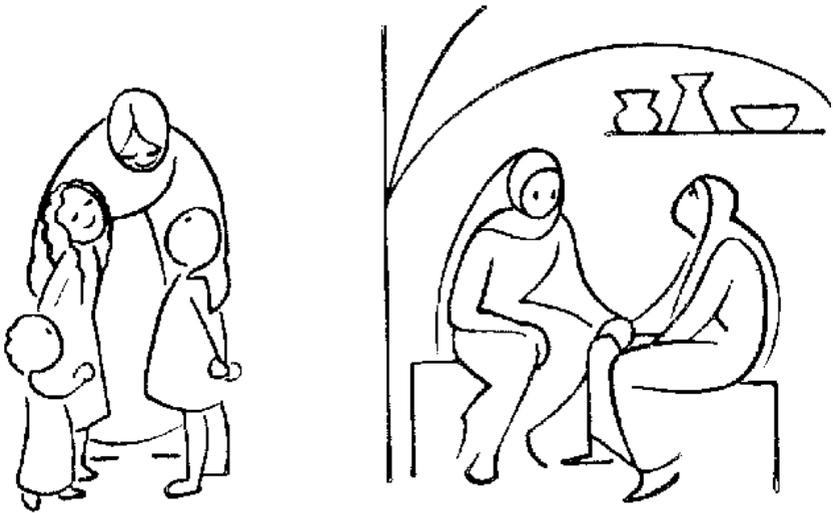
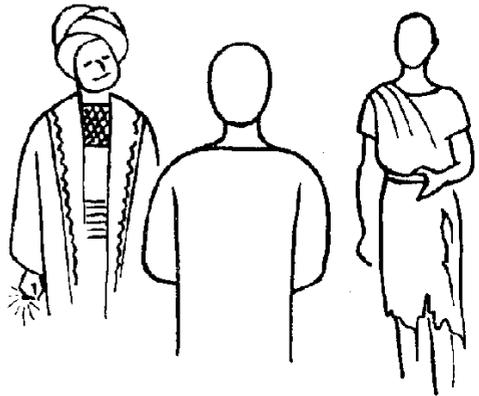


James: An Epistle of Straw?



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by Brian Johnston



Lessons from the Letter of James

1. Talking about trials

Martin Luther described the Bible letter by James as 'a right strawy epistle'. It seems he felt disappointed that it didn't contain any exalted description of Christ, nor make reference to the work of the Spirit, and didn't work hard to defend the faith.

We usually take it to have been written by James, the Lord's half-brother. He came late to faith; his conversion wasn't until after the Lord's resurrection. Despite that, and to some extent influenced perhaps by his family association to Christ, James appears to have been highly respected by the community of faith at Jerusalem. Famously, he chaired the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts chapter 15.

It's true that James doesn't deal with the glories of Christ and his Church or with the great Christian blessings, nor does he transport us to the world to come. James seems to be at home in more mundane matters. He doesn't write in great soaring passages, nor are there many strongly motivating exhortations. But the value of his contribution, under God, is in forcing us to face up squarely to practical realities and their ethical implications.

Let's take it a chapter at a time, and so we'll begin with the first chapter which is almost, if not, entirely devoted to how we should cope with a major difficulty in Christian experience – that of facing up to trials and troubles. We would be so much poorer without this introductory chapter of James. Repeatedly, throughout his letter, James uses the expression, 'my brothers'. He's not speaking down to his audience from a great height, but he's drawing alongside to give compassionate counsel – counsel we can be so grateful for. Let's read it:

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

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials ... (James 1:1-2)

With these opening remarks, James sets the scene. He wanted to speak to his audience at that time – and to us today – about **adversity in testing** – the kind of testing we routinely face in the varied trials of Christian life. He continues:

... knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its

perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:3-4)

James is not asking his listeners to pretend that times of testing trials are happy occasions! That would be to part company with reality. No, rather he calls on us to rejoice in the assurance that God can still work to our **advantage in testing**. James describes the advantage to be gained through such an experience as the steadfastness it can produce in us – which in turn develops maturity. This may not at first be uppermost in our mind, so James says:

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

In other words, if we can't see the underlying advantage in testing, then God's **assistance in testing** is something we can call on. We can at any time during it ask God for the wisdom which will enable us to have this bigger perspective of God's purpose in our life even through such a dark experience as this

current trial. We are to pray, James says, for wise insight, but without swinging between faith and doubt. In what follows, it appears James is thinking about two alternative circumstances in which we may find ourselves being tested. I'm referring to when he says:

But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. (James 1:9-11)

So, the **alternatives in testing** are poverty and riches. The Book of Proverbs tells us that the poor man may be tempted to steal; while the rich man may be tempted to become arrogant. The way of escape for the poor brother is to glory in his exaltation; and for the rich brother, it is to glory in his humiliation. God's grace in Christ, received by faith, is the greatest leveller. But now what does James say?

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has

promised to those who love Him.
(James 1:12)

James' latest comment here is about **assessment in testing**. Whenever we pass through the experience of being put to the test in life's circumstances, God is assessing how we react. He's positively looking for the quality of steadfastness on our part which he will crown with his seal of approval. The stress of testing can become a rewarding experience in the longer term. But James warns against our becoming frustrated:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:13-17)

What appeals to me here is the **antithesis of testing**. Let me explain. We earlier read James' words about one side of the contrast. This is when we react well by God's help to the testing, and allow ourselves to become

steadfast and mature. By contrast, spurning God's help, we can be enticed and our active service for God is extinguished. What a contrast! James clarifies here that, while God may permit the challenging circumstances, he will never entice us to a wrong response – that will come from within our own selves, stemming from our fallen human nature. James adds the clear statement that God himself cannot be corrupted or enticed, although his people at times foolishly did put him to the test. Yet he remains the source of all that is good. As James goes on to write:

In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:18-21)

I think these verses present to us what should be our **ambition in testing**. God designs them to demonstrate our quality and so to put his grace on display. God wishes to bring out the best in us. In all of this section, there's

been but one word for testing. Different Bible translations will translate it variously as 'temptation' or 'trial'. Generally, temptation suggests negativity; while trial can be more positively linked with a process of refinement or show of genuineness. Wasn't it concerning Joseph that we read of how the word of God tried him (Psalm 105:19)? Job was another who said that after God had tried him he would emerge as gold (Job 23:10). Satan, however, is described in the Bible as 'the Tempter' because he has no other agenda than to use life's challenges to bring us down and to bring out the worst in us. God looks for the best; Satan looks for the worst. As we receive the word – some relevant verse of God's Word – and

receive it with the right attitude, then we'll be able to experience deliverance in the test.

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled



religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:22-27)

This is how James concludes his really helpful, extended analysis on testing which occupies all of his first chapter. We were thinking of how God's Word comes to us to strengthen us in any difficulty. But will we hear it and forget; or listen carefully and do? James' illustration of the man in the mirror is memorable. God's Word reflects back to us

the true state of our heart. Looking intently into the mirror of God's Word will enable us to have the **ascendancy in testing**. Joseph and Job, as we've thought already, gained the high ground on the far side of some tough testing. Religion that's tested and true, James says is about controlled speech, helping others and practising holiness. Life's most testing experiences will not have the power to topple us when, having asked in prayer for God's wisdom, we then look to our Bibles to find focus and strength.

2. Preferably not partial

As we've already mentioned, James doesn't tackle any very exalted topics in his letter, but still we should be grateful to him, under God, because he tackles some very useful and practical issues. At the start of chapter 2, he begins his second topic: looking at how we should try to avoid partiality or favouritism. We can see how he picks relevant issues – deceptively common situations which raise real ethical problems.

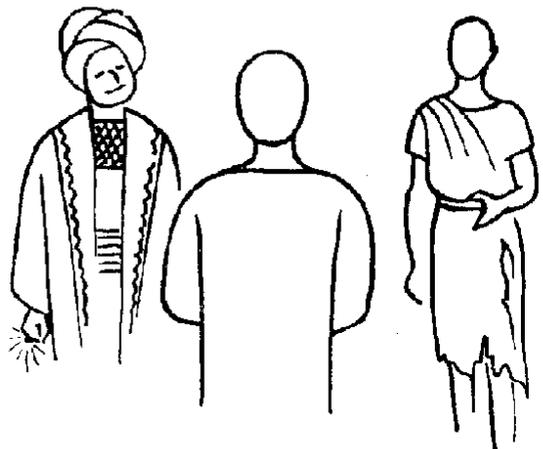
James begins this next piece of compassionate counsel with his typical way of addressing himself to 'my brothers' ...

... do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions

among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? (James 2:1-4)

Well, it's an easy-to-understand scenario. We might recognize it in any one of a number of variations. But it always comes down to ugly prejudice. We're so easily impressed by the trappings of success and power; and it's sadly all too easy to ignore someone of a rather unkempt appearance – as if they were somehow less of a person. By making such a superficial evaluation, we set ourselves up, in effect, as judges; judges with evil motives, no less, according to James. He continues his friendly advice as follows:

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this



world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? (James 2:5-7)

James now tells them – and us – that a superficial assessment, like one which favoured the rich, was unreasonable. In fact, it was unreasonable on two counts.

First, God has expressed himself time and again throughout the Bible in different ways as being on the side of the poor. God's law of liberty is good news for the poor giving them a fair deal. And, second, those whom these Christians were favouring were actually drawn from a class of people, namely the rich, who were persecuting them at that time in the history of Christianity. So what sense did this partiality or favouritism make? None at all, but even so, we all know how easy it is for people to get sucked into the general trend of society – which is to be impressed by the celebrity status of the rich and famous. After all, does it not come down to being envious of their success – even if we don't like to admit it? James goes on:

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your

neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. (James 2:8-11)

This is where James brings an even more telling argument into play. God's Old Testament law had expressed itself firmly against partiality. To show favouritism, therefore, was nothing short of breaking the law. We should, of course, do exactly what the law of God demands. And this means that we are to act mercifully to the poor, by not showing partiality. The law was quite explicit on this point – although James contents himself with the support of the general principle of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

James then says if we fail to observe the law on what we might judge as a seemingly minor point – like showing favouritism – then we're actually guilty of breaking the whole law which includes commands against murder and committing adultery. It's a bit like if one link in a chain is broken, then the

whole effect and purpose of the chain in securing an object is defeated.

So, where are we up to? We now come to the famous statement with which James signs off this section: 'mercy triumphs over judgement'. What exactly does this summing up mean? First, let's read it again, as James concludes his argument:

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:12-13)

God's law will hold us accountable if we distort it by discriminating in a way that shows we're not impartial. Often this last statement about mercy and judgement is detached from its context here and used as a kind of 'proof-text' to justify not acting in some disciplinary way - as if implying we had an escape route to allow us to avoid some problematic disciplinary decision. I've sat through some debates about which is the best decision to make or which is the best course of action to follow. Sometimes the choice splits between on the one hand pursuing a tough line which holds someone accountable for his or her actions; and, on the other hand, extending what's claimed to be the more gracious Christian approach of simply overlooking

any offence. Those who advocate the second option tend to quote the Bible by saying: 'mercy triumphs over judgment'. These words are misappropriated if they're taken to imply that anyone could be more merciful than God is in the judgements he requires of us.

Does this statement mean that while you're entitled to carry out biblical judgement, the even better (or more Christian) way is to mercifully suspend judgement? Well, surely the reference to 'mercy' here is a reference in context to those who may or would have shown mercy to the poorer visitors. Such mercy rejoices over judgement. To show a merciful equality to the poor is far better than to discriminate against them by directing them to inferior seats as if they mattered a lot less to God than the high class rich visitor.

What about the word 'judgement'? The judgement mentioned in verse 13 must relate back to the so-called judges in verse 4 - meaning the people who were wrongly motivated to discriminate against the church visitor in poor clothing. Of course, there are obviously different ways we can use a word like judgement, and this was true of the actual Bible word used here. One expert (Thayer) in the original language mentions that it can, of course,

mean a sentence of condemnation – but that it can also mean: an opinion or decision especially concerning what's right or wrong.

Even if the word judgement in the sense of a condemning sentence were retained as the preferred meaning here, it's not referring – as is often supposed by the way it's applied – it's not referring to any one person's choice or decision between whether to opt for a merciful rather than judgemental act. The main issue in the section we've read has to do with – not judgement – but discrimination. These early Christians were discriminating against poorer visitors who entered the church services; while they showed favouritism towards the impressively dressed richer folks.

If we're to understand the statement 'mercy triumphs over judgement' as summing up the whole case that James has been arguing in the preceding paragraph, then surely James uses it because the issue was that certain of the Christian brothers and sisters were holding opinions prejudicial to poorer or disadvantaged persons who might happen to attend a church service. They discriminated against them by favouring the more affluent-looking visitors with better seats. In this view, it was better, in summary, James says, to be merciful to the poor

rather than discriminate in favour of the rich visitors.

Someone who acts mercifully will have less reason to fear that they themselves will one day be harshly assessed or judged. We're to act as those who keep in mind that one day we'll be judged also. If we act without mercy, we'll be judged without mercy. James, however, is not calling on people not to judge. I think it's important to stress that here because of the way this text is often misapplied. James is not saying that they, or we, should not judge. He's calling on them to show mercy to the poor by not discriminating in favour of the rich. And he's reminding them that one day they'll be held accountable.

We should always act with compassion – especially when we're required to carry out judgement. Here's the key point. James is not suggesting mercy here as being an alternative to judgement. Mercy is not an alternative to judgment, it's an essential – and ought to be an inseparable – companion of any judgement we're biblically called upon to make. The judgement of God's royal law was more merciful than the partiality they showed while ignoring it even as they flattered the rich. God's true mercy triumphs over human lack of judgement in unbalanced discrimination.

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In summary, this slogan affirms that merciful treatment of the poor which is according to the law requires that there be no discrimination in favour of the rich. It's definitely not a case of mercy as an option to judgement. So, next time you're faced with a tricky pastoral situation – and some well-intentioned person says – 'mercy

glories against judgement' – remember these are not choices for you; they're not alternative courses of action. You must always be merciful in the judgement you make, so that in the coming day when assessment is handed down upon you, you, in turn, will not have to fear harshness.

3. The faith that saves us

We've mentioned right at the start of this booklet that not all commentators – including some very notable ones – have been kind to James. His lack of focus on the person of Christ or the Holy Spirit is one of the reasons usually quoted, but then there's the added charge that his theology may be suspect as it seems to run counter to Paul's – especially in the matter of faith and works.

But is James preaching salvation by God's grace alone, or salvation by works? Before we begin to answer that, we should straightaway affirm that the inclusion of the letter by James in the canon of Scripture – in other words the fact that it's included in our Bibles – means that we must start from the fact that this is part of God's inspired Word, and as a result is inerrant, or without error in what it teaches. Once we grant that, we will easily see that James can be understood as in no way contradicting Paul.

The section which has caused confusion for some is found in James chapter 2, starting from verse 14. There, James says:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14)

Then, having asked the question, James proceeds to give four answers – the first of which highlights a practical absurdity. Let James take it up from here:

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (James 2:15-17)

Obviously, the answer to the question, "What use is the withholding of practical help?" is "No use at all." Remember the question under consideration is: 'Can that faith save him?' The faith, if we can call it that, which dismisses a destitute brother or sister without practical assistance (that is, without works) is unreal. God is a God of means. Practical help is no faith-killer, but the absence of such support is a denial of faith. Now, James

brings us answer number two by considering two competing challenges:

But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (James 2:18)

The first thing here is about being asked to show faith without producing works as supporting evidence of that faith; and the second thing is about showing works as the real evidence of the faith behind them. These head-to-head challenges distinguish between what's real and what's only hot air or empty words. The faith that saves is real faith which can be displayed through faith-motivated actions. If we've nothing to show for the faith we claim to have, then neither is there any faith there. Next, which is thirdly, James employs an extreme example, when he says:

You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? (James 2:19-20)

Well, I said it was an extreme example, and it is! Do demons believe? Yes, in the sense that they intellectually know that God exists. But does that faith save them? No, it doesn't, and neither

would you expect it to. A mere awareness of the facts, mentally giving assent to the truth, is not what faith is about. Faith, real faith, truly exists when you act on the facts.

The fourth and final answer or response which James gives to the question he set out to answer, is to quote some historical examples of faith from two famous lives in the Bible. Here's what he says:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:21-26)

Let's take the example of Abraham, because it's the one where people have sensed that James is saying something different from Paul. James quotes Genesis chapter 15 and

verse 6 (as does Paul, which says): "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." This is from part of Abraham's story, a part that's a long time before the most famous event in Abraham's life – which is when he was prepared to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. We know chapter 15 is a long time before this because Isaac wasn't even born back then when we're told Abraham's faith was the basis for him being accredited as righteous by God. But when God tested the genuineness of his faith years later by asking him to sacrifice his precious, long-awaited son, Abraham so trusted God that he would not have held back anything precious. Of course, God would never have let him go through with the act of killing his son, it was simply a test which God knew Abraham's faith would pass. In that sense he was justified by his works – only in the sense that his work of being prepared to offer his son proved the real faith that he previously had. As James said:

You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected.
(James 2:22)

We need to understand that James is not contrasting faith with works as to which may save us. We know from Paul's biblical writings that the answer is clear: we are saved or justified by faith.

James' point is totally consistent with that. He tells us is that a mere professed faith can't save us, only a real faith. And what's more: any real faith will inevitably reveal itself in works – in actions which stem from our faith.

It's only through our faith in Christ that the Bible tells us we are justified in God's sight and so ready for heaven. Only faith, but it must be real faith – not an empty profession.

Again, allow me to illustrate. In the 19th century there was a tightrope stunt artist known professionally as the 'The Great Blondin'. In 1859, he was the first person to walk on a 335 metre rope suspended high over the water of the Niagara Falls in Canada which plunged down far below him. On one occasion, he asked the crowd, "How many of you believe that I, The Great Blondin, can not only walk back across that tightrope, but this time do it while I push a wheelbarrow?" Again they cried, "We believe! We believe!" Then he asked, "How many of you really believe it?" "Oh, we really believe it!" they shouted back. One man, a little more enthusiastic than the others, caught The Great Blondin's eye. Pointing to the man, he said, "If you really believe, then get in the wheelbarrow." The man quickly disappeared. The difference between what we say

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we believe and what we really believe will always show up in our actions.

And that really is what James has been telling us.

4. Taming the tongue

From his discourse on idle faith, which we studied in the previous chapter, James now turns to discuss idle speech. So far, in reading James, we've been learning that to gain spiritual maturity a believer must be what God wants him to be, and so do what God wants him to do. James has been outlining for us what it means to be mature as a Christian. He began by describing how maturity is gained by navigating through the trials of life by God's help. He then went on to explain how a mature faith doesn't lapse into favouritism nor does it fail to extend itself into faith-based actions. But, in his third chapter, using dramatic language and very graphic illustrations, James examines our speech – as yet another area where either our maturity or, sadly, our immaturity will soon show itself. James now devotes an entire chapter to the problem of a careless and corrupt tongue.

A man working in the produce department of a store was asked by a lady if she could buy half a head of lettuce. He replied, "Half a head? Are you serious? God grows these in whole heads and that's how we sell them!"

"You mean," she persisted, "that after all the years I've shopped here, you won't sell me half-a-head of lettuce?"

"Look," he said, "If you like, I'll ask the manager." She indicated that would be appreciated, so the young man marched to the front of the store to where his manager was located. "You won't believe this, but there's a lame-brained idiot of a lady back there who wants to know if she can buy half-a-head of lettuce."

He noticed the manager gesturing, and turned around to see the lady standing behind him, obviously having followed him to the front of the store. "And this nice lady was wondering if she could buy the other half!" he concluded.

Later in the day the manager cornered the young man and said, "That was the finest example of thinking on your feet I've ever seen! Where did you learn that?" "I grew up in Grand Rapids, and if you know anything about Grand Rapids, you know that it's known for its great hockey teams and its ugly women."

The manager's face flushed, and he interrupted, "My wife is from

Grand Rapids!" "And which hockey team did she play for?" was the young man's reply – and his second piece of quick-thinking that day.

Usually, we're not that smart. But there's something better than being smart; James tells us that it's known as learning to control our tongue in the first place. Some never learn that skill until it's too late ...

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, grey slate tombstone. The quaint stone bears an epitaph not easily seen unless you bend over and look closely. The faint etchings read:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
lies Arabella Young,
Who on the twenty-fourth of May,
began to hold her tongue.

Perhaps it's challenging to ask: 'How carefully do you monitor what goes into your mouth, compared to what comes out of it? For example, do you follow a low-fat diet? Do you watch the number of calories that you consume?' Now, compared to the care you take in controlling what goes into your mouth, how careful are you to control what comes out of your mouth? Do you apply as much energy, and planning and self-discipline to controlling your speech as you

apply to controlling your calories, or your fat grams? Jesus once said that what comes out of your mouth can defile you – and with that, of course, James is in full agreement and begins to introduce this by saying:

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

Again addressing himself to 'my brothers' (a feature of this letter which we've noted before, and a sign that a new topic is being considered) James now suggests restraint in the multiplication of teachers. Possibly, too many of the new Jewish Christians aspired to teach. In Jewish families of that time, a typical aspiration among parents was for their sons to obtain the status of a rabbi. True, teaching has to be done, but those who teach must understand their responsibility, for those who teach will be judged more strictly. A teacher's condemnation is greater because, having professed to have a clear knowledge of duty, he's all the more bound to obey it. James, of course, with his gentle style, did not point a finger at the offenders without including himself: 'We all

stumble in many ways,' he wrote. Notice the 'we'.

I recall an aunt of mine who had a pet dog which she spoilt with too many sweet things to eat. As a result all its teeth rotted away and fell out or had to be extracted. As a result, it always amused us to see this dog, for the poor thing had no longer any means of keeping its tongue in its mouth. Whenever its jaws opened slightly, out fell its tongue! I'm thinking of this now, as I read what James has to say. If I can paraphrase, he's telling us that nothing seems to trip up a Christian believer more than a dangling tongue!

If a believer is rarely at fault in what he says, he or she is a mature person. Spiritual maturity requires a tamed tongue. James continues:

Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire

body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! (James 3:3-5)

The tongue may be small, but it's certainly influential. Three illustrations make this point clear: the bit and the horse, the rudder and the ship, and the spark and the forest. The argument is clear. Just as little bits turn around grown horses, small rudders guide large ships, and a small spark consumes an entire forest, so the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts and can easily ruin an entire life.

And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is



set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. (James 3:6-8)

The tongue is not only powerful; but it's also perverse and poisonous and polluting. It's small and influential but, worse by far, its repertoire can be hellish in origin. At any time from birth to death, it can give vent to the fallen system which is present throughout all our body members.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh. (James 3:9-12)

Having very clearly illustrated the inconsistent and wrong use of the tongue, James now contrasts two types of wisdom. He asks:

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. (James 3:13-17)

In the same way as the quality of faith is reflected in works; so the quality of wisdom is reflected in lifestyle. And the main ingredient of a lifestyle displaying heavenly wisdom is gentleness or meekness. So it was with Christ, the greatest ever teacher. And yes, it's possible that James has come full circle back to the theme at the top of the chapter – about teachers. They're to be mature and wise. Their maturity is to be seen in a controlled tongue; and their wisdom displayed in a non-self-assertive lifestyle. Finally here, James says:

And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:18)

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In other words, peace is the seed sown that yields a harvest of righteousness.

To achieve spiritual maturity, which is James' goal, as we've thought, we need to learn to speak with care.

So in our study of James, this is where we've got to ...

If in his first chapter, James tells us that a Christian believer should **stand confidently**; we can think of his second chapter as encouraging us to **serve compassionately**; and now in the third chapter, he urges us to **speak carefully**.

5. Believers behaving badly

Now we turn our sights on James chapter 4 where a sobering scene presents itself. There are no two ways of saying this: sometimes Christians are a poor testimony. At times we are capable of behaving at least as badly as unbelievers.

Addressing a national seminar of Southern Baptist leaders, George Gallup once said, "We find there is very little difference in ethical behaviour between churchgoers and those who are not active religiously ... The levels of lying, cheating, and stealing are remarkable[y] similar in both groups."

A recent survey by George Gallup Jr. revealed again the same startling trend in our culture. According to Gallup the evidence seems to indicate that there are no clear behavioural patterns that distinguish Christians from non-Christians in our society. We all seem to be marching to the same drummer, looking to the shifting standards of contemporary culture for the basis of what is acceptable behaviour.

In his book *I Surrender*, Patrick Morley writes that Christianity's integrity problem is in the misconception "that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior." He goes on to say, "It is revival without reformation." (Quoted in *John The Baptizer*, Bible Study Guide by C. Swindoll, p. 16)

James, it seems, found the same thing early in the history of Christianity. If anything, the behaviours he challenges are rather extreme. He begins chapter 4 by saying:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward

God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (James 4:1-10)

There, James ends up writing to them about humility – but he started out by denouncing the hatred which existed between some of them, at least measured by the fact that he spoke of murder being committed. The Lord Jesus had spoken of it being but a short step from anger in the heart to the actual act of murder (Matthew 5:21-22). But was actual murder literally happening among the community of believers? It does read as though it was. In fact, the whole range of quarrels, conflicts, fights and waging war is mentioned. Unbridled desires (pleasures), lust and envy were

at the root of it. People wanted what other folks had. There was no thought about God's pleasure or what he desired. They either didn't pray, or their prayers were self-serving.

James at this point doesn't refer to them as 'my brothers' – his normal trademark, but instead addresses them as 'you adulteresses'. In spiritual terms, they were flirting with the world. This reminds us of what the apostle John says – that if we love the world then the love of the Father is not in us (1 John 2:14-16). To be a friend of the world, or even to wish to be, makes us an enemy of God. This reminds me of the strong language the apostle Paul used against some believers at Philippi where he described them as 'enemies of the cross' on account of their appetite for self-gratification.

The next thing James writes is difficult – the text of the verse as we have it reads a little ambiguously – but overall it seems as if the general reference is to the tendency, witnessed in Scripture, of our own human spirit tending to lust after the things it doesn't have. This certainly fits with the problem James is dealing with here among these believers. But then he comes in with the remedy, after reminding them that God is in opposition against the proud, but gives special grace to those

who are humble. He then gives a list of commands: submit to God; resist the Devil; draw near to God; cleanse your hands; purify your heart; mourn and weep; and so humble yourselves before God.

James has identified the cause of conflict as their pursuit of pleasure. He next identified the consequence of conflict as having made themselves enemies of God. Finally, he identifies the cure now as a real humbling of themselves before God.

As if that wasn't enough, James now urges them to turn from expressing wrong judgements to deliver proper justice. He says:

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

It seems some of them were murmuring against some of the others. James points out that if we speak badly of someone, and so judge them, then because we are doing so by our own standards and not God's, we are effectively replacing God's Law, and in that sense we're assuming

the place of the Law-giver – which is God's place alone.

Finally, James returns to the theme of pride. He warns his brothers to replace boasting with belief. Those who were rich businessmen were boasting in their arrogance about where they would go next to trade and what profits they were going to make. None of this took any account of God, and what his will was. They were so absorbed in the bottom line, they failed to register that if they even lived to breathe for another day it was by God's grace. Here's what he says:

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

I'd really like you to notice how James signs off this chapter. He says:

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

I wonder if this might not be taken as a kind of summing up of

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all that we've covered so far with James. He's been telling us various 'right things to do'. Things like: asking God for wisdom in trials; treating all church visitors fairly and equally; employing our tongue consistently and eliminating careless talk; submitting to God's Law by avoiding slander; and ensuring we take God's will for us into account in the provisional plans we make. Knowingly failing to do any of these right things, would certainly count as sin.

6. God and the doctor!

Previously, we've seen James reprimanding rich merchants for excluding God from their business travel plans while assuming their future was guaranteed. In reality, James reminded them, not only are riches uncertain, but life itself is uncertain – while God alone holds the key of all unknown.

We've also heard James tackle serious lifestyle issues within the believing community. Both these ideas come together again as he begins his final chapter:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have

condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you. (James 5:1-6)

It seems that wealthy landowners were not treating their workers biblically or even humanely. The law of God in the Old Testament required labourers not to be kept waiting for their pay at the end of the day. They, as some still do today, lived from day to day, with no margins and no reserve. Receiving a day's pay at the end of the day can be a basic survival issue. And some of these workers, by having their pay withheld were simply not surviving. By contrast, the landowners were stockpiling wealth in the various forms that were current then. They were flaunting their wealth even as their unpaid labourers were dying. It could even be that there's a connection or overlap here with the pleasure-pursuing believers of chapter 4 who were committing murder. In effect, that's what's happening here. And they were self-deceived into living purely for the 'here and now'. They had lost sight of these being 'the last days' – that's the time between the two Advents of Christ. James will shortly bring before his readers

the fact of the Lord's soon return – he says, likely with the afflicted poor chiefly in mind:

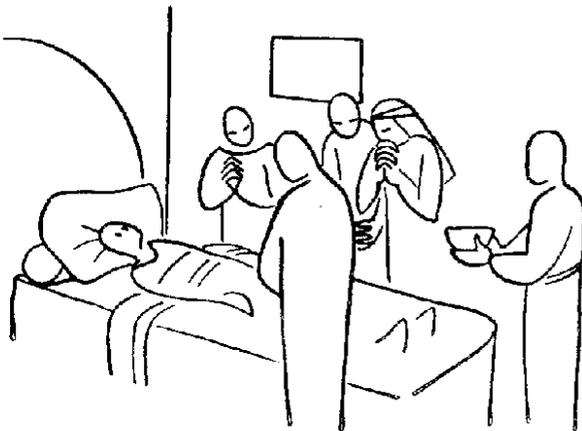
Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment. (James 5:7-12)

James encourages the patience of these field labourers, as we've seen, by fittingly directing them to the example of the farmer who had to anxiously endure a four-month gap between seedtime and harvest, spending his time on the lookout for the early rains soon after sowing and the late ripening rains just before harvest in the spring of the year.

The faithful farmer had God's promise (Deuteronomy 11:14) to rest on. And so had they, which should relieve any tendency to make rash utterances and irreverent oaths by being totally truthful in ordinary speech in everyday things. What tended to happen back then – with minds affected by impatience or exasperated by the trials of life James dealt with earlier – was that people took God's name (or some Pharisical substitute or even the mention of the place of his throne or his footstool) lightly on their lips. I'm sure James would be shocked at the prevalence of this in society today. The letters 'OMG' represent this detestable practice today of an empty uttering of the words "Oh my God!" which is so commonly accepted, sadly, that even professing Christians frequently use it. Christians, of all people, should sensitively guard against the fashionable misuse of God's name by its thoughtless mention in general conversation. Having dealt with wrong speech in chapter 3 of his letter; James will now close that letter by concentrating positively on correct speech, as when we address ourselves to God in prayer. He says:

Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the

church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:13-20)



Well, I doubt if James realised when he wrote this ending to his letter just how much discussion and controversy it would give rise to. Let's see if we can demystify it somewhat. To begin with, when he talks about someone who is sick, he uses two words which describe a state of weakness and weariness. It's one of the tasks of church elders that they are to help the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14). And, of course, it's elders who are to be called for here, and not apostles.

The elders are called upon to be the active agents in the restoration which is envisaged here. The word 'restore' continues to keep open the thought of a malaise that's spiritual as well as physical – something that chimes also with the wording 'if he has committed sins.' At the very end of his letter, James makes a similar point about turning a sinner from

the error of his ways.

This is all contained in this section which mentions the effective praying of those who are righteous, in other words those whose sins are already forgiven and who are living in the truth, and trying to lend a hand to others.

The emphasis is on prayer, and not on the use of the oil – even in the matter of the

called-for anointing. This is made all the clearer as the translation properly urges prayer, 'having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord.' The use of oil was the lesser part, carried out before prayer commenced, and perhaps being a stimulus to faith as necessary for the prayer of faith. However, while we're mentioning the anointing with the oil, we should make the point that there were two available Greek words for anointing, both available for James to use. One (*chrío*) was used for religious or ritual or sacred anointing, and from it we get the term 'Christ' as the 'Anointed One.' The other word deals generally with the type of mundane and revivifying oil rub which we find being used by the Good Samaritan. To this day, in parts of the world, the medicinal rubbing in of oil is a common form of treatment.

James, in this section, uses the non-religious word (*aleipho*). [Note: Trench (N.T. Synonyms) says: "*Aleiphein* is the mundane and profane, *chriein* the sacred and religious, word."]

What this leaves open to us is the understanding that the duty of care laid upon the elders in the case of a person who was languishing like this, was to come as requested, and first of all ensure the current best medical treatment of the day was being undertaken, and then to commend its use to God in

prayer, which was prayer offered in faith and in accordance with the name of the Lord.

The impression of some sort of ceremony being conducted here is definitely diluted by the fact that James could have chosen (under divine superintendence) the word signifying ceremonial anointing, but didn't. The general word he used had then to do with the rubbing on of salves and lotions which were oil-based as extensively then used on athletes in gymnastic schools etc. From this, it can be concluded that instead of teaching ritual healing apart from medicine, the passage teaches the exact opposite. Emphasis thus seems to be prayer with medicine or having medicated then major on praying! Significantly, the sick are to leave the results in God's hands.

This use of olive oil was one of the best remedial agencies known to the ancients. They used it internally and externally. Some physicians prescribe it today. It is clear (both in Mark 6:13 and here) that medicinal value is attached to the use of the oil and emphasis is placed on the worth of prayer. There is absolutely nothing here of the ideas of pagan magic or of the later practice of "extreme unction" (which came in after the eighth century). The bottom line is that here in James we have [prayer] and medicine; that is,

God and the doctor – and that’s precisely where we are today. The best physicians believe in God and want the help of prayer.

In closing, let’s revisit the thought that we could well be dealing with a malaise here that was very possibly as much spiritual as physical, or certainly spiritual with physical consequences – reflecting the wording ‘restore’ and ‘if he has committed sins’ and ‘turning a sinner from the error of his ways’.

We can now review the whole letter in retrospect, and in so doing, we realize James has identified quite a few serious sins which apparently were prevalent in the early believing community. We already noted how he ends the 4th chapter: *to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin*, and wondered if this might not be a summing up of all that we’d covered so far with James. He’d been telling us about various

‘right things to do’ – such as: asking God for wisdom in trials; treating all church visitors fairly and equally; employing our tongue consistently and eliminating careless talk; submitting to God’s Law by avoiding slander; and ensuring we take God’s will for us into account in the plans we make. Knowingly failing to do any of these right things, would certainly count as sin. Added to which, James has also challenged seriously sinful lifestyles within the believing community, which included being absorbed in pleasure-seeking to the extent that it made them enemies of God.

And so, it’s more than possible, therefore, that we take our leave of this most practical letter by James with the happier setting of a repentant brother, who had previously been overtaken in perhaps one of these ways, but now he is having restorative, healing ministry lovingly dispensed by the church elders.

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