

# LEARNING TO LIVE

## Studies in the book of James

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STUDENT MANUAL



STEINBACH BIBLE COLLEGE  
STEINBACH, MANITOBA

**“When the love of God has vanished in a society,  
the love of neighbour quickly disappears.”**

*Walter Brueggemann*

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# C ontents

Lesson	Author	page
1 Perseverance and Prayer	<i>Nettie Bergen</i>	4
2 Trials and Temptations	<i>Jason Hiebert</i>	9
3 Listen, Obey, ...Action	<i>Jaimee Dueck</i>	12
4 Favouritism	<i>Juanita Thiessen</i>	17
5 Faith and Works	<i>Andrea Krahn</i>	23
6 Was It Something I Said?	<i>Rob Shipman</i>	28
7 "Oh, Wise One..."	<i>Maxine Plett</i>	33
8 Repentance and Submission	<i>LeRoy Siemens</i>	38
9 Total submission?	<i>Eva Wiebe</i>	44
10 The Rich and The Poor	<i>Ron Zacharias</i>	48
11 Patience During Persecution	<i>Martha Klassen</i>	53
12 A Community Not of This World	<i>Dallas Wiebe</i>	59

LESSON

# 1

## Perseverance and Prayer

*by Nettie Bergen*

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**James**  
**1:1–11**

Key Verse: Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:4

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### Bible Background

In the first eleven verses of James, the author introduces the three main themes of his letter. The three themes are perseverance through trials, gaining wisdom through prayer and oppression of the poor by the rich. These three themes will come back continually throughout the book of James.

### Bible Truth

Perseverance is important to strengthen a believer's faith; wisdom is also gained through trials. Prayer is needed to gain both wisdom and perseverance.

### Life Response

Perseverance can be a hard lesson to learn, but God often uses trials to refine his children. The following story from Philip Yancey's book *Disappointment With God* serves to illustrate something of what James means.

"I have known Meg for more than a decade. She is a devout Christian, a pastor's wife, and a very fine writer. The Woodsons had two children, Peggie and Joey, both born with cystic fibrosis... They spent several weeks each year in a local hospital, and both grew up knowing they would probably die before reaching adulthood.

Joey, a bright, happy, all-American boy, died at the age of twelve... Peggie survived several health crises in high school and went away to college. She seemed to grow stronger, not weaker, and our hopes rose that she would find healing after all. But there was no miracle: Peggie died at the age of twenty-three. ... I came across the letter Meg had written me after Peggie's death.

I find myself wanting to tell you something of how Peggie died. I don't know why except that the need to talk about it is so compelling and, since I refuse to put my friends here through it more than once, I have run out of people to tell. The weekend before she went into the hospital for the last time, Peggie came home all excited about a quotation from William Barclay her minister had used. She was so taken with it that she had copied it down on a 3 x 5 card for me: *"Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory."* She said her minister must have had a hard week, because after he read it he banged the pulpit and then turned his back to them and cried.

After Peggie had been in the hospital for a while and things were not going well, she looked around at all the paraphernalia of death to which she was attached. Then she said, "Hey, Ma, remember that quotation?" And she looked around again at all the tubes, stuck the tip of her tongue out of the corner of her mouth, nodded her head, and raised her eyes in excitement at the experiment to which she was committing herself. Her commitment held as long as her awareness of anything in the real world held. Once, the president of her college came to see her and asked if there was anything specific he could pray for. She was too weak to talk, but nodded to me to explain the Barclay quote and ask him to pray that her hard time would be turned into glory. I was sitting beside her bed a few days before her death when suddenly she began screaming. I will never forget those shrill, piercing, primal screams. Nurses raced into the room from every direction and surrounded her with their love. So, it's against this background of human beings falling apart-nurses can only stay on that floor so long-because they could not do more to help, that God, who could have helped, looked down on a young woman devoted to Him, quite willing to die

for Him to give Him glory, and decided to sit on His hands and let her death top the horror charts for cystic fibrosis deaths.

Peggie never complained against God. It was no pious restraint: I don't think it ever occurred to her to complain. And none of us who lived through her death with her complained at the time either. We were upheld.

God's love was so real, one could not doubt it or rail against its ways. If I've been telling you all this in an effort to come to some kind of resolution to the problem of Peggie's and my pain, perhaps I've been brought once again to the only thing that helps me experience God's love: His stroking, His "I'm here, Meg." But, again I wonder, how could He be in a situation like that and sit on His hands?

As I think of it, I've never expressed all this to anyone before, for fear of disturbing someone's faith. Don't think you must say anything to "make me feel better." But thanks for listening. Most people have no idea how much that helps.

We are not through learning or being refined, but God will do this to us repeatedly. The only thing that we need to remember is that He will walk beside us.

1. Think of a time in your life which was extremely difficult. Did God give you a reminder that he was there? What was it?
2. Did that situation refine your relationship with God? In what ways?

## **Read James 1:1–4**

### Perseverance through Trials

James calls us to be joyful in our trials and temptations. This was a common Jewish wisdom tradition. Virtue was gained when a person endured trials and occasionally expressed joy because of God's sovereignty. Trials that James specifically addresses include poverty and oppression of the poor.

The call to consider such things "pure joy" seems almost impossible, considering, that as humans we become depressed and do not understand how James could call us to do that. James is going against the typical hu-

man behaviour. This idea of joyfulness during times of trials and tests is a choice. It is a definite way of thinking they are to adopt as their attitude when unpleasant circumstances come.

James goes on to call the recipients of the letter “my brothers” which puts James on the same level as those he is instructing. We can see James has struggled with being joyful in the midst of trials as well.

Why does this need to be done? Why should we be joyful when facing all kinds of trials? James 1:3 clearly states the answers to these questions, “because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance”(NIV). This teaching (which is found also in Romans 5:1-8) is quite consistent with what Jesus says in the Beatitudes. Matthew 5:12 says, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”(NIV). The thought of James is that trials can be considered to be the agents through which God tests and either reveals it or refines it.

Perseverance is needed to build a stronger relationship with God, it is needed to have a stronger faith in who God is, and what he is capable of.

3. Has there been a time in your life when trials seemed to take hold of you? What was your attitude toward them? How did God carry you through? Do you trust him more now? How is this reflected in your life?

## **Read James 1:5–8**

### Wisdom through Prayer

In order to do what James has required of us in the first part of the chapter, we must be in prayer and not yield to an attitude of doubting. Christians need to seek after God and continually ask for wisdom, not wisdom that gives the answers to all of life’s questions, but wisdom that will carry a person through those trials. This request should not be an afterthought. We must always be aware of our need for wisdom from God in order to be strong in this world.

Most Christians understand that they are supposed to ask for wisdom, yet either fail to do so or do so halfheartedly. James believes that Christians should have a passion, a true yearning for the wisdom of God because wisdom is exactly what is needed for the practice of righteousness in daily life.

James does put some conditions on the asking for wisdom. The request must be made in an attitude of faith. James makes very serious accusations about those who doubt, comparing them to waves “blown and tossed by the sea”(verse 6).

James also states that a person is double minded if he is doing lip service to God and then lives an ordinary life, or he pretends to be a Christian but lives as an atheist. “Such a man has little claim upon God’s promises. Instead, we are to come with pure hearts of faith, assured that as we are single minded in seeking His will; God will graciously hear us”(Luck, 21).

4. How does your life show you value prayer?
5. When we pray for wisdom, are we sincere? What are we asking for, a clearer world view or answers to our own life questions?

## **Read James 1:9–11**

### **The Rich and The Poor**

There is also a very weighty warning found in this scripture passage dealing with pride, riches, and the poor. James takes his stand and is uncompromising on the issue of the rich and poor. He clearly states, “The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower” James 1:9,10(NIV).

The poor man is not self-sufficient and can usually say so. He is often more able to clearly see the gifts God has so graciously given to him and how God has carried him through trials and testing. The rich, on the other hand, more easily fall into the trap of self-sufficiency. James says that the rich man needs to realize his possessions do not make him who he is and both he and his riches “will fade away”(verse 11). He has to be very mindful that he is not a “self made man” and be very sure that he remains mindful of God and His grace.

6. How do my possessions get in the way of how I see God?
7. How is praying for wisdom and perseverance hindered when I believe I do everything in my own strength?



LESSON

2

# Trials and Temptations

by Jason Hiebert

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**James**

**1:12–18**

Key Verse: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone, but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. James 1:13-14

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## Bible Background

It is widely acknowledged that the purpose of James was twofold. James wrote to “expose hypocritical practices and to teach right Christian behaviour” (NIV study notes). The letter was also intended to correct misunderstanding regarding the meaning of freedom in Christ. As Paul’s letters make clear, there were some people in the early church who were pushing Paul’s teaching of grace through faith to an extreme which Paul never intended and, indeed, found offensive.

In the previous section (James 1:1-11) the author introduces the three main themes of his letter. These themes are perseverance through trials, gaining wisdom through prayer and oppression of the poor by the rich.

Now, in 1:12-18, James explores the source of testings and begins to explore acceptable ways of looking at, and dealing with testing.

## Bible Truth

When trials come and we are called to persevere, we know that God wills the testing of our faith for our good because He is a Father who loves us.

## Life Response

“Okay, I admit it. I’m a little slow. At first I wondered why my favourite radio station kept playing the line: *As for me and my mouse, we will serve the Lord.*’ They’d slip that sound bite in between everything—right

after the weather, in between traffic and sports. I kept pondering their pun from that famous verse (Joshua 24:15), “As for me and my house...” What’s a mouse got to do with a radio station? I thought.

Nothing, of course! It’s not that a mouse has anything to do with a radio station. It’s just that many of us are Web surfers and it takes only a little click to find big trouble.

My radio station didn’t want me to lose sight that God wants me to give everything to Him—even (especially) the Web sites I visit. (*Campus Journal* October 5, 2001).

We must examine our susceptibility to temptations and weaknesses and allow them to drive us to God, both for mercy and for strength.

1. What trials and temptations have you experienced during your life?
2. How has your relationship with God changed after persevering or failing to persevere through a trial?

## Read James 1:12–15

### Who or what causes trials and temptations?

The Old Testament often speaks of God “testing” the righteous. Abraham and Job were both tested and persevered. God does not test people hoping they will fail. He tests them, rather, out of love and for their good.

Even though verse 13 uses the same Greek root word earlier translated “trials” (*peirasmos*), it takes on a different shade of meaning (Martin 32). Verse 13 speaks against the false view that God is the source of temptations. James is clear that “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” He exposes the real source of our temptations and struggles in verse 14. James suggests that we are not trapped in sin by some irresistible power but by our own “evil desires”.

In the Greek literature of James’ day there was the idea that temptations were too great to resist. We are, after all, “only human” so how could we be blamed if it was too much for us? James does not agree. When people give in to temptation, what is happening is that people, on the basis of their own “evil desires”, choose to sin. That choice will surely have consequences. Verse 15 uses the image of an illegitimate birth (this was a common rhetorical technique used by Jewish Rabbis) to reveal the slippery

path to which the desires within us can lead. Evil desires give birth to an illegitimate child named “sin”. “Sin”, when it matures, also takes part in conceiving an illegitimate offspring – in this case *death*. Without the proper, wise response of repentance, sin will become full-grown and lead first of all to an unhealthy and harmful lifestyle which may lead others astray. In the end, it also leads to the individual’s eventual “damnation and spiritual death on the Day of Judgment” (Adamson, 73).

3. Thinking of society in general, what are areas and desires that are leading people into temptation and sin?
4. What can you do to persevere through a trial or a temptation?

## **Read James 1:16–18**

### What good can come from testing?

Verse 12 tells us that if we persevere through trials here on earth and remain faithful to God even under pressure we will receive the “Crown of Life”. The “Crown of Life” is not a promise of honour here on earth, but of eternal life with God.

Verse 17 tells us that God sends only “good and perfect gifts,” such as creation and rebirth. The perfect gift may be the wisdom mentioned in James 1:5. God gives wisdom generously to those who ask.

When God allows us to be tested, we identify the parts of our character that are sinful and we are wise if this motivates us to seek God’s help. We need to ask for God’s power and wisdom to control our desires; to stop them before sin develops. This makes us more dependent on God and less dependent on ourselves.

James reassures his readers of the promise of wisdom in verse 17, by calling God the “Father of Lights.” To ancient readers these words would be an assurance that “testings are not the result of arbitrary fate, but the faithful workings of a loving Father” (Keener, 692).

God’s grace is reflected in verse 18. While desire illegitimately gives birth to sin and death (v. 15), God the Father legitimately gives birth to new spiritual life for believers.

5. How would you respond to someone who tells you that no good can come from the trials and temptations you are experiencing?

LESSON

# 3

## Listen, Obey, ... Action!

*by Jaimee Dueck*

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### **James 1:19–27**

Key Verse: “But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.” James 1:25

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### Bible Background

James’ sermon on listening and doing in 1:19-27, was preached to a church that needed encouragement in how to live as Christians in a polluted world. At the time James delivered this sermon, the church in Jerusalem did not consist of only Jews — many of the Christians were Gentiles, prostitutes, thieves, tax collectors, poor or old. During this time of famine and economic instability, these Christians were neglected and oppressed. Because of their desperate situation, church members became weary and impatient. Some tried to make the situation better for themselves by trying to gain power in the church, and all of this led to gossip and quarrels. The Christians were tempted in various ways to compromise with the world, and it is to these temptations that James speaks.

In the previous passages, James has talked about the trials and temptations. Now, in verses 19-27, he develops appropriate ways to deal with them.

### Bible Truth

To be an authentic Christian we should listen more than we speak, get rid of anger and all other evil in our lives. We should obey God’s word, rather than just listening to it, and live out our faith in the world while not becoming part of it.

## Life Response

Last Sunday I went to church as usual. I heard an inspiring sermon on some aspect of how to be a better Christian. I listened attentively and took notes. I realized that I was not living up to the standards God has set for me in his word, and I told myself, I needed to change... but that's where it ended.

After church I went home and everything was the same. During the week I dominated the conversation with a friend, I got angry with a family member, and I neglected to help my grandmother do her grocery shopping. Nothing had changed. I learned much on Sunday morning, but I didn't do anything with it. Why is this so hard to do? If I looked in the mirror and saw a piece of food in my teeth, wouldn't I want to remove it before going out in public? The word of God should do the same to me. When I see myself in the mirror of God's word, with all of those ugly sins in my life, shouldn't I want to remove them as soon as possible?

I need to have the same attitude as the husband who came home early from church one Sunday to have his wife ask, "What, Donald, is the sermon all done?" "No, no," he replied, "it is all *said* but it is not begun to be done yet" (Bird 28).

1. What about you? Do you act on what you have learned from God's word? Or are you content with simply listening?
2. When it comes to making changes in your life, why is it so much easier to listen and learn than to practice what you have learned?

## Read James 1:19–21

### Two ears, one mouth

James opens this passage with a brotherly exhortation: he urges us to control our speech—to use our two ears more than our mouths. In an age and a culture where the ability to "speak your mind" is applauded, this concept of listening more than speaking may be a foreign one. James, however, teaches that this is the way the wise use their speech — and he is supported by other scripture, as well. Proverbs 29:20 says, "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him." The principle is the same for anger: "Do not be quickly provoked in your

spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9). The wise person controls his speech and angry emotions because he or she realizes that they are very powerful and can too easily be turned into weapons. When James warns us of anger, he is talking about the expression of all anger — even “righteous” anger. If anger is nursed and then angry emotions are expressed carelessly they can easily get out of control, and this does not bring God’s righteousness. The way of wisdom requires that we be quick to listen to God’s words, that we control impulsive speech and rage and that we seek to live according to God’s righteous and peaceful will for our lives.

How exactly is that done? James goes on to describe what we need to do in order to live a righteous life. First, we need to “get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent”. In the Greek, the words chosen give an image of taking off dirty clothes. These “dirty clothes”, our moral filth and evil, could refer to greed, malice, anger and harmful speech. Only once these things are discarded of like dirty clothes can we accept the gospel and begin to act on it (Davids 40).

After that comes the second step, to “humbly accept the word planted in you”. The NIV translation *planted* in verse 21 is preferred over the translations *engrafted* (KJV) and *inborn* (RV), because the Greek refers to the Word being “planted” in a person after birth (Adamson 100). People are not born with the Word in them; instead, the Word is accepted and grows to be a new part of a person’s nature. In keeping with the botanical imagery, it is also important to realise that we are not done with the Word once it has saved us. After it has been planted in our hearts, we need to nurture it so that it can produce the fruit of an authentic and godly life.

3. Respond to the statement, “In an age where the ability to ‘speak your mind’ is applauded, this concept of listening more than speaking may be a foreign one.” Is this true in your life? What do you use more — your ears or your mouth? Can you think of some examples?
4. How does anger (even “righteous” anger that we justify) cause divisions in your church, family and friendships? Why does anger prevent us from living out God’s righteous will?

## Read James 1:22–25

### Mirror, mirror on the wall...

This section stresses the importance of hearing and obeying. This is not a new idea to James' readers; the Jews had been taught that hearing the law and obeying the law go hand in hand.

Deuteronomy 6 stresses the importance of not only hearing but also obeying: "Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey." This passage, known and prayed daily as the *Shema*, teaches, like James, that those who obey God's commands will be blessed and that blessing includes enjoying a long and abundant life (Deut.. 6:2).

From verse 22 on, James tells us what it means for us to accept the word. He teaches that mentally accepting the word (or gospel) is not enough, it must be put into action. Some people think they have a relationship with God just because they read their Bible regularly and hear the word preached at church and Sunday school. But if they are not obeying God's word, they are only fooling themselves. Their relationship with God is not what they think it is—it is *nonexistent* (Moo 81-82, emphasis mine). In light of the so-called contradiction between Paul and James in regards to the whole topic of "works", it is interesting to note that Paul also stresses the need for action. Romans 2:13 says: "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who *obey* the law who will be declared righteous."

We can conclude, therefore, that it does not matter how much you know about the Bible, how much you have learned in seminary or how well you listened to the pastor's sermon. If you do not practice what you know the Bible teaches, you are fooling yourself and others.

James illustrates this truth with a metaphor. He compares the man who hears God's word and doesn't practice it to the man who looks in the mirror and forgets what he looked like.

The mirror is God's perfect law, the word of God. We use mirrors to examine ourselves, and God's word is a mirror in that it shows us what we are really like. James cautions us about becoming too absorbed in looking at and analyzing ourselves and not doing anything about the unpleasant things we might discover. A constant danger that we face, especially in the information age of self-help books, the Internet, and e-mail, is that we will gain much knowledge about human nature and about ourselves without ever allowing this knowledge to change us. But the wise person

who looks carefully into the perfect law, obeys Christ's commands and makes them a part of his life is blessed and will live an abundant life.

5. When is the last time you looked intently into the mirror of God's perfect law? Did you see anything you needed to change? What did you do about it? Can you think of any examples from your life that you would like to share?

## Read James 1:26, 27

### Pure Religion

In this section, James assures us that our religion is worth nothing if we do nothing with it. An especially important aspect of Christianity to James is controlling the tongue. He teaches that if we do not control what comes out of our mouths, we are deceiving ourselves about the reality of our "religion". The Greek word translated "religion" refers to "outward acts of worship" (Moo 85).

James says that these outward acts that we consider "worship" are nothing more than meaningless acts if we are not obedient in something as nitty-gritty as the way we speak to each other.

Pure religion is doing what God's word says, sharing it with others through word and deed, and separating ourselves from the world. For many of us, it is often a big step to even become aware of the needs of others around us. James is calling us to a bigger step yet. For James, seeing the needs of others is not enough, we must also serve others by meeting these needs. We must imitate our Father, who is "a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5). The type of religion that is acceptable to God consists of simple action, such as taking care of the helpless—not just the orphans and the widows but also the outcasts, the homeless, the sick and the destitute (Moo 86). And we are most effective at doing this when we stay clean in our polluted world. How strange—how simple!—this sounds in a society consumed with speed, technology and themselves (Palmer 65).

6. What kind of religion do you have? How does this compare with God's pure religion? Have you been deceiving yourself about the reality of your religion? Share with the group what you plan to do with your knowledge of God's perfect law... then do it!



LESSON

# 4

## Favouritism

*by Juanita Thiessen*

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### James 2:1–13

Key verse: “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love you neighbour as yourself’ you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.”

James 2:8-9

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### Bible Background

James implies that the Jewish people were poor and were in an immense time of social tension. In Palestine, the rich were oppressing the poor people. Wisdom to the Jews meant that the people who respected God should not show any favouritism. The Roman laws favoured the rich, and the lower class people could not accuse anyone of higher class of anything. However, the people of higher status were able to initiate lawsuits against the poorer people. The law of freedom mentioned in 1:25 implies being delivered from sin. We are not to show any partiality, because we will have to answer to God who is an impartial judge. The Jews defined God’s character by his attributes, mercy and justice.

### Bible Truth

God sees every person’s hearts, attitudes and considers everyone equal. We are commanded to love our neighbour as ourselves and if we show any form of favouritism, we are breaking God’s law.

### Life Response

In a book, *Church: Why Bother?* Philip Yancey answers his question, in part, by telling a story. Adolphus was a young black man with a past and with a wild, angry look in his eye. He happened to come to the church

during a time when the pastor had preached several sermons on the topic of grace and acceptance of people with differences. The repeated message of the pastor, Bill Leslie, was that in a world of competition and ranking, God's grace came with no strings attached. The church was about to be put to the test.

Adolphus, among his many other problems, had terrible fits of rage and times when he just could not be reasoned with. In his own words, he deliberately came to a white church so that he could "watch white people squirm". When he mentioned in the middle of a Sunday school class that he wished he had an M 16 rifle in his hands at that very moment, the white people indeed squirmed. Sometimes he would walk into church and slowly make his way to a seat at the front of the church while raising his hands and making obscene gestures. At times this same hand gesture would reappear when Adolphus raised his hands during the singing of praise choruses. On other occasions, he would also wear headphones and tune in bebop music instead of the sermon, distracting others with his dancing and finger snapping.

As part of the worship service, this particular church always had a segment entitled "Prayers of the People". The way it worked was this: Anyone present was invited to share a prayer request or praise item with the group and pray for that request on the spot. Following that prayer, the congregation was to respond in unison with "Lord, hear our prayer". This, of course, was new to Adolphus. It took him a couple of weeks to get used to the idea.

When he figured that this was also a time for him to speak his concerns, he shouted out "Lord, thank you for creating Whitney Houston and her magnificent body!" The congregation responded with a very weak, and somewhat puzzled "Lord hear our prayer".

The next time this happened, the prayer he blurted out was "Lord, I pray that the white honky pastors of the church would see their houses burn down this week".

The congregation did not respond to this prayer at all. When the elders checked into the matter, they discovered (to no-one's surprise) that Adolphus had been kicked out of three churches before. In light of all the recent teaching about grace and acceptance, they pondered what, if anything, their church could do...

A doctor and psychiatrist, both church members, began the process by volunteering their time and their services. They looked after Adolphus physically and adjusted the medication he needed to control his mood

swings. Along with this, others in the church began to mentor him and help him realize that many of the things he said and did were inappropriate and offensive. People drove him to and from church so that he could save the bus fare money. The “white honky pastors” invited him into their homes (the very ones he had prayed would be burned) every holiday so that he would be considered part of their family. It took time before the church’s love and effort began to make a difference. Adolphus started to calm down, then asked if he could join the church and become an actual member. He was quizzed and put on probation. The agreement was that he could join “when he demonstrated that he understood what it meant to be a Christian... and when he learned to act appropriately around others in the church”. It did not happen overnight, nor did it happen without a few ‘incidents’ and bumps along the way. But it did happen.

Adolphus, the unwelcome and annoying misfit, became a member of the church! For most of his life, Adolphus had never had anyone to invest his energy in, no family, no job, and no stability. This church gave him a second, third, and fourth chance and they accepted him...

The story, however, does not end on an entirely positive note. Many members of the church were not at all happy about his presence among them. Adolphus’ presence made some people very uncomfortable...

1. How do you respond to this story? What do you think you might do in a situation like this? How would your church respond to someone like Adolphus?
2. How willing would you be to show him grace? What limits are there?

## **Read James 2:1–4**

### **Discrimination Against the Poor**

James opens this chapter describing the glory of Jesus and insisting that we are not to show favoritism or partiality to anyone. The point is that some people in the early church had snobbish attitudes and this is inconsistent with the law of love. In the specific illustration James gives, two very different people came into the assembly (synagogue). The rich man wearing fancy clothes was given a special seat but the poor man was told to stand. It is interesting to note that even the Jewish legal texts of the

day condemn judges who show favouritism by allowing one litigant to sit while the other must stand. In fact, to avoid partiality, many Rabbis in first century Judaism required both litigants to dress exactly alike (Keener 694)! Roman law, on the other hand, was clearly designed to favour the rich and keep the social caste system intact.

James is giving a warning here that the church was in danger of reflecting the same warped ranking system found in the pagan politics, industry, and society of the day.

This is no small matter. James tells us in 2:4 that by discriminating against the poor people we become much like corrupt judges. In light of the teaching regarding injustice, crooked judges, and corrupt scales in Jewish literature (especially Proverbs and several of the Prophets), this warning would surely hit hard.

It's interesting to connect the concept of Jesus as the glory of God (2:1) with what follows immediately after. Christ was judged on human standards and was always looked down upon. He was from the wrong city (can anything good come from Nazareth?), had unacceptable and even illegitimate parentage, he did not have official approval on His teaching, had no wealth, and was followed by a motley crew which featured the likes of Matthew Levi, and a group of lowly women. From a human point of view, He did not look all that impressive and maybe the snobbish favouritism James is talking about was one of the reasons why the movers and shakers rejected Him. Jesus was despised and rejected in line with the prophecy of Isaiah 53:1-3. Yet, through all this, Jesus is the glory of God. God's glory was first in the tabernacle in the Old Testament, then in Jesus when he was on the earth, and now in *each* believer and the church as a whole—even if they do not look like much from the human point of view. We dare not make the same mistake as those who failed to see the glory of God reflected in people that the world considered small and inconsequential (Matthew 11:25).

3. Who would you least like to see walk through the door of your church this Sunday? Why? What are your attitudes and motives for how you treat them?
  
4. Are there people in your church that you separate from because they may not be as "blessed" as you are? On what kind of standards do we judge and discriminate against people?

## Read James 2:5–11

### Love Your Neighbour

This section of chapter 2 tells us that if we show any discrimination we are actually breaking the Royal law and will be judged by that Law and found guilty. God chooses the poor to be rich in faith and those who love Him will inherit the kingdom. God disregards national and social differences of people and sees the rich and the poor alike (Ephesians 6:9, see also the story in Acts 10:34-35). God's grace allows Christians to relate to people based on God's plan and not on human status.

In verse 8, James refers back to a central Old Testament command found in Leviticus 19:18. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves. This verse was obviously central to Jesus as it is found several times in the Gospels (Luke 10:25-27, Matthew 5:43, Matthew 19:19, etc.). This is the Word that is to govern all other laws. As Paul makes clear, "Love is the fulfilment of the law" (Romans 13:10). Our motive to love others should be to glorify God and as we love others, we are drawn closer and closer to God through Jesus. Unfortunately, we often fail to obey this central law and fail to love one another. As a result, we not only fail to draw closer to one another, we fail to draw closer to God the Father.

5. We are commanded to love our neighbour. Who is our neighbour? What exactly does it mean to love our neighbours?
6. When was the last time you thought about who your neighbour really is, and if you are showing God's love to them?
7. Think about a person that you do not like and think about how you can love them. How does God see this person?

## Read James 2:12–13

### Final Judgement

These verses remind us that the Law, including the Royal Law, is not a word of bondage. In the Jewish mind, the Law of the Heavenly King was something that superseded and set them free from bondage to the affairs of this world (Keener 695). James seems to be in agreement but

takes it one step further. In English Law, there is a maxim that states that “He who comes to equity must also practice equity”. James seems to be giving an early version of that maxim – “He who seeks mercy must also be merciful” (Adamson 118). In this regard, James is in line with the Old Testament (Hosea 6:6) and the teachings of Jesus (Luke 6:36). The idea of “judgement” may sound foreign to our ears, but it is not foreign to the New Testament. In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus also teaches, very clearly, that faith (or the lack of it) is shown by how we treat the lowly and despised ones. We will be judged by our words, deeds, and attitudes.

When God judges our words He examines our hearts, and everything we say to people and how we say it will come before Him. God does not remember our sins once we have repented but our sins do affect our works and our character. As Warren Wiersbe has said, “We cannot sin lightly and serve faithfully”. God chooses to show mercy or not when judging our attitudes. God is merciful to us if we have been merciful to others. We should not think, however, that we *earn* mercy by showing mercy. What we are doing is reflecting the character of our Father who showed us mercy. Our God is a God of both mercy and justice.

When people repent and have faith, He is able to show mercy, but when God sees rebellion and unbelief, He must act justly.

We will be judged ‘by the law of liberty’ because when we obey God’s law it frees us from sin and allows us to walk in liberty.

The law also prepares us for liberty because we develop inward discipline as we are given outward discipline. Contrary to the world’s definition, liberty is not freedom without limits to do whatever we want to do. That form of self-absorption is just another form of bondage. Liberty is the freedom to be all that we can be in Jesus Christ and then living that out in our family, church, community and world.

8. Do you realize that you will be judged on everything you say, do, and what your attitudes are towards others? How often do you think before you speak or act?
  
9. How often do we want to be shown mercy from others and God and yet are not willing to show mercy to others?

LESSON

# 5

## Faith and Works

by *Andrea Krahn*

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### James 2:14–26

Key verse: “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? James 2:14

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### Bible Background

The people to whom James was writing were most likely Jewish believers. They were mainly poor people who were caught in a situation of considerable social tension. James was combating some form of misunderstanding that had developed in the church. The source of the problem may have been teachers who were setting forth erroneous teaching. The church was becoming worldly and the people were becoming callous and arrogant, failing to put their faith into practice.

### Bible Truth

True faith is more than simply believing that something is true. It should be reflected in our behaviour. “If Christ is really Lord, then the marks of His Lordship will appear in our lives” (Roper, 52).

### Life Response

Think about this challenge given by Richard Foster in the book entitled *Devotional Classics*.

“We cannot live wholly unto God unless we live unto him in all the ordinary actions of our life, unless he is the rule and measure of all our ways, just as we cannot pray wholly unto God unless our prayers look wholly unto him. Many people are strict when it comes to times and places of devotion, but when the service and the church is over, they live like those that seldom or never come there. In their way of life, their manner of spending their

time and money, in their cares and fears, in their pleasures and indulgences, in their labours and diversions, they are like the rest of the world. When their prayers are over, they stop living unto God until the next time they pray...

It is very observable that there is not one command in all the gospel for public worship. One could say that it is the duty that is least insisted upon in scripture. Frequent church attendance is never so much as mentioned in all of the New Testament. But the command to have faith which governs the ordinary actions of our lives is to be found in almost every verse in scripture. Our blessed Saviour and his apostles were very intent on giving us teachings that relate to daily life... Isn't it strange that people place so much emphasis upon going to church when there is not one command from Jesus to do so, and yet neglect the basic duties of our ordinary life which are commanded in every page of the Gospels?

1. Why do we put so much emphasis on going to church?
2. "... the command to have faith which governs the ordinary actions of our lives is to be found in almost every verse of scripture". In light of what Foster says, what is the purpose of going to church?

## Read James 2:14–19

### Two Kinds of Faith

On the surface it appears that James is contradicting what Paul says about being saved by faith. This, however, is not the case. "The difference between Paul and James consists in the sequence of works and conversion: Paul denies any efficiency to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works" (Moo, 102). To avoid misinterpreting either James or Paul, we must understand that the main point of James' argument is not that works must be added to faith but that genuine faith includes works.

In Verse 14, James asks the key question, "Can such faith (i.e. profession of faith without any deeds of mercy) save him?" The question is often put this way: Is it enough to believe in Christ, or do we need to do something else beyond that in order to be saved? The answer to that has to do with



how we define what it means to “believe in Christ”. According to James, belief/faith is not just knowing something in our head, it is also how that knowledge shows itself in our lifestyle. “James makes the distinction here between what a man says he believes and how his belief behaves. If the two don’t jibe, we can’t believe what he says” (Roper, 53). If a person says one thing and does another, then that person must not completely believe what he is saying.

James is not unique in saying this. The scriptures are filled with this teaching. For example, in Isaiah 58:6-7, the prophet is speaking out against the public rituals the people were demonstrating. The people had missed the whole idea behind the ritual.

They were saying that they were humbling themselves before God but, in fact, they were living just as they had before. The result of their selfish lifestyle was that there was injustice, poverty and homelessness throughout the covenant land. These are the very things James is concerned about in the churches to whom he is writing. Even Jesus’ actions were meant to demonstrate the validity of His words. In John 14:8-11, He says that it was the works as well as the words that reflected the true character of the Son of God.

Too often we have been content to offer mere words, when God may have been calling us to action. Words – sermons, prayers, confessions of faith, wise advice, encouragement – are indispensable to true Christianity. But they are shown to have real meaning, James reminds us, when people can see actions that correspond to those words. (Moo 103).

In verse 18a, James uses the common Jewish literary device of an imaginary opponent. This ‘other person’ objects to James’ argument by claiming that different people may have different gifts; one may have faith and another may have works. In verse 18b, again using a literary device, James challenges the opponent to “show me”. The challenge “Show me your faith apart from your works”, is more than just a call for evidence. James is suggesting that faith can only be demonstrated by what it does. The faith the imaginary opponent claims to have is obviously not faith at all, but something more along the lines of delusion.

In verse 19, James portrays the essential poverty of faith without works by comparing it to the ‘faith’ that demons have. In essence, James is saying “So you hold to basic correct doctrine, you know your facts. So What?

Even the demons know that and it doesn't change their character at all". In a convicting insight, Douglas Moo notes that the demons shudder when they say that there is one God but this is apparently more than can be said of some professing Christians who, so lightly, make the same confession.

- 3 How often do we, as Christians, claim to have a strong faith in Christ but neglect to do even the most basic things that God has called us to do? What kinds of things do we neglect?
- 4 How often do you neglect to do these things?
- 5 Think back to the last sermon you heard or the last time you read your Bible. Did it change your behaviour in any way? How long did that change last? In light of Douglas Moo's comment, have we been taking our belief in the Lordship of Christ too lightly?

## Read James 2:20–26

### True Faith Lived Out

In verses 20-26, James shows from the Old Testament that real faith has always involved obedience in lifestyle and that it is this 'working faith' which leads to acceptance before God. Abraham's faith was not a once-for-all thing, nor was he without his failings. But for him, faith was characteristic, it was a way of life. Working faith is produced through successive acts of obedience. What Abraham *did* was both the proof and the result of what Abraham *believed* and, so, his deeds brought his faith to completion or maturity.

At first glance, verse 24 seems to contradict what Paul teaches in places like Ephesians 2:8. To hold James and Paul in opposition to each other is an oversimplification. For one thing, that same Ephesians passage mentions that good works are the purpose of the gift of our salvation (Eph. 2:10). For another, Paul was also perfectly capable of saying things like; "For it is not those who hear the Law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the Law who will be declared righteous" (Romans 2:13). This sounds very similar to what James has been saying

throughout chapter 2 of his letter - especially given that Romans 2:11 also talks about favouritism (see also Romans 2:7, Romans 10:5). Perhaps the gap between these two is not as wide as it is sometimes said to be. We also need to be aware that Paul and James are referring to different kinds of faith. The faith that Paul talks about is true faith – a faith that is shown through deeds. The faith that James is referring to, in verse 24, is the dead faith that is not lived out.

James adds one final illustration to get his point across in verse 25. Rahab was a prostitute but she was declared righteous on the basis of works that issued from her faith, just as Abraham had been.

In the last verse, James vividly restates his central theme and again we see that he is concerned not so much that works be added to faith, but that one possess the right kind of faith in the first place.

6. What are some things that we can do to live out our faith? Why haven't we been doing them?

7. When will you start doing some of these things?

LESSON

# 6

# Was It Something I Said?

*by Rob Shipman*

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**James**  
**3:1–12**

Key Verse: We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man able to keep his whole body in check. James 3:2

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## Bible Background

**S**o far in his letter, James has made it clear that faith is more than a belief, it is how that belief affects our lives. We cannot claim to know the truth unless we do it. This principle is applied to all our life, including our speech.

James has already mentioned the importance of controlling the tongue in 1:19 and again in 1:26. According to Earl Palmer the thrust of these verses is that we should “think before we speak”. The first section of chapter 3 is where James expands on these concepts.

## Bible Truth

The things we say are a result of the attitudes and desires in our hearts. Our words, therefore, indicate how we will eventually act. Jesus said it clearly, “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”.

## Life Response

I play on a hockey team that is in a church league. There is an interesting phenomenon that occurs in many games. Each team gathers at their own goal and says a little prayer.

It usually goes something like this: “God, thanks that we can come out and have fun and get exercise. Keep us safe and help us to have good attitudes and be good sports.” And so the game begins.

In the course of play, inevitably, the referee makes a bad call. This is acknowledged by a “friendly” comment that he should be sure to see his eye-care professional in the very near future. This helpful suggestion is repeated throughout the evening as the need arises. The play continues.

Shortly after this, a player is tripped, or shoved, and things begin to get more interesting. Comments on the bench range from, “That guy’s a jerk” to “He’s going to get one right back”. The team feeds off each other’s anger. The game goes on. The two players involved start to ‘talk’ to each other, insults are traded, threats are made, tempers flare. Eventually, this results in something resembling a wrestling match more than a friendly hockey game for which the ‘Christian’ players gave prayer of thanks just a short while before.

Finally, the game ends and the teams line up and shake hands, saying “Good Game” and “Way to go, Buddy”.

1. Does this story hit too close to home to be enjoyable? What James has been saying in this letter is that our attitudes and desires must be transformed by what we believe. In what areas have you been struggling with this? The sports rink? Work place? Home? Church?

## **Read James 3:1–2**

### So you want to teach?

The churches to which James is writing had less formal services than ours do today. As a result, those who wanted simply to elevate their status could volunteer to teach and preach. These “teachers” would then use their influence to serve themselves. James strongly warns the church against this idea because teachers will be judged more strictly. This is due to the fact that, in the Biblical view, teachers are not just mouthpieces who pass on information. To teach involves the modelling of both attitude and action. The goal of teaching is that students reflect, and in some ways reproduce, their teachers lives (e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1). Given this view of teaching, it is easy to see how a warped example in the teacher will show itself in the warped living of the students. It is very likely that James has actual false teachers in mind when he writes this word of warning. His point is that the false teachers have set a bad example and, to a large extent, this is why the church has been having some of

the problems to which he has spoken so far. His word of warning seems to be based on the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 12:36, 18:6).

In verse 2, James says that we all stumble, but the one who can control his tongue will control the rest of his body. When he speaks of a 'perfect man', it is likely that he has in mind the idea of completion or maturity which he has already mentioned in 1:4. If we are able to keep our speech pure and edifying, we are well on our way and the rest is relatively easy (Davids 81).

2. This passage, and the words following, are specifically meant for teachers. In the church, who are teachers? Where does the teaching take place and what is the curriculum? Why do teachers need to be careful of what they say?
3. Can you describe a time when you were strongly influenced by someone who was teaching you? What was the circumstance and how did that person influence you so strongly?
4. For whom are you a model? What do they learn from listening to you speak? Is this different from what they learn by watching you live?

## **Read James 3:3–8**

### **Bits and Rudders, Sparks and Snakes**

James uses the example of a bit in a horse's mouth and the rudder of a ship to explain the influence of the tongue. Though the bit is very small it can control the whole horse. Likewise, the rudder can turn the ship though it is only a small part of it. In context, the analogy seems to be that, just as the bit and the rudder control things larger and more powerful than themselves, so the speech of teachers controls the church. So far, these examples give the idea that the tongue is potentially a very positive influence, control the tongue and you control the whole body (Hodges, 79).

From here James moves into the potential dangers of the tongue. The picture of the spark and the fire, brings to mind images of raw destruc-

tion and terror. The tongue makes great boasts, and like a spark, causes all kinds of problems. James says that within the tongue is a “world of evil” that corrupts the body. Think of what Hitler accomplished with his speeches, or the times we have destroyed people’s reputations, self-esteem, and relationships by what we’ve said.

Think about the times you have been ravaged by what someone has said. This is the kind of influence an uncontrolled tongue can have. James continues to say that an uncontrolled tongue is set on fire by hell. Peter Davids challenges us with a question: Could it be that the things we say to each other, and about each other, are the things that Satan wants us to say, not the kinds of things God would have us say? What does this say about who we are really following and who we are allowing to be ‘lord’ in our lives?

James goes on to say that though men can control even wild animals, we cannot control our own tongues. He gives the vivid word picture of the tongue as a snake full of poison.

5. How do you respond to the question that Peter Davids asks in the previous section?
  
6. Is your tongue more often like the bit that steers your behaviour in a positive direction, or is it a destructive fire in your life? Can you recall specific examples when your words were helpful, or someone has said something to you that was helpful? What about when your words were destructive?

## **Read James 3:9–12**

### **Babbling Brooks and Fig Vines?**

James has argued that the tongue can be destructive and is difficult to control, but also that it can be a positive force. Now he gives a concrete example of its double nature.

The same tongue is used to praise God and then curse a person who is made in God’s image. This doesn’t make sense. In the culture of James, it was understood that if you showed disrespect to the image of Caesar you showed disrespect to Caesar himself. It was inconceivable to think that you could swear yourself to be a loyal citizen of the Empire while smashing a statue of the Emperor. In the same way, you can not proclaim

yourself to be a faithful child of God while using your tongue to savage those made in God's image. To give a modern image, this would be like singing "O Canada" while burning a Canadian flag. Something is wrong with that picture. Can a spring give both fresh and salt water, or can a grapevine bear figs? Of course not. This is the principle Jesus taught when he said "By their fruit you will recognize them"(Mathew7:20). James is making it very clear that the nature of the person will be revealed in the things they say.

7. Think back to the story of the hockey game. How were the players like "fig vines"? What was the end result? What lies behind the things we have been saying lately? What results have we been seeing? How can we overcome this?



LESSON

# 7

## “Oh wise one...”

by *Maxine Plett*

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### James 3:13–18

Key Verse: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” James 3:13

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### Bible Background

**T**he earlier portion of chapter 3 was where James developed a thought first mentioned all the way back in chapter 1. True faith will show itself particularly by the way people speak. If a teacher’s words and life are corrupt, the corruption will quickly spread and be very destructive for the church as a whole. The “fire” of the tongue, mentioned in 3:5 is very likely the source of the selfishness and disorder to which James now turns his attention.

It is possible that, in addition to the division within the church, James is also making a broader application regarding the relationship between the church and the world. The Zealots believed that violent retaliation against the Romans (and Jewish leaders sympathetic to the Romans) was a righteous action. They claimed to be religious, wise, teachers. But their way led to destruction and to the death of thousands. It is no wonder that James is urging the poor to wait on God instead. In this passage, the “wisdom from above” is the key.

### Bible Truth

We need to gain wisdom from God, not from the world. We show this wisdom in our lives by being pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, impartial and sincere.

### Life Response

In the book *Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice tells a story which accurately catches the absurdity of much that passes for wisdom.

One fine day four people were flying in a small, four-passenger plane. On board were a pilot, a minister, and two others, one of whom had just won an award for being the “Smartest Person in the World.”

As they were flying along, the pilot turned to the three passengers and said, “I’ve got some bad news, and I’ve got some worse news. The bad news is, we’re out of gas. The plane’s going down and we’re gonna crash. The worse news is, I only have three parachutes on board.”

Simple math revealed, of course, that someone would have to go down with the plane. The pilot continued. “I have a wife and three children at home. I have many responsibilities. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to take one of the parachutes.” With that, he grabbed one of the chutes and jumped out of the plane. The Smartest Person in the World was next to speak. “I’m the Smartest Person in the World,” he said. “I might be the one who comes up with a cure for cancer or AIDS, or solves the world’s economic problems. Everyone is counting on me!”

The Smartest Person in the World grabbed the second parachute and jumped. The minister then spoke up and said, “Son, you take the last parachute. I’ve made my peace with God, and I’m willing to go down with the plane. Now take the last parachute and go.”

“Relax, Reverend,” said the other person. “The Smartest Person in the World just jumped out of the plane with my backpack.”

A lot of people think they’re pretty smart. In reality, they are pretty much like “The Smartest Person in the World”. They jump out into the world without parachutes. They think they know it all and have all they need to live happy and fulfilled lives, to keep them from crashing and burning. What they actually have is a backpack.

1. When in your life have you latched onto something which you thought would ‘save your life’ or make your life work for you only to discover that it turned out to be a ‘backpack’? How and when did you realize that you were going to ‘crash and burn’?
2. Looking at the issue from a broader perspective, do you feel that Christianity is grabbing on to some ‘backpacks’ instead of the wisdom from God? Give some examples. If this is true, how might we end up “crashing and burning”?

## Read James 3:13–18

### Foolishness Masquerading as Wisdom

This passage opens with a probing question. James is challenging all of the believers, particularly the teachers or people in positions of influence, to examine themselves. In Biblical thought, wisdom is not only attainable for all, it is found fairly easily. In fact, Proverbs personifies wisdom and says that she calls and beckons to people, inviting all to choose her path and not the path of the foolish world (see Proverbs chapters 7&8). Wisdom is to be demonstrated by a person's lifestyle. It must be proven and confirmed with conduct. Even our English proverb "actions speak louder than words" reflects this truth. When we act we have to remember to have the right motives in our spiritual zeal. Wisdom is important in our Christian lives. "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10).

If wisdom calls to us, and if it is found fairly easily, how will we know it when we see it? This is a good question, especially given the fact that no teacher comes along and openly says that their teaching is foolishness! There is foolishness masquerading as wisdom all around us. James goes on to unmask "wisdom" which is not from above 14-16.

First, we see envy. The word here is literally *zeal* and this is the same word clutched at by the Zealots in their campaign of ethnic intolerance and hatred all disguised as true religion (Keener 697). Next we see selfishness. The phrase "selfish ambition" translates a word which carries the meaning "party spirit" (Moo 109). This word was used in Greek literature to describe people who seized political power by unjust means (Nystrom 207). It is a spirit that is self-seeking and causes rivalry and division. Boasting originates with pride, which is not part of heavenly wisdom. And after boasting, comes deceit. It is continuous; starting with selfishness, which leads to rivalry, and then to boasting, which includes lying. When the mask is off, this is the vicious cycle of "wisdom". Anything which calls itself "wisdom" but which shows these characteristics is not from heaven. In fact, it is "earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil" (vs.15). This wisdom is the exact opposite of 'the wisdom that comes from above'. Eventually, failure will be evident with earthly wisdom. In it's selfish grabbing, it will 'crash and burn' just as it was with the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

James talks about chaos, disorder and every evil practice as being the results of envy and selfishness. All of this will happen when leaders pursue their own interests and show no concern for others. The result is ‘evil of every kind’.

The world has not kept reverence and awe for God, therefore the world has lost whatever wisdom it had. Remember, though, that God freely gives wisdom to those who ask him (Jam. 1:5).

3. How do you respond to the last paragraph above? In what ways do you agree that the world has lost whatever wisdom it had? Does this mean that we, as Christians, have nothing to learn from any sources outside of the church? Explain and defend your answer.
  
4. In what ways have you seen individual Christians, or churches, or even conferences, display some of these characteristics? Does that also mean that they have lost whatever wisdom they had? What can we do to change that?
  
5. How have you experienced the effects of this “wisdom” in your own life? In the world around you?

## Divine Wisdom

If counterfeit wisdom is easy to spot because of the trail of destruction it leaves, true wisdom is also easy to spot by the life it brings. The characteristics of the wisdom that comes from God are discussed in verse 17.

The person who is full of heavenly wisdom will display purity, a love for peace, consideration, submission, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity. This would involve moral blamelessness, peaceful attitudes and being open to reason. In the context of James, especially considering his interaction with the themes of Proverbs, it is easy to see why gentleness and impartiality are also included. Wisdom does not hide. It is readily seen in the way a person speaks and the way a person lives. If a person is controlled by mercy and giving to the undeserving, they are displaying true wisdom.

Mercy is love in action and the fruit is the results of the action. Again, it may take awhile to be evident, but genuine wisdom will produce fruit in the lives of others.

Verse 18 encourages believers to become peacemakers and to solve the conflicts within the church. The point in the context is this: true wisdom is the wisdom of peace, not of violence. It is the way of Jesus and not the way of Barabbas and the Zealots. James talks about the fruit of righteousness being the reward for those who make peace. “Fruit” means the conduct pleasing to God, which includes the virtues listed in the previous verse (Moo 137).

## Summary

Looking at this passage, it is evident that trouble, envy, strife, confusion, and evil works are the result of worldly wisdom. Wrong thinking leads to wrong living, and wrong living results in others following a bad example. But God’s wisdom brings blessing and renewed lives.

“During His earthly ministry, Jesus opposed sin and publicly rebuked the spiritual leaders of Israel. Yet the moral and social outcasts (prostitutes and tax collectors) experienced the love of the Lord Jesus.

They knew that He was ‘peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere.’” (Kistenmaker 125)

6. In question 4, we discussed occasions when you experienced counterfeit wisdom by the behaviour of other Christians, churches or conferences. Now think about and describe ways you have seen true wisdom displayed. What characteristics did you see? What was the fruit, or the result?
7. Are these characteristics evident in your life? Which ones? Which aspect of true wisdom do you need to work on? What will you do about it?

LESSON

# 8

## Repentance and Submission

by *LeRoy Siemens*

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### James 4:1–10

Key Verse: “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” James 4:7-8

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### Bible Background

In the immediately preceding passage, James discusses the idea that God’s wisdom is not the same as the ‘wisdom’ of the world (3:13-18). He clearly states that true wisdom produces peace and false wisdom produces chaos. Therefore, Christians who have a genuine faith (as explained in 2:14-26) cannot be a part of both worlds, this is the issue that James goes on to address. The first section of chapter four speaks directly to the issue of giving in to the worldly pressures that were so prevalent to the believers in Jerusalem. Much of chapter three was addressed primarily to teachers or people in positions of influence (although the words were, of course, applicable to the church as a whole). The words of chapter four are addressed, not only to teachers, but also to “the rest of the brotherhood who are in similar sin” (Adamson 165).

In this passage, there are also close connections with earlier sections of the letter. Notice, for example, the connection between chapters 1:5-7 and 4:2b-3. James’ letter seems to be very carefully constructed.

### Bible Truth

There is a continual battle within us between our evil desires and our obedience to God. God is a jealous God who desires our humble repentance and total submission to Him.

## Life Response

Stop. That was it, just a simple word. Stop. No music was heard. Del Currie, lead singer for the Christian Band FONO, simply gave up music one day. “I started to search for what God’s plans were for my life. I walked, talked, ate, and slept music. It sounds weird now, but my ultimate sacrifice to God—to show how much I loved Him and wanted to know His plans for me—was to give up my music.”

And he did. For a full year. No guitar. No writing music. No singing. Del waited and waited and waited. He gave up what he loved the most, to listen to the One he loved most. One day, Del felt that God gave him a clear message to get back to the tunes. He started to write and sing with greater passion and inspiration than he had ever experienced before. “God was giving me my heart’s desire,” he says, “but only after I put Him first.”

It is very easy for personal desires and worldly gain to become too important to us and interfere or block us from having a growing relationship with God. If you insist on hanging on to whatever is coming between you and God, you’ll never know the joy found in bringing a true sacrifice to Christ. Stop walking your own way. Let Him have everything (Campus Journal, March 24, 2000).

1. Describe a time in your life when you felt God was asking you to make a clear choice about who or what had priority in your life. How did you respond?
2. The Life Response story hints that the musician stopped playing because he ‘felt’ God was calling him to make this sacrifice. It says specifically that he began to play again because he ‘felt’ God was giving him back “the desire of his heart”. How reliable a guide are these sorts of feelings? From what we have seen so far in James, how else might God speak to us regarding issues of discipleship and loyalty?
3. To what or whom are you currently holding on too tightly because you are afraid of what will happen if you let go?

## Read James 4:1–5

### Spiritual Adultery

From the way James begins this section, it is obvious that all was not well with this Christian community. After the description of the fruits of true wisdom and the bitter harvest of false wisdom, the first words of chapter four show, clearly, which of the two is to be seen among these Christians. We do not get the idea that there was just one specific dispute. It seems, rather, that there was an atmosphere of strife and tension.

James begins this section by asking his listeners, “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” (4:1a). It’s a rhetorical question, to some degree, because 3:16 has already given the answer. But James then goes on to give a straightforward answer. “Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (4:1b). James seems to be speaking of the kind of inward turmoil and conflict he mentioned back in 1:13-15. This is caused by our own evil desires which draw us away from God. Do not be fooled into thinking that this is just an individual struggle. Sooner or later, these desires “erupt from the individual life into wars and fighting within the community of the church” (Stevenson, 69).

The inner roots of our outward trouble are indicated in verse 1 (our lusts and passions), and in verse 4 (our love of the world). Throughout this epistle, James has a recurring theme that friendship with the world makes us enemies of God. We need to be wary that worldly things don’t mean more to us than things concerning God’s kingdom. As Christians we sometimes think that we should be able to gain victory over our inner desires. In this context we see, however, that “there was no [immediate] victory for these people but only a constant struggle between living for God and being controlled by the world” (Davids 98). This is not a struggle relevant only in James’ era, but one that many of us struggle with, on a daily basis, today.

In verses 2 and 3 a progression occurs which goes from the causes to some of the results. He is expounding on what was already stated in verse 1. Because of jealous desires and impure motives we long for things we can’t have. This in turn affects our prayer life. James mentions three of our most common problems in prayer: 1) We don’t ask, 2) we ask for wrong things, or 3) we ask with wrong motives. It is only when we align our will with God’s, and seek only after His will that our prayer life will be powerful.



James' closure to this section comes through stating that God has had a jealous desire throughout Scripture for us to be faithful, and it is to this that we are called.

4. What are some desires that cause quarrelling within the church? How about in our families? What about our relationships at work or with our friends?
  
5. Does this passage teach that selfish desires, coveting, and 'friendship with the world' is the source of every quarrel, fight or disagreement we might have? Does it mean that we all have to agree on every issue and, if we don't, there is sin or selfishness lurking somewhere? What do our answers say about our approach to church conflict? Can there be 'healthy' church conflict? Explain and defend your answers.
  
6. What does 'friendship with the world' mean? Does James mean that we should completely reject society and culture, or be in total opposition to it? What should be the relationship between the church and the world? Given what James says earlier in the letter, what should the relationship be between churches and secular social agencies such as foodbanks or women's shelters? What about a Christian's involvement with politics?
  
7. In what areas have you been convicted by these words of James?

## **Read James 4:6–10**

### Correction through Humble Repentance

After clarifying that our problems lie in our lusts and passions, James continues to tell us that we need more than just an understanding of our condition. We need an attitude adjustment. In verse 6 we see that we are to be humble; without humility we cannot make a claim on the grace of God because of His jealous anger towards our sin. "There is reason to tremble, but trembling will be a prelude to joy if we turn to God for grace" (Davids 101). There is help beyond what any of us expect or

deserve. This verse, therefore, gives us a reason for hope. Later, in chapter 5:1-6, we see that James is well aware of God's coming judgement on those who refuse to repent.

Verse 7 is the beginning of a series of instruction (actually more like commands) as to how we can develop our attitude of humility. The first statement is that we are to 'submit ourselves to God.'

This is the key to the rest of the requirements. The Greek word translated 'submit' (*hupotasso*) is a word which often carries the strong force of 'enlist' (Adamson 174). It means, not only do we put ourselves under the authority of another, we are, from that point on, to be **obedient** to that authority. As we have seen so often, James is calling for a specific lifestyle, an attitude of submission that will be maintained and cultivated. He is not satisfied with either lip service or isolated acts of submission.

In order for us to draw near to God, we need to cleanse ourselves, both spiritually and morally. The plain word for this is the good old-fashioned word *repentance*. If we are truly honest in our repentance we will grieve and mourn because of our sorrow for what we have done and for the destruction it has caused. This is much more than a flippant apology either to God or to the people who have been hurt. James calls us to sincere confession and what James calls *gloom* is an expression of our sorrow. Given the tone and the language of this passage, it may be that James is thinking of the tax collector in Jesus' parable (Luke 18). He is an example of one who wails and has downcast eyes because of what he has done, this attitude is acceptable before God whereas the religious pride of the Pharisee is not.

In any case, we need to keep a balance. James is not calling us to a joyless life. This text does not mean that we can never laugh again. It means, rather than pursuing frivolity all the time and seeking our own pleasure, sometimes we need to give some serious thought to God (Adamson 175). The fact of God's holiness and the seriousness of His displeasure should cause us to fall before God. But we should not remain in despair, because in verse 10 we find hope, "when we humble ourselves before God, He will lift us up".

8. How do these words of James sound to you? Which do you find harder to accept: That God gives lavish grace when we repent or that He asks us to be so broken by sin that we grieve, mourn,

and wail? What is the reason for your answer and what does your answer say about your view of God? What does it say about your view of sin?

9. The passage as a whole is a strong call to a community characterized by harmony, by a vigorous pursuit of God, by deep repentance, and by forgiveness. As we look into the mirror of this passage (remember James 1:23-25), what do we need to do in order to more closely resemble what James calls us to?

LESSON

9

# Total Submission?

by *Eva Wiebe*

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## James 4:11–17

Key Verse: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbour.” James 4:12

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### Bible Background

After the general description of an extremely tense atmosphere (4:1–6) and after a strong call to repentance and reconciliation (4:7–10), James begins to address specific problems within the church community. The way in which they are behaving toward one another is clearly violating the Royal law of love which was a central part of James’ argument back in 2:8. What the specific problems all have in common is a reliance on the ‘wisdom’ of the world. This so-called wisdom is bringing its bitter harvest of foolish and slanderous speech and a chasing after wealth at the expense of people.

### Bible Truth

We need to depend on God and not on ourselves. We need to depend on Him in every aspect of our lives, including all of our relationships and all of our plans.

### Life Response

An old legend tells of a merchant in Baghdad who one day sent his servant to the market. Before very long the servant came back, white and trembling, and in great agitation said to his master: “Down in the market place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and when I turned around I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Master, please lend me your horse, for I must hasten away to avoid her. I will ride to Samarra and there I will hide, and Death will not find me.”

The merchant lent him his horse and the servant galloped away in great haste. Later the merchant went down to the market place and saw Death standing in the crowd. He went over to her and asked, "Why did you frighten my servant this morning? Why did you make a threatening gesture?" "That was not a threatening gesture," Death said. "It was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra (Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* 168).

A recent survey asked American citizens the question "What would make you a happier person?" For 48% of the respondents, the answer, predictably enough, was "more money". As a challenge to this false belief, University of Chicago psychologist Ed Diener interviewed 49 Americans all of whom had a net worth of more than \$100 million. Many of these rich people said that they were basically unhappy, and one of them said that he could "never remember being happy at all". So often, we chase after resources that are, in the words of the Bible, only mist which will vanish through our hand even as we grasp for them (Nystrom 264). Not only that, we do so knowing that life is unpredictable and that we all, just like the merchant's servant, have an 'appointment in Samarra'.

1. What are some of the "resources" that society chases after thinking that they will bring happiness or contentment? For each one mentioned, think about the impact chasing that thing has globally (e.g. on international relationships, justice, equity of resources). What impact does chasing after that thing have on our local communities? On our churches? In our homes?
2. We tend to get a bit smug when we read how people respond to survey questions like the one mentioned above, thinking that we would give a more spiritual answer. As a group, honestly consider whether our answers to the question "What would make you happier" would actually be very much different. Discuss whether the things we do, and the things we seek after, reflect the way we would like to answer the question. Is there a gap between the things we say we value and the things which our lifestyle says we value?
3. Discuss the statement "For Christians to rely on anything other than God is to lack integrity; it is to be exactly the double minded person of James 1".

## Read James 4: 11–12

### Watch Your Mouth!

In this first section it says that we are not to slander or judge our brothers, because if we do we are speaking against the law and judging the law. Slander means to speak against one another. James was speaking to Jews of the Diaspora, Jews that were scattered and lived in different countries because of Roman persecution (1:1). They were away from the land and the temple, and from godly instruction. Not only that, but they had also become Christians (James uses the term *brothers* in verse 11 showing a connection in Christ between himself and those to whom he writes). The evidence of the letter itself shows that they were slipping away from God and into the world. The first exhibit to prove this is their slanderous speech. This is another example of James interacting with the Jewish wisdom tradition with which his readers would have been quite familiar. Commands not to slander can be found in each section of the Old Testament. It is clear in the Law (Lev. 19:16), the Psalms (101:5) and Proverbs (10:18). It is obvious that this type of slander and harsh criticism violates the Law of Love which James mentions in 2:8. Worse, it treats that Law as if it were non-existent or no longer in force.

James says, to do that was to arrogantly assume that you were above the Law – and, by extension above the Giver of the Law. In verse 12 it says that there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, which is God.

4. What does it mean –we are not to judge others? Is there no place for evaluation of another person’s lifestyle? How does this passage relate to things like community, accountability and church discipline (see James 5:19-20 which implies a judgement in regards to who has wandered into error. See also Galatians 6:1 and 1 Cor 5:?) Are there areas in which we are not to judge and some where we are or is there another principle involved here?
5. In our lives, what are some of the motives at work when we judge others? How are these violations of the Law of Love?

## Read James 4:13–17

### Our Way or God's Way?

In verse 13, James is speaking of the travelling merchants who are planning and calculating gains to themselves. They are depending only on their own will and what they want, they are leaving God out of the plans.

James then brings this to a head when he says (v. 14), “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” We are but a vapour that soon disappears; we are insignificant without God. It is not hard to hear Jesus' parable about the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) in the background of James' letter.

James is not saying that making plans is, in itself, wrong. It becomes wrong when we arrogantly and presumptuously leave God out. We need to remember that we are in the hands of God, so we need to plan accordingly (v. 15). God's will is best so we need to acknowledge and ask for guidance when we are making plans for the future. James' listeners were not only making plans without God but they were also boasting about them. It is important to remember that the issue is first of all a spiritual one and that the spiritual is reflected through the economic and social issues. Like the people in the survey mentioned earlier, they were chasing after things that would bring them “life, security and prosperity”, but were not considering the Lord.

In verse 17 there is warning against those who are ignoring God's will. Characteristically, it is a call to action and doing things which we know are the will of God. Again, it is possible that James is echoing a saying of Jesus (Luke 12:47).

6. Although, he is about to speak to it more directly, what is James saying about money here? Is he against it, in favour of it or indifferent to it?
  
7. In what areas of your life do you tend to make decisions and plans first and (maybe) ask God's approval later? Why are you reluctant to let God have control of these areas?

LESSON

# 10

## The Rich and The Poor

*by Ron Zacharias*

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### **James 5:1–6**

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

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### Bible Background

James is writing to the “twelve tribes scattered among the nations”. This language reflects the Jewish concept of the *diaspora*—the ‘scattering’ or the ‘exile’ of God’s people in the world. The Jewish background of his readers provides James with a foundation on which to build as he responds to a troubled church. The people that he was writing to had high respect for the Scripture and this gives James an authority to which he can refer.

If we take a look at several other parts of James, we can see that 5:1-6 is a passage which focuses and restates much of what he has already said. For example, in 1:9-11, James has described how the rich will be scorched and wither away even as they go about their business. Then 2:6-7 gives another blow to the rich people who are taking advantage of the poor. They are bringing them into the courts and using their social status to condemn the innocent poor. The verses in 4:13-17 again bring into perspective those who desire to be rich. They are focusing on self-indulgent ways of making themselves rich and forgetting about what God has called them to do to take care of the poor. This is, obviously, a major concern for James and it is noteworthy that such a short letter contains so many references to it.

James is reaffirming a crucial theme from the Old Testament: The poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized matter to God, therefore, they should matter in the community of God’s people. (Mk 10:21).



## Bible Truth

The treasures of this world are already rotting away and we are bringing judgment upon ourselves if we fail to recognize the needs of the poor and, instead, use our wealth to live self-indulgent lives.

## Life Response

In my first year in college, a portion of the Introduction to Church Ministries course involved going into the inner city of Winnipeg, MB for Mission Exposure. During one of the first days there, we were instructed to take a walk around town. As our group started out, I was thinking, "This could not be too bad. After all, we are living in Canada!" We soon started to realize that it was bad. These people were living in a poverty stricken area. Windows were missing from doors and people were wandering the streets aimlessly, in ragged clothing which could not keep them warm. It was very disturbing to realize that these people lived their lives not knowing where the next meal might come from, or how they could get clothes for their kids. I think, however, that the most disturbing part was when I returned to school and took a closer look at the area where we lived. There was literally new house after new house going up and there was not a missing window from anyone's house. The town had left over money that had to be spent, so they paved a path through the local park. Thousands of dollars were spent to lay a strip of concrete so that the local people did not have to walk on the grass.

How more plainly does James have to spell it out? Here we are living self-indulgent lives while, less than an hour's drive away, people are cold and hungry.

1. Most of us do not consider ourselves rich. We rationalize our position and conclude that athletes or movie stars are rich, and we are just getting by. But answer these questions honestly: Have you ever had to wonder where your next meal is coming from? Have you ever gone without shelter or without proper clothing? If so, how did the people around you respond? If not, why do you not consider yourself rich? Are there people in your area that are not sure where their next meal is going to come from? Do you know what, if anything, is being done to help these people and are you involved in it? What makes us different from the rich people that James is describing?

2. What exactly is the role of the church regarding the poor? Are they our responsibility or the Government's?

## Read James 5:1–6

### Affluence is a Spiritual Issue

In 5:1-6, James is pointing out the faults of the people that have become rich. There are two reasons for doing this and both are very vital to the long-term health of the church. The first reason is to warn those who are in danger of idolizing wealth and power. The second is to condemn those who have already gained wealth and are not using it in a godly way.

In the same manner, and using much the same language of the Old Testament prophets, James brings a message of destruction to the rich in this passage. There are four ways in which the rich have abused their wealth and James condemns them for each one.

1. The rich have hoarded wealth and neglected the poor. To be wealthy in those days meant that you had acquired land, precious metals, and clothing. Throughout the Roman Empire (including Palestine), the rich people in the community built luxuries for themselves and neglected to share with the poor.

2. The rich people had, in essence, stolen from the poor by failing to pay their labourers money that was owed to them. This is a direct reflection from the Old Testament law which clearly required people to make prompt payment to the people that work for them (e.g. Leviticus 19:13, Malachi 3:5). To reinforce this theme, James says that Yahweh Sabaoth (the Lord of the Hosts/Armies) has heard the cries of the workers and is about to bring judgment upon the employers. There could be no misunderstanding of what James was trying to communicate by the use of this rare title. The Rabbis of his day understood this particular phrase to refer to “the God at war with injustice” (Adamson 187). It seems that the main text to which James refers is Deuteronomy 24:14. This is a direct law stating that God's people are supposed to pay wages everyday before sunset because the employees were poor and they needed the money. The goal of the Law was that in the community of God's peo-

ple the poor would be treated on par with all other Israelites. By echoing this text, James is saying that the same should be true in the church but in actuality the rich people are neglecting the law of the Lord.

Therefore, the voices of the workers are reaching the Lord Almighty and the rich are guilty of sin.

3. The rich people were living self-indulgent lifestyles. They lived in luxury and indulgence. The rich people were nourishing the needs of their own hearts and forgetting about the other people that were around them. In contrast, James has been living each day as if it was the last because he knew that after Christ rose from the dead any day could be the end, and these people were living as if they were in control.

4. The rich people were also using their social and political status to pervert justice and condemn innocent men. In those days if you were a wealthy person, that automatically gave you social status. In turn, this gave you advantage in the courts which they used to take back what was owed to the poor. Despite the plain words of Jesus that “many who are first will be last and many who are last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30 – not the context and the parable which immediately follows this verse), the social caste system was being reinforced in the church.

In summary, it seems that being rich involves a great risk and that the risk may even be greater for the rich in the community of God’s people. We are called to give all things over to God and see what He wants us to do with the things that He gives us. We are also called to take care of one another in regards to both spiritual and physical needs. Finally, far from merely mimicking the social structure of the world around us, we are called to model the love and concern of the Lord Almighty (Yahweh Sabaoth). We should make sure the needs of our immediate congregations are being met and then look further and continue to do so until “justice rolls on like a river and righteousness like a never ending stream” (Amos 5:24).

3. James uses very pointed language in this passage. What makes his withering accusations and denunciations different than the violent and quarrelsome speech he has already condemned in this very letter (3:1-12, 4:1-11)?

4. In church the pendulum seems to swing between being overly judgmental and trying to dictate people's lives on the one hand and being overly accepting and not challenging sinful lifestyles on the other. How does James help us find a balance?
5. To what degree are your business practices and your use of money the business of other people in your church?
6. Respond to the idea that "being rich involves great risk and that risk may even be greater within the community of God's people". Is being wealthy inherently dangerous? What are the dangers in theory? If we are to be considered wealthy (and there is no doubt that by the standards of much of the world most of us are wealthy), what are the particular dangers for us?
7. As a group, honestly consider your theology of wealth. To what degree do you believe prosperity to be a sign of righteousness or blessing from God? Conversely, do you consider poverty to be a sign of God's displeasure? To what degree do your views reflect the emphasis of Scripture and to what degree are they influenced by our culture (perhaps even the Christian subculture)?
8. Respond to the statement "Christian stewardship is not something we do, it is something we become. It is neither a technique nor a task. It is a way of living" (Bonk, Jon. Missions and Money, 131). Is this concept consistent with the letter of James? Is it consistent with the way in which we are actually living?

LESSON

# 11

## Patience During Persecution

*by Martha Klassen*

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**James**  
**5:7–11**

Key Verse: “You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.”  
James 5:8

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### Bible Background

**T**his general letter was written in a time of social, economic and religious upheaval. It was a time when the Christians endured sporadic, but often intense, persecution. Persecution came at them from many different angles. The Jews persecuted them as heretics and apostates from the tradition of the Fathers. The Romans persecuted them because of their connection to the Jewish faith—particularly during those times of Jewish rebellion against Rome. The Romans also persecuted them because they were seen as both atheists (their God was invisible although the Jews had the Temple) and as traitors (they did not pay allegiance to the Roman rulers by burning incense to Caesar). Caesar Nero in particular tortured and killed Christians in horrible ways.

As if all this was not enough, the letter of James makes it clear that the trouble was not all external. The social, ethnic, and economic chasms of society were very much present within the church and this was leading to chaos and disorder, to a form of ‘civil war’ (James 4:1-6). Employers, even if they were within the church were not treating their workers with respect. Often they oppressed the workers and refused to pay them. Because of this situation, the Christians were becoming impatient in their oppression. They started to grumble and complain against each other. In this section of his letter, James addresses this issue by giving a clear call to patience even in the midst of uncertain and unpleasant circumstances.

## Bible Truth

James encourages his readers all over the world to be patient, even in suffering, because the Lord's coming is very near. At the Lord's coming, he will take them out of all their suffering.

## Life Response

This past year, while participating in Steinbach Bible College Mission Exposure trip to Belize, I met a young girl who attended the school where I was working. She was about seven years old and had faced more hardships than most of us could even imagine. Her hardships included living in poverty and having crippled legs. She used an adult-sized walker to get around. She painfully walked up the hill to school several times a day. When she was halfway up the hill, she would squat down beside the road and rest for several minutes before completing the journey. Her dedication and stubbornness to attend school, despite the difficulty of getting there, impressed me. I naturally assumed that she would be a bitter and complaining little girl because of the difficult life she lived. I was proven wrong when I met her. She was one of the friendliest and kindest girls I have ever met. When I smiled at her while she was limping toward the school building, the painful but determined look on her face immediately turned into a huge grin!

Even though her struggle was not an oppressive master, but a disability, I believe she practised James 5:7-11 every day. Despite her difficulties, she patiently endured her suffering without a complaint. Just like the readers of James and the little Belizean girl, we too have our own struggles, which we need to patiently endure until the end. We cannot live our lives in bitterness because God has handed a situation to us that does not meet our expectations.

1. Why do you think the writer might have "naturally assumed" that the crippled girl would be "bitter and complaining"? Do you think this girl would see herself as a great example of patience the way the writer did? What do your answers say about our lifestyle and about our expectations in the world?
2. Describe people in your life who have been handed a difficult situation in life but have responded with a godly patience. What did their example do for you?

3. Along the same lines, have there been people in your life who have reacted to such circumstances with bitterness and lashing out as described earlier in James? What did their response do to you?
4. Respond to this statement found in a Bible College yearbook several years ago. "Suffering is a great teacher because it teaches us patience and wisdom. Suffering is good! Amen". Does this statement bother you? Do you agree with it? Are there ways in which it is, or can be, false and misleading?
5. Is God allowing you to go through some difficult times? Are you fighting hard to have a good attitude or do you allow yourself to become bitter because of it? Although it is very hard to know how we will react to situations before we actually face them, if God allowed you to suffer, would you have a good attitude or would you give into the temptation of bitterness?

## Read James 5:7–9

### The Lord is Coming!

In chapter 5:1-6, James talked to the rich oppressors and warned them about their oppression. After a short, but strict word to them, he turns his attention to the oppressed. He tells them to wait patiently for the suffering to end. James does not mean that his readers should sit around waiting passively. He encourages them to meet the struggle head on and hold out against it.

Patience is an art that is learned and developed over a period of time. It is the opposite of being short tempered; it does not take revenge. In the fashion and language of the prophets, James makes it very clear that God will return as Judge and will avenge the oppressed.

James uses the example of a farmer who plants a crop and confidently waits for the rains to come and water the field. This period of waiting could, and often did, include hard times and perhaps even hunger. However, no matter how hungry he and his family may be, he must remain patient and expectant. There is nothing he can do to speed up the proc-

ess of rainfall or harvest. He is helpless in regards to things he can not control. But that does not mean he sits back as a passive victim of fate. In fact, there is another side to this example which is often overlooked.

James also makes it clear that the farmer can count on the rains coming twice a year and that the harvest will happen! That will all happen in due time, as will the return of the Judge.

In the meantime, the readers are not to grumble against each other.

Often in persecution, one's temper grows short and one complains and grumbles against those whom we are to love. Groaning and grumbling are the opposite of being joyful and thankful. When a believer grumbles, he falls into sin. It is a sin because he accuses God, perhaps indirectly, for his misfortunes. Directly, the complainer finds fault with fellow men. James warns his readers that just as God will judge the sin in the oppressors, he will also judge their sin of complaining and grumbling against each other.

6. Think of a time when you were struggling with something. What was your attitude towards the trial? Did you meet the trial head on or did you try to avoid the struggle? What bearing did the knowledge that the Lord was returning have on your response?
  
7. During that time, how did you treat those around you? Did you experience a shortness of temper towards them? Were you able to fulfil the Royal Law of James 2:8? What did you do about the urge to not love?

## **Read James 5:10–11**

### Examples from the Past

James knew that people learn from examples and therefore, in keeping with Jewish wisdom tradition, he used them. Being patient during oppression was a difficult concept to grasp, so James used the prophets and Job as examples.

The people often persecuted the prophets as they spoke the word of God. The prophets, who were given the greatest privilege of spreading God's word, were also the most afflicted. Yet they persevered despite the suffer-



ing and were called blessed for enduring to the end. The devotional writer Matthew Henry said that when we realize that the greatest men of the Bible also had the most affliction, we should also be “reconciled to affliction”. It is this to which James draws our attention: The men whom God considered great suffered much and were great examples of patience. They are to be considered blessed because they endured to the end.

Another example James gives is Job. The Lord allowed Satan to remove all of God’s blessings, causing Job to live in agony. Although Job cursed the day he was born, he remained faithful to God. Job’s faith persevered. Although he was not passive and docile, although he struggled honestly with pain and doubt, under all the miseries, he could still bless God in an attitude of humility and patience. At the end of Job’s waiting, God restored his health, family and wealth; all that he had lost was restored. In the same way, the reader’s faith was to persevere during the oppression of their earthly masters.

If God allowed Satan to take everything away from Job, and God allowed the rich to oppress the poor in the days of James, does he have compassion on his people? James’ answer is yes, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (v 11).

Compassion is best translated as “heart”. God has a heart for his people (Kistemaker 170). He loves and cares deeply for them. God has mercy on his people and this mercy is such that God will make abundant amends for all of their suffering and afflictions.

In conclusion, the message that James is trying to get across is that his readers are to be patient during oppression because God’s compassion and mercy will take them out of oppression at the Lord’s coming. Injustice and oppression will not be the last word.

8. Discuss how (or if) the Lord’s return impacts our current attitudes, actions, or beliefs? What difference does the Lord’s return make in your struggles? How does this show?
  
9. In the light of the overall passage (James 5:1-11), discuss this passage in Janet Peery’s novel The River Beyond the World:

“Hearts are made two ways”, her mother said. “Some are full with what they’re given no matter how small, and others can’t forget what they can’t have.”

“She’s mean,” Luisa insisted. “And that’s a sin.”

Her mother stopped to cool the mano, then sprinkled kernels onto the metate and blew on them as if to give them courage. She shook her head. “Forgive her.”

“But she never asks.”

Her mother shook her arms and then resumed rolling as the corn crunched between the stones. “All the more reason...,” she said.

Are we always required to forgive those who have hurt us but do not acknowledge this nor ask for forgiveness? How does our obedience to this affect our ability to be “patient in the face of suffering”?

10. In what ways is your life reflecting that you believe God to be compassionate and merciful? How could you improve on that?

LESSON

# 12 A Community Not of This World

*by Dallas Wiebe*

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**James  
5:12–20**

Key Verse: “Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

James 5:16

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## Bible Background

o far in James’ letter, he has mainly been confronting issues that have had a negative impact within the church. As he concludes, however, he now changes to the idea of mutual edification and building Christian community. This last part of the letter is much more positive and encouraging and much of it has to do with speech acts within the assembly. James describes to his readers how to build a community unlike that of the world. This community is to be governed by faith and love. These two themes have been carried through his entire letter as well as the entire New Testament.

## Bible Truth

The community of faith is supposed to be in contrast to that of the world because it is built on the teachings and example of Christ. The Christian community should be characterized by trust, honest care for each other, mutual confession, and prayer, which all edify the church.

## Life Response

When I was younger, I had a close friend and we did everything together. We made forts, climbed trees, went biking, started fires, and many other things little boys like to do. Our parents were both dedicated Christians and we had both made early decisions in life to follow Christ as well. As we grew older, my friend slowly turned away from faith and started to get

caught up in the world. I knew I should approach him. He respected me and I knew I could have a positive effect on his life. But since I was too selfish and scared to take the time, I chose to do nothing. I did not have the courage to tell him in a loving way, that I did not agree with the direction he was heading and try to point him back to Christ. James speaks to this apathetic or timid attitude. He calls his readers to care for those in the community of believers, build a community on trust, and care for others.

1. James would consider the silence of the writer in the story above to reflect a lack of wisdom. Discuss the situations in your life, your church or your community in which a similar lack of wisdom is being displayed. What might be a better response? Do you truly love those people? How does it show?

## Read James 5:12

### Do you swear to tell the truth...?

James starts by commanding his readers not to swear, but simply speak the truth. In this command, he uses the term, “above all”. This is very likely a technique James uses to let his readers know he is about to conclude, but it might also reflect the emphasis he places on this particular command. The command not to take oaths is yet another example of the wisdom theme, in that wisdom is reflected in careful and proper speech. Truthful speech must come from the heart and the truthfulness that comes from the heart will cause other actions in life to be genuine as well. Jews during this time swore by “heaven or earth” instead of God, so that, they would be sure not to misuse his Name. In courts, people had to swear an oath to prevent them from shading the truth. In this passage, however, James is referring more to everyday flippant oaths (such as those a merchant might make in stressing the quality of his wares), rather than an official oath taken in court. Such oaths are dangerous because they so easily lead to sin, such as, taking the Lord’s name in vain or bearing false witness. When I was younger, I had a close friend and we did everything together. We made forts, climbed trees, went biking, started fires, and many other things little boys like to do. Our parents were both dedicated Christians and we had both made early decisions in life to follow Christ as well. As we grew older, my friend slowly turned away from faith and started to get

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James also loosely quotes Matthew 5:34, 35, 37, and backs up his teaching with the authority of Jesus himself who states “I am the truth”. This disallowing of oaths is an encouragement to plain speech that comes from a decision in the heart. If you can trust one’s “yes” to be “yes” and their “no” to be “no” without the invoking of an oath, then one’s entire speech can be trusted. This simple speech is fundamental for every other form of action or speech, especially in determining religious motives. If people cannot trust your word, how can they trust you in other aspects of life? This community of faith is supposed to be built on trust. Trust can only occur when a person’s speech is simple and not masked in false religiosity.

2. Think about the larger church. Can you think of any ways deceitful lips have hindered the image of the church in the world?
3. Narrow the focus of the question above. Can you think of ways in which deceitful lips have hindered the image of your church in your community?
4. How do people see you? As a person of your word or someone who shades the truth periodically? What about the times when no one is the wiser?

## **Read James 5:13–18**

### The Power of Prayer

In the beginning of this section we see that Christians will not go through life on a mountain top kind of experience. Christians will have times of trouble, whether personal, financial, or spiritual. Therefore, James encourages his readers to pray when they are in such circumstances. God is our source of strength and we are to look to Him when we need help and encouragement. At the same time, this trouble will not last forever and we need to remember God when things are good. God is part of our everyday lives. We just need to remember that and make sure we relate to Him no matter what the circumstances.

In verses 14–15, James brings up the concept of supporting the sick, which like his concern for the poor, goes against the “survival of the fittest” instincts of the world. These people who are seen as weak in the world are to be honoured by being visited by the elders, anointed with oil and prayed over (elders were seen as representatives of the church of God). Oil was seen as a medicinal tool at this time, alluding to the idea of using medical practices for the person. It was also symbolic of the healing power of God and was used almost ritually. The elder should encourage medical practices, but the oil was/is to be a reminder of the healing power of God and the elder applying the oil should be the avenue through which God shows He cares despite circumstances.

It is prayer, though, that is seen as the primary act and it is God who heals. Calling on the name of the Lord causes the elder to rely on the power of God, not on reputation, office, or personal expertise. This prayer must be made in faith, not only on the part of the one receiving the ministry, but also by those praying for the sick. It also alludes to the fact that sickness can be related to sin in some way. The body and soul are closely interrelated as can be seen in the healing of the paralytic (Matthew 9:1–8). Sickness is not always a direct result of sin, as both the case of Job and the blind man in John 9:1–3 makes clear, but we should not disregard the issue entirely. A sick person should examine his or her own life to see if sin may be the cause. If sin is in the way, God is willing to forgive and able to heal. The context and the words James uses indicate that the phrases, “the sick person will be made well” and “the Lord will raise him up” in verse 15 refer, primarily, to physical healing in those cases where sin and sickness are related.

In verse 16, we see that unconfessed sin blocks the pathway both to God and relationships with others. Again, the word “healed” has more to do with a physical healing than a spiritual or relational one, although, this verse might also hint to that as well (Nystrom 307). Once sin is confessed, lines of communication with God and others are opened once again. It alludes to the fact that the offender and offended are to pray together and for each other. This process will help mend wrongs. In verse 16b, James refers to the prayer of a righteous man. Abraham is the most obvious example of a righteous man and his righteousness was accredited to him because he had real faith and a sensitive heart to God. This is also seen in the example James chooses. Elijah was a normal human being,

“just like us”, and we have access to the same God who worked amazing miracles through the prayers and the service of Elijah. These verses really show the power of prayer and the confidence we have that the Lord will answer, just as he did with Elijah. It also shows the importance of people praying for each other and showing care for your brother in need.

5. In what ways do we give special attention to those who are sick and weak within our congregations? When you pray for the sick, do you honestly believe that God can heal?
  
6. Have you, or anyone that you know, been harmed by other people who have recklessly concluded that your sickness or suffering was specifically a result of punishment for sin? What impact did that experience have on your walk with God?
  
7. On the other hand, do you think we are too quick to dismiss any connections between sin and suffering? Defend your answer from the scriptures.
  
8. As a follow up to the last two questions, what is your belief about the connection between the physical and the spiritual in regards to sin and sickness? Is your answer consistent with your belief about how the physical and spiritual are connected in regards to the issue of wealth and poverty?
  
9. At this moment, what sin in your life is hurting your relationship with God or others? How open are you to confessing your sins with others? How does that affect the power of your prayer life?

## **Read James 5:19–20**

### **Loving Confrontation**

In these two verses, James shows the corporate responsibility Christians have to one another. Not only do we need to pray together and confess our sins to each other, we also need to be responsible to correct those who



turn away from God. These verses speak about the “wandering” person. We need to understand what that phrase meant in its original context. We tend to think of this in the narrow sense of someone who has denied his or her faith, but in the thought of James, the reference is to anyone who has, consciously or otherwise, chosen a deviant path. As we have seen throughout the letter, James believes that truth is not just something to be believed, it is something to be lived. This is why the wisdom literature so often uses the image of “walking in the way” or “walking in the path” of the Lord. With this final word, James is actually once again summing up a theme from within the Old Testament (Proverbs 14:8, Isaiah 9:15, Ezekiel 33:1-20).

In a world which so often reflects those famous and flippant words of Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”, we as a community of believers must be concerned for one another. James has already made it very clear that we must care for each other’s physical needs. Now he re-emphasizes that we must also care for each other’s spiritual needs, even if that means a little correction every once in a while.

We do not like to confront others with their sin, but it is the wise and loving thing to do when handled in the proper way. James goes on to state the implications of such an action when he states that God “will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins”. Of course, the person who corrects cannot forgive these sins, but is the person preventing the straying person from living in sin any longer or allowing it to grow worse. This must be done gently, however, and with proper motives, as James has already stated in 4:11-12. It is our responsibility to direct those who have strayed to turn back to the path of wisdom and live a life of submission and faith in God. This is the kind of community Christ was trying to build; one characterized by trust, prayer, confession, and an honest, loving care for others (even if it has to hurt a bit). As Proverbs says, “wounds from a friend can be trusted but an enemy multiplies kisses” (27:6).

10. What are some specific ways in which people are “wandering” away from the path of wisdom? Whose responsibility is it to get involved and “bring them back”?
  
11. What do you think the role of community discipline might be in some of these situations?

12. The letter of James is often quite blunt and even harsh (especially on the issue of money and speech). How can you reconcile his words with the call to love, to forgive and to refrain from judging others? What errors are easy to “wander” into as we try to balance righteousness and mercy? In what ways do these errors appeal to us and how can they be minimized?
13. Is there now or has there ever been someone in your life whom you needed to confront? What did you do? How open are you to correction from others?

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**NOTE:** For students wishing to pursue further study on any of the topics discussed in these lessons, a bibliography is included at the back of the **“Learning to Live” leader’s guide.**