

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Several books of the Bible address how to handle the experiences (predicaments and problems) of life. The best known and most extensive collection of these writings is Proverbs. In the New Testament Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and all of the letter of James could be classified as "wisdom literature." The Book of James has been called the Proverbs of the New Testament. It is generally thought that the author was the brother of Jesus. He was the head of the Church at Jerusalem at the time of the ministry of Paul. The Epistle was written to Christians and addresses the issues of everyday Christian living. Not only do we find advice regarding what we might or should do, but we also find help regarding our attitude or the way we view problems.

James 1:1-18

We deal with problems and trials every day. Some problems are beyond our experience and knowledge and for these we seek advice from people who have specialized knowledge in the area. Other problems seem to not have a good answer. In our attempt to remedy a "problem" we may be faced with possible actions that lead to unknown outcomes. These may all appear to be worse than the original problem. A phrase that is popular nowadays to describe this situation is "unintended consequences." We use various other terms or phrases to describe such situations. Sometimes we say we are on the "horns of a dilemma." Many situations we call "problems" might be better described as predicaments. Predicaments usually put us on the horns of a dilemma. In such situations we need wisdom to guide us in determining the best alternatives in the face of uncertainty.

¹ James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. James 1:1 (NASB95)

The first thing we notice about James is that he does not identify himself as the brother of Jesus nor does he identify himself as the pastor of the church at Jerusalem. (The identity of the author is basically unknown - some think this James was one of the children of Mary and Joseph.) The basis of his authority in expecting people to heed what the letter says was simply that he was a servant of Jesus. This letter was written to "the twelve tribes" of the dispersion. Various commentators think that these (twelve tribes) are the descendants of the Israelites who were taken from Samaria and dispersed by the Assyrians. Others think these are the Christian Jews who left Jerusalem following the death of Stephen. The other possibility is that the designation "the twelve tribes" is simply the "Israel of God" or the Church and would then have been intended for all Christians regardless of their parentage. When I read this letter, it speaks to me and I don't know of any Israelite background in my lineage. So, I would tend to favor the third option as to whom the letter was intended.

² Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4 (NASB95)

The trials and testings that James referenced in his opening remarks are not thought to be severe persecutions or health problems (different Greek word would be used for this). It is likely that the reference was to things like social rejection or economic boycotts that happened to Christians who were living in areas where pagan religions or even Judaism was prevalent. If these things did become severe even life-threatening, then relocation or becoming a refugee would be a reasonable

choice. That option was certainly exercised by many of the Christians in Jerusalem following the death of Stephen.

One thing each of us learns in our Christian walk is that we are not immune from troubles and trials. The Bible tells us that “the rain falls on the just and the unjust” which could be related to positive or negative outcomes. If we are farmers, then the rain could be a blessing. If we are having a picnic or a parade, then rain would be unfavorable. To suggest that problems and trials should be viewed with joy seems rather strange to most people. In fact, to the world, this idea seems ridiculous. Most of us in the church typically think in terms of just “being able to hold up in the face of adversity” or cope with problems as being the most we could expect.

The real question is “how will we handle the problems and predicaments of life? We have at least two choices: we can go the way of the world or we can follow the advice of James. The way of the world is to fight back, to rebel or to ignore the problems. James has suggested that we do more than just “get by” or cope with the situation. We should use such situations to our advantage by profiting from them. All of us have seen people who let even small problems ruin their day and some let troubles ruin their entire lives. There is little that is more selfish or self-absorbing than the sorrow that comes from encountering problems or troubles that we consider to be unfair or undeserved. When we see a rock in the road, do we think it is something to stumble over, something to avoid, or something from which to build. We make the choice of how we are going to face the challenges of life. Opportunities for spiritual growth are often disguised as trouble.

Whether it is great sorrow or great gladness, wonderful successes or heavy losses, all the things we experience are God’s disciplines of Life. These can either make us wiser, better and more devout, or make us bitter and separate us from Him. Too often these “disciplines” we undergo have “no effect” and leave us “undisciplined” so that it was all in vain. But if we will simply exercise some introspection, these trials will reveal the truth of who we really are in the depths of our very being.

This revelation of “what or who we are” may show that we are very far from the known character or nature of God which in its depth and breath is totally good. When we realize that we don’t always think, speak, nor act in ways that are aligned with the grace, mercy and love that we associate with God, are we motivated to change or do we simply write it off as “nobody’s perfect?”

Some might argue that this line of thinking or questioning may border on “legalism” or “keeping the law.” Perhaps a better way to consider this is in light of Paul’s admonition to the Christians in the Galatian churches that they are to “put to death the works of the flesh” and to “walk in the Spirit” which yields the fruit of the Spirit as the expression of our lives. To the extent that this is happening in our lives, we give evidence or indicate that we are like our Father in Heaven who is perfect (depth) and complete (breath) lacking nothing.

The major objective that God has for each of us in our Christian walk is that we become as He is by being conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29) Who is the express image of the Father (Heb. 1:3). Whether we label such a condition as perfection, fulfillment or maturity the path that leads to it goes through perseverance or patience. The Bible teaches the importance of sticking with the task until the job is done. This is part of the character of God. In Philippians 1:6 Paul wrote, “And I am confident of this very thing, that He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the Day of Jesus Christ.” Jesus said we shall reap in due season if we faint not. Jesus also reminded us in the Revelation that the rewards of the Kingdom are for those who overcome.

Notice that in both the Romans chapter eight passage and in the above quoted passage from

Philippians, it is God Who is using all things and working in us to bring about this transformation. Our part in this process is to cooperate with God in the disciplines He brings to us. That “cooperation” is “active perseverance” rather than just “passively enduring” the problems and trials. The trials and problems would seek to prevent us from faithfully staying on track toward the goal of the high calling we have in Christ. Perseverance is akin to making course corrections when an ill wind tries to blow our ship off course. Finding the wisdom to deal with the situations of life so we can have the right outlook and practice perseverance is valuable to us. How do we find such wisdom?

⁵ But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. James 1:5–8 (NASB95)

As we concluded verse four, we saw that we should be “lacking nothing.” The reality is that none of us has “arrived” and we do have deficiencies or that something might be lacking that could hinder us from our growth toward maturity in Christ. James addressed this likely “lack” in verse five.

Wisdom (as used in these verses) is not simply “knowledge and understanding” but involves embracing the truth that the purpose of everything in life is there to cause us to become all that God intends for us to be. Wanting to be like Christ and realizing that is what God also wants for us is the ultimate way we can show the proper kind of respect for God. Such respect is called “the fear of the Lord” in the Old Testament and as we remember, that is the beginning of “wisdom.”

When we come to such a realization, then we will not evaluate nor desire things on the basis of physical beauty, how pleasant it is to our senses, or how much worldly success it might bring us. The only thing that will matter is the ability of the situation to cause us to be more like Christ. Wisdom of this description could be said to be practical Christianity that is focused on daily living and not on rites and rituals.

Throughout our discussions most of our thoughts regarding events that try or test us were probably focused on things that would be seen as negative happenings or undesirable things. Before we go too far, let’s consider what kind of events in life are more likely to draw us closer to God and which ones might tend to cause us to drift off course? Are those things that cause suffering and anxiety and failure more likely to cause us to seek God or things that give us pleasure, peace of mind and great success? There may be more danger in the pleasantries of life than in the sufferings we encounter which could cause us to be diverted from the “Way” in which we should walk.

Back to addressing the question of “How do we find such wisdom?” The answer is simply “ask for it.” What a great promise! God will provide the wisdom for us to deal with the trials and tribulations of life. Notice that we are to deal with them. This is not something we just turn over to God. The trials and tribulations are opportunities for us to grow and become more like Christ.

We quickly discover a significant difficulty most of us face in dealing with tough problems. As we address such issues, we switch back and forth between doing it God’s way and doing it our way. James warns us that if we are not committed to dealing with such problems entirely in God’s way, then we are not likely to get any benefit from the help He gives. One of the things that would help us is to develop some objectivity about problems. This is difficult to do because we are usually too involved to be objective. One series of steps that has been suggested is to do the following: Talk to God about the problem. Read His words and meditate on it. Ask Him to help you to put the problem in the right perspective. State the problem aloud. If it is still confused, then write it down.

As we do these things, we do so with the determination to obey regardless of the way God might lead us. We also need to be on the lookout for positive things that can result from having experienced the problem.

⁹ But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; ¹⁰ and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. ¹² Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. James 1:9–12 (NASB95)

James continues with his paradoxical look at life to help us see things from spiritual insight and not from a worldly view. If the world thinks that rejoicing in trials and problems is strange, then they would think that finding a reason to glory in poverty or seeing the benefit of losing great wealth is really “off the scale” of normal thinking. The argument presented by most commentators is that a believer (brother) who has little material means should realize that he is rich in spiritual things. There is a hymn that has the refrain “I’m a child of the King” and He has all we will ever need. If we look past the material poverty to the spiritual reality, then we can rejoice in having great “wealth” of what **really** counts and is of **eternal** value. On the other hand, a person of great material possession can rejoice as he puts such material wealth in proper perspective to realize that “you can’t take it with you” and that such “things” have no eternal or lasting significance. The key is to keep material things in proper perspective.

It struck me how similar verse nine is to the beatitudes of Matthew chapter five. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Perhaps a general truth to take away from these paradoxes is that we should view all our circumstances (social position, material wealth, intellect, popularity, fame, etc.) in such a way that we see (interpret) these situations as God sees them and not the way the world views them.

Most commentaries address verse 12 in terms of what we will experience when our life is over and we are in heaven. Practically everything else in this chapter (as well as all this letter) is about life right now. We have already noted how similar this passage is to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount which was focused on the way we live now and the “blessedness” of doing things in ways that align with the character and nature of God.

The result (outcome that we experience on a moment-to-moment basis) of the correct approach and perseverance (not giving up or giving in) to the trials we encounter is experiencing life as God intended for us to have. Compare this to the words of Jesus in John 10:10: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Could we argue that this is just “the crown of life?” When trials come and we ride through these times and come out victorious (as a result of being obedient to God’s word), then there is a promised reward – blessedness and all that concept implies. A word of caution for all of us: The judgment of whether the outcome is victorious or not depends on whether we view life from an eternal or temporal viewpoint. Faith assures us that God will show us the way to handle the situations of life as we seek to do His will and to grow to be more like Jesus.

¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. ¹⁵ Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. James 1:13–15 (NASB95)

In the Greek, the word translated as trials and testing is the same as that which is translated as tempted. The context of the passage is used to understand the different intent of the writer or speaker. In the earlier verses the focus was on an idea similar to doing an assay on an ore or on a

metal to determine its purity. In verse twelve the word was used in this same general sense of anything that might turn us away from being faithful to our calling as followers of Christ. Starting in verse thirteen, the word is used in a way that most people today think of when they hear or see the word “tempt” as being an allurement to do something that is wrong.

It is always wrong for us to blame God for our doing wrong. Though trials come our way, God does not ever entice us to do evil. The tendency to do evil is built into the human nature. There is a progression of events: We start with a strong desire. If that strong desire is not brought under control, then it leads to predictable consequences. Once the idea becomes entrenched (implanted), it is like a pregnancy. It will result in a birth. In this case the thing that is born is sin. But sin is not the final outcome of the sequence. Sin brings forth death if it is allowed to run its course. James is telling us that, in life, we will encounter problems that are just part of life. We will also encounter problems that are a result of our being enticed to sin. The outcomes of these are usually different. The first are opportunities that help us grow. The second will be destructive if we do not repent and turn away from such enticements.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. ¹⁷ Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. ¹⁸ In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. James 1:16–18 (NASB95)

God wants only what is best for us. As we remember how good God has been in the past, we are reassured since we know that God does not change. The good He wants for us is only natural considering we are His children. As we realize this special relationship of being a child of God, then we should behave in a Godly fashion.

These verses can perhaps be considered to be the contrast of what God has for us (the word of truth that leads to life) as compared to what the world, the flesh and the devil offer us which is sin that leads to death.

How can we apply this to our lives? When problems arise we should not despair but view them as opportunities for growth. When we consider the various alternatives of how to deal with problems we must always consider where our actions will take us – will they lead to sin and experience a life that is separated and estranged from God or to following the leading of the Holy Spirit and living a full and meaningful life that has eternal qualities.

James 1:19-27

Many years ago, I found a small paper back book that was a commentary on the Epistle of James that was written to help teenagers understand this book of the Bible. The title of the book by Ethel Barrett was “Will the Real Phony Please Stand Up?” This title was a take off on the “What’s My Line” TV show of the 1960s. The idea of the show was that three contestants would all claim to be a person who had accomplished something and a panel of celebrities would ask a series of questions to determine which guest was the “real” person all three were claiming to be.

All of us do a pretty good job of presenting a public persona of “who we are” to the world in which we live. You probably have noticed that some people have one persona at work, another persona at home, and still another one at church. So how do you tell which one is the real person? I think most use a “rule of thumb” that could be called “look for the lowest common denominator.” That is a phrase that comes from grammar school mathematics that is used when adding fractions. We aren’t adding fractions, but all of us tend to think that each person has a lower limit of common decency that he or she will not violate. For some that limit is set at a pretty high level and for some

others it is pretty low. We probably don't ever pretend to be less noble than we are, but do find ourselves putting on a pretty face that hides the reality of "who we are."

The second part of the first chapter of James' letter looks at this question of "belief and behavior" and examines it in the light of what we say and what we do. James addressed such issues as being receptive to God's word, (James 1:19-21); practicing or acting on God's Word (James 1:22-25); and applying God's word (James 1:26-27).

¹⁹ This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. James 1:19-21 (NASB95)

James seems to be a very practical person and was probably a good teacher. In the first part of the chapter (first 18 verses) he presented a basic life philosophy of how we should look at things that happen around us and to us. Now he has moved into some practical applications of what should result from seeing life from the perspective he has just presented. The starting point for this practical application is eagerness to learn or "quick to listen." The English word "listen" or "hear" that is used in various translations doesn't capture the intent of the Greek word which carries the idea of "harken" or "pay attention" or "take it to heart." So much of what we hear with our physical ears, never get into our minds and much of what does make it to our minds does not get into our hearts. You've heard the expression "in one ear and out the other." This description likely applies to the great majority of what we hear. Even if the information gets recorded in our minds, it is still a long way off from being accepted as something that is going to influence what we do.

The second way for this philosophy to express itself is in what we say. Some times people will try to practice the advice of being slow to speak by not speaking at all. The caution is that we should speak only after having given thoughtful consideration to the situation. Many times, we will speak from preconceived ideas and will jump to a conclusion about a situation before knowing the facts. This may be why "listening" was placed before "speaking" in the list that James gave us.

The Bible reminds us in many places that God is slow to anger. Since this is true, then we would behave as God does if we too are going to be "slow to anger." The psychologists of today tell us we should not keep our angry feelings pent up inside of us. They say we should vent our feelings to have good mental health. Advice of this kind can be taken to extremes by those with agendas to be disruptive by advocating incivility. If everyone abandons civility then we have anarchy and chaos.

There is a better way: don't get angry at all. When angry feelings and resentment start to build, then it is up to us to recognize that the trials of life are really for our eventual good. If we truly count it all joy when problems start, then we won't have much room for anger or wrath in our lives. The little petty things won't get to us. We can save our righteous indignation for those things that are truly important issues.

If James' advice of "quick to learn, slow to speak, slow to anger" is applied in reference to the Word of God, then we could say that we should be eager to know God's intent for our lives and not protest those plans nor become resentful about how things have worked out. If we pay attention to the Word and not listen to our own opinion about what we should do, then we will get rid of thoughts and actions that are not pleasing to God and we will allow the Holy Spirit to work the Word into the very fabric of our being so that we are transformed into the image of Christ.

²² But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for once he has looked at himself

and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. James 1:22–25 (NASB95)

Jesus told a parable about two brothers whose father told them to go work in the vineyard. Both of them understood what he said and what he wanted. One brother readily agreed to get right to work and the other brother refused to go. Eventually, the one that agreed to work found something else to do and the son that refused went out and worked all day in the vineyard. Jesus said that it was obvious which son was pleasing to his father. The Word of God places much emphasis on turning what we know to be “the right thing to do” into “doing the right thing.”

This admonition from James is very similar to what Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount. He used the illustration of building a house on the sand versus building it on a rock. If we simply hear the word of God and even agree that it is truth and yet nothing is affected in our lives, then hearing it and agreeing with it is useless. We are simply fooling ourselves. Part of our problem is that we can be easily stirred into wanting to do something about a situation while we are listening to a motivational speaker; however, if no real change happens deep down inside, then we quickly forget all the good things we thought we were going to do. I like James' example of looking into a mirror and then quickly forgetting as we walk away from the mirror. How many times have you seen a person check out his appearance in a mirror? He (or she) will straighten up, shoulders back, maybe even smile and then as soon as they walk away, they are slouching and frowning. Sometimes our resolve to do better lasts about that long. If we lived in a room full of mirrors so that we could see ourselves all the time, then we might smile more, have better posture and do other things that could be helpful.

The word of God must be a mirror for us. As we read the word, we can see our lives in comparison to what the word says. We may think about areas that could be straightened up and put into better agreement with the word and then we close the book, go out into the world and don't think about it until we read that particular passage again. If we really had the word of God in our hearts, and God has promised to write it on our hearts, then it would be like living in a room full of mirrors. When we did something (or even thought about it), then there would be the Holy Spirit holding up the word of God so that we could see whether or not we are in agreement with it.

In the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Walvoord makes the following observation:

To look into the mirror of the Word of God involves an obligation. One must look **intently into the perfect Law that gives freedom**. The intent and sustained look with a ready response is the key to spiritual strength and continued maturity. The word for “looks intently into” (*parakypsas*) literally means “to stoop down” in order to have a good close look. The “Law that gives freedom” seems like a paradox. Law seems to imply restraint and therefore a lack of freedom. Not so with God's Law. His perfect Law provides true freedom. “Hold to My teaching,” Christ said, “then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). One who does what God decrees will find full liberty and **will be blessed in what he does**.

The Bible is full of great promises and many Christians are missing them because we are forgetful hearers and do not practice (do) what we know we ought to do. James gives some practical examples from daily living where we might do a quick check as to how we are doing.

²⁶ If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. James 1:26–27 (NASB95)

If we can't control what we say, then perhaps we ought to do some examining of what is in our hearts. Jesus told us that "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." James characterized religion that does not result in a changed heart that leads to a controlled tongue as

“empty” or vain.

Visiting the fatherless and widows is typical of the activities that will be considered at the Great White Throne judgement. Did we visit those in prison, those that were sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc.? Notice that James includes these things in the same list that points out that we should have purity in our lives – keep ourselves unspotted from the world. This list of activities is not intended to be exhaustive and just because you find a person doing such things does not, in any way, prove that person is a Christian. Christians certainly should be doing these kinds of things. Notice what James is telling us that we need a balance of the Social Gospel and Personal Piety. Many times we find people concentrating on one or the other – we really need both.

A good summary of what James is telling us can be found in *The New Bible Commentary* by D. A. Carson and others. He said

One can tell truly godly people by their lifestyle. If people have uncontrolled tongues (and so are often exploding in anger or quarreling), all of their religious practices are worthless. They really do not love God in their hearts. The type of piety which God looks for has two characteristics, which are the two sides of the same coin. First, it cares for the poor (the orphans and widows are two of the four major categories of the poor in the OT). Secondly, it is not *polluted by the world*, which means that it is not seeking security or advancement in terms of what is valued by people in the world. Because it does not love the world, there is no need to hold on to money. Therefore such people can be generous and give freely.

These activities – these things to do – that James has mentioned relate to what we (as individuals) do out in the world. The same principles must also apply in the Church and its activities. So often I read the Bible and my focus is on what God wants me to do as a believer. I don't normally think in terms of how does this or should this apply to the body of believers. When we fail to make this connection, then we wind up with a worship service of activities that exalt those who “perform” rather than exalt Jesus. We have activities and rituals that are pleasing and even entertaining to us as observers and participants. The net result in many cases is that it would not make a lot of difference if we thought about God or not. We could be attending a motivational meeting to inspire us to be better individuals and not see a lot of difference on what we do as a result of having been there. It is even more difficult to see that the impact of what we learn and of our coming together is doing anything to motivate the body of believers to act in unity and with common purpose.

James 2:1-13

Many people today are impressed only with that which they can sense with the five physical senses. They never get beyond the outward characteristics to the real meat of the matter. There is even a saying that in advertising one must “sell the sizzle rather than the steak.” We have become the “sizzle society.” Many people are greatly influenced by appearances and do not look beyond the outward show to see if any substance is beneath the surface.

- Why do you think a used car dealer has all his cars washed at least once a week?
- Why would a bakery who sells directly to the public direct the exhaust from their operation toward the main street?
- Why would a sales person spend more on clothing than an accountant spends?
- Why would you pay more attention to what Billy Graham says compared to a street- corner preacher?

This is not something new. Jesus came into a world that put much stock into outward appearances. Agents of governors and kings who might go into an area to prepare for a visit from the governor or king would be expected to reflect the dignity of the ruler they represented in the way they dressed and the way they behaved themselves. Yet John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for the coming Messiah dressed in camel hair clothing and was eating locust and wild honey. We would do well to keep in mind what God told Samuel regarding the selection of a king for the nation of Israel: “for man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

I’m not sure that we can ever be objective in assessing such things. We tend to think that the opinion of a person who speaks with a Midwestern accent and uses proper grammar is better than the opinion of a person who sounds as if he grew up as a tenant farmer in the deep south. We tend to think that a handsome, well-groomed person is smarter or more reliable than a physically unattractive, poorly groomed person would be.

God doesn’t have a problem with making assessments on the basis of outward appearance since He looks on the heart. We do NOT have that ability just based on what we see or hear in an initial encounter. It usually takes multiple encounters with a person to really get to know them and discover who they really are. Just as you cannot judge a book by its cover (you need to read it) and you can’t judge a steak by the sizzle (you have to taste it), you cannot judge a person by the clothes they wear or how attractive they may (or may not) be.

These things relate to what we do out in the world. Do the same principles apply in the Church and its activities? James addressed the question of prejudging in a church setting based on appearance in Chapter two of his general epistle. Various translations have rendered the Greek word used in the original text as “respect of persons” or “partiality” or “favoritism.” We will see that such behavior (or thinking) is judgmental, unreasonable, and even sinful.

¹ My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ² For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? James 2:1–4 (NASB95)

The general admonition is simply “Christian must not show favoritism or preferential treatment.” We are called to be as God is. We are to follow His example. There is ample evidence in the Scripture that God shows no partiality; therefore, for us to do so would be incompatible with His nature. James then gave an example of what favoritism might look like in the church. It is so easy to judge things by the outward appearance that most of us fall into that trap. This kind of behavior can result in discrimination of people on the basis of some really shallow criteria. In the church, it might be how well one dresses or how much money one is perceived to have. I’m sure that we are guilty of such practice in our own church. It may not show itself in deed or word, but I would hazard a guess that all of us are guilty of “partiality thinking.”

In all the times I have read this passage in the past, I had just assumed that James was describing a worship service. That may not be the case. The word translated “assembly” in most translations is normally translated “synagogue.” James may have been describing a dispute settlement in which the elders were meeting to hear the dispute between two believers. In such cases, those whom he is addressing are expected to take on a role of being judges with regard to the dispute. The caution, then is to be careful to judge based on the facts and not on appearances.

In fact, in verse four James focused on the fact that they had taken on a role of being a judge. If we apply James’ admonition with regard to what might have happened in a worship service, then

the bad judgment is compounded by their assuming a role that has not been assigned to them. Not only are they setting themselves up as judges, they are also doing a bad job in this role since they were operating with wrong thinking. Another subtle issue that James touched on is that this practice of being judgmental was going on among Christians. They were not just making judgments about the pagans and the heathen, but they were judging fellow believers. If we slip into such behavior of judging other Christians, then we need to realize that God had accepted them and we should ask ourselves the question “Who are we, to judge differently than the judgment already rendered by God?”

⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? James 2:5–7 (NASB95)

God has promised that those who love Him are heirs of His kingdom because they are rich in faith. This promise included even those who are poor in worldly riches. The criterion is simply this: We must have the kind of faith that produces love for God and has nothing to do with how smart you are, how much material possession you have been given to be a steward of, how good-looking you are, or what your nationality happens to be. The major effect these things can have is that the person who has wealth, good intelligence, and/or beauty might put their trust in these things rather than trust in God.

James pointed out how illogical the practice of favoritism was in his day. Those who were most critical of the church were likely to be those that were wealthy and yet the leaders and other members were showing them partiality and preferential treatment over those who really loved and supported the church. James was not advocating that we treat the wealthy without proper respect, but that we should not let wealth (beauty, fame, intelligence) be a criterion for deciding how we treat people.

It was not very likely in a society in which the common person had little or no power for the rich and powerful to be abused by the judicial system. However, let's put this situation into the context of today in which there are laws that should provide equal protection under the law for all regardless of their socioeconomic status. Is it possible that we might encounter reverse discrimination or partiality that would unfairly favor the poor over the rich? Have you ever heard of McDonalds and the \$7 million dollar lawsuit judgment over a cup of hot coffee?

There are people who put themselves in harms way in order to bring about lawsuits against those who are rich. After all, who would want to sue a poor person? This is the same logic that Willie Sutton used in answering the question of why did he rob banks? Willie said, “That where they keep the money.” We have romanticized the story of Robin Hood (who stole from the rich to give to the poor) to the point that we have turned justice on its head. Today we need to caution people to not show partiality period!

We may argue that showing partiality is just a little sin. However, when we consider the consequences of such action on other people, then we can see that this “little” sin can have serious consequences. If we show partiality to a “rich” person, then we will cause him to conclude that the fact he is rich is important. This can lead that person to trust in his riches and to become prideful. Such attitudes (which are quite natural reactions) hinder people in their spiritual growth and make it difficult for them to really put their trust in God. If we show prejudice against a “poor” person, then we add to his sense of worthlessness that the rest of the world has been reinforcing for years. Such feelings can lead to despair and hopelessness that makes faith ineffective. When faith becomes

ineffective, then the person may conclude that even God could not care for someone so worthless.

The alternative is to let the Holy Spirit have control of our lives in such a way to free us from prejudice and partiality. Paul tells us (2 Cor 3:17) “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” This liberty sets us free from the old ways of judging others and we are at liberty to be as God is in showing mercy and grace based on “who we are in Christ” and not based on the other person’s status. Our salvation should matter or make a difference in the way we live our lives.

⁸ If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:8–13 (NASB95)

I guess that this sums it up pretty well. If we love our neighbor as ourselves – regardless if that neighbor is rich or poor, then we will not have to worry about the specifics of what we do. If the love of God - the God kind of love – is in our hearts then we will be motivated to action and our religion will not be vain. Let just remember that it is not so much in **knowing** the right things to do as in **doing** the right things that we are pleasing to God.

Many of us understand that “God is love,” we have seen numerous examples of His love in action, and yet we still do not get involved in expressing our love in concrete terms. Why? Usually, it is because we had rather do something else (typically for ourselves).

Jesus calls on each person who would follow Him to deny himself, take up his cross daily and then follow Him. Unless we get self out of the way, then we will be motivated by what pleases us and even if we help others, we will do so with the consideration of “what’s in this for me?” James saw such considerations as leading to partiality. If we show favoritism to one person over another, it is likely that it is because we think that there may be some advantage for us by showing such partiality. Once we start thinking that way, then we have abandoned the spirit of the law that would have us to “love our neighbor as we love ourselves.”

It is important to remember that loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is a two-edged sword. We know that showing mercy is preferable to demanding judgment. The problem comes when we want mercy for ourselves and judgment for everyone else. Based on what the scriptures tell us God will deal with us in a similar way to how we deal with others. Jesus’ comment on the Lord’s Prayer was specifically about forgiveness and that God will forgive us in the same way we forgive others. The same thing could be said about showing partiality or favoritism. If you want to be treated impartially and fairly, then we must practice that ourselves.

It is really quite straight forward. We can treat people impartially when we don’t get distracted by external appearances. We must see people in the same way God sees them and relate to them in love and mercy.

James 2:14-26

Years ago, someone told me about a friend of his. This friend had a reputation of being a “mean fellow.” I have no idea why people thought he was mean; however, his friend said, “He’s really not. Let me tell you what he does. He knows a lot of elderly people that need help, and he will

buy them a load of coal and have it delivered. If he sees something else that they need he will just go out and get it for them.” It would be my guess that this person did not go to church, he probably cursed like a sailor, probably drank, smoked and chewed. Yet he was coming closer to doing what Jesus told us to do than many people who are at church every time the doors are open, who never say a bad word, would sooner die than drink and thinks that smoking and chewing are about the nastiest habits around.

We recall the parable about two brothers whose father told them to go work in the vineyard. Both of them understood what he said and what he wanted. One brother readily agreed to get right to work and the other brother refused to go. Eventually, the one who agreed to work found something else to do and the son that refused went out and worked all day in the vineyard.

While these are two different stories, there is a common thread in both stories. How you would describe the “moral” of the story in each case? Could it be that “what you do matters more than what you just say?” Jesus implied that it was obvious which son was pleasing to his father. The Word of God places much emphasis on turning what we know to be “the right thing to do” into “doing the right thing.”

The second half of chapter two of James addresses such questions in terms of “what we believe” and the “way we behave.” We could divide these thirteen verses into three groups of simple concepts

- Dead Faith – James 2:14-17
- Useful Faith – James 2:18-19
- Complete or Saving Faith – James 2:20-26

¹⁴ What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? ¹⁷ Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. James 2:14–17 (NASB95)

It would be a mistake to assume that verse 14 and following are not intimately connected to the previous verses starting in verse eight. It is there that James mentioned the “royal law” of “love your neighbor as yourself” which we understand to be the spirit of the laws that are outlined in the second half of the Ten Commandments. Remember that James was writing to people who had come out of a Jewish religious system in which there was a lot of emphasis on keeping the letter of the law and they did not let the spirit of the law “get in the way” of thinking that they were pleasing to God simply by observing (in minute detail) the letter of the law. The problem with that religious system was that if you broke one of the rules, then the whole of the “law” was broken.

It is only in keeping the spirit of the law that we are pleasing to God and we can do that only if we have the love of God poured into our hearts that is accomplished when we put our faith and trust in Jesus. After they have heard the gospel message that “justification is by grace through faith,” some had applied the same kind of logic they used with regard to the letter of the law to the concept of faith as a means of salvation. The equivalent of thinking that the letter of the law is all that is needed would be that “if you will just believe the right doctrines and make the right professions or confessions,” then that is all you need. In the case of the letter of the law, the missing element was the “spirit of the law” and in the case of salvation by faith alone, the missing element is validation of the genuineness of that faith by works of faith.

Not everything we call “faith” is the real thing. If we have the kind of faith that does not result in godly action, then it is not the kind of faith that leads to salvation. James called it dead faith. The example James used about helping or not helping another person with food and clothing

illustrates how ridiculous it is to think that a faith devoid of action can do anyone any good.

Some will try to confuse the teaching of this passage with “earning God’s mercy.” This is not the issue. The question here is the genuineness of the faith and the reality of the salvation experience. (A person may have the perfect intellectual grasp of the doctrines and so one could argue that this is “true faith.” I would claim that you may have a true doctrine but a faulty faith in that knowing the truth does not accomplish anything unless we are motivated to action that is a result of the truth we know.) Many skeptics (atheists, for example) claim that the salvation experience the Church proclaims is nothing more than some emotional high that is self-induced. For some people, this may be the case. However, if their faith is genuine, then there will be results. It will be more than lip-service.

¹⁸ But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. James 2:18–19 (NASB95)

There are some things that are practically impossible to do. For example, if you tried to describe the color blue to a person who was blind from birth and, you would fail. The only way you can know what blue looks like is to see it. If your child asks you “Do you love me?” Your answer is an automatic “Yes.” You don’t even have to think about your answer. But, in childlike innocence, the child may then ask “Can I see your love for me? Show it to me.” You cannot see love apart from actions. We could take all the “fruit of the Spirit” (love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, meekness, temperance, and faith) and the thing they have in common is that you cannot see them with your physical eye. So when James says show me your faith without deeds, this is somewhat “tongue in cheek.” There is no way to do that. A simpler example could be “can you see the wind?” How do you know that there is a wind? By the results!

Genuine “saving faith” will produce “works of faith.” Even Jesus said, “By their fruit, ye shall know them.” This is exactly what James meant by “I will show you my faith by my works.” If just believing the facts is all it takes, then the devil would have it made. He knows! Even Abraham’s faith was validated in that he took action that proved he believed that God’s word is true.

²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²² You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:20–26 (NASB95)

This consideration of faith and deeds (in verse twenty) should cause us to raise the question of “does doing good deeds prove that we have genuine faith?” I don’t think that we would want to jump to that conclusion. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews mentioned in two places that we had been delivered from “dead works.” So consider this: Dead Faith is belief that doesn’t produce good deeds and Dead Works are deeds that came about but not as a result of good faith.

What are some examples of doing things that could come under the general classification of “dead works?” Possible Examples: A person is running for public office and works on a Habitat for Humanity house for a poor person. A person is being considered for a job promotion at the local factory and he volunteers to help with several United Way agencies to help the needy of the community. A guy is courting a young lady whose dad is the pastor of the local church. The guy volunteers to help with teaching in the children’s department. With no more than what has been

said, we still don't know if these are "dead works" or not! The missing bit of information in each case is the motivation for what was done. The purpose in the heart is known only by God. The message in these examples is that we need to be careful in such judgments.

As we move on into the remaining verses we will discover some subtle differences in meanings of the way certain verbs were used by James and compare these with what Paul had written regarding this same general subject.

In verse twenty-one James asked the question "Was not Abraham justified by works?" An apparent answer to this question can be found in Romans 4:2 where Paul wrote "If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God." This comparison looks very much like a contradiction. Both passages used the same Greek word (*dikaioo*) for "justified." As we well know, there can be different "shades of meaning" for various words in any language. In this particular case (according to Strong's Numbers) there are at least three different usages for this Greek word. The first is "to render righteous." The second is "to show, exhibit, one to be righteous." The third is "to declare, pronounce, one to be just, righteous."

Apparently, Paul referenced the first "shade of meaning" in the Romans passage with the implied assertion that Abraham was not "rendered" (made) righteous by offering up Isaac. On the other hand, James was using the second "shade of meaning" in his letter to claim that what Abraham did "showed" or "demonstrated" his righteousness.

Some of the newer translations such as the NIV try to show this difference in translating verse twenty-one as "Abraham was considered righteous for what he did." The key word in understanding this and seeing that James and Paul are not contradicting each other is the word "considered." Paul said (in Romans 4:3) "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." The consideration or visible evidence of that righteousness was **seen** in the offering of Isaac. James did NOT write that "what Abraham did" **caused** him to **be** righteous. What he did simply gave understanding or evidence of the righteousness (or right standing before God) that he already had.

The next sentence is (from NIV) "*You see that his faith and his actions were working together.*" The key word here is "see." What Abraham did enabled us to "see" evidence of his faith. It is also important to note that the observation that "faith and action worked together" is another way of stating that people will behave in a way that is in accordance with what they truly believe.

And the scripture was fulfilled . . . When promises or prophecies are found in the Bible we expect these to be fulfilled or to happen, occur, come to pass, or whatever term we might use. The promise to Abraham that "his descendants would possess the land of Canaan" was fulfilled when they actually occupied the land. The prophecy that "the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem" was fulfilled when Jesus was born there some two thousand years ago. When God gave the promise, it was (in His viewpoint) a done deal. We say that the promise or prophecy was fulfilled (or completed) when we could **see** the evidence of it. So when Abraham offered up Isaac he was giving evidence of his righteousness (resulting from his faith) and thus we can say that "what was written" was **fulfilled**. The fulfillment did not cause the righteousness, but it just allowed it to be seen.

We notice the same words of "see" and "considered" are used in the description of what Rahab did to help the spies when the Israelites were checking out the promised land before the invasion and fall of Jericho.

The bottom line is that the fulfillment or completion of any promise or declaration of a spiritual reality is the happening or outworking of whatever action is associated with the spiritual

reality. In the case of faith or belief the outworking of the resulting righteousness is found in righteous deeds or actions.

Summary

These verses state loudly and clearly that true Christianity is not an “easy believism.” It is not founded on “cheap grace.” It is not just going to church to learn something that is never applied to daily living. It is, on the other hand, a way of life that brings the love of God to bear on and influence all of life. It is a belief that leads to action. It is really a question of whether the love of God is real in our lives. When we are saved, we are given the love of God in our hearts and it is His love that produces the life-changing results. Putting our faith into action is just an expression of our love – that is, God’s love – the self-sacrificing kind of love.

Addendum:

The following is included in the lesson material to show that when Paul stated that Abraham believed God and it was accounted or reckoned to him as righteousness (Romans chapter 4 and Galatians chapter 3) he was using different words than those used by James when he stated “Was not Abraham our father justified or considered righteous by works?”

“accounted” or “reckoned” used in Gal 3:6 is Strong’s number 3049 *logizomai logizomai log-id'-zom-ahee*

AV-think 9, impute 8, reckon 6, count 5, account 4, suppose 2, reason 1, number 1, misc 5; 41
1) to reckon, count, compute, calculate, count over

This word deals with reality. If I "logizomai" or reckon that my bank book has \$25 in it, it has \$25 in it. Otherwise I am deceiving myself. This word refers to facts not suppositions.

Compare the above with

“justified” or “considered righteous” used in James 2:21 is Strong’s number 1344 *dikaioo dikaioo dik-ah-yo'-o*

AV-justify 37, be freed 1, be righteous 1, justifier 1; 40

1) to render righteous or such he ought to be

2) to show, exhibit, evince, one to be righteous, such as he is and wishes himself to be considered

3) to declare, pronounce, one to be just, righteous, or such as he ought to be

Paul was right when he stated that God accounted Abraham’s faith (believing God) as righteousness and James was right when he stated that Abraham showed (gave evidence) that he was righteous by his obedience or action. These statements are NOT in conflict but are complementary.

James 3:1-18

In this day of “social media” almost everyone has an opinion about anything and everything and they want to “share” that opinion with anyone and everyone who will listen to (or read) what they have to say. There are some good ideas and also some really bad ideas that being tossed about in an apparent effort to influence the thinking or opinion of others. In a general sense, sharing ideas and opinions with others to inform or influence could be called “teaching.”

In the time in which the Gospels and the Epistles that make up the New Testament were being written, many of the Jewish Christians scattered about the world were engaged in their own versions of social media such as writing letters, one-on-one discussions, and even more formal sharing of ideas in public gathering places. They were a “religious” people and what they shared with other people was impacted by their world view and their understanding or lack of understanding of what was happening during this transition period of the rapid growth of the church. We know from Paul’s letters to several of the churches that some of these teachers had opinions and ideas that were incorrect and these false teachings were having a negative impact on the Christians and the various churches where these teachers were active.

James was aware of the problem and devoted a significant portion of his letter to warn people to exercise care when taking on a role of “teacher” in their interactions with others. Apparently, many of the Christian Jews were thought by the Gentiles to be more informed or knowledgeable about “religious” things because of their familiarity with the Old Testament Scriptures. Consequently, their opinions were sometimes given more weight than was deserved and when they spoke they would tend to take on the professorial tone of a teacher.

Most of us know from our own personal experience that our tongue gets us into trouble. We joke about the person who has “foot-in-mouth” disease. We can see from the political arena the damage that an inappropriate word can do. In our day of “political correctness” we find that even innocent (in their intent) remarks can get us into deep trouble by using inappropriate comparisons and stereotypes as we attempt to make a particular point in some conversations. All of us would do well to be careful in what we say, lest we do offend someone else. Jesus warned us that we would give an account of even the idle words we speak. Sometimes that accounting comes in this life.

In writing about the need for Christians to exercise control in our lives James focused on the judgment that results from not exercising control, the potential dangers such lack of control can create, the need for consistency in our conduct of life and then he contrasts wise behavior with just following the natural instincts of selfish ambition.

¹ Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. James 3:1–2 (NASB95)

While the focus of James was certainly directed toward those Jewish Christians who found themselves in the role of “teacher,” all of us can learn from the cautions given regarding whatever we say. Sometimes we are not careful in what we say and don’t think about the influence we may be having on others.

The emphasis in the first part of this chapter is about the importance of what we say. It would be appropriate to start with those who are known by what they say. Those in a teaching ministry (or even those in the secular teaching profession) need continual reminding of the significant influence and the accompanying responsibility this influence carries with it. You can readily see that this could apply to anyone in a position of leadership. If a governor, president, pastor, deacon, or a Sunday School teacher does (or says) something that is not appropriate, then the impact of such statements can be harmful. The harm that James (as well as Paul) was apparently concerned about was that the wrong ideas or doctrinal errors being advanced by such “teachers” would lead others away from the truth and limit the freedom and blessings that God intended for those who embrace the truth of the Gospel. Another legitimate concern and one that we see today among various leaders is that everyone seems to be much more critical of those in leadership than

if someone else had said or done the same thing. The criticism or judgment is even more harsh if the leader had been known for speaking against similar things for which he was found to be doing.

James gave a strong warning that even teachers who know what to do and know the consequences of doing what is wrong are subject to making mistakes. Add to this the probability that the teacher had likely condemned others who have made such mistakes in the past and we see a good reason for us to not be critical of others. We have a tendency to criticize or find fault with everyone who is not exactly as we are since we tend to use ourselves as a standard of what is “right.” Even if we live exemplary lives in all things we do, there is a good possibility that we will say something that will be wrong (or interpreted in a manner other than what was intended).

Is it fair to hold those in leadership to a higher standard than we would hold others? You may have mixed opinions about this. Can you think of other Scripture references where this idea is stated? (Several references speak to this: Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47 speak of Jewish teachers who offer long prayers for show and take advantage of the poor would receive greater condemnation. A more general statement was made by Jesus in the latter part of Luke 12:48 that would apply to everyone.)

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more." (Luke 12:48, NASB95)

If a person does control his tongue, then this is an indication he has the ability to control his whole person since controlling the tongue is much more difficult than controlling other actions in our lives. You may be thinking that you know exceptions to this. A person could be very careful in what he says and not so careful in other areas of his life. However, just having the ability to exercise control does not guarantee that he will carry out what he is able to do. Therefore, the outcome in what we do may fall far short of what we could have done.

The importance of what we say applies not only to interactions with others, but it also applies to ourselves. We have likely heard the expression, “What you say is what you get.” The Bible teaches us to make a good profession of what we believe will happen. Usually people talk about all their fears of the bad things that might happen to them. These can become predictions since we sometimes subconsciously focus on the obstacles rather than on the way over or around the obstacles. If we tell ourselves we can’t do this or we can’t do that, then it is likely that we will stop trying the first time we prove ourselves correct. Our problem is that we believe what we say.

³ Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. James 3:3–6 (NASB95)

Bits, rudders, tongues and matches! What do these four things have in common? The commonality I see is “leverage.” We can think of leverage as “using a small effort or small amount of resources to accomplish a large result.” Another word that comes to mind is “potential.” Of course potential can work for benefit or for detriment. The four examples that James used go from neutrality (bits and horses, rudder and ship) to potentially bad (boastful tongue creating a poor image for a person) and then to disaster (a spark causing a forest fire).

Just as a fire can spread and do great damage to everything around, the tongue can defile our entire person.

A person can put a bit in a horse’s mouth and use that horse to plow a field, provide transportation to help someone, or can be used in war. The ship’s rudder can direct a vessel that is

carrying food and passengers or it can direct a boat load of pirates. Fire can be destructive, but who would want to give up the great benefits of fire for cooking our food and warming our homes. In the same way, words can injure and really hurt others, but they can also inspire and motivate others to greatness. Moses told the children of Israel as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land.

I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: Deut 30:19

So, what does all this have to do with those who would presume to be teachers? We can start with a positive example of Bob Pierce who in 1970 saw the poverty and suffering of children on the Korean island of Koje-do and started what eventually became Samaritans' Purse Ministry. Years before that Bob "stumbled across some courageous women (in China) who were living among lepers and orphans, sacrificing everything to share the love of Jesus Christ. Through their selfless love, God gave Pierce a vision for ministry." A little spark started a big beneficial fire. We can find many negative examples of what has happened. One such negative example that most of us know about is what happened around 600 A.D. when a person name Muhammad lit a spark that started a destructive fire that has plagued the world ever since.

⁷ For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. ¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh. James 3:7-12 (NASB95)

There is a certain irony in all of this in that we have demonstrated our ability to tame and train various types of wild animals. We recognize the danger posed by a large animal or poisonous insect and we take precautions to protect ourselves and others; yet we ignore our own tongue which can be far more dangerous when it comes to ruining the lives of people.

Not only is the tongue unruly, it is also very inconsistent. How can blessings and curses come from the same mouth? Jesus taught us that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. If blessings and curses are both coming from the same mouth, then only one of them is truly representative of what is in the heart. It doesn't take a genius to determine what is there! Can you imagine a truly good person deliberately acting badly to try to fool someone else? No, but it is easy to imagine a person deliberately acting good to make a positive impression on another person.

Warren Wiersbe has observed: "The important thing, of course, is the heart; for it is "out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaketh." (Matt. 12:34) If the heart is filled with hatred, Satan will light the fire. But if the heart is filled with love, God will light the fire."

The specific situation noted by James was "praising God and cursing people" which is nothing more than hypocrisy. This could also be illustrated by those who speak well of a person when speaking face-to-face, but may speak ill of the person when they are not present. Another example of such inconsistent behavior is to speak well of those who are rich and powerful and to speak ill of those who are poor and needy. There may also be a problem of cardio-schizophrenia. Just as a city has various districts and certain areas of that city are under the authority of the government and other areas that are totally in rebellion to authority. Is it possible that in the process of becoming transformed into the image of Christ that we have areas in our lives that are tamed and others that are still wild?

¹³ Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This

wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.¹⁸ And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. James 3:13–18 (NASB95)

These various considerations of the impact of even the little things we say and do might lead us to think about whether or not we should be doing anything deliberately to influence the world around us. The simple answer is that some should and some should not. We would hope that the foolish and the ignorant should not be trying to influence what happens. As we all know that is not the always the case. James has defined for us who among us should be taking on the role of teacher – those who are wise and have understanding.

The opposite of having wisdom and understanding could be the bitter jealousy and selfish ambition that would be related to prideful arrogance and false teaching. James certainly suggests that those who would presume to be teachers were motivated by worldly values rather than being called by God. If a person’s teaching leads to disorder and strife rather than peace, gentleness, mercy and good fruits, then it become obvious that the source is “earthly, natural, or even demonic.” You shall know them by their fruits.

The words we speak should reflect what is in our hearts. If we are righteous and good, then it will show up that way in what we do and what we say. Conversely, if our actions and our speech do not reflect what *we think* is in our hearts, then we need to carry out some self examination and face up to the truth about ourselves. If we try to rationalize it by denying what is there, then we fall victim to self delusion. Such rationalizing is the way of the world, the flesh and the devil which results in our lives being filled with envy and strife. Envy and strife complicate our lives. Sin of this nature brings confusion and leads to evil actions.

There is a better way. We can face up to the truth and turn to God to deliver us and the envy and strife can be put away. When we do that, then we find room for purity, peace, gentleness, mercy, impartiality, and honesty and other fruits of righteousness that God has provided for those who are righteous.

We are familiar with the general theme that postulates “We will act in accordance with what we believe.” We could also postulate another truth that “what we believe is a result of who we are in the depths of our being.” This, of course, brings us back to the absolute need to be born again of the Spirit of God that results from identifying with Christ in His death on the cross. It is only by dying to self that we are able to have the resurrected life of Christ as our Source.

James 4:1-17

In the previous chapter, James addressed his concern regarding the judgment and accountability of those who influence other people by their words and the need to exercise care since their influence could have far-reaching impact on others. What about the responsibility and accountability of those who hear the messages of these various “teachers” who could potentially have influence on us? Another way to look at this concern is to consider it or approach it from a standpoint of submission. When we hear a teaching or an idea or a concept, do we accept it, question it, or reject it? In a sense, acceptance or agreement is like submission. When we “buy into” or accept some idea or concept, then it will have an effect in the way we think, what we say and what we do. Consequently, it is important to make sure that the principles and precepts that we adopt are on the correct side of the dividing line that separates the way of the world from the Kingdom of God.

If the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God could be illustrated on a map or chart,

would the dividing line between the two be sharp or fuzzy? We will look for an answer to this question in the words of James that we are presently exploring. While a geography map would show cities, countries, and mountains and valleys on either side of a boundary line, our map has ideas, and concepts that would be shown on one side or the other of the dividing line.

The really important issue is “where do we reside on this map of kingdoms?” The answer to that question can be determined by an honest assessment of what ideas, precepts, concepts, and world view to which we are submitted as evidenced by our typical behavior. Is it likely that most of us find that we may actually embrace ideas on both sides of the line that divides the two kingdoms.

¹ What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ² You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”? James 4:1–5 (NASB95)

By this time in our study of the letter from James, we have likely come to the conclusion that the target readers were those who identified with the church but gave little or no evidence of the new birth. Based on many of the concerns that James addressed in the letter, these folks were giving behavioral evidence that they lived their lives in submission to the concepts and ideas associated with the kingdom of this world rather than the kingdom of God.

Another word for fights and quarrels is “conflict.” All of us have conflicts. While some of the conflicts we experience are external (between us and other people), many of the conflicts we have are internal. These internal conflicts arise from a disparity in what we would like (or maybe claim) to be and like to do and what we are and actually do. The word “desires” or “lusts” used in the first verse in some translations literally means “pleasures.” How often do we make choices on the basis of which alternatives make us feel good?

Is it wrong to choose an alternative that makes us feel good? It depends on which side of the dividing line we are living out our lives which make a difference in which actions and attitudes give us pleasure. The Greek word that is translated as “pleasures” is “hedone.” This is the root for the word hedonism which generally has a negative connotation. A more acceptable word that has a positive connotation is the word “delight.” There are many things that should give us pleasure or delight on the kingdom of God side of living such as delighting in the truth, delighting in seeing others living for Christ, and delighting in helping others.

We might be surprised to learn that some of the external conflicts are spillovers from the internal conflicts we have. This is not always the case. There are situations in which conflicts arise simply because we need to oppose what is happening because it is wrong.

Like most things we encounter, conflict can be both good and evil. Conflict is good when it causes us to recognize we are not where we should be in our relationship with God and with each other. Conflict can also be destructive if it is simply one person trying to win at the expense of someone else. Unhealthy conflict can result in overt fighting and quarrels. We see these results in interpersonal relationships, families, communities, churches, political groups, businesses, and between nations.

If destructive conflicts arise from a perceived disparity in what we have and our hearts’ desire, then conflict resolution should start with an examination of that desire and the methods

available to us for closing the gap or eliminating the disparity. One of the simplest ways to obtain something is to just ask for it. To whom should we direct such requests? Rephrasing the question, we might ask, “Who is the source of every good and perfect gift?” The obvious answer is God is that Source. When we ask God for something, He is more interested in why we want it than in what we want. The attitudes of our hearts and our relationship with Him and our fellow man are issues of importance to God and should be to us. If we are simply imitating the world — greed, inordinate desire, pride, etc. — then we know we cannot expect a loving heavenly Father to give us anything that would feed such an attitude.

In the Old Testament, when Israel went the way of the world, God considered it adultery. James is blunt in his warning of the consequences of Christians attempting to live the way the world lives. The basic problem is that Kingdom principles and worldly principles are not compatible. There can be no detente with the world system. Just as a person cannot be married to two people and be loyal to both, a person cannot buy into the principles of the world and the principles of the Kingdom of God at the same time. This is essentially the same argument James made with regard to having a tree that produces olives and figs – it is not logical that you can love and embrace the ways of the world and not be at odds with what God desires.

The natural human spirit is motivated by greed and envy. It is driven by natural appetites and not supernatural or spiritual values. For the Christian, God provides means to overcome this tendency. If being a Christian means that you have died to self by the Cross of Christ and you have been born again by the Spirit of God, then you are dead to those things that used to motivate the natural human spirit. God provides the grace; however, we must cooperate with God in what He is doing in us by participating in His provisions. This participation requires that we come under the Lordship of Christ and not attempt to function under the dominion of the way of the world.

In verse five, do we assume that James is writing about the “natural human spirit” or about the indwelling Holy Spirit we have as Christians? If you compare various translations and commentaries, you will find more of these that lean toward the “Holy Spirit” option. The context of the passage does not appear to support that option. First of all, this verse is a summary statement that more or less explains why there are problems with conflicts and trying to do things in a worldly way. Things happen that way because the natural human spirit is “hard wired” for destruction and conflict. Young’s Literal Translation renders this verse as follows: *‘To envy earnestly desireth the spirit that did dwell in us.’* Since this is a literal rendering, we might restate it as follows: *‘The spirit that did dwell in us earnestly desires to envy.’* Notice the past tense of the verb used here – the spirit that DID dwell in us.

It is also instructive to look a bit closer at the meaning of the Greek word that is translated as “envy” in this verse. The word is “phthonos” and comes from the Greek word “phtherio” which is typically translated “corrupt” and means to defile or be depraved. So what James was saying is “It is not surprising that we have fighting or conflict because the natural human spirit is attracted or drawn to corruption and depravity.” On the face of it, it sounds quite bleak; however, there is hope which we see in the very next verse that tells us that God’s grace is greater than all our sins that spring from this fallen nature.

⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.”

⁷ Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. James 4:6–10 (NASB95)

Submitting ourselves to God is the key to victory in the Christian life. Only those who are humble will do this. God has given us the power to overcome the world, the flesh and the devil. It seems like such a simple formula: resist the devil and God has promised that the devil will run away.

Look closely at our responsibility in this matter. It starts with submission to the will of God. If we are not walking in the will of God, then resisting the devil may be a futile exercise. After we have resisted, then we need to draw closer to God. The closer we come to God the more we realize the need for His work in us to purify us and to complete the transformation of our very being by the renewing of our minds. We cannot do this if we are full of pride. We must recognize the complete inadequacy of our own ability and take on those characteristics Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount (poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, etc.). If we can truly see ourselves as we are when we are separated from God, then humility no longer becomes a problem.

¹¹ Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor? James 4:11–12 (NASB95)

We can assume that James was referring to the “royal law” that he mentioned in chapter two and verse eight. If you are walking in that law of “loving your neighbor as you love yourself,” then there is no room for slandering another person.

Being critical of others is strong evidence of having a prideful attitude. Humility and pride are as incompatible as the Kingdom of God and the way of the world. If we recognize our position under God, then we can see that the disparity of who we are and what God intends us to be is so great that any disparity we see between ourselves and our neighbor pales into insignificance.

We could take this discussion a step further and make the argument that if the person against whom the slander is directed is a “brother in Christ,” then we are speaking ill of one who has been justified by God and there we find that we are essentially sitting in judgment of God. That is not a good position to find ourselves.

¹³ Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” ¹⁴ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” ¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. James 4:13–16 (NASB95)

How can we plan apart from God who controls everything? Such planning is more evidence of pride. Most Christians do not realize they are either leaving God out entirely or including Him in as an afterthought. If we try to live our lives as if God does not matter, then it is seen by God as evil. Even if what we do seems to be charitable and good, if we are doing it on our own, then we cannot expect God to bless something from which He is excluded. Most people think that if we do something that produces benefit (even if it is done for the wrong reason) that it is pleasing to God. Such thinking is also evidence of pride. We have no goodness apart from God.

¹⁷ Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin. James 4:17 (NASB95)

Doing what is right involves more than “what” is done. “Why” we do “what” we do is also important. God will judge what we do by the light He has given us. We can recognize opportunities to do good works. God intends for us to do these. As He reveals to us such opportunities, then we must take action.

This verse is very similar to what Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia regarding the opportunities that God gives us to help others. A comment related to Galatians 6:10 seems

appropriate for this admonition from James: “When presented with an opportunity to help someone, then we have an obligation to help simply because the opportunity is there and it doesn’t matter if it is convenient or how much self-denial it may cost us. We should do it and be thankful for the privilege regardless if it is our neighbors or strangers.”

James 5:1-20

If “anticipation” means “looking ahead to something,” what is that “something” for us? If we had a “fill-in-the-blank” form which had the words “I am anticipating _____”, then what would you write in that space? In our current culture, we are likely to be anticipating the next holiday, or some event associated with things in which we are interested. There could be literally thousands of possible answers to such a question depending on the narrowness of our focus. On the other hand, if we broaden out the perspective to national or even global concerns, our responses will likely be more general such as “things are going to become worst, stay the same or get better.” We may be of the mind set that things will likely get worse before they get better.

If we attempted to think about things in the same way as a Jewish Christian around AD 50, then we might find ourselves in a situation of “hoping for the best and anticipating more of the same.” Many of these had experienced persecution and rejection from their fellow countrymen and even members of their own families. To make matters worse, they sometimes experienced a lack of acceptance in the Gentile territories to which they had gone to escape the persecution that had happened in their native country.

It seems that the beginning of this last chapter of the letter from James is closely related to the beginning of the first chapter where James admonished those receiving this letter to keep a positive outlook even when they were undergoing trials and persecution. The types of persecution they may have experienced are likely similar to the behaviors James mentioned that “rich” people were doing at the expense of those who could not protect themselves. James had a warning about such behavior.

¹ Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! ⁴ Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, *and* which has been withheld by you, cries out *against you*; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. ⁵ You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and put to death the righteous *man*; he does not resist you. James 5:1-6 (NASB95)

In words reminiscent of the prophet Amos, James called to task those who oppressed the poor. Getting wealth at the expense of others and showing no regard for those who suffer is **not** characteristic of those who will inhabit the Kingdom of God.

Most commentaries tend to favor the idea that these verses were descriptive of what many of the Jewish Christians had endured in their homeland at the hand of those non-Christians Jews who were in powerful positions because of their material possessions. It is likely that those mentioned in these verses would never see what James had written; however, James was apparently trying to encourage the victims of such abuse regarding God’s judgment on their oppressors. It is also likely that such oppression by the rich and powerful was not limited to those Jews who had become Christians – they probably oppressed anyone who was defenseless.

If we think about the time period in which this letter was written and the situation in which the Church was functioning, then we can appreciate that these first six verses were likely directed toward the Jewish leadership with regard to the way they treated poor people and (perhaps more specifically) the way they treated those in the Christian community. The phrase “miseries that were coming” and the “day of slaughter” are likely references to the predicted destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. James also stated they had killed the “just” and this is likely related to the crucifixion of Christ. The fact that Jesus did not resist their persecution certainly agrees with the statement James made in the second half of verse six. He could also have been referring to the collective persecutions that were going on at that time of all the Christians in Jerusalem and other parts of the world.

⁷ Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. ⁸ You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. ¹⁰ As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and *is* merciful. James 5:7-11 (NASB95)

In verse seven, James began summarizing the main points of his letter. The first point we see is that instead of acting like those in the world would respond to persecution and being cheated by others, the proper action for Christians was (and still is) perseverance as we wait upon the Lord to act on our behalf.

The phrase “the coming of the Lord” can mean different things to various people depending on their circumstances. The first thoughts of many Christians today would likely be about the “rapture” of the church when they hear that phrase. Others might think about the return of the Lord to the earth to set up a Kingdom that will last a thousand years. In the context of those Jewish Christians in AD 50 the meaning of the phrase “the coming of Lord” probably was something different from what we might anticipate today. In Barnes Notes we see “The ‘coming of the Lord’ in any way was an event which Christians were taught to expect, and which would be connected with their deliverance from troubles.” According to Barnes this “deliverance” could be a reference “to remove you [the oppressed person] by death, or to destroy the city of Jerusalem and bring an end to the Jewish institutions, or to judge the world and receive his people to Himself.”

Just as the Christians of the first century were persecuted by the Jews and by the Roman government, Christians today may find themselves in situations where they are persecuted because of their stand for Christ. James saw the possibility that some might be tempted to abandon their faith in order to be accepted by the world (or Jewish) system and thus end the persecution. The voice of wisdom calls for patient endurance in the same way a farmer has to wait for the seed to germinate and the plants to mature and bear fruit. We must stand firm even when we are persecuted. Jesus’ message to the church in the Revelation was “to him who overcomes, I will give the crown of life.” The bottom line in whatever the details may be in this phrase is that “there will be an intervention by the Lord to end the persecutions and troubles that we have if we remain faithful to Him.” Some commentaries note that many of the Jews did go back to Judaism and this was the “great apostasy” mentioned in some of Paul’s writings about the end of the age. Of course, other commentators teach that this is something that is yet to occur sometime in our future.

The theme mentioned in an earlier part of this letter regarding the proper use of our tongues is seen in James’ advice in verse nine that we should be supportive of each other in the church. Sometimes the severest critics of Christians are other Christians and James had warned against

judging one another in the fourth chapter of his letter. James reminded them (and us) that the real Judge is already at the door and His judgments are the only ones that matter.

We must not let nonessential differences separate us. Jesus prayed for unity among His followers so all the world would know Who He is. When we fight among ourselves, then we confuse the world as to Who Jesus is. Recall that Jesus told His disciples “By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, that you **love** one another.” We need to always realize that the differences we have with the world are an order of magnitude larger than the differences we have with fellow Christians with regard to what is really important.

The story of Job mentioned here could be a picture of the church in the end time or more likely those receiving this letter would have related it to their own situation in their day. In the years leading up to the time when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple there was severe persecution directed against the church and many died for their faith. Those Jewish Christians still living in Jerusalem at the time of the Roman siege that culminated in the destruction of the city and the temple were certainly concerned about their imminent death. History records that these Christians escaped the city before it fell and they were spared. Just as God restored all Job lost, so will He give us all things.

The point is that God does not forget those who put their trust in Him. The trials that we experience are not to make life hard for believers, but are instead demonstrations of God’s mercy in helping us develop character and put our investments in heaven, where they will last forever.

¹² But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment. James 5:12 (NASB95)

We should always be on guard that we maintain a reputation of being a person of our word. No one who knows us should ever have to wonder whether or not we are being truthful. If an acquaintance would require us to take an oath or to sign a contract to protect himself in dealing with us, then this should be an indication to us that we are not viewed as totally trustworthy or honest. Such lack of trust is in itself a condemnation of our witness. You probably have known people whom you would not trust anything they say. Others you have known are just the opposite and you have complete confidence in them.

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? *Then* he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; ¹⁵ and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. James 5:13-18 (NASB95)

As was typical of letters written during this time, the writer included a wish for good health for the recipients of the letter. James went a step further and provided a reminder of God’s provision for His people. This was not something new for Christians of that day in that there was an expectation that healing was available and it was common practice to anoint with oil and pray for healing.

Whether we are experiencing defeats or successes, our response and reaction should be directed toward God. Problems are stepping stones that can bring us into a closer relationship with God. We need godly wisdom to understand what He is trying to accomplish in our lives especially when we are “in trouble.” However, times of joy and happiness sometimes are more dangerous for

the Christian than times of distress. When all is going well, then we may tend to think we deserve it or that we are responsible for making the success happen.

We know that we should not trust in works of righteousness for our salvation and we know that we must not trust our security to material possessions and wealth, but sometimes we forget to turn to the Lord for healing of sicknesses.

We are uncomfortable in discussing the **possibility** that any sickness is a result of sin in our lives. Sickness does not have to be connected with sin (see John 9:3), but sin can cause sickness (see 1 Cor. 11:30). We should explore this possibility with the Lord in our times of prayer and meditation. If we expect to be healed, then we must first remove the cause of the problem.

If there is sin in our lives which will cause us to be in disharmony with God, with other people and even within our own selves, then we need to neutralize the effect of that sin. The first step is to acknowledge the sin (confess it) and then turn away from it as a way of life (repent). We are assured by the word of God that He is faithful and just to forgive us of that sin and to cleanse us. It is then that restoration and healing can come.

James told us earlier that we have not because we ask not. Many Christians read in the Bible about the great works God did in response to the prayers of the famous people written about in the Bible. James reminds us that even Elijah was as we are and God answered his prayers. It is not the greatness of the one who prays but the greatness of God to Whom we pray that matters.

¹⁹ My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, ²⁰ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. James 5:19–20 (NASB95)

Believers should fellowship and share with each other so that we can minister to each other. The possibility of straying from the paths of righteousness is ever present for even mature Christians. Paul wrote of this situation also in Galatians 6:1.

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.

We can be presumptuous and think that God will forgive us just because we sin. The word of God clearly teaches that He will forgive us if we confess our sins. If we attempt to cover our sins (not confessing but rationalizing), then we are acting in the same manner as Adam and Eve with their fig leaves. We need to come to God for the covering He provides in the death of His Son.

Life is full of uncertainties. If we find ourselves in a situation that we need to trust someone or something with your health or resources, then we would do the due diligence and check out these areas of consideration. We can still find ourselves in situations where the truth about these things cannot be discovered and we still have uncertainty. If we think that we have to have absolute certainty, then we might find that we are paralyzed with fear of the unknown.

There is another step we can take that will allow us to proceed even in the face of the uncertainties of life. What you have to do is to take a *step of faith* and it needs to be faith in something that **is** certain. That *sure certainty* (in which we have complete confidence) is that we **know** God loves us, cares for us, knows what is best for us, and has the power to act on our behalf. Such trust means that we can have an inner quietness that comes from the confidence we have in God. Resting in God frees us from anxiety and fear. Our faith in God comes from our confidence in Him and the hope we find in his promises. We know that “hope” is not just wishful thinking but is firm confidence in a future reality.