or destroy; in the worst possible case, it can help to ruin our relationship with God. Hearing James's stern words as he describes the dangers involved in speech, we might almost be tempted to take a vow of silence! Yet his purpose is not to make us afraid to speak, but only to realize how important it is to use our speech properly.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What is James's purpose in cautioning prospective teachers? Why would someone never at fault in his or her speech probably also be 'perfect' in other respects? In what respect does the tongue control the rest of the body? How does speech affect the rest of our lives? Give examples both positive and negative. Can we solve the problem of the tongue by trying to say as little as possible? Are there other possible responses to James's teachings?

Praise Or Cursing (James 3:7-12)

James again cautions us that the tongue can never be completely tamed. Yet we do have a choice in the ways that we use it. We can praise or curse, edify or destroy, tell the truth or tell lies. Once more, James reminds us of the close connection between our faith and our actions. We should strive to use the tongue in a way that reflects the teachings and values of Jesus.

Much of the danger from the tongue comes from its restlessness (3:7-8). The tongue yearns to be unloosed; it yearns to express itself regardless of the consequences. James compares it to the numerous wild animals that humanity has tamed and domesticated through the years, and then reminds us that no one yet has tamed the tongue - a testimony to its impatience for activity. The worldly, in fact, often put so much importance on 'expressing oneself' that they fail to distinguish between genuine self-expression and a simple lack of self-control.

This would not be such a problem if the tongue were not potentially so full of poison. If misuse of the tongue were merely amusing or at worst annoying, then James would not express such concern. But malicious, deceitful, or hostile words can harm others, ourselves, or both. Often we are even unaware of the ways that our innocent but careless words can cause harm. All of this is the consequence of misusing the potential of the tongue. Just as the most deadly of toxins can often be used in life-saving medications, so also the tongue's power to harm can be harnessed to do good instead.

In practice, none of us will be faultless for very long in what we say. When we err, we can only demonstrate humility and learn for the future. Yet even the errors we make with our tongues can remind us of the good we may be able to do with them. The power of speech, when combined with spiritual understanding, is among the most valuable capabilities that our Creator has instilled in us.

No matter how many times Satan has deceived us into misusing the tongue, let us not allow him to discourage us from learning how to use it to show compassion, instill faith, and proclaim God's glory. Let it instead be a reminder that, if we can learn to use our tongues as God wishes (and enables) us to, then we can have the potential for using them wisely and beneficially.

All this is further emphasized by the realization of the widely varying kinds of utterances that can come out of the same mouth (3:9-12). A great deal of the trouble with speech lies simply in the struggle for consistency. Everyone, no matter how wise or godly, will sometimes say things they regret. Everyone, no matter how malicious or ignorant, will sometimes make worthwhile or edifying observations. The challenge, then, is to place our tongues under Christ's lordship, so that we use them truthfully and positively much more often.

For, as James points out, to use the same tongue for both praise and cursing* is an almost unnatural practice. As with everything else he has discussed, it is largely a matter of choosing whether to follow God's wisdom or instead to accept the world's wisdom.

* That is, to pronounce a condemnatory curse upon someone. Note that, though similar prohibitions of cursing are found in passages such as Luke 6:28 and Romans 12:14, Paul himself pronounced curses in passages like 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Galatians 1:8-9. See also the discussion questions below.

In nature, a spring that produces good, fresh water* will continue to produce fresh water, while a spring that produces unpleasant or salty water** will also continue to do so. Any deviation would be unnatural and most surprising. The application of this example (and the briefer examples in verse 12) is that we are called to choose whether we belong to God or whether we belong to the world. For a believer in God to curse his or her brother would be as unnatural as for a freshwater spring suddenly to spew up bad, brackish water.

* Literally, 'sweet' water, that is, pure and fresh. The Greek word for sweet is γλυκός ("glukus"), which we can recognize in our word 'glucose'.

** This phrase actually refers not to salt water as in ocean water, but to brackish, silty, or bitter water, unsuitable for drinking.

James himself speaks harshly at times to certain groups of persons, and thus he is not saying that Christians may say nothing but upbeat, positive things. Yet he is reminding us of how careful we should be whenever we do need to correct or rebuke in the name of Jesus. It should never be a joyful task to criticize or reprove, but only a regrettable necessity.

On the other hand, we can rejoice in having opportunities to encourage, to praise, and to edify. In keeping with James's analogy, we have the Spirit in us as an unending source of living water, fresher and purer than the finest springs on earth. We do not need rhetorical brilliance or painstaking education to use our tongues wisely and beneficially, but only faith in Jesus and devotion to his teachings.

Indeed, James's examples all imply that the tongue is too restless and powerful for us to control it merely by carefully weighing each word. "Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34, and with a slightly different wording, Luke 6:45). If we store up godly thoughts, ask God for wisdom, and meditate on spiritual truths, then we may find ourselves being pleasantly surprised at some of the things that our tongues say.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is the tongue so restless? Give examples of how this can arise in daily life. How can we curb this tendency? What points is James making with his analogies from nature? What is the parallel in our lives? How can we make our speech purer? Does this mean that we can never say anything negative? How can we know if (or when) there are exceptions? How is it helpful to remember where our ability to speak comes from?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2007

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Week Seven: Who Is Wise & Understanding? (James 3:13-18)

James now turns to the theme that underlies so many of the other teachings in the epistle. Throughout the book, we have seen examples of the contrast between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. Now, James sharpens the contrast between these two perspectives, and he also explains the kinds of fruits that result from pursuing each kind of wisdom.

Review Of Recent Lessons

One of James's basic themes is that faith and actions should work together (James 2:14-26). Along with the contrast between worldly and godly perspectives, this ties together many of the other teachings in the letter.

Warning us that no one can tame the tongue, James explains the dangers of misusing the power of speech (James 3:1-12). James starts with an initial caution about the serious responsibilities involved in teaching the gospel, and then he proceeds to discuss the tongue. As a small rudder can steer a great ship or a small spark can set a great forest on fire, so also the tongue's influence can be enormous, for good or for ill.

Speech can be used for praise or cursing, for telling the truth or for deception. The tongue is restless, and eager to do something, so the challenge is for us to learn to use its potential wisely. Although it is inevitable that both wise and foolish things will come out of the same mouth, it is nevertheless a distortion of the ability that God gave us.

For Christians, the challenge is to use our tongues, our amazing capacity for human speech, in a way that pleases God. The tongue's true potential is great. When it is used with truth, humility, and compassion, then it can comfort, encourage, edify, instruct, and bless in many other ways.

Earthly 'Wisdom' & Its Fruits (James 3:13-16)

What constitutes wisdom is perceived much differently by the worldly and by the godly. Those whom the world considers to be 'wise' are often motivated by a spirit of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Thus even their greatest intellectual achievements can result in little or nothing of a constructive nature, for wherever their hearts are, this is where they will use their 'knowledge'

True demonstrations of wisdom are never done in worldly or self-serving ways (3:13). True wisdom is never shown in talk alone, but in our lives*. James uses a wonderful phrase when he describes the ways that true wisdom comes out in what we do "in the humility that comes from wisdom". Indeed, this is a 'test' of true wisdom - does it produce humility, or something else?

* The phrase rendered 'good life' in the NIV and NRSV does not refer to life in a biographical sense, but rather to the way one lives and acts. The NASB more accurately translates it as 'good behavior'.

The truly wise, who pursue and value godly wisdom, do not use their knowledge to get their way, to gain praise, or to acquire privilege and authority. The truly wise are those who have learned how little they really know about the things that matter most, and how much God knows about it all - and this humbling awareness affects everything that they do. It affects the way they treat others, the way they teach others, and the way they worship God.

False, earthly wisdom is all too easy to find (3:14-16). Whenever we think we are wise, we must always search our hearts, for the heart all too often harbors jealousy*, envy*, and selfish ambition, masquerading as a pursuit for knowledge. The kind of motivation that causes us to seek wisdom is, indeed, important, for it will often determine the kind of fruit that our 'wisdom' will produce.

* The word used here is ζηλος ("zeal"), which most closely means jealousy. (Another word, φθονος, is closest to our English word envy.) Ζηλος can also, depending on the context, mean zeal, since zeal and jealousy can be seen as two different forms of a similar kind of passion.

Rivalry, envy, boasting, and ambition are the frequent ungodly companions of fleshly 'wisdom'. We all will struggle at one time or another with these things, and James understands this. He warns us neither to boast about our ambitions nor to live in denial of what is in our hearts. This latter is especially difficult for unbelievers, and indeed there are many who are 'wise' in a worldly sense, but who live their whole lives in denial of the selfishness in their hearts.

James warns us that the kind of wisdom or knowledge that is not used in humility is earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil, not of God. This is precisely the reason for so many disorders and evil practices in our world. Pagans who acquire knowledge or talent so often feel that this entitles them to other things, and in their unceasing rivalries and strivings with one another, sins and tragedies of many kinds can arise.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What ideas does James give us for identifying true wisdom? Why does he say that humility comes from wisdom? Of what kind(s) of knowledge is this true? Why do envy and selfish ambition often accompany worldly wisdom? Why do these lead to 'disorder and every evil practice'?

Godly Wisdom & Its Fruits (James 3:17-18)

True godly wisdom, by contrast, produces only good fruit. James describes the results of valuing the right kind of wisdom, as a way of encouraging us to pursue the kinds of true wisdom that the world rarely appreciates. One of his implications is that we can always tell whether we are pursuing the right kinds of wisdom, from the fruits that the things we know produce in our lives.

The heavenly kind of wisdom is our ideal (3:17). Godly wisdom has a purity* of quality and purpose that sets it apart from false wisdom. Heavenly wisdom is not based on technical phrases that hinder our understanding, but rather on simple yet important truths. It also focuses on things that matter to God, rather than on clever ways of getting things that the flesh desires.

* The word here primarily means pure as in innocent, uncorrupted, unspoiled.

Godly wisdom is inherently peace-loving, even though its truths may provoke opposition. Those who are wise in God's eyes do not avoid the truth solely for the sake of avoiding conflict, but at the same time they remember that "as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). When godly wisdom does encounter argument or opposition, it does not worry about 'winning', but about bringing peace and light to those who need it.

God's wisdom is also considerate and submissive. It can produce these two qualities because heavenly wisdom helps us to set aside the selfish ambition and jealousy that so often attach themselves to fleshly forms of knowledge. Worldly kinds of wisdom often make it harder for us to be considerate and submissive - only God's teachings can make us wise and humble at the same time.

Godly knowledge and understanding also produce acts of mercy and other good fruits. Godly wisdom thus leads to action, fitting in with one of James's other key themes. Absorbing large amounts of earthly knowledge might not produce any kind of action at all, much less action that blesses others. But when the kind of wisdom that comes from God enters our hearts, it will stir us to put our faith into practice.

Similarly, God's wisdom teaches us to be impartial and sincere. These again are qualities very difficult for the worldly to produce, because earthly knowledge too often is hindered by the likes of jealousy and envy. Since godly understanding teaches us a new perspective on ourselves and on others, "we regard no one from a worldly point of view" (2 Corinthians 5:16).

Using one of the New Testament's frequent images, James exhorts us to "sow in peace" (3:18), by seeking godly wisdom that will help godly qualities to grow within us. Then in turn we shall reap a spiritual harvest of righteousness, a harvest of spiritual blessings in our lives and in the lives of others.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Consider each of the qualities of godly wisdom that James lists in verse 17? How is each one a natural result of a Christ-like perspective? How is each quality shown in Jesus' life? How can we show each one in our lives? What kinds of knowledge or understanding can help us develop each of these specific qualities? How can we 'sow in peace' in our lives? What kind of a 'harvest' can we expect?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2007

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Eight: Come Near To God (James 4:1-10)

James has mentioned two particularly important themes: the importance of putting faith into practice, and the importance of seeking true, godly wisdom. These two ideas lie behind many other points in the epistle. James now appeals for us to come closer to God, and in one of the book's sternest passages, he warns us that we must choose between the world and God.

Review Of Recent Lessons

One of James's main themes is that of faith and actions working together (James 2:14-26). His teachings about speech illustrate this, and he also warns us that 'no one can tame the tongue' (James 3:1-12). James then introduces his other main theme by asking us to consider who is genuinely wise and understanding (James 3:13-18).

Genuine, godly wisdom leads to humble attitudes and humble deeds, but earthly 'wisdom' has different fruits. Selfish ambition, rivalry, jealousy, and envy are often closely associated with worldly knowledge, so that even potentially useful knowledge can lead instead to disorder and sin. Often this is not the fault of the facts, ideas, or data themselves, but rather comes from the attitudes of those who seek such knowledge for selfish reasons. At other times, the things that the world considers wise or intelligent are either obvious facts stated pretentiously, trivial details that serve little purpose, or errors based on faulty reasoning or on unquestioned assumptions.

Godly wisdom produces good spiritual fruits. It is characterized by purity, truthfulness, and other similar qualities. Godly wisdom seems insignificant to the worldly, because it concerns itself with the things that really matter to God, not the lesser things that the world values.

These two main lessons of James (the relation between faith and actions; godly wisdom and perspectives compared to worldly ones) can be applied to many of the epistle's other topics. For example, when James urges us to see the positive side of our earthly trials, this puts into practice beliefs such as our faith in an eternal future with God, and it demonstrates the kind of wisdom and perspective that could come only from God, not from the world.

The Struggle Against Fleshly Desires (James 4:1-3)

With the important overall principles in mind, James now calls us to look inside ourselves for the sources of some of the problems that we face in this world. Many kinds of sins arise out of the fleshly desires that we all have, since we are often too weak to face them down. In particular, these desires can damage or destroy relationships - with one another, and also with God.

Like James, the world and its leaders repeatedly ask themselves what causes fights and quarrels (4:1-2a). Unlike James, though, the worldly live in denial of the root spiritual problems that lead to so many conflicts. We all have a multitude of desires* swirling within us, and if we want to understand and prevent conflict, we must see them for what they are. Some of our desires are godly, but many others are not. We must avoid making excuses for the latter kind.

* The Greek word *ηδονη* ("hedone", from which we get the word 'hedonism') is translated in this passage as 'desire(s)' or 'or pleasure(s)' in the NIV. Other versions translate it as lust(s) or craving(s).

We all have in our hearts a need and desire for God, yet the flesh often distorts this innate yearning into less worthy desires. We all need and desire God's love and approval, yet many persons channel this into an inappropriate craving for human approval or for physical pleasure. We all need and desire for God to give our lives purpose and meaning, yet many distort this genuine need, and replace it with an obsession over material objects or earthly success.

We thus have to recognize our fleshly limitations if we are to learn from James's insights. It is entirely natural to have all kinds of desires, but the godly learn to distinguish the true desires placed in us by God from the false desires that this world instills in us. Even then, we shall still stumble, and thus grace, mercy, and humility will always be important.

Fighting, coveting, and even more serious sins* inevitably arise whenever we harbor fleshly desires. Worse, one sin can lead to another, and indeed a fleshly desire can lead to an unending series of sins as long as the root desire remains unrecognized or unchecked. This is true even on a large scale. Wars, for example, occur because of distorted desires that come to infect whole nations - for example, the desire for revenge, for fleshly glory, or for (apparent) security.

* The verb often translated 'kill' (for example, in the KJV and NIV) in verse 2 is the word for murder, and it is translated that way in the NRSV and the NASV.

Here it is a very good idea to remember what James told us in 1:13-15. We cannot blame our fleshly desires on God, nor should we rationalize them by saying that they are 'natural'. Instead, we ought to accept the responsibility for our desires, so that we can learn to see them for what they are. When we are honest with ourselves, an awareness of even the most sinful of desires can lead to spiritual renewal and insight.

This also helps to explain why we often do not have things that we earnestly desire (4:2b-3). James points out two possible mistakes that can arise when our fleshly desires overcome our spiritual judgment. The first, and most obvious, is that we simply fail to ask God*. Even believers** can forget the simple practicality and necessity of offering their prayers and petitions to God when they need or desire something important.

* This naturally implies asking through prayer, but James is also speaking more broadly, which is why he says 'ask' instead of the more specific 'pray'. When fleshly desires take hold of us, it becomes easy to forget about God's part in things altogether. When this happens, not only do we fail to pray, but we also leave God out of our thoughts and discussions on the subject. See also below.

** Implied in this entire passage, in that the epistle is written to believers.

Such dismaying situations arise when we put our faith in the wrong things. It always requires faith and patience to trust God for what we need. He will act in his own time and his own way, and he will also withhold what we desire if he knows that it could endanger us spiritually. This tests our faith, and sometimes our faith fails us. When this happens, we often find ourselves turning to the world's quick-fix, self-centered methods, rather than continuing to put our trust in God. God wants us to trust him in all things, even when it tests our faith.

The second such problem that James describes is that of asking God with the wrong motivation. We may even pray to God for what we want, but God can recognize false motives, even if we are able to fool others around us. God does not like it when we use prayer (or any other aspect of our relationship with him) as a pious front that conceals a desire for pleasure. It is much better to

be honest with God, with ourselves, and with others. There are many things, even in this mortal life, that are much more important than having all of our fleshly desires satisfied.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does James ask us to consider the causes of fights and quarrels? Give examples of sins and problems that can arise from unchecked desires. In what other ways do fleshly desires hurt us? What kinds of desires does James have in mind here? How can we distinguish godly desires from those that are potentially destructive? How should we deal with the dangerous ones?

Choosing Between The World & God (James 4:4-10)

In contrasting worldly perspectives and godly perspectives, James is not merely creating an academic distinction, nor is he offering us the choice of two equal options. It just is not possible to be close friends both with God and with the world. Some of James's exhortations are surprisingly severe, for he wants to impress upon us the importance of making the right choice.

James's warns his readers sternly against spiritual adultery (4:4-6). Yet even in phrasing his admonition in this way, he reminds us that God desires our relationship with him to be one of personal commitment and devotion, not one of impersonal law-keeping and obligatory service. At the same time, we must heed his firm statement that friendship with the world means conflict* with God. We can live in this world, we can care about it, we can even enjoy its occasional innocent pleasures, but we must not become 'friends' with it unless we want to come into conflict with God.

* The NIV translates the phrase in verse 4 as 'hatred toward God', but the word is better translated as 'enmity' (as in the KJV or NRSV) or 'hostility' (as in the NRSV).

When God created the first human, he breathed life into him (see Genesis 2:7), and likewise he gives each one of us a spirit* of life. As James reminds us here, God is jealous** about the spirits and souls he has given us. He seeks those who will give their hearts to him, rather than to this world. Again, he does not ask us to hate the world or to hate anyone in it. What he does ask is for us to renounce any allegiance to the world's perspectives, values, leaders, and the like.

* Although the phrase James uses could also refer to the Holy Spirit, it is more likely that he is referring to the spirit of life that God has put in each of this. This kind of expression was also used by ancient Jewish rabbis in connection with Scriptures such as Genesis 2:7.

** Verse 5 is phrased in such a way as to make it possible to translate it in two different ways. It could be rendered so as to say that God jealously desires to retain his Lordship over the (spirit of) life he has put within us, or it could say that this spirit itself (or, if one assumes that this refers here to the Holy Spirit, himself) jealously desires God. If, as seems likely, 'spirit' here refers to our own spirits and not to the Holy Spirit, then the first interpretation is much more likely. But if one would instead associate 'spirit' with the Holy Spirit, then either translation would make sense.

Even in giving us such warnings, James reminds us of the ultimate triumph that we can experience through God's grace. God stands opposed to the proud. Though God still loves them, the proud cannot see God or know him until they humble themselves so that they can realize their need for God. But God's grace is given freely to the humble. We can never earn or deserve God's grace; we can only appreciate it. It is through genuine humility that we show God how much we appreciate, desire, and need his grace.

James climaxes a solemn passage with a call to humility (4:7-10). The devil will never stop tempting us, so in the long run we have only two choices when it comes to his temptations: we can either give in to them, or we can resist them. James reminds us that the devil will back off, even 'flee', if our resistance is strong enough. He'll come back later, of course, but James's point is that we make things much easier for ourselves when we firmly resist sin than we do when we waver between obedience and disobedience.

Just as the devil flees those who put up resistance to him, so also God eagerly comes near to those who want to come nearer to him. His interest in us is much different than the devil's. God wants with all his heart to know and to love every human he has created. Thus even our smallest steps towards him are greatly welcome in his eyes, so that he is moved by his very nature to encourage them.

Coming to God requires clean hands and clean hearts. We must wash our hands (figuratively) of our past sins, acknowledging them for the fruitless folly they are. And we must cleanse our hearts, pledging God our sincere devotion for the future. God's grace and mercy will sustain both our past and our future, so that all he asks is our sincere pledge of faith in the present.

This kind of genuine faith will call us to take our relationship with God seriously. James calls us to "grieve, mourn, and wail", as one of his provocative statements designed to startle us into a renewed understanding of important points. It is far better to mourn in this world and to be saved in the next than it is to enjoy ourselves now, only to face eternal separation from God.

James calls for such a sober-minded attitude because God lifts up the humble. There is never a shortage of people-pleasing teachers who proclaim God to be concerned above all with our 'happiness', but in reality God wants above all to see humility in his people. By developing humility, we make it easy for God to keep us close to him, and we make ourselves much more likely to offer grace and mercy to those around us.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does James mean by an 'adulterous people'? Why is he so blunt in his approach? What does it mean to be a 'friend' of the world? Does God demand that we become enemies of the world? What choice does he call us to make, and why must we make it? In what sense is God (and/or his Spirit) jealous? How does God oppose the proud? What kind of grace does he give to the humble?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2007

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Nine: Life Here Is A Mist (James 4:11-17)

Many of James's teachings are based in large part upon an understanding of how short our lives in this world truly are. Avoiding or denying this awareness leads to an undue emphasis on the things of this earth. As James now points out, the realization of this earth's temporary nature can help us to avoid distractions, and can motivate us to serve and to please God.

Review

James calls us to ask ourselves what kind of person is truly wise and understanding (James 3:13-18), in order to contrast worldly forms of wisdom with the wisdom that comes from God. He then urges us to come near to God (James 4:1-10), using some stern language in doing so.

We all struggle against our fleshly desires. James points out the importance of resisting them, because so many of our fights and quarrels arise from selfish desires within us. We are often aware that we do not have many of the things we that desire. James tells us that sometimes this is simply a matter of not asking God - that is, either not praying to God, or else praying for something but at the same time trusting in the world rather than in God.

Choosing between the world and God is an important part of our lives here. In giving a stern warning against spiritual adultery, James reminds us how important our relationship with God is, both to us and to God. We cannot leave this world yet, and we do not need to hate the world, but we also must never trust the world or live on its terms.

The call to come to God is also a call to humility. We are constantly faced with the need to resist the devil and to draw closer to God. This necessitates a cleansing both inside and outside, and it requires times of sober contemplation of spiritual reality, so that we take our relationship with God seriously. God opposes the proud and self-satisfied, but he lifts up the humble and he pours out his grace on them.

One Lawgiver, One Judge (James 4:11-12)

As we develop the humility and dependence on grace that James teaches us, we come to realize how little we know, compared with God. God is thus the only true lawgiver, the only being who has the wisdom and authority to instruct us in all truth. And God is the only one worthy to pass judgment on the beings he has created, for only he both truly loves them and truly knows them.

It is a basic aspect of our relationships with one another that we must not slander* or judge (4:11). We are often told this in the Scriptures, but James adds an additional reason, saying that slandering or judging one another is equivalent to speaking against or judging the law itself.

* Also translated in some versions as 'speak evil' or 'speak against', the word literally means to say bad things about (someone or something).

It is through God's law* that we learn to love and forgive one another, just as we want God to love and forgive us. Thus anyone who makes a practice of judging or slandering his or her brothers and sisters is implying that the law is wrong. A judgmental mentality shows contempt for God's Word and for the mercy that lies behind it. It is a sign of someone who thinks that his or her standards of right and wrong are better than God's. It should be clear that we can hardly keep the law once we have set up ourselves as judges in this way, with the presumed authority of improving on God's Word.

* As in previous passages, James uses 'the law' in a general sense, not limited to the Law of Moses or to any particular set of laws, but referring broadly to God's words, commands, and will.

We are all ill-qualified to judge our neighbor (4:12), for none of us has the wisdom or the purity to be a judge. While we believers are well aware that there is only one lawgiver and judge, we can easily fail to accept the implications of this. God does indeed hold in his hand the power to save or to destroy, just as James says.

He gives us this sobering reminder because it is easy for us to claim to accept God as Judge and Jesus as Lord, but much more difficult to accept that God has the right and the ability to save us or to destroy us. Unlike the humans who hold comparatively trivial positions of power and authority (and who generally are unfit even for such low positions), God has true power and true authority. The degree to which we accept his is a true test of our faith.

And so, once again, James returns to the importance of humility and grace. Just as we must be humble about our own lives and abilities, we must also be humble towards others and their weaknesses. By no means does this suggest that they are flawless, for they are not. Rather, it rests on the awareness of our own equal sinfulness and imperfection, and on the knowledge that we too need God's grace just as desperately as anyone else needs it.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does it mean to slander a brother or sister? What does it mean to judge? Why are these practices equivalent to judging God's law? What does it mean that God is the only lawgiver and judge? How should this realization affect us? Where does God's grace fit in, with regard to this?

Life With True Direction (James 4:13-17)

James directly challenges those whose thoughts and plans center on things that have value only in this life. Such a focus represents not only a lack of perspective, but also a lack of humility. The human desire to control and dictate events in our lives is simply an illusion. In reality, we are at every moment completely at the mercy of things far greater than ourselves.

Regardless of how badly the world wishes to forget it, and regardless of how difficult it is for even believers to accept it, our earthly bodies and lives are merely impermanent mists (4:13-14). It is second nature for the world to indulge itself in all kinds of human-made plans, earthly gains, physical pleasures, and the like. But they are all meaningless and deceptive. Even when indulged in with human intelligence or zeal, they are still nothing but a vain attempt to forget the mortal, perishable nature of this world and everything in it.

Even from an earthly viewpoint, it would be wise to place less importance on worldly success, fame, and achievement. Even when we get them, these things always come with a price. At other times, the inherent uncertainties of this world simply make it impossible to plan too far into the future or to get what we desire when we wish it. Those who try to plan out their lives (or, even more foolishly, the lives of others) usually end up self-deceived or frustrated.

This world is not easy, fair, or safe, and it never will be. There is often no possible way to get something we desire, or at least no way to acquire it without sinning. This earth is irrevocably scarred by sin, inherently filled with imperfection and randomness, and perpetually characterized by impermanence. More importantly, that is how God expected it to be; for he knew before he created the world that he would need to redeem it one day.

This physical world was never meant to be a permanent dwelling place for the extraordinary spiritual beings that God created in his image. Even if its present problems were eliminated (and even if a whole new set of problems did not immediately occur, as they inevitably would in the real world), this earth still would not be worthy of the daughters and sons of the eternal God. We only think otherwise because our thoughts are too often limited by the best that this world has to offer, forgetting that God has promised us blessings much better and more lasting.

The fragility of life is revealed in every corner of this present universe. Life is an extraordinary thing, both beautiful and frightening, and in this world an individual life can never last for very long. Living souls do not belong in a limited physical world, but in an endless eternal heaven. This essential truth should always remind us of the folly and futility of striving desperately after the things of this world, as though they were of crucial importance.

Nor will it do to take refuge in God's alleged desire for us to 'be happy'. God wants us to be content and joyful, but not at all by having all of the things that we desire. His will is for us to learn what really matters, and to derive true joy from having his promises that assure us of true security, true peace, and true love forever. When he promises us joy, it is conditional on us following him and living by his will.

Instead of trying so persistently to be in control of things we cannot control, we ought instead to live for God's will (4:15-17). This is a better way for at least two basic reasons. When seeking God's will, we are no longer the driving force, relying on our own alleged wisdom and goodness, but are instead humble seekers calling out to a God who knows exactly who we are and exactly what we need. Then too, in following God's will we can be assured that we are on the right track. We can be done with the self-delusion and inevitable frustration that come with self-will.

Thus our guideline should not be, 'what will I gain?' or, 'will this make me happy?' or, "what will people think of me if I do this?". Instead, the first (and sometimes the only) question should be, "what is God's will?" In the short term, this may or may not lead us where we want to go - but then, if we are honest with ourselves, we shall realize that rarely are we truly satisfied for very long whenever we insist on doing things our own way.

The alternative - that is, living entirely for our own desires and goals - is inherently boastful and arrogant. Even if we do not boast overtly of our accomplishments and our earthly glory, to live

for these is to imply that we know better than God what is good for us. If we are not going to consider God's will to be paramount, then we implicitly exalt our own.

Having explained this, James now alerts us that we have a responsibility to respond. He has emphasized repeatedly that we must choose between the world and God as the guiding light in our lives. It is in this context that James makes his well-known statement that, "anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins"*.

* This was apparently a well-known saying that James quotes (perhaps in slightly altered form) in connection with his appeal to live by God's will.

The 'good we ought to do' is to live by God's will. Note that James is not declaring a policy that requires us to perform every possible good deed for everyone around us, nor is he discussing specific moral* issues here. He is urging us to adopt a way of thinking and living that is truly good, fitting, and beneficial. God makes no promise of anything in particular here on this earth, though he always does supply us with much more than we need here. But those who heed James's plea will receive what God has planned for them, not what they wished for themselves.

* In this verse, James uses the word *καλος* ("kalos"), meaning 'good' in the sense of pleasing, fitting, or appropriate. It is often translated as 'beautiful'. There is a different word, *αγαθος* ("agathos"), that means 'good' in a moral or ethical sense.

The spiritual blessings we receive now are of greater value than the flashy but shallow things that the world values. More and greater blessings await us in eternity, blessings of a sort we cannot even comprehend now. This world tries to train us to see its pleasures and riches as the highest standard of reward. We simply need to take a broader look at what God has done, to see that what he offers is limitless and imperishable.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What kinds of plans and goals is James criticizing in verses 13-14? Can believers fall into the same kind of thinking? What is wrong with it? Does it usually achieve its aims? What does James call us to do instead? What is 'the good we ought to do'? Why is it sin not to do it?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2007*

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Ten: The Judge Is Standing At The Door (James 5:1-12)

After reminding us that our lives here are only a mist, James now further develops a perspective that looks beyond this world. As the only Lawgiver and Judge, God is aware of all that goes on in everyone's life. Whether or not we are aware of his presence, whether or not we accept him as God, he is already standing ready to call the world to judgment when the time comes.

Review of Recent Lessons

After his comparison of earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, James exhorts us to come near to God (James 4:1-10). We must acknowledge our fleshly desires and come humbly to God, relying on his grace and mercy.

Our short and fragile lives here on this earth are only a mist (4:11-17). James calls us not to speak against one another, and he reminds us that there is only one Lawgiver and only one Judge. We must thus take care not to slander one another or to pass judgment on one another, for we are in no position to become judges of our brothers and sisters.

To have life with true direction, we should remember that our earthly lives are impermanent mists. Most of the planning and scheming by humans is ineffective even in an earthly sense, because things in this world are so uncertain. Instead of trying to control every event in our lives or in the lives of others, we ought instead to live by asking ourselves, "what is God will?" in any given situation. This will make it easier to hear God's call, and easier to see God's guiding hand at work.

Warning To The Self-Indulgent & Self-Satisfied (James 5:1-6)

James issues a stern warning to those who take their wealth or material blessings for granted. If our very lives are impermanent mists, then how much more temporary are the material things of this world. Yet it is easy for us to allow our spiritual sensibilities to become dulled by money and material things, to the point that we cannot hear the needs of those crying out spiritually.

The impermanence of wealth means that those who have it should not use their wealth as a weapon against others (5:1-3). Many persons who are rich now will someday face misery for rejecting God, and some of them may face unpleasant consequences even sooner. Jesus himself reminded us of the many ways in which material things can become lost or damaged.

James uses expressions about wealth rotting and precious metals corroding that closely parallel Jesus' warnings against storing up earthly riches in passages like Matthew 6:19-20. His meaning goes beyond the literal, for he is warning us that the very material things we crave can become a burden or a curse when we overvalue them.

James's harsh words are directed not against the material possessions themselves, which have little spiritual significance one way or another. But he is firm in rebuking those who, in his words, 'hoard wealth in the last days'* , and thus put material wealth ahead of spiritual needs. For it is indeed sadly true that most persons are much more interested in accumulating wealth than they are in nurturing the fruits of the Spirit in their lives.

* See also Acts 2:17, 2 Timothy 3:1, Hebrews 1:2, 1 Peter 1:20, 2 Peter 3:3, and Jude 1:18. Expressions such as 'the last days' or 'the last times' (plural) simply refer to the spiritual era that began with Jesus. When the Scriptures refer to the end of the world, the expression 'the last day' or 'the last time' (singular) is generally used, as in John 6:40, 6:44, 6:54, 11:24, 12:48, and 1 Peter 1:5. John also uses 'the last hour' in a slightly different context in 1 John 2:18.

Hoarding is in itself objectionable, and it is also foolish to hoard up materials that will soon be of no use. Moreover, those who obsessively accumulate wealth invariably find themselves making choices that place their love of money above their love for God. It is simply not possible to live both for God and for this world. James made this point emphatically in the previous chapter, and Jesus himself warned us that we cannot serve two masters (*e.g.* Matthew 6:24).

Pre-occupation with material wealth causes us to ignore others' needs (5:4-6). When money becomes too important to someone, that person soon sacrifices his or her integrity and faith to get more money. James gives a specific example of rich persons who underpay those who labor on their land. Those who are blessed with material abundance all too often feel that this entitles them to reap effortless profits from the work of others. Yet God hears with compassion the cries of those who are in need, and he will remember those who had the chance to help but would not.

It is not the purpose of this life to live in luxury and self-indulgence. God's generosity is extraordinary, and most of us have much more than we need. It is not the mere possession of wealth that is a sin - rather, the problem lies in craving more than we need. This goes back to James's previous warning about the fleshly desires that cause so much sin and pain. The world wants us to accept without question the all-importance of material belongings, but God wants us to realize that there are many things that matter much more.

The persons whom James criticizes have even allowed their desire for money to drive them to the malicious persecution of innocent, harmless persons. Although James might have had different specific situations in mind*, the same problem persists today. Every society makes it easy for those with wealth or power to keep it, and gives them an inherent advantage whenever their interests clash with those of weaker persons. Here too, a simple re-evaluation of our desires can make our own lives and the lives of others much less painful.

* It is often thought that James was thinking about the ways that the laws of the time made it relatively easy for large landowners to seize smaller portions of land by exposing smaller landowners to some kind of legal difficulty. Other commentators think that James is just referring back to his previous example - that is, that by not paying proper wages to laborers, the rich are then condemning them to starvation or other perils.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why do so many wealthy and powerful persons oppress and persecute the weak, instead of appreciating what they have? Is wealth wrong in itself? What are the dangers of having a material abundance? What kinds of attitudes or practices would James criticize in our society? Is it possible to please God with our attitude towards the material possessions we have?

Waiting Patiently For The Lord (James 5:7-12)

Until it is time for Jesus to return to take us home with him, we must live in hope and trust in God's promises. We must be patient in the face of persecution, injustice, and other worldly ills. This means that we must also be patient with one another, and we must learn to trust and help one another. When we do so, we can bring God's light to the world while we live on this earth.

The Lord's coming is always near (5:7-9), even if it is not 'near' in the narrow time-dimension of our universe. It is imminent, it is certain, and once it comes even the existence of the entire physical universe will seem brief. James gives the parallel of a farmer waiting for the rains to come in season. He may have to wait weeks, but the rains are just as certain. And once the crop is produced and harvested, the waiting will not seem like so much. So too, we can count on an ultimate spiritual harvest, even if we do not know the date on our calendar.

James thus exhorts us to be patient, so that we can concentrate today on whatever God has given us to do, and to stand firm, so that the wait does not cause us to lose faith. It is notable that James says this in the wake of his denunciations of the ways that the rich and powerful so often exploit and oppress the rest of us. As keenly as God feels the injustices of this earth, he calls us to endure them patiently, because we can be secure in the knowledge that he himself will deal with them when the time comes.

James adds another plea for us not to grumble against each other. It is an unfortunate consequence of the world's way of doing things that we are often forced into competition with one another. At other times, those who are struggling with similar problems can easily become frustrated with each other, when in reality the cause of the problem is external. If we have the spiritual discernment to remind ourselves that those around us usually have plenty of problems of their own, then this can help us to be gracious and merciful when we need to be.

Next we see some familiar examples of perseverance (5:10-11). Many of the prophets of the Old Testament lived lonely lives filled with persecution and rejection, and Job's sufferings likewise would crush most of us. James's point is not to feel guilty when we compare ourselves with such amazing examples, but rather to learn from them. They were not inherently any better or stronger or more patient than us - but they did know that they needed to rely completely on God.

God is truly full of compassion and mercy, to a degree that we will never fully understand until we see him face-to-face. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, and the rest simply threw themselves at God's feet and asked for his mercy. They went where he directed and accepted what he provided, because they knew that above all he was merciful and compassionate. They could not always figure out everything that God was doing, but they always knew that God would ultimately keep them close to him. We can follow their example by faithfully doing what is right to the best of our limited knowledge and ability, even when it is difficult or frightening to do so.

James adds to this an admonition about genuine truthfulness (5:12). Although it may seem out of place, it is connected with the idea that we must be patient with our circumstances and with one another, knowing that we all shall be judged soon.

Thus James says that 'above all' we must not swear oaths*. The habit of resorting to oaths (e.g. "I swear to you, I'm telling the truth.") is a tacit admission that we are not generally as honest as we could be with each other, so that we need to perform a special ritual when we decide to be honest after all. As believers, if we cannot be honest with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, then we will have a lot of trouble building relationships.

* This has nothing to do with foul language or 'swear words'. The dual usage of such phrasing is a later development.

So our 'yes' should truly mean yes, and our 'no' should truly mean no. We do not always realize the spiritual hazards that can be caused by the swearing of oaths, because it is an entrenched and even respected part of secular culture. 'Swearing on the Bible' is one of the farcical rituals employed in our nation's medieval-quality legal system, to give it an air of apparent legitimacy. Likewise, public officials are often 'sworn in' during overblown ceremonies, for the same reason. All this is contrary to God's way of doing things*, although it is interesting that even secular authorities feel such an obvious need for God's approval.

* Note that swearing an oath and making a vow are different actions, and in the original language they involve two distinct expressions. A vow involves a promise or prayer to God, whereas an oath is an assurance of honesty or truthfulness on the specific occasion when the oath was made. Both oaths and vows were part of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, vows are unnecessary but generally harmless (for example, see Acts 18:18). James and Jesus himself (e.g. Mathew 5:34) told us not to swear oaths.

To God, the importance of truthfulness has little to do with the specific occasion or its apparent importance. Human authorities impose an artificial air of solemnity on those occasions when it is important for their purposes to do so, and they may even impose this solemnity by force if needed. But God does not have varying standards of truthfulness depending on the occasion. God is always truthful with us, and he wants us always to trust one another so that we can tell the truth in love.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what sense is the Lord's coming near? What implications of this does James identify? How can we develop the kind of patience that James exhorts us to have? Why, in this context, should we not grumble about one another? What should we learn from James's examples of patience? What connection is there between this and the swearing of oaths? Does James want us to apply verse 12 in private settings only, or also in public settings?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2007

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THE WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

Notes For Week Eleven: If One Of You Is . . . (James 5:13-20)

As James prepares to conclude his epistle, he offers some practical thoughts for us to follow in a variety of circumstances. In particular, these ideas show us how much we can help one another, especially through prayer. James closes with a final reminder of the importance of compassion, mercy, and grace, in our relationship with God and in our relationships with one another.

Review of Recent Lessons

After his comparison of earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, James exhorts us to come near to God (James 4:1-10). We must acknowledge our fleshly desires and come humbly to God, relying on his grace and mercy. Because our short and fragile lives here on this earth are only a mist (James 4:11-17), we should live for God's will instead of plotting and planning to get the things that our flesh desires.

That this world will someday end, and that we shall all face judgment, is certain - in fact, the Judge is standing at the door (5:1-12). James thus gives a somber warning to the self-indulgent and self-satisfied. The impermanence of wealth makes it both foolish and sinful to place material wealth above spiritual needs. Those who do so usually compound their error by ignoring the needs of those around them, and they harm others, rather than helping them.

James urges us all to wait patiently for the Lord, since his coming is near. He reminds us of the many examples of perseverance in Scripture, and he also exhorts us to live in genuine truthfulness. We should tell the truth always, not only in formal or 'important' situations.

Offering Mutual Aid (James 5:13-16)

The ideas in these verses are straightforward, perhaps even obvious. Yet these are the very lessons that we so often forget when we could most benefit from them. Much of Christianity really is rather easy to understand if we ignore the distractions of the world and listen to God. Once we realize this, we can see that there are countless ways in which we can help one another.

James points out that there is generally a simple, appropriate spiritual response to whatever current situation we might find ourselves in (5:13). Whenever we are in trouble* of any kind, our first response ought to be to pray, so that whatever we may do can be done with an awareness of God's help and guidance. When we are happy, it is most of all fitting to praise God, through song or any other appropriate means.

* Literally, 'suffering' or 'afflicted' (i.e. by events or emotions), as several versions translate the verse.

These are simple ideas, yet they remind us that our first response is not always the one focused on God. When we face trials or trouble, it can take us a while before our emotions subside long enough for us to remember to pray. Likewise, when we are happy, it is not always our first thought to praise and thank God for the blessings we have received.

James develops these ideas further with his thoughts on spiritual healing (5:14-16). Continuing with his theme, he notes that the best first response to an illness is to ask others to pray (note the slight but interesting difference from his advice to the troubled). He goes further with this

example, recommending that a severely sick person seek out the elders of the church for prayer and anointing*, in order to call special attention to the situation.

* Although it might seem possible at first that the anointing with oil that James mentions is for medical purposes (note also Mark 6:13), this turns out to be rather doubtful. Although medicinal oils were used for a number of purposes, overall medical science was far too advanced at the time for anyone to have considered the use of medicinal oils to be a universal cure. Note also that James says (in verse 15) that it is the prayer that makes the person well. Anointing here, as in most other uses, has the significance of designating something as belonging to the Lord, or giving something over to God.

James makes some interesting observations on what this can accomplish. He emphasizes that a 'prayer offered in faith' can make the sick person well. The sick person will be raised up by God, and by God's power, which he graciously grants in response to faithful prayer. The power is not in the anointing, in the elders, or even in the act of prayer, but in God himself. The humility of the sick person allows him to ask for help, and the compassion of the elders (or others) who pray for him leads to prayers offered in sincere faith.

Because it is natural to associate physical healing with spiritual health, healing from sin* is also given as an additional result of such faithful prayers. This leads James to exhort us all to confess our sins to one another, and thus to pray for one another. The early Christians set us an example in the way that they truly believed in praying for one another, and today we can do the same.

* In this era, there was a common misconception that illnesses and diseases were the direct result of sin. Jesus himself refutes this, and it is most doubtful that James would have believed it. James says 'if' the sick person has sinned, leaving it as a clear possibility that the illness may have nothing to do with sin.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How are the things that James recommends appropriate responses to being in trouble, happy, or sick? Are there other occasions when we can practice similar responses to situations? Why is the sick person told to take the extra step of having others pray? Is there any way for us now to put into practice James's advice for the elders to anoint a sick person? What reasons are there for us to pray for each other's spiritual healing?

Spiritual Strength (James 5:17-20)

The final two points in the epistle help us to remember where we can find true strength and true power. Elijah is one of many possible examples of the power available to us when we pray in the will of God. But we do not have to be an 'Elijah' for God to be able to use us in valuable ways. Even the least of us can help others to share in God's limitless grace and mercy.

James presents Elijah as an example of "powerful and effective prayer" by a righteous man (5:17-18). He stresses that Elijah was human "just like us", for otherwise his example would not be of any use to us. We would do well to remember that Scripture provides countless examples of faith from those who were truly human, without any special ability to do the right thing. They were subject to the same emotions, temptations, and desires as we are.

The historical setting for the events James describes can be found in 1 Kings 17-18*. In the era of the divided kingdom, Elijah prophesied in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Ahab, one of the worst of all of Israel's rulers. Ahab's rampant idolatry and blatant sin were imitated by the people, provoking Elijah to pray for God to withhold the blessing of rain. Only after Elijah's dramatic confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel did the rains return.

* James refers specifically to 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:41-45, but he has the whole episode in mind.

Elijah's prayer for blessing first to be withheld and then to be granted clearly had God's approval. Though James's main point is to teach how powerful the prayer of a single person can be, Elijah's approach to a dire spiritual situation is also of note in its own right. Elijah was surely sensitive to the sufferings caused by the lack of rain, and yet he knew that this trial was necessary, in order to draw attention to the spiritual 'drought' in Israel. He did not, of course, take any personal action to deprive others of rain or anything else - he simply prayed for God to do so, and was then ready to accept whatever answer God gave him.

James closes with a reminder of how we can share God's mercy with one another (5:19-20). We all know how easy it is for someone to wander from the truth*, whether due to foolish desires, false teachings, spiritual complacency, or something else. James points out what a fine act of mercy it is to bring such a person back to the truth. In practice, this can be quite a difficult task, but that simply highlights all the more how valuable it is in God's sight.

* Although some of James's points in this verse could equally be applied to helping an unbeliever, in context he is talking about a believer in Jesus who strays from the truth in some significant way.

The consequences of returning to Jesus after having wandered away are spiritually momentous. Such a person has been saved from spiritual death, amongst many other implications. James uses the wonderful expression that this 'covers over a multitude of sins', emphasizing that the act of spiritual restoration is a time for joy, relief, and compassion. The wanderer needs humility to return, and the one who brings back the wanderer needs compassion and faith. God's joy thus overflows in the forgiveness of the numerous sins that can now be swept away.

It is indeed appropriate that James should close with this emphasis on the power of grace and mercy. We are so often weak, and are so often caught up in the cravings of our fleshly bodies. Yet Jesus knows this, and all he asks is that we have the humility to realize how helpless we are without him. For his part, God offers us countless spiritual blessings, yet mercy and grace are the blessings that so often, in our daily lives, we find ourselves in need of again and again.

If we learn to live in humility, with a new appreciation for God's grace and mercy, it enables us to make the kinds practical changes that James has discussed. This also allows us to rejoice with God over the multitude of sins whose power to harm was washed away by the blood of Jesus.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does James use Elijah as an example of prayer? How was Elijah just like us? Why doesn't his ability to do miracles change this? How can we learn from Elijah's example of prayer? What does it mean to 'wander from the truth'? How can we help to 'bring back' such a person? How does this cover up a multitude of sins? How is this last verse a fitting way of closing the epistle?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2007

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