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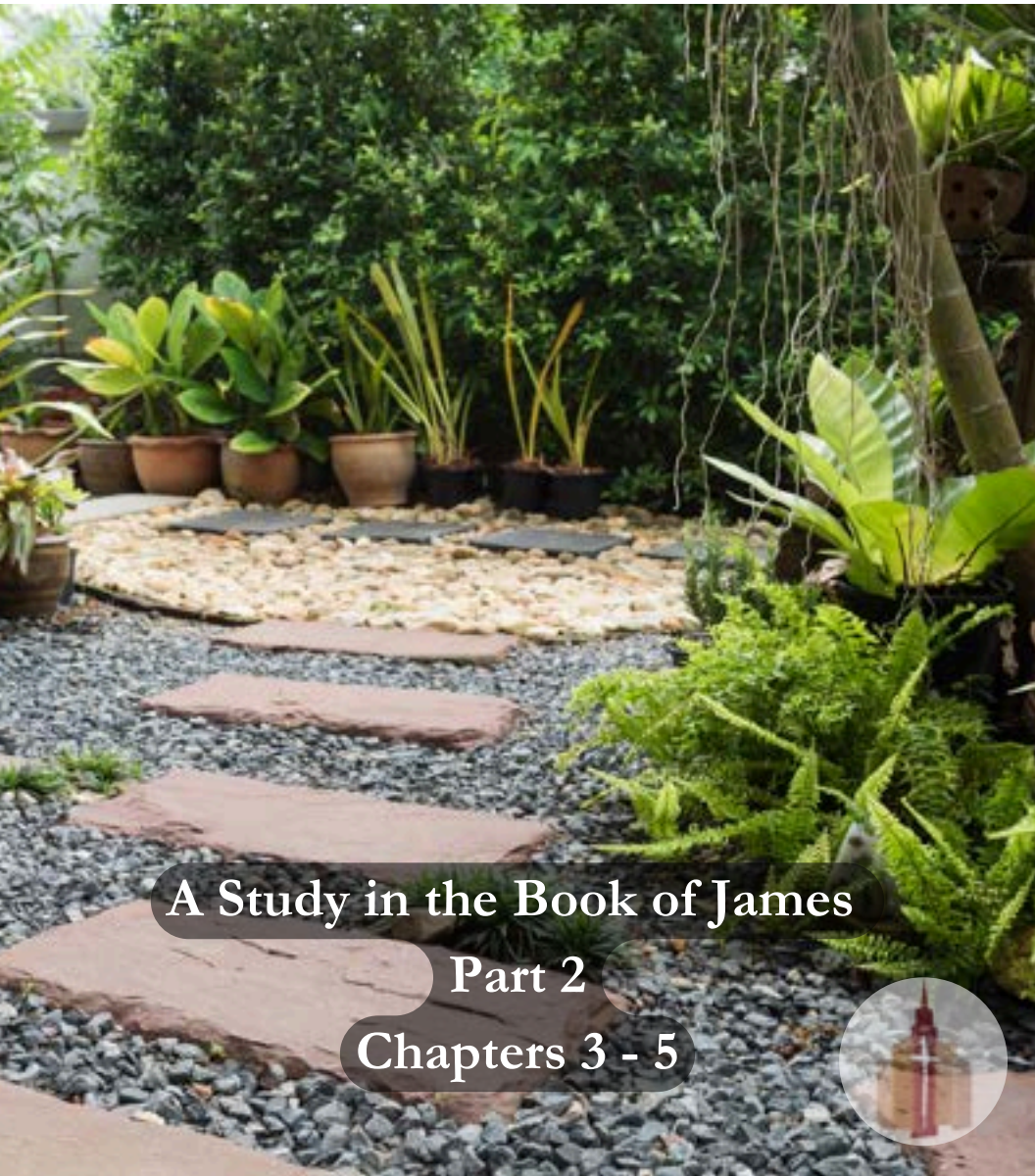
JAMES:
FAITH IN ACTION
Living for an Audience of One



A Study in the Book of James

Part 2

Chapters 3 - 5

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction
3	Session 1: The Power of the Tongue
9	Session 2: Wisdom from Above.
13	Session 3: Resist and Submit
17	Session 4: You are a Mist.
22	Session 5: Warning to the Rich.
27	Session 6: Patience and Trust
32	Session 7: Changing the World

INTRODUCTION

That day in Acts, when the Holy Spirit came upon a group of Jesus' followers, was the continuation of an ancient story about God. The 66 books that make up the Bible detail the story of God's activities with people. From the very beginning, his journey with men and women—and young people—was punctuated by a common thread: God is faithful to his promises. The Bible contains the record of what this journey with people looked like as God works mainly through one unremarkable family in ways that impact all of history. They often failed God—that is a common theme as well—but God continued to unfold his plan to bring about his purposes. His plan continues to this day.

The Epistle of James is a letter—at least that's what many experts would say—but it is constructed like a speech, meant not just to give those listening more knowledge but to convince them to change behavior that didn't look like it should if you were a follower of Jesus. The writer is likely James, the brother of Jesus. He wrote quite early in the life of the Church. These things are important to know, as will become apparent a little further along.

Being one of the first 'Christian' writers is an important responsibility—who better to begin to chronicle the Christian adventure than the brother of Jesus? However, James never uses that title, although it is fairly obvious that there is the weight of authority in his writing.

There are a few other things that are important to know as we set off on this exploration. First, the letter was written to Hebrew Christians by a Hebrew Christian. The structure and examples in the letter make this clear.

Secondly, it was written to poor Christians and rich Christians—and those in between. How they behaved as they worshipped together would tell the world about the One they worshipped.

So, let's get started on Part 2 of 'Faith in Action: Living for an audience of One.'

SESSION 1

THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

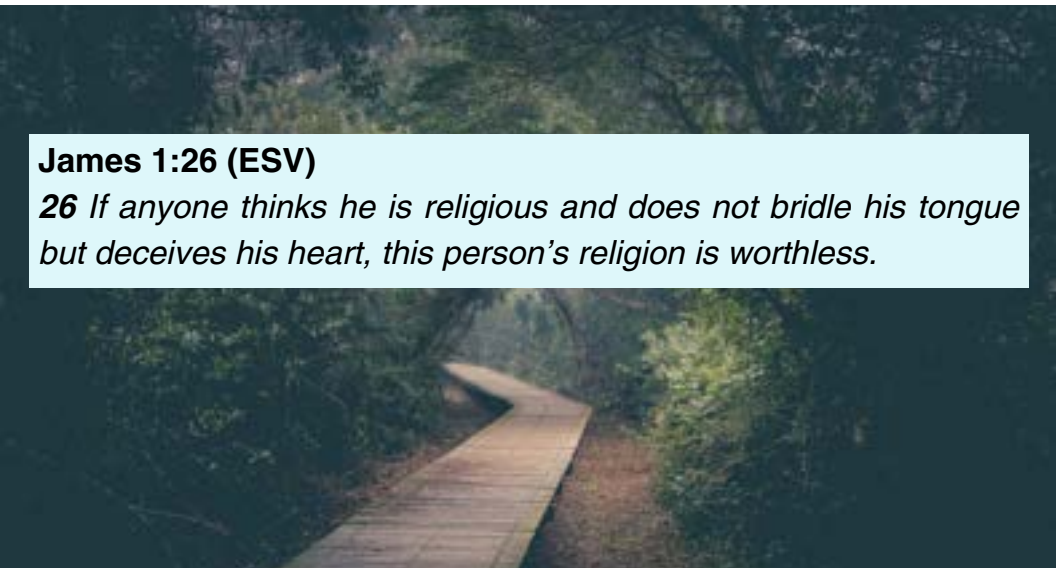
JAMES 3:1–12 (ESV)

1 *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.* ***2*** *For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.* ***3*** *If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.* ***4*** *Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.* ***5*** *So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!* ***6*** *And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.* ***7*** *For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,* ***8*** *but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* ***9*** *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.* ***10*** *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.* ***11*** *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?* ***12*** *Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*

INSIGHTS

Our second study in the Book of James doesn't waste time getting to the heart of the issue. *'Not many should become teachers.'* We can probably recall those great teachers who significantly influenced us at key moments in our lives. Maybe it was an English teacher who stirred within you a love for language or poetry, or a creative writing teacher who helped you to appreciate a well-crafted sentence. Sometimes a teacher will see something that will help influence our career choices or see a gift of leadership that can transform the trajectory of a life. We owe a great deal to teachers during our schooling or further education who influence us beyond what they can know. There is power in their words as they instruct us. But that is not the only way that teachers influence us. Sometimes, their influence is harmful. Words have power. They can cause pain and destruction or bring hope and healing. Words are important.

James has already flagged this issue with us.



James 1:26 (ESV)
26 *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*

What we say comes out of our heart and is a good representation of whether we have 'true religion.' One of the marks of authentic faith is control of our speech.

Can you think of a time when what someone said caused you joy? When it caused you pain?

DISCOVERY

James is talking about teaching in the church, and warns that we shouldn't rush into this role without deep reflection. Teachers will be judged strictly for what they say because they have the power to do immeasurable damage to the church. Their words will either convey the truth, obscure it, or even deny it. It is an important responsibility that should not be undertaken lightly.

Although this is a particular issue for teaching in the church, it is actually crucial for all believers to consider—the importance of keeping the tongue in check. Jesus talks about how we will be held accountable for our words.

Matthew 12:36–37 (ESV)

36 *I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,* ***37*** *for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*

The situation described in verse 2 is not James telling us that all is lost because there is no way we can be perfect. James is not describing someone who is never at fault, but someone who generally doesn't stumble in what they say. Such a person is not perfect in the sense of being sinless, but they are complete and mature. (It is the same word used in James 1:4, describing a person who has been made complete through perseverance). James reiterates his point in 1:26 that the mark of authentic faith is the ability to keep a tight rein on our tongues. This person is 'perfect' (complete).

Questions:

1.What are some examples that show our society does not put much importance on the value of words?

2.What do our words tell us about our hearts? Is there a connection? If so, what is it?

3.What are two or three practical ways you can be more careful with your words?

RESPONSE

James then goes to great lengths to give us word pictures describing the power of the tongue: horses and ships. Bits are small but can direct the movement of a horse. Ships can be massive, but they are directed by a small rudder. One of the biggest ships in the world is the US aircraft carrier, USS Eisenhower. It weighs over 91,000 tons, is nearly 1,100 feet in length, has a nuclear-powered 280,000 horsepower engine, a complement of 6,100 men and women, and carries nearly 100 aircraft. It is like a floating city. But despite its massive dimension, it is steered by a rudder just a tenth of one percent of the ship's size. It is hard to believe that something so small can maneuver a ship so huge.

James says it is the same with the tongue. It is like ‘a fire, a world of unrighteousness . . . setting on fire the entire course of life’ (v. 3:6).We can tame beasts that are wild, but taming the tongue is difficult. The way it is used can have a significant impact.

Not long after our family moved to South Africa, we were driving home to the farm where we were staying and got caught in a veld fire. Basically, there was a fire racing across a dry field (veld) and it jumped the road, creating such thick smoke that we couldn’t see if any cars were coming or if we were even staying on the road. It was pretty terrifying, and we figured our work in South Africa would be pretty short-lived! James tells us that the tongue is like a raging fire that can be completely out of control. Just a few careless words can do untold damage, or words ‘fitly spoken’ can be a balm that brings healing.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things out not to be so' (3.10).

Like with most things, you can use the tongue for evil or for good. The choice is yours. And what passes across your tongue represents what is happening in your heart.

'*Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.'* (3:11-12).

We need to grasp this, or we will misunderstand what James is saying in these verses. He is not outlining a program for mastering our tongues but is instead telling us that this is something that we cannot do in our own strength. It is beyond human capability.

The reason the tongue is beyond our control is because of what it is: the outflow of our hearts. It is important that we grasp this truth. James has wisdom and help for us in the verses that follow, but we will make no progress unless we first recognize the extent of the problem we have with our tongues.

Questions:

1. What is the most challenging thing about these verses?
2. Is there a way you have used your tongue either recently or in the past that requires you to seek someone's forgiveness? What steps do you need to take to make it right?
3. How do James' instructions apply to social media? How do they apply to all of our digital communication?

NOTES

SESSION 2

WISDOM FROM ABOVE

James 3:13–18 (ESV)

13 *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.* ***14*** *But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.* ***15*** *This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.* ***16*** *For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.* ***17*** *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.* ***18*** *And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

INSIGHTS

James starts with a question: *'Who is wise and understanding among you?'* Would you put yourself in that category? And how do you determine what the qualifications are for this?

It is a common tendency to equate wisdom and understanding with being clever or smart. We tend to look for the people who know the most, have had theological training, or just sound as if they know what they are talking about. But James cautions against that kind of thinking: 'Who is wise among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Wisdom is something that can be demonstrated not primarily with words but with deeds. It is someone's conduct and how they live, rather than what they know, that shows them to be wise. James is not discounting the need for knowledge but is showing us where wisdom is seen. Its evidence is on display through behavior rather than intellect. In looking for wisdom, we are looking for the good life, not clever-sounding answers. And the good life is made up of deeds done in humility as an overflow of one's wisdom.

DISCOVERY

There are two kinds of wisdom, and they are vastly different. One comes from heaven; the other is earthly. One is spiritual; the other is unspiritual. One is from God; the other is demonic (v. 15). True wisdom, in other words, comes from outside this world. It comes from God alone, as the Proverb reminds us: 'For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding' (Prov 2:6). And, as we already know from James, 'if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God' (James 1:5). We cannot gain true wisdom without turning to God for it. This means that if the source of wisdom is God, we need to be people who pray and seek Him for it. We need His perspective in our lives. We need Him to give us humble hearts. We need him to tame our tongues. This is why humility and wisdom go together in this passage: to truly know yourself is to know yourself as someone in need of God's grace.

Questions:

1.Have you ever seen godly wisdom in action? What did it look like?
2.What are some characteristics of ungodly wisdom?
3.Can you think of examples when you have displayed both types of wisdom? What did it look like?

RESPONSE

There are things that James tells us will exist when wisdom is earthly, unspiritual and demonic: 'jealousy and selfish ambition' which lead to 'disorder and every vile practice.' This is wisdom that is not wisdom—basically, it might look like wisdom to those around us while actually being the fruit of unspiritual living.

Godly wisdom, on the other hand, sees things from an eternal perspective. It leads to harmony. It has effects, just like ungodly wisdom, but its effects are *'first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere'* (3:17). When this wisdom flows from your life, there is consideration of others where once there was one-upmanship and envy. In other words, the purity of God's wisdom flows out relationally so that others experience it.

And this relational peace and harmony has knock-on effects that yield a harvest: *'righteousness sown in peace by those who make peace'* (v. 18). This harvest of righteousness yields crops in two ways: First, it yields fruit in our own lives as we live in the light of the wisdom that God graciously gives his people. We live lives pleasing to him. We show it by leading a good life, *'show(ing) his works in the meekness of wisdom'* (v. 13) But the impact also goes beyond our lives. The language of harvest suggests that it is such an attractive way of life that others are drawn to God through it—a compelling behavior that puts the gospel on display to those outside of the faith.

Questions:

1. What does your 'harvest' look like? Does what you plant need to change? If so, what steps will you take to make that happen?
2. Is there a friend or relative who needs to see your wisdom in action? Pray for the opportunity to serve them in Godly wisdom.

NOTES

SESSION 3

RESIST AND SUBMIT

James 4:1–12 (ESV)

1 *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* ***2*** *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet 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 wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* ***4*** *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* ***5*** *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?* ***6*** *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* ***7*** *Submit yourselves 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 wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.* ***10*** *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.* ***11*** *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.* ***12*** *There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*

INSIGHTS

Conflict is a fairly normal part of life and comes in many different contexts. It could be a blow up at work or at home with family, with friends or with strangers. And it can take various forms. It could be a conflict that is an obvious falling out noticed by others or there could be a boiling animosity that is just below the surface, possibly even looking like the veneer of friendship. And the conflict might impact each party to the conflict differently: one might hardly be aware of the issue while the other finds it a massive ordeal.

Sadly, conflict doesn't cease in Christian community. And it seems like James is merely carrying forward his argument from the previous section on wisdom and what it looks like. As we remember, wisdom leads to good conduct, not *'bitter jealousy and selfish ambition . . .'* (James 3:14). That 'wisdom' is not from above, but is instead *'earthly, unspiritual, demonic'* (3:15).

DISCOVERY

James begins by asking one of his penetrating questions: 'What causes fights and quarrels among you?' (4:1) He invites his listeners to cast their minds back to a recent conflict. What happened? Why did it take place? Why does the same conflict keep recurring? What is happening?

When issues flare up with others, it is easy to think that the problem lies with someone else. Others are to blame for the conflict. However, James won't let us answer the question so easily. The issue is not

everyone else, but it is me. The problem is that I have unchecked passions and desires that bubble to the surface.

James has had to remind us of the nature of our hearts already. Our own evil desires are the root of the conflict. Our fights and quarrels stem *'from your desires that battle within you . . . You desire but you do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight'* (4:1-2). This is strong language—we don't actually kill each other. But as Jesus pointed out (Matt. 5:21-22), we do not need to kill to commit a form of murder.

Questions:

1. Consider a conflict you have been involved in. What was the issue and what did it reveal about your heart? Had you made the issue someone else's fault? Explain.
2. What does it look like to become a 'friend of the world?' And why is it considered adultery?

RESPONSE

James has shown us that if we look inside ourselves, we see selfish hearts. This is the default setting for us if we live with ourselves at the center. It requires us to take ourselves off the throne of our lives and give that position over to God. *'Submit yourselves to God'* (4:7). Recognize the sin that lives within us and 'Cleanse our hands, purify our hearts" (4:8) Mourn over our sin because we understand that it is destroying us.

James gives us a simple equation: friendship with the world = enmity with God (4:4). It is evident by the things that we are chasing.

Fortunately, God *'gives us more grace'* (4:6). Regardless of where our hearts take us, he is ready to forgive. But the slope is dangerous—friendship with the world is separation from God. We can't have it both ways.

Finally, we can't speak evil against each other. God alone is the judge and when we speak evil, we put ourselves as judge in his place. 'Who am I to judge my neighbor?'

Questions:

1. How does the world's definition of wisdom differ from the Scripture's definition?
2. Practically speaking, what does it mean to submit to God and resist the devil?
3. What are some ways that you have experienced 'more grace' recently?

NOTES

SESSION 4
YOU ARE A MIST

James 4:13–17 (ESV)

13 *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—* ***14*** *yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.* ***15*** *Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."* ***16*** *As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.* ***17*** *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*

INSIGHT

It is pretty common to think that we run our own show and our own schedules. I know what my day will look like tomorrow or even next week. Our calendars are filled with events that seem sure to happen exactly as expected. James reminds us that things are not set in stone and that our plans can change in an instant. It reminds us of the passage in Luke 12 where Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool.

Luke 12:16–20 (ESV)

16 *And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully,* ***17*** *and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?'* ***18*** *And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.* ***19*** *And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." '* ***20*** *But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'*

We can make plans, but they may or may not take place.

Proverbs 19:21 (ESV) *says:*
21 *Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.*

James begins this section by addressing travelling merchants, who would have spent time in a new place, establishing contacts and trading before moving on somewhere else. Then and now this is the familiar language of everyday planning. The details may differ, but the mentality is much the same. Plans like these are part of everyday life for all of us, not just traveling merchants.

Is it wrong to plan ahead? Explain.

DISCOVERY

Well, planning ahead is not the problem—in fact, it is unavoidable if you are to function in life. Our ever busier lifestyles mean we have multiple commitments. Our schedules need to be synced between our personal devices and then around those in our family. Work life and home life routines need to be organized.

Yet, James is reminding us that in all of our scheduling, there is danger that we will adopt an attitude that is ungodly and, in fact, arrogant. James suggests we get two things exactly right:

First, we need to have a proper view of the future. James (as always!) cuts to the chase. We don't know what will happen tomorrow (v 14a). We don't have any idea what will happen in the future—outside of the promises of Scripture that we will be with Jesus. But tomorrow is in God's hands and he hasn't told us about it. On one level, we recognize this so we allow for back-up plans and contingencies. But looking at it another way, we really don't want to think about the fact that we are not in control. You may not finish this page before you breathe your last breath. This is unsettling, so we don't want to think about it. And then we plan our lives as if we are in control. We make assumptions. Our default view is that once we plan it, it will happen. James makes it plain that this is not so.

Secondly, James looks at our view of ourselves. James continues to ask penetrating questions: *"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes"* (14b). As we plan our lives, there is a danger that we think we are the center of all of it. We have the starring role in our own storyline. What is your life? It is a mist—brief, ethereal, gone quickly. We are around for a few brief moments and then gone. The fog from a hot shower disappears in an instant. This is how James sums up our lives, which is not very encouraging.

Questions:

1. Why does this picture of life described by James seem so distant to us?
2. Can you think of another way to describe how life is fleeting?

RESPONSE

In contrast to how we normally plan our lives, James offers a different perspective. We should always hold our plans loosely, leaning into the always better plans of the Lord. *'If it's the Lords will, we will do this or that'* (v 15). That doesn't mean that we just tack that saying on to the front of all of our plans.

Instead, our attitude needs to change; our double-mindedness needs to be repented of. *'In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps'* (Prov. 16:9). I am not the master of my destiny or the captain of my soul. I am a fleeting mist, not in control of the wind's direction or when I vanish. Sadly, when our calendars come out, we can quickly become atheists.

If we know God, we should know the good we should be doing. God has shown it to us. To say, 'my schedule is full' could be sin, says James in verse 17: to not make time and space for *'the good we ought to do . . . is sin.'* Are we leaving out the things of God because our days are too packed? Does the pace of life determine whether we spend time with God and his people?

Questions:

1. How can you consciously take account of who you are and who God is in your planning?
2. Are there ways in which your plans don't really reflect God's will? What needs to change?

NOTES

SESSION 5

WARNING TO THE RICH

James 5:1-6 (ESV)

1 *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.* ***2*** *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.* ***3*** *Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.* ***4*** *Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.* ***5*** *You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.* ***6*** *You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*

INSIGHTS

It is pretty clear by now that there were enormous tensions between the rich and the poor in James' community. Most people were poor, facing exploitation by the rich. In this section, James addresses rich people directly by speaking with the force of an Old Testament prophet.

Which 'rich people' was James addressing? Rather than addressing the rich in general, there are good reasons for thinking that James has his sights on the non-Christian rich of his day. They probably weren't part of his audience, but James wants those Christians hearing this

message to know what God thinks about ungodliness. This was a common rhetorical device in the Old Testament. The people of God were frequently given prophecies directed to the surrounding nations. The point was not that Isaiah was doing a preaching tour through these nations, but instead to show God's people what He thought of their behavior. It would be easy to envy the rich, or aspire to be like them, or even be bitter that they are not like them.

Have you ever envied what someone else had and wished you were them?

DISCOVERY

Verses 2 and 3 of this passage are particularly graphic:

2 *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.* ***3*** *Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.*

This is a detailed picture of massive waste, of lavish possessions left to rot. It's almost like it was hoarded without any thought of using it. The owner just wanted to have it as a lavish display. John Calvin describes the role for possessions:

God has not appointed gold for rust, nor garments for moths; but on the contrary, he has designed them as aids and helps to human life (Calvin's Commentary on James in Alberry p. 128).

This is a graphic warning for us today. We live in a society where accumulation is seen as good in its own right. Amassing money and possessions is commended and seen as achieving success. The more you have, the better you are.

But James shows that pursuing wealth for its own sake is ungodly. Waste 'testifies against' us. This doesn't mean that we crawl into holes and shun possessions and wealth, but it does mean that we do not put great stock in them or pursue them.

Questions:

1. Can you think of biblical examples where possessions ended up consuming someone?
2. Can you think of an example where someone used possessions to further God's Kingdom?
3. What is to be the focus of our possessions?

RESPONSE

James finishes this section with a return to issues of justice.

James 5:4–6 (ESV)

__4__ Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. __5__ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. __6__ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

We may not be negligent landowners, as it seems like these people were, but this still has application for us. It is easy for the wealthy, which could be most any of us who can provide for our needs, to overlook the needs of others and our responsibility to them. For the workmen in the field, a day's wages is everything. No wages meant no food for the family, which would be disastrous. Wealthy landowners would fraudulently hold wages due, and God would hear the cries of those who weren't paid. The workmen were considered the 'little people.' It wasn't a priority for the affluent to care for their workers because it didn't affect them--their families had food and shelter.

But God is concerned for the poor and oppressed. Throughout the Old Testament, he instituted laws to protect them—in fact, over 2000 verses deal with God's care and concern for the poor. Prophets like Amos condemned those who exploited the poor and vulnerable (Amos 5:11-12; see also Jeremiah 22:13 and Malachi 3:5). And no such acts today go unnoticed by him. No one else may notice or care, but God sees, understands, and promises to act.

James saves his strangest charge for the end: *'You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you*'(v 6). Wickedness and exploitation could have directly led to loss of life. Protesting workers could easily have had their lives taken away. For us today, we need to think about our responsibility as consumers, to consider the kinds of companies we're supporting and how they treat their workers in far-flung and impoverished places. It is possible that our purchasing habits could be furthering forms of injustice. The problem is not having money, but loving money—stewarding it in a way that does not show our love for our neighbor. Can you be trusted with what you have been given?

Questions:

1. Do you see yourself in the description of the 'worldly wealthy' in these verses? Explain.
2. How would the use of your money bring God's displeasure? Are there things that you need to adjust in how you spend your resources? If so, what are your plans?
3. How can we speak against injustice? Are there ways to stand up for the oppressed?

NOTES

27

SESSION 6

PATIENCE AND TRUST

James 5:7-12 (ESV)

__7__ Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. __8__ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. __9__ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. __10__ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. __11__ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. __12__ But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

INSIGHTS

For James' audience, their lot seems to be one of injustice. They are likely among the workers and harvesters talked about in the last session whose wages remain unpaid. James lets them know that God is their Avenger, that the wicked wealthy will not—ultimately—get away with what they are doing. James begins this section as a Pastor concerned about the flock in his charge. The call is not to seek

revenge—an uprising of the workers who are being exploited by the wealthy. James is writing as a Christian to Christians—and the Christians were typically the ones on the receiving end of wickedness—with the message of patience. It is not that it doesn't matter because the rich will always do what they do, but that justice will be done. James' readers need not fear for one moment that the unjust will get away with it.

This is likely why James ties his command to the coming return of Jesus: *'Be patient, then . . . until the Lord's coming'* (v. 7). This is the event that will bring ultimate justice. This is not just an in-house event for God's people. This is a global, historical event. It will herald the judgment of all sin and the righting of all wrongs for all time. It is the return of Jesus which will bring about the 'day of slaughter' that James has just been promising. You can afford to be patient because you know that your suffering will be thoroughly dealt with—forever. Knowing the end with full confidence makes it possible to bear something that seems unendurable. James' readers can be patient because Jesus will return and their hardship will come to an end.

James gives an everyday example of the kind of patience that is needed. Think about the farmers. They must wait patiently for the rain to water their crops. They don't know when it will happen, but it will eventually happen. This is an illustration that everyone would understand through experience. Farming was woven into the fabric of life. Since this was likely a mostly Jewish audience, James knew they would pick up the connection he was making.

Deuteronomy 11:13-14 (ESV):

13 *"And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul,* ***14*** *he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil.*

The regular rains are an expression of God's faithfulness. Just as he has faithfully sent his rains at the proper time, so too he will show his faithfulness in bringing justice. The farmers wait on God—you can too.

Questions:

1. When have you had to be patient for God's timing?
2. What are the difficulties in exercising patience?
3. How does our view of God's coming justice change our view of suffering?

DISCOVERY

James uses key examples to illustrate patience from Israel's history: The Prophets and Job. These examples demonstrate how to face suffering with patience. They serve a double purpose: First, they show that what James' audience is going through is not unusual. This has been how it works for God's people through all generations. We need this reminder. It is easy to think that hardship is abnormal or even a sign that something is wrong in our Christian life. But suffering is normal for God's people. It is not a sign that things have gone wrong, but that they've gone right.

Secondly, these examples are encouraging for us. They show how followers of God in the past have remained faithful in the challenging times in which they find themselves. James provides examples to let us know that it can be done. We can remain faithful as well! What we face in our trials is not necessarily easy, but it is also not new. We are travelling a well-worn path.

James is not finished yet. He reminds us again about the significance of how we speak in difficult times. Twice we are reminded in this short section of how, as we seek to wait patiently in the trials of this life, our tongues have the capacity to spoil everything. He attaches a solemn warning:

'But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation' (James 5:12).

We were warned earlier about grumbling (v. 9). Now we are told not to swear oaths. James is not changing subjects here, but instead applying another lesson around patience. As we wait with patience, we are to speak with patience. Rash speech can quickly threaten godly endurance. This is another example of the double-mindedness that has been characterizing many of his readers and undermining the credibility of their Christian witness. The lack of verbal integrity leads to condemnation. This all reminds us of the need for wisdom, a familiar refrain in the book of James.

Questions:

1. As you think about your current circumstances, what specific examples from the prophets and Job are particularly encouraging for you?
2. In what way do you need to make your 'yes' truly mean 'yes' and your 'no' mean 'no'?
3. How do you need to pray for wisdom today?

RESPONSE

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit that should flow from a life of faith. But it feels like society is hardwired for urgency. We want it all and we want it now. We see the examples from the Prophets and Job and can put these heroes in a category that is unattainable for us, or seems like it should be.

But patience is actually recognizing that God is in control. Farmers cannot cause it to rain even when they are desperate for rain. The prophets were hoping to see repentance arise from their warnings aimed at God's people, pleading with them to turn from idols and return to God before it was too late. In almost every case, the

warnings fell on deaf ears and the prophets never saw what they were seeking. Jeremiah identifies the common refrain:

Jeremiah 25:4 (ESV)
4 *You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets,*

That's the patience of a prophet that James is encouraging in us. Can you have the patience to wait even when what you are hoping for seems like something God would want to happen, like revival for his people or justice in a political sphere?

Questions:

1. What issue tests your patience the most? Why?
2. What has God taught you during times of testing about his character?
3. Are there times when you fail to 'incline your ears to hear?' Why does that happen and what do you do?

NOTES

SESSION 7

CHANGING THE WORLD

James 5:13-20 (ESV)

13 *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.* ***14*** *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.* ***15*** *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* ***16*** *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.* ***17*** *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.* ***18*** *Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.* ***19*** *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,* ***20*** *let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

INSIGHTS

This last section of James presents challenges that can make it a bit difficult to understand, but its focus on prayer is important. This passage includes a discussion of prayer (v 13-18) and within that section a discussion of healing (v. 14-16). One thing is clear: we need to pray because prayer changes things. The prayer itself is not magical or special. But God, to whom we pray, is powerful and loves to serve his children.

Have you ever wondered why prayer is necessary? If God knows what we need, why do we need to pray? Well, a few things come to mind. We are told throughout Scripture to pray. We find the command in this passage, but it also comes from Jesus. He says a few times—*when you pray, say . . .* (Mt. 6:5,6 & 7, Luke 11:2). Jesus assumes that we will pray and gives direction on how that should look. But we pray because we are in a living, breathing relationship with the Creator of all that is, and to have a relationship we need to communicate. He certainly does know what we need—he knows everything—but we are told to pray '*without ceasing'* (1 Thess. 5:17) because that puts us in constant contact with God. Without communication, there is no relationship. Prayer is the power of God at our disposal through our relationship with him. He knows what we need, but he wants us to pour out our hearts to him as our loving Father, ready to hear and answer our prayers.

Questions:

1. When you feel most connected to God, what is happening?
2. Do your prayers sometimes seem to go no farther than the ceiling? What do you think causes that and what can you do?

DISCOVERY

James gives us specific instruction around prayer and sickness. If you are suffering, pray. This takes us back to the beginning of this letter where this church community was suffering with '*trials of various kinds*' (James 1:2). Pray when that is happening. God answers, and although it may not be an instant removal of the issue, God will walk the journey through the trial with you. If you are cheerful, sing! If you are sick, pray and get the leaders of the church to pray as well. This is not magical, but is instead a way to engage the whole church in prayer for you. Oil is likely symbolic, representing God's Spirit. There are other times in Scripture where oil was used to anoint or set someone aside for service or ministry. The elders are not specially gifted healers, but are instead praying for healing, asking God for his miraculous touch to heal what is broken. God sometimes answers and heals, sometimes he answers and does not heal. We trust him to do what is best for us according to his will. Healing doesn't happen because you have enough faith to pull it off. Healing is a gift from God. Sometimes we see God step in and heal and sometimes—even in the lives of Paul with his 'thorn in the flesh' or Timothy with his stomach ailment, he does not heal. Faith means we trust Jesus to do what is best, whether he brings healing or not.

That does not negate the power of prayer. Elijah was human just like us and prayed that it might not rain and God answered his prayer so that it did not rain for 3 and a half years. Then he prayed and God brought a deluge.

Questions:

1. Does this passage create confusion around healing? If so, how? How would you counsel someone confused about how faith and healing work?
2. Why might God not heal in response to prayer for healing? Does that make it difficult to trust him? Explain.

RESPONSE

James finishes this great letter by reminding us of the importance of community. We are accountable to each other. If someone is wandering from the truth, do you care? Are you willing to take the difficult step to engage someone to stop them from disaster? For James, that is an important part of being in community. The devil *'prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. . . .'* Destruction is just around the corner and it is important that we care enough to confront. Such action will *'save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.'* We don't really want to confront. Sometimes people will turn on us or misinterpret our desire to help. But by confronting sin we could make a real difference—stopping a headlong walk to destruction or stopping sin in its tracks. Community is not an insignificant thing!

Questions:

1. Have you ever been willing to step in to confront someone who was heading down the wrong road? How did it go?
2. What are the steps you would use to confront a friend or family member who is heading in the wrong direction?

Spend time praying together for God to use you as an example for others.

SUMMARY

James has moved through a number of important issues that describe by both warning and example what it looks like to live by faith. Some of his challenges are easy--making slight adjustments to conform our life to his teaching. For others, we need a wholesale makeover for our lives to be *'conformed to the image of His son'* (Rom. 8:29).

Are you ready to pick up the challenge?

NOTES

JAMES:
FAITH IN ACTION

Living for an Audience of One

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