

Andy Gemmill Sermons on James, Transcript

Originally produced by Andy Gemmill

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Exposition for Expositors – James

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When I transcribed this, I had access to minimal audio-to-text automation. As I was listening and transcribing, I thought of my father. So, to my father (and mother): my spiritual head through my formative years, without whom I would never have matured this far

SERMON 1 – Exposition for Expositors – James

Please turn to James and to chapter one. Let me read the first section of this letter.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

to the twelve tribes in the dispersion:

greetings.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.

Lots of Questions

I first came across this letter quite soon after being converted, in 1980, in a Christian Union Bible study group at university. I think I remember being told that we had chosen to study this letter in our group because it was *practical*. That's the word that was used.

Now my memories of my Christian Union Bible study group are now a little vague, and I think that's because the group itself was more than a little vague. We wandered all over the place, week after week. And you can understand why a letter like James is very attractive for a Christian Union Bible study group leader. For no matter how vague and wandering your group is, *you can't fail* to bump into lots of clear imperatives. Do this. Don't do that. And a desperate Bible study group leader at least knows they're on safe territory. The group will come away with something definite to do or not to do. There are a few places in the scriptures which are so full of pithy, down to earth, readily applicable instructions, lively language, and vivid concepts.

Nearly everyone agrees about this letter that it's a practical letter. But that is about all that they agree about in relation to this letter. The questions are legion:

Who's the author?

Who are the recipients?

Why did he write?

What kind of writing is this?

Is it a sermon?

Is it a collection of wise sayings?

Is it a quasi-prophetic letter of pastoral encouragement,
as one writer calls it?

What is it? What's it for? This "practical" letter. And that is a puzzle.

An Elusive Purpose

For though the individual items in the letter are engaging, the overall message is elusive. Elusive would not be too strong a word, I think. If you've studied or preached through this letter, you'll know what that's like. The individual bits reach out and grab you by the throat, but how do they relate to one another? And what on earth caused James to put quill to scroll?

Now, for the preacher, teacher, or student of the Bible, there is something very reassuring about the straight lines of a Pauline argument, is there not? A for B, for C, for D, and therefore not E or F, but G and H and definitely not I – you know you're in an argument with Paul. But this is not like that.

How are we going to make sense of a letter like this? We're going to have three visits to this letter. In Sermon 2, we'll look at a relatively self-contained section to try and look at the detail of the letter. In Sermon 3, we'll consider a rather broader section with a broader sweep and try to work out how the different bits fit together in that. In this Sermon, we are going to plunge in and swim around the letter as a whole for a bit, and splash a lot of water all over the place, and try to get a feel for how it works and what is going on.

General or Specific?

Now, there's a strong tradition that treats this letter as a rather general letter. The opening statement has a breadth to it: "to the twelve tribes in the dispersion." One thinks also of the lack of a personal address, the lack of local references, and the absence of names. At first sight, it doesn't appear to have been written to anyone in particular. It certainly has a Jewish feel to it. There's a non-linearity in the argument of this letter, which is reminiscent of wisdom literature or of the epistle to the Hebrews or to some degree with John's writings. The first impression then is a general sort of letter, probably to a believing Jewish sort of audience.

However, I think that as one goes through this letter, a rather more specific focus begins to emerge. Let's take a little trip through the letter. Look at James 1:19. "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires." Now, those words could be written to anyone, anywhere.

Look at James 1:26. "If anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is

this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and keep oneself unstained from the world.” Again, this could be written to anyone.

But now look at James 2:2. “Imagine,” says James, “a situation where two very different people wander into your assembly, a rich and a poor, and they end up being very differently treated.” We all know the illustration. Look how he continues in James 2:5. “Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he's promised to those who love him? **But you have dishonored the poor man.**” Doesn't feel quite so abstract and theoretical anymore, does it? I suppose this could be rhetorical method, but doesn't it look as though a finger is beginning to point?

And look at James 2:6. “Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you are called?” Now, I suppose one could throw that into the ether and it be generally true in many circumstances. Anyone in the world who's going to be persecuted legally is likely to have that done to them by the rich, because the rich have the resources to do that kind of thing. And yet, doesn't it have the feel of a particular situation, where particular people are being dragged into court by particular others?

And that sort of thing continues.

Look at James 2:15. “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and one of you says to them, ‘go in peace, be warmed and filled’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it doesn't have works, is dead.” And then verse 18, “But someone will say, you have faith and I have works.” It's as if he anticipates a bit of comeback from his hearers, which again suggests that this is not quite as abstract and theoretical an example, as we might read at first sight.

Or look at James 3:1. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers.” Now, of course, this could be a general instruction about teaching across the board – or it could reflect a situation where, James 1:19, people are slow to listen, quick to speak, quick to anger – a situation in which all sorts of people *are* presuming to be teachers.

Or look at James 3:9. “With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.” The language is very strong. We bless God, we curse people made in His image. This could be hyperbole, or it could be that James knows that that is precisely what is happening.

Or James 4:1. “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this that your passions are at war within you? You desire and don't have, so you murder, you covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.” Now, of course, quarrels are common amongst Christians, are they not? But he could be talking about a situation in which there really are all sorts of fights and quarrels going on.

One could go on at length.

It is not that this couldn't be a general letter, written speculatively to a *general audience*, with *general truths* for Christian living. But the more you go on, you wonder whether he hasn't got a particular situation in mind.

I suppose the question updated to a modern context would be, “Is this a blog post? or is this a letter with an address on it?” Is this something written to people in general, hoping that someone will read it and benefit from it? Or is there a particular situation in mind that this letter is written towards? In medical terminology, is it prophylaxis (i.e., preventative medicine) or is it treatment (for a specific disease)?

Well, for what it's worth, I'm going to go gently towards the latter of those. This is not prophylaxis, not *merely* general advice for Christians – although of course it's applicable across the board – but written to a more particular situation than we sometimes allow. And in fact, I think there are one or two bits of the letter, most notably the healing section in chapter 5:13-18, which we'll meet in Sermon 3, which makes much more sense, I think, if a particular situation is in mind.

And I think the closing lines also suggest that. James 5: Turn right to James 5:19-20, to the closing remarks of the letter. “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” This all suggests that this is a remedial letter which is designed *itself* to bring people back and to encourage others to bring one another back. And that's what I'm going to assume for the rest of our time together.

Bad Behavior

If that's so, what's this letter like? Well, though chapter 5 says that wandering from the truth is an issue, this is not a letter which appears to deal with false teaching. It's not a Galatians or a Colossians. On the other hand, what we find in this letter is that, rather than dealing with loads of bad teaching, this is a letter which deals with a great deal of *bad behavior*.

What a catalogue of relational dysfunction there is in this letter. Quick to talk, quick to anger, slow to listen; dishonoring the poor, favoring the enemies of God, people who lack mercy, who lack kindness, whose speech is uncontrolled and destructive, who curse those made in God's image, who are full of jealousy and selfish ambition, who squabble, fight, speak evil against one another, plan arrogantly for the future, hoard wealth at the expense of the poor, grumble against others. This letter is stuffed full, bursting with bad behavior. Imagine having to be a pastor or elder or church member in a situation like this. You may not have to imagine very hard to imagine a situation like this.

Now I don't think we can pin this down any better than that, but I think there is a specific situation in mind characterized by bad behavior. Christians speaking against one another, mistreating one another.

Background Issues

Why are they behaving badly? Well, there may be some contributing issues in the background in this letter. There are certainly major socioeconomic differences in this letter. Wealth and poverty is a big sub-theme. There is a persecutory edge in the background of this letter. People are being taken to court, and the name of Christ is being blasphemed in some way by this.

There is no doubt that if you belong to a church going through a hard time, sometimes people who go through hard times with one another start behaving badly towards one another. I have come across a couple of situations in the last few years where church leadership teams went through very hard

times united together, and then fell out catastrophically with one another afterwards. Sometimes hard times do that to people.

The Cause of the Bad Behavior - 15:00

But these background issues are not the causes of the problem in this letter. No, the problem in this letter comes from *inside*. And what I think James does in this letter is to try to get these people to recognize *the seriousness* of the way that they're relating to one another. To face up to the fact that their relational dysfunction is actually massively important – much more important than they imagine. Indeed, a massive departure from the truth, though they might think the right things in their head. And it's a letter designed to encourage them by all possible means to repent of that.

Let's look at the nature of the condition:

- Chapter 1, verse 16: "Don't be deceived, my beloved brothers."
- Chapter 1, verse 22: "Be hearers of the Word, doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."
- Chapter 1, verse 26: "If anyone thinks he's religious and doesn't bridle his tongue but deceives his heart..."

Apparently, self-deception is a big issue here! But even bigger than that is the idea of division.

Now, there are a number of recurring issues in this letter: speech, trials, testing, rich and poor, sufferings, favoritism. We wander in and out of those throughout the letter, but there is one idea which is woven through all the way. And it's the idea of doubleness, division, lack of singleness of being. And I think it's all over the place.

I'll start with the most obvious examples...

Chapter 1, verse 7: "That person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a two-souled man, a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." Apparently, it's possible to have a dividedness in response to God's Word. On one hand, wanting God's help. On the other, not wanting God's help. Both at the same time.

Chapter 2, verse 4. We've met the example already. James says, in treating these two people who come into your assembly differently, "have you not then made distinctions within yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Again, the idea of dividedness, which leads them to outward favoritism.

Chapter 4, verse 4. The heart of this letter is the beginning of chapter 4, I think. "You," literally, "you adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Divided in loyalty between God and the world.

Look at the response, chapter 4, verse 8. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse you, hands you sinners, and purify you hearts, you two-souled." Become single again, not double.

Now, these are obvious examples, but when you know that this theme is there, you find it popping up all over the place. Let me introduce you to some others.

Chapter 1 verse 22. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Listening to it, but not doing it. There's a dividedness of the person there. One part listens, but the being doesn't do.

Chapter 2 verse 1. "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." These people believe in the glorious Lord, *and yet*, a verse or so later, they honor the glory of the world. There's a dividedness there. Which glory do you really believe in?

Chapter 2 verse 15. "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for that, well what good is that!?" A divided response, a division between faith and deeds, seeing the need, doing nothing. Non-unity of behavior there.

Chapter 2 verse 19. Here's a particularly startling example. "You believe that God is one? Well, bully for you. Even the demons believe and shudder." These are people who say that God is one. In this letter, God is one, single, unified, and treats everyone the same. He's undivided in His treatment of human beings. If God is one, you would expect those who are ruled by Him to be single in response – but these people have faith and not works. And actually, says James, demons have better faith than you do. They believe that God is one, *and they shudder*. It's an entirely appropriate response. It's a unified response, whereas yours, you believe that God is one, and yet you don't do the things that follow from that. There is a unity of response in the demon that is not seen in James' readers.

Chapter 3 verse 9. "With our tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the image of God." A dividedness in speaking where there ought to be unity.

Let me suggest then that this is the big underlying issue of this letter. These people are two-timing God: married to God, lusting after the world, and at lots of levels, that is reflected in dividedness of being; of speech, of action, of thought, of attitude. And I don't think it really matters where you are in this letter, you bump into this idea everywhere: where there ought to be unity of being, there is dividedness.

And this is the disease that lies behind the symptoms, and this is what the letter is designed to root out. And the danger of this disease is that it's not easy to get at, for the symptoms are many and every day.

Now, let me talk to you about symptoms for a moment, I used to be a doctor. We all have symptoms of all sorts all the time. Even now, you may be sitting in your seat and experiencing an ache, a pain, an itch, a rash, a little cough here and there. Every lecture you go to as a medical student, you come out thinking that you're just about to die. Last week, I was sure I had coronary heart disease and cancer and cholera, and this week, because we're doing psychiatry, I know I'm just about to go mental.

Now, the truth is that most of our bodily symptoms, most of the time, are of absolutely no significance at all. And what we need to be told is that we're quite all right, really, and we just need to stop looking up medical websites.

However, sometimes it's not like that. I remember spending a long three-quarters of an hour on a June afternoon in an outpatient clinic, trying to persuade a young woman that she was seriously ill and needed serious treatment. And the trouble was that her symptoms were not all that bad, really. *A little*

bit of a cough that she'd had for a few weeks, *a little* shortness of breath, nothing to speak of, nothing to write home about. But the reality was that unless she embraced the seriousness of the disease, and took what was likely to be really significantly uncomfortable treatment, she would be a permanent respiratory cripple within a year. Sometimes the symptoms are ordinary and every day, and the disease is really serious.

And if you'll forgive this medical excursus, James is a bit like a doctor, trying to get a patient to believe that his several easily overlooked symptoms are, in fact, the result of a fatal disease which needs extreme treatment if the patient is to survive. And there's always the danger of self-deception. It's part of the condition as well.

The basic way this letter works is that it looks underneath the symptoms and gets at the heart of the matter all the time. Now, can I say that pastorally it's very easy to have a symptomatic approach to Christian behavior. To treat the symptoms without looking at the disease. 'Behave yourself. Stop lying. Stop stealing. Don't do that kind of thing.' But this is much too important a disease for that. So let me suggest that this letter is a sustained attack on an elusive disease.

A Sustained Attack on an Elusive Disease

Let's look at something of the physician's method. How does he approach the condition? Well, I think he has four tools, or four movements, that he uses in many and various ways.

1. Ordinary Things to Deep Issues

First, he moves from ordinary things to deep issues.

Turn back to chapter one. We start on the subject of trials. Things which test the trust in God and test our perseverance. Notice that the whole section from verse two to verse twelve is contained within bookends. "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and that steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Verse twelve, "Blessed is the man who remains *steadfast* under trial, for when he has stood the test, he'll receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him."

Let me make a couple of observations about this. When we think about trials and temptations and testing, the things that naturally spring to mind are the nasty catastrophes of life: sickness, suffering, bereavement, loss of job, all that kind of stuff. But the examples that James contains within these bookends are not those. For verses nine and ten and eleven are contained within those bookends of staying steadfast under trial. "Let the lonely brother boast in his exaltation, the rich in his humiliation." The examples James gives of testing are *poverty and riches*.

Now, when you think about that, it's an obvious thing to do. One spends most of the best hours of the best years of one's life, doing things which are more or less directly designed to influence your material status in life.

Notice also that the issue of riches and wealth get much more airtime than the issues of poverty. Verse nine, very brief word about the lonely brother. Verse ten and eleven, a great deal about the rich man. This suggests that wealth is a much bigger trial in life than poverty. Now, left to myself, I would

think that poverty is a worse challenge than riches, would you not? In fact, trial by riches, I quite fancy a bit of that, just for a little while anyway.

You see what James does? He takes something very ordinary and every day and unremarkable – your material circumstances – and he says ‘That is where the test is won or lost.’ That is where things are persevered in or not persevered in. In everyday life, in ordinary things, from ordinary things to deep issues.

2. Outward Actions to Inward Attitudes

Second, from outward actions to inward attitudes.

This is all over the place. James 1:26. **“If anyone thinks he's religious and doesn't keep a control of his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.”** Do you see the move there? You think you're religious, but look at your tongue, and that says something about your heart. As a matter of fact, it says that your religion is worthless. Straight from the outward action to the inward attitude. What the outward action displays about the inner being. We can find lots of other examples of this, but we won't deal with this movement in any greater detail at this stage. From outward to inward.

3. Small Beginnings to Big Ends – 30:19

Third, from small beginnings to big ends.

James 1:13. **“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I'm being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil and He Himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when He's lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it's conceived give birth to sin, and sin, when it's fully grown, brings forth death.”** Straight from conception to death in a few words. Small beginnings to big ends. The desire to the consequence at the end.

Now James does this all the time. He moves very quickly from something small in the present, right down the line, very quickly, to a terrible end (if that's what's persisted in).

4. Treatment of People to Attitude Towards God – 31:10

Fourth move, and perhaps the most important one: from treatment of people to attitude to God.

James 1:19. **“Know this my beloved brothers let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted Word, which is able to save your souls.”** What does James want his hearers to do? He wants them to receive and keep believing the gospel which has been implanted in them.

But where does he start? Verse nineteen. He starts talking about listening to people. He wants them to listen to the gospel. But where he starts is, ‘How's your listening to people going?’ And the point I think is this: If you are slow to listen and quick to speak in relation to human beings, you are not suddenly going to transform into somebody who's quick to listen to God. You're not! You might think you are, but James says that you're not. If you won't listen in one area, you're never going to listen in another area. If you won't listen to the person who you can see, how are you going to ever listen properly to God

who you can't see? You can't be a non-listener in one realm and suddenly a listener in the other. The way you relate to people shows precisely how you relate to God.

James 3:9 is another good example. "With our tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God." It doesn't matter what you say to God in church on Sunday, you are not a God praiser if you're speaking against your work colleagues on Monday morning. You are not. It doesn't matter what you think. You can't be a bad speaker in one area and a right speaker in another area. Your attitude to people shows precisely what your attitude to God is.

Now James does this uncomfortably all the way through the letter. 'Do you think that you love God wholeheartedly? Well look at how you relate to other people. Your mistreatment of them shows precisely where you are in relation to God' – that's the dynamic of this letter. Bad behavior tells you something about how you really are with God. And *that* needs to be repented of. That's the way the letter works.

The Heart of the Letter – 34:10

Now let's briefly look at chapter four as an example of this. Chapter four is at the heart of the letter. Notice, before we get into it, that chapter one starts rather gently. "Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds." By chapter four, the tone has changed significantly.

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this that your passions are at war within you? You desire and don't have so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel."

Note several things. Note the movement from outward to inward. The outward battle, verse one, reveals an inward battle. Second half of verse one. Note the small start and the big end. "You desire and don't have so you murder!" Now I don't imagine they're actually doing away with one another yet. But what he's saying is this is the trajectory that you're on with that kind of attitude.

Let me read more. "You covet and cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." These people have no lack of wants but they won't ask God for the things they need. They speak to people about things – indeed, they fight people for things – but they won't speak to God about things. The proud heart is at its most proud in its prayerlessness. God would be willing to give, but these are not people who are willing to ask.

One might think of many practical examples of this. Another medical example: I used to work late nights and shifts in hospital and I used to find myself (when tired) getting angry. It often happened that I didn't boil over, but inwardly it was boiling under. And I used to find myself having this conversation:

'I'm so angry.'

'Pray about it. It always helps when you ask God for help.'

'I don't want to. I want to remain angry.'

'Pray about it. You know it always makes it better when you ask God for help.'

'I don't want to' - Until, in the end, I prayed about it and every time it was better. Every time.

Now that's a trivial example. Think of your ministry. You worry about issues in church, about people in church. You agonize over disputes in church. Don't you find yourself chewing away at things in church all the time, especially the way people have related to you? And do you not find yourself sometimes unwilling to ask God about those things? I find myself sometimes going on about things for *days* in my mind without actually praying for help in those areas. There are many burdens that simply ought to be prayed about and asked about.

When these people do get to praying, they don't ask the right things because they want the wrong things. Do you see how James gradually takes the lid off? He starts with squabbles and ends up with *adultery* (James 4:4).

Here's the big punch of the letter. "You adulteresses" is feminine. The use of the feminine, I think, deliberately calls to mind Old Testament Israel. Her recurrent unfaithfulness to God: possessed by her husband, the creator, looking for security and strength and fulfillment elsewhere. Using all His gifts to whore after other sources of security and significance. Rarely was Israel totally indifferent to Yahweh, she just liked somebody else in bed to make her feel secure. Incidentally, I wonder if the reference in **chapter one verse one** "to the scattered tribes" might not also have that kind of edge. Why were Israel scattered? Because of this kind of unfaithfulness.

Think of the deceptiveness of adultery, the secret life, the double life, the lying, the self-deception. Adultery always starts with self-deception.

'It won't really be all that serious.'

'Nobody will find out.'

'No one will get hurt.'

That's the feel of the whole of this letter.

'Oh, these things, they're not that big. They're not that big!'

Actually, they're adultery.

'Don't you know,' says James, 'that what you're doing is God-hating?'

Verse four, "You make yourselves enemies of God by treating one another in this way." Now, I don't think they thought that for a second, do you?

When you tell yourself and others that you belong to God and you get all your sense of security elsewhere, follow your own concerns, get excited by everything about from Him and mistreat your brothers and sisters, it communicates not that you think God is a great God, a great Savior, a great Lord, a great lover, but that you think He's inadequate.

Now, James's treatment, James's diagnosis here, here the lid is off the diagnosis. The worms are all over the table. And the solution to this is the Gospel and God's grace. Verse five,

“Or do you suppose that it is to no purpose that the scripture says, He yearns jealously over the spirit that He’s made to dwell in us? But He gives more grace. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Our only hope as human beings is that God wants us for himself.

Verse five is probably better translated, **“The Spirit that he has put within us yearns intensely.”** God’s Spirit within us is intensely provoked by our unfaithfulness. God desires intensely to have our affections. The Father did *not* send His Son into the world, and the Father and the Son did *not* pour out the Spirit so that disciples could nod at Him from time to time. Jesus did *not* come to die to have fickle groupies whooping from the crowd around the cross and then disappearing off to admire other sources of strength and security. God’s Spirit did *not* come to take up residence as a lodger, but a possessor; not a flat mate at whom you smile while climbing the stairs to go to bed with another. God wants us for Himself. It’s our only hope.

He wants our desires, hopes, dreams, ambitions, loves, hates, strengths, weaknesses, talents and shortcomings. *He wants us all*, every bit. And that is our great hope. And that’s why James says that God’s grace is bigger than our rebelliousness. He gives greater grace. I think the point is that His grace is able to conquer human rebelliousness *and* human dividedness. He’s big enough for that. “Therefore, He opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble.”

And so, what is required? Verse 7, singleness of response. “Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” – he may seem strong, but he will. “Come near to God, and He will come near to you” – He will! “Cleanse your hands, you sinners. Purify yourself, you double-minded.” Be single again in relation to God. “Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and” amazingly, wonderfully, “He will exalt you.” Isn’t that a wonderful thing? God’s grace is bigger than our dividedness. He knows our dividedness, and He’s bigger than it. That is our only hope.

Concluding Remarks

Now that we’ve splashed around in this letter a little bit, let me just draw one or two things by way of conclusion.

Chapter 4 is the heart of this letter, the sharp, the pointy end of this letter. But the writer takes a while to get to it. Starts very gently in Chapter 1. Trials. Count it all joy. Talks about material circumstances in life. Chapter 2 gets a bit more personal and a bit more pointy. Begins to focus on behavioral things. But only in Chapter 4 does he face them with the heart of what’s gone wrong. I wonder if there isn’t here a clear progression of argument which is brilliantly designed for people in this sort of situation. He *reels* them in.

What is the contribution of this letter to the New Testament? Well, I wonder if this is the New Testament letter designed to deal with the problem of primarily bad behavior. It’s not theological error that’s the issue here. It’s bad behavior that’s the subject matter again and again and again and again. It’s not that some new untruth has arrived. The primary issue is in their relationships.

The method that James uses here is a wonderful example of how to deal with relationship problems. We’re not always good at dealing with bad behavior. Often, we ignore it. We think it’s not that

important. We do that when it comes to ourselves, and when it comes to others. There's a great deal of denial of bad behavior in Christian circles.

We tend also to think of doctrinal error as somehow separate from relationship issues in church. 'They're just relationship issues.' And we try and say to people, 'Be nice to each other.' But this emphasizes that when people aren't getting on together that's a theological issue. It says something about them and God, not *just* about them and each other. And it needs to be dealt with theologically.

Let me ask you, think of the big relational problems in your congregation. Have they been dealt with yet by telling people to behave nicely to each other? That is not the route to solution. The route to solution is: going from people to God, people to God.

His method is very interesting. In chapter one the arm is round the shoulder. "Count it all joy, brothers, when you meet various trials." By chapter four, the headlock is on, and the fist goes in. Chapter four is brutally honest. There's a movement in this letter from gentle to direct. And there's great wisdom in that. Sometimes these difficult relational things need to be crept up on, theologically. Not just smacked on the nose - he does smack it on the nose in the end, but not immediately.

Finally, remember this is a remedial letter. It's a letter of *hope*. If we find it uncovering our problems, that is with *remedy* in view. Bringing people back to the truth, bringing people back to singleness of response to God. And on that note, let's pray together for God's help.

Prayer

God gives greater grace.

Therefore, the scripture says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

We thank you, gracious God, for this gracious letter. We thank you that you're a God who wants people whole. Thank you that you long for people to come back, and not just be reconciled superficially to one another, but to draw near to you.

Thank you that you know all about the deceptiveness of our hearts and the dividedness of our hearts. Thank you that your grace is bigger than those things. Help us therefore not to despair for ourselves. And help us not to despair for others who have wandered away from the truth.

Please help us to demonstrate unity of heart and mind. Please would you bring your Gospel to bear in our lives in such a way that our outward relationships are changed as well as our relationship to you. Please be at work among us for good and for your honor and glory. Amen.

SERMON 2 – Exposition for Expositors – James

Let's pray before we read.

We thank you, heavenly Father, for your living Word. And we pray that as we gather around it now, you would please use it to rule over us. Please give us the wisdom we so desperately need. Please, bring the Gospel to bear in our lives in fruitful ways. Hear us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Not many of you should become teachers my brothers. For you know that we who teach will be judged with greatest strictness, for we all stumble in many ways and if anyone does not stumble in what he says he's a perfect man able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the us, we guide the whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they're so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder, wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire, set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening, both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

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

What Is This All About?

One of the most notable features of the book of James is his teaching about speech and use of the tongue. There's no doubting how powerful the tongue can be. Words have enormous power. Power to build up and tear down. Power to help and encourage, to discourage and destroy. The whole morale of a political party, for example, or even a nation, can be changed just by a speech. With words the weakest armies have been roused with bravery in battle; with words, the bravest can be rendered powerless and ineffective. We all know that at one level they're just vibrations of air, yet they have massive power to influence.

We used to have a rule at home that when the children were small they used their words to do something, not just whine or scream. So on those occasions when something desirable came into view and it was much easier to go sneer, the parental response, was always 'Use your words, use your words, nothing *happens* until you use your words.' It is useful to use your words in life.

The truth is that nearly everything we do, especially in relation to other people, is done mainly with our words. That's how we do things. Of course, our feet are useful and our hands are useful, but

most of what we do we do by speaking, backed up by other bits and pieces. This passage tells us all about the great influence that the tongue can have.

At first sight, one might think that the big point of this passage is, 'well, the tongue's a very powerful thing, so *I must work hard to control it*. But that isn't where this passage starts, and it's certainly not what the bulk of the first part of this passage is about. Most significantly, this passage about the tongue starts, "Not many of you should become teachers."

This is, first of all, a passage about the teacher. Though it contains a great deal about the tongue. I suggested last sermon that this might be a letter that's more than just practical. Not so much a collection of wise sayings for living in general, but as a fairly focused antidote to Christians relating badly to one another. What I think this chapter flags up is the importance of the teacher in all that, for good or for ill.

The teacher is enormously important in the Bible... *not so in our culture*. Those of you who have a background in teaching in school will probably be well tired of the saying 'Those who can't teach. Those who can't teach teach teachers. Those who can't teach teachers become civil servants in the Department of Education, and so it goes on.' But the teacher is enormously important in the Bible, and I want to show you that this passage is about teachers. It starts with teachers, and what's more, the words in **verse one** are closely linked with what follows. Not all of our translations do the connective words very well here. "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers. **For**, you know that what we teach will be judged more strictly. **For**, we all stumble in many ways. If anyone's never at fault in what he says, he's a perfect man," verse three, "**And**," so on, the whole thing just rolls from one to another, from teacher to tongue.

And the flow of the chapter is with that too. After the negative, verse 1, "not many teachers," verse 13 has a more inviting and positive note. 'Well, who is wise and understanding among you then?' 'What kind of teachers do you need then?' I think that's what the second section is about.

It wouldn't at all be a surprise in the Bible to have the teacher cast as, **verse 13**, "the wise man." Look at **verse 18** as well. **Verse 18** talks about those who sow in peace and raise a harvest of righteousness. And you can't help thinking about the language of the parable of the sower, for example. James often seems to elude or refer to the words of Jesus. The sower sowing the word, *a teacher* raising a harvest in the end.

Let me suggest, also, that the focus on the teacher *here* would fit in very well with the letter as a *whole*. For if this is a letter dealing with bad behavior, exposing the divided heart, the divided person, the great remedy in this letter is *the Gospel*. Look at **chapter 1 verse 21**. I think this might well be the headline exhortation in the letter.

"Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted Word which is able to save your souls."

I'm sure he's talking here about the Gospel. He refers to it in **verse 18** as "the Word of truth" which gave us life. **The Gospel, then, is a word not merely to be received at the start of the Christian life, but to be received humbly all the way through the Christian experience.** If the remedy in this letter is the Gospel Word, what could be more important than the person who teaches the Gospel Word? So it's not

surprising to find stuff in this letter about teachers, indeed you'd be surprised if there wasn't something in this letter about the Christian teacher.

Why Not Many?

But why, James 3:1, not many teachers? You would have thought, wouldn't you, that if the Gospel is so important, then the more teachers of it you can get the better. And there are many encouragements in the scriptures to be intentional about the multiplication of teachers. One thinks of the exaltation of the Lord Jesus to His disciples to pray for labourers to be sent out into the harvest field; or of Paul's encouragement that the person who desires to be an overseer desires a *noble* task; or his instruction to Timothy (Timothy 2:2), that Timothy is to pass on the ministry that has been entrusted to him to faithful individuals who'll be able to pass it on to others. There's loads about the multiplication of teachers in the Bible. Why, then, not many?

It may I be linked to the situation James is writing to. Look back again to James 1:19-20. "Know this, my beloved brothers: Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires." James anticipates that his readers may not be *quick to listen*. That they may be *quick to speak* and *quick to anger*. Chapter three also has that "*quick to speak*" edge to it as well. Look at 3:5. People who "*boast of great things*". 3:14, people who boast out of "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" and so deny the truth. And in a climate where words are being used in that kind of way (quick to speak, boastful, self-promoting), there are going to be people who put themselves forward as teachers. In a world where everyone needs to be heard, the position of teacher is likely to be sought by all the wrong sorts of people. And part of the remedy to that sort of bad behavior is to discourage those sorts people from being teachers. Not many teachers. 'Don't rush into it!' says James.

And his argument is, 'Well look, if you've really got your head screwed on properly you won't want to rush into it!' The argument in the first part of chapter 3 is quite complicated in various ways, but the main point is in verses 1 to 3. 'Don't rush into it.' Why? Well, because we know that "we who teach will be judged with greatest strictness." You're a teacher? Well, you'll have to give account all the more precisely and exactly for what you've said.

Now, of course, the judgment in view here is God's judgment. Often the teacher only has eyes for what human beings think of him. 'What will people think of my sermon?' 'What will other ministers think of my church?' 'What will they think of my initiatives and programs?' James wants the teacher to raise his eyes to the judgment of God here. Human beings so easily have the wool pulled over their eyes, but not God. What you say doesn't matter much if no one is listening, but if you're a teacher, if others are listening to you, then God is very concerned and there will be stricter judgment.

Look at Your Tongue

And James doesn't just leave it there. It's not just 'stricter judgment, so don't rush into being a teacher,' but it's 'stricter judgment, and we all stumble, don't we? And so don't rush into being a teacher.' Verse 2, "For we all stumble in many ways. And if ever anyone is never at fault in what he says, he's a perfect man, able to control his whole body." Now, let me say that controllable speech is certainly James' *goal* here, but it is not, I think, at this point, his *main point*. The weight of the argument here is to make the point that we *don't* speak as we ought (so much of the time). We all stumble in many ways,

just look at your tongue. How long do you need to listen to my everyday speech, especially the way I speak about others, to know that I'm a sinful person? Not very long, sadly.

'Look at your tongue,' says James. 'You want to see that we all make many mistakes? Take a look at what you say.' Bit like going to the doctor this. When I was small, every time you went to the doctor, he asked you to stick your tongue out. There was a kind of fad among medical practice that actually the tongue was a really place to look for the condition of the body. Now there are some things you can learn from looking at tongues, but it's rather limited and that's rather passed out of favour now. But James is doing something similar like that here. He's saying, 'You want to see what you're like? Well stick your tongue out and I'll show you.'

And he goes to work on the tongue in **3:3-12**. And I think the point here is primarily about how the tongue shows that we all make mistakes. That's the argument. The tongue is a good indicator of our inward condition.

First idea here is that the small controls the large.

"If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide the whole bodies as well. Look at ships also. They're so large and driven by strong winds but are guided by a *small* rudder whenever the will of the pirate direct. So also the tongue is a *small* member, yet it boasts of great things."

Now, these are examples common in the ancient world. Horses and ships. A horse is a *big* thing. You can make it do what you want with a very *small* thing, if you know how to do it. Ships are *big* things. We know this and I think in our own better than in any age. The biggest deadweight ship in our own age was a ship called the Seawise Giant, a massive tanker, deadweight 657,019 metric tons. It's quite heavy really isn't it? All you need to turn it is a small thing, proportionally small in relation to the whole. A small thing controls the big thing. And James says, the small tongue "boasts of great things." The little tongue is very influential; a small part of the body but making great boasts; little organ, great statements.

And straight away, **verses 5 and 6**, we're its negative features. **"How great a forest is set ablaze by a *small* fire. And the tongue is a fire a world of unrighteousness set among our members staining the whole body"** again small to big **"setting on fire the entire course of life"** emphasis on the whole again **"and set on fire by hell."**

The controlling image here is off-burning and it's a negative image. A little spark will set a whole forest off. The tongue is like that, says James. All you need to destroy thousands of acres of forest is one spark in the right place. The tongue, says James, has massive destructive power.

A moment's thought reveals that to be true to life. It takes such a *small* remark to cause a *big* burn. Don't you know that personally? The stupid or ill-considered remark that you wonder 'what possessed me to say that? Why did I open my mouth?' Haven't you had weeks in ministry dominated by the fallout from words, yours or others, that took only *a few seconds* to speak? Or that email that you dashed off in frustration and hit the send button because you were angry, and you hit it hard because you were angry. And the massive destruction that that caused. We ought to have a license to be allowed to use words, are we not? Such powerful and dangerous things.

Here James describes the tongue as "a world of unrighteousness set among our members." What does he mean by this? I think he means it's like the enemy within, a little outpost of enemy activity. Someone has described your tongue as being like an embassy on foreign soil. The embassy of the world in the body of the believer. The anti-God world has set up a beachhead in your mouth. I think the point here is that the tongue is in some way at the disposal of the anti-God world and has *big* effects for evil – like a fire, like a rudder, like a bit – often those effects are driven by the concerns of the anti-God world within our speech.

James goes on: "staining the whole body, setting on fire entire course of life." Again, emphasis is on the bigness of the effect. I think he's not saying that the body is itself made wicked by the tongue. That would be too literalistic. And you can't cut your tongue out and take away the influence of the world on you, can you? No, I think it's more the style he uses to operate. He often looks on *the outside* for evidence of what's *inside*. We explored this yesterday a little. And what he's saying here, I think, is that the attitudes and thoughts that are vocalized by the tongue are the things that corrupt the being. I think the Lord Jesus says very similarly, but with more focus on the inwards, when he describes how "out of the heart of man come evil thoughts and they defile a man." In James speak it's more like out of the mouth of man come evil words and they defile a man. Same idea, slightly different focus. Everything about a person's self and life shares the corruption of the tongue.

And, says James, concluding this fire-based set of images, "set on fire by hell." It's a striking image. I think it implies not only the satanic influence that operates in the realm of human speech. The devil is, after all, a liar and the father of lies. It also expresses the condemnation that belongs to that realm because of our speech. Hell is, after all, not so much the place that Satan lives as the place of his destruction, the final end of the evil one. Again, here's James looking down the line to *the big end* of the little words. Not only do our tongues *express* evil, the destructive influence of our words in present age is a little foretaste of the destructiveness of hell. That, of course, is why your church, when people are speaking dysfunctionally, can be much more like hell than heaven. And sometimes church is hell rather than heaven, is it not? Because of the way people speak and relate to one another.

Verse 7. We cannot control our tongues. He's still on the same idea. "Every kind of beast, bird, reptile, sea creature, can be and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil, full of deadly poison." He refers here to the whole of the created order, back in Genesis chapter one, over which we are given dominion and recognizes that significantly we can control everything but the thing that lives in our mouth. There's only one thing in the whole of the created order we can't master, a restless evil full of deadly poison; which, of course, means that the one thing we can't control in the whole of the created order is *ourselves*.

And it's like that, isn't it? I talked to a man some time ago. At one point in the conversation he was arguing how he was a decent guy. He thought what mattered in life was not believing in Christ, but that you didn't do anyone any harm. Five minutes later on in the conversation, he was lamenting the fact that he had said something to his mother which had caused a major bust up between them, and then she died suddenly and the whole thing was left unresolved. He deeply regretted it five minutes before he was saying I've never hurt anyone. Well, look at your tongue and think again.

Look at our tongues, we know that we're sinful through and through – we cannot control ourselves. And the end point of that, verse 9, is the double mindedness. The tongue exposes the double

mindedness which James is on about all the time: "With it we bless our Lord Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God." And the incongruity of that doubleness is brought out in the next verse: "from the same mouth blessing and cursing. My brothers, it ought not to be like that. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine figs? Can a salt pond yield freshwater?" No! But can the one human being be divided? Certainly we can. It's so incongruous.

What we speak to or about others tells us what we are. Double, where we ought to be single.

Now let me say three things¹ that James is not saying. First, he's not saying, first of all, 'The tongue is important, get a grip on it.' Here he's saying something rather different. 'The tongue is important *and* you can't get a grip in it, can you?' No one can control it. Big strong emphasis here. "A restless evil full of deadly poison." You can't get a hold on it! It's too slippery and slimy for that.

Second, he is not saying *at this point*, 'If you want to be a teacher, get a grip on your speech.' Now there does need to be self-control in that area, and he'll on to that kind of territory later on. He's saying *here*, 'This is the way it is, so you don't really want to be a teacher, do you? Because we'll meet stricter judgment.' Now it may seem like a great goal to be a teacher, and it is a great goal, but so often the reason we want to be teachers is that we like to be listened to. And we like to have people hear what we say, and we like to use our *words* for *ourselves*. You really want that, says James? Think again. We all have many sins as is demonstrated by the performance of our tongues, so don't rush into that because that brings with it stricter judgment.

What Sort of Teachers?

Well, what sort of teachers? And here we hit a more positive note. "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." Let me say a little bit about words and our culture. The expert is king in our culture. We may not be able to answer the question or provide the help ourselves, but we know men and women who can. Expertise is highly valued in the culture in which we live. It's tied up with knowledge. It's tied up with cleverness and quickness of mind. In academic circles, it's tied up with reputation, with publications, with all sorts of things. I used to work in hospital medicine and the realm in which I used to work was driven largely by the desire for recognition by a small group of elite physicians. Who cares what the patients think? What the guys at the top think, that's what really matters. What expertise is not to do within our culture is what's written here. For here the measure of somebody's wisdom is not his clever words, **verse 13**, but his works done in the meekness of wisdom. 'You want to be a teacher?' says James, 'Well, show me the life then.' It's not 'Give me the words then,' but show me show me the life. The ordinary life, the private life as we might call it, the unofficial life, the off-duty life, the life as distinct from the role.

Now put it that way and you'll see there's a huge difference between today's expert and the wise person. For in the culture in which we live there is no need whatever for one's expertise to be tied to one's life. No need whatever.

For most of us in the jobs that we do or have done before being in ministry or now that we are in ministry, for most of us most of the time our fitness to give advice on what we're supposed to know about would be something entirely different from what goes on in our lives when off duty and not at

¹ In the sermon, he only gave the following two. Perhaps for the sake of time or through a misstep in his notes.

work. Even in the political sphere, which is so much under scrutiny now, it is true that misbehaviour in the private realm may disqualify someone from the work, but only for a while.

Not so for Christian wisdom. For **wisdom is not to do with the intellect, with mental sharpness, with cleverness, with shining brilliance, but with goodness.**

Now the Bible is full of ideas about wisdom, for wisdom is fundamentally to do relating rightly to the world as it is. And though there are many people who are wise to a degree in that they know how to operate in a sphere in the world. You can only be genuinely wise, full-on wise, if you're a Christian. Not because you're clever, or because being a Christian helps (though it does), but because you can never relate rightly to the world in which you live, unless you relate rightly to the one who rules it and made it.

And so wisdom has a definite pattern. **Verse 13**, wisdom leads to meekness humility. Why? because it recognizes God for who God is, and it sheds light on who I am – most significantly, I am a creature, a made one, derived not autonomous – and a flawed creature at that. And what is God like? Good, right, straight, true, self-sufficient. I, on the other hand, I'm not like that. Not good, though I may put on a good front. Not right, not true, not self-sufficient, although I may pretend to be. Being in touch with reality, says James, ought to be measured by meekness, a level of humility. The wise person is measured *not* by pride *but* by humility. *Not* by cleverness *but* by goodness.

Now I think it's fair to say that humility is not envied in our culture. And it certainly was not envied in the first century. One commentator says this,

“There was some place for humility in Hebrew thought, but the dominant morality of the day associated the word with weakness and grovelling. It's linked with adjectives like ignoble, abject, servile, slavish, downcast and low. Epictetus names humility first in a list of moral faults.”

Well, in the context of **verse one** and the matter of teaching, what we must value and look for and cultivate is not first of all gifts (though of course some aptitude to teach is a given for a teacher), but rather goodness, godliness, meekness. If you want to be a useful Christian in the lives of others what is required is *not* brilliance *but* humility.

True wisdom leads to humility and to goodness. And then James has a little knock back again to improper treatment, improper behavior, **verse 14**,

“but if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

He talks here about a different sort of wisdom, a proud sort of wisdom, a boastful sort of wisdom, a false-to-the-truth sort of wisdom, not the wisdom that comes down from above, but I different sort of wisdom. And I wonder if the point is to alert the reader to the fact that just because something (or somebody) puts itself forward as being wise, doesn't necessarily mean it is. Maybe there are competing claims here to the wisdom, to the wise label. And I think what he's saying here is that where one sees rival claims to wisdom, there one sees *somewhere* jealousy and selfish ambition at work. Where you see teachers competing for attention, for the limelight, for the people, for the airtime, there you see jealousy at work.

An example: one area I think in the nation at the moment, in the Christian world at moment is a competition for students in student ministry. In the city in which I worked until recently there was an unholy scramble among church leaders to get hold of students. Well they're easy to get hold of, doesn't require much effort to get more, and it makes you feel good if you've got more. Everyone wants to have students, it makes them feel good.

And I think that's why this whole section is here. James is writing said that the between true wisdom and false wisdom will be clearly seen for what it is. It is not often obvious. It's not openly **verse 14**, is it? No one says, 'Come to my church, I am jealous, ambition personified and I'll feel great if I can possess you too.' If our politicians boasted of being selfishly ambitious, nobody would vote them! They're ambitious alright, but they boast that they're right and they're cleverer than the other blokes, so you ought to vote for them.

If people proclaimed openly that they were selfishly ambitious, we'd never listen to them for a moment! But let the Christian teacher boldly proclaim special knowledge of God, or special spirituality, or special wisdom, or a special student program, we'll go for that because that's what we want. Knowledge of God, wisdom, and spirituality. Beware the teacher who's always proclaiming that they are the one to listen to. Beware the teacher who always has to be right. Beware the kind of wisdom that's always pointing the finger at those it considers to be wrong. Beware of wisdom that mages on criticism or ridiculing others. It's not a good sign. Now there is a very important place for saying that things are wrong. A very important place. If we don't express negatives, positives are never properly understood. But beware of the kind of wisdom which always goes *first* to putting other people down. Chances are, underneath, it's ambitious, envious, not really wise at all.

In fact, look what it really is. **Verse 15**: "This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, earthly, unspiritual, demonic." That's what that kind influence is. And look what the result is. **"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there will be disorder and every vile practice."**

Here I think we get to the heart of this Letter. For this is very much a letter about disorder and bad behavior. And if this is indeed a chapter about the significance of the Christian teacher, what this chapter does is to lay part of the responsibility for the disorder and vile practice at the teachers' feet. Look for the kind of teaching that unsettles people, leads to party spirit. The kind of teaching which results in nothing worthwhile being done. The kind of teaching which is always busting things up and causing controversy.

If you see a Christian fellowship divided and at odds, there you'll see *somewhere* the work of selfish ambition. Not always from the pastor, of course, but from some so-called source of wisdom within the fellowship. If we see Christians always picky and mean and unkind, something causes that. 'And you'll know false wisdom,' says James, 'by the fact that it causes disorder; and true wisdom by the fact that it produces goodness.'

Now notice again how the focus of this Letter has sharpened. **Chapter one** starts very general. It introduces the symptoms of double-mindedness. **Chapter two**, much more personal, that double-mindedness is manifested in the way people treat each other. **In chapter 3** we're beginning to get to the cause. Look at the teachers. To be fair we don't know which is chicken and which is egg. Which came first? The disorder of the teacher. Which produced which? But the teacher is vital in James's scheme and the teacher will be important in turning this around.

But he finishes on a much more positive note. Verse 17, “But...” What a relief! “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere, and a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” Sharply contrasting with what has gone before. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition leading to (3:16) to disorder and every vile practice. A different set of characteristics (3:17) leading to a harvest of righteousness sown in peace by peacemakers.

Here we have the character of true wisdom described at length. Wonderful characteristics. First pure, peaceable – what a contrast with verse 16 which is self-assertive – gentle, open to reason, compliant, willing to give ground, not insisting on its own way all the time. Full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, literally without doubleness; singleness towards people, sincere without faking. And what is the result of this sort of wisdom? Righteousness. I take it not just personal righteousness, but all of these words are relational words, and I think James has in mind in contrast with the disorder of verse 16, the order and rightness of right relationships in verse 17.

There are then two sorts of wisdom among Christian teachers. Some concluding thoughts as to what flows out from that.

Four Concluding Thoughts

First, dealing with disorder. Disorder and vile practice is common enough among Christians. It is easy to want to crack heads together when disorder is faced in church, and sometimes there's a place for that. But verse seventeen and eighteen encourages us to be patient sowers of the Word in a peaceable life. Yes, sure sometimes conflict and controversy and a bit of head cracking, may be necessary, but this must be the background to that. And there is great encouragement here that those who sow in peace will raise a harvest of righteousness.

Second, there's a warning here. It is easy to conduct ministry from a position of envy and jealousy and bitterness, desiring the success of others, wanting to be like someone else. Have you not thought to yourself “I would love to be like that person in ministry?” Why do we want to be like them? Well so often because if we were like them, we would share in their success and reputation. But the good Lord has made us the people we are, and He's given us what we have and withheld what we do not have. None of that is accident. Brothers and sisters, do you believe that? You are not an accident. It's a wonderfully reassuring truth. We are creatures designed and made by a loving Creator. Children brought to life by a loving Father. Does He withhold any good gift that is right for His children? Not any. We are the people he has made us to be. It is not an accident that we are the way we are. Envy is inappropriate for creatures and for children of the living God.

Third, can I say something about training and selection? Not many teachers is, I think, not a general commandment. He's not wanting to discourage ministry training initiatives, for example, or indeed conferences like this. However, I am sure that 3:1 is a disincentive for the presumptuous, for those who long to be in the public eye. We do need to be looking for others to pass the work on to, but this passage is a great indication of what sorts of others we ought to be looking for to pass the work on to. Christian ministry is full of needy people who are there because they love to be affirmed by others, and the truth is that good work is done not necessarily by the super brilliant, but by those who can so peaceably even in conflict. We often look for, our eye is caught by, we are impressed by, the brilliantly

gifted. But great care needs to be taken here. For often those who impress at first do not have the meekness that comes from wisdom.

In ministry we cannot escape our motivations. We cannot escape our motivations. We live in a society which values cleverness and pretends cleverness and brilliance. I have a very good friend. He is about as clever as it's possible to be. He is about as well educated as is possible to be. A couple of years ago, talking with him, he reflected on his education and he said this, "You know what I think my education gave me? It made me," I wonder how you think he completed that sentence, "it made me a good liar." And by that he meant that inbuilt to the whole of his educational system and everything, was the idea that it was a good idea to look better than you were, and to hide your inadequacies and weaknesses, and to impress by putting on a false face. Well, the secret to ministry is not to get good at hiding your sins and your ignorance. The secret to ministry is not to get good at pretending and putting on a good face. Sometimes the brilliant need to be dealt with cautiously.

It also has a good worth to say about the business of choosing and training. It should encourage us that the forum in which ministry training ought to be done primarily is in the local congregation. Why? Because that's where people see what you're really like. When you get to the level of, you know, being selected by your denominational selection board for training, it's so easy to pull the wool over the eyes of those guys. Try it on with your wife or your children or the people who've worked with you in ministry for ages and ages and ages, and it won't be so straightforward.

One of the reasons we find training and equipping others difficult is that we resist putting people in place who are better than we are. Brothers and sisters can I urge you to repent of that now and forever. I don't know about you but I want to appoint people to ministry who are godlier than me, and theologically sharper than me, and if I'm not committed to doing that, I will always be holding people down, worried that people will think better of them than me. I will always be limiting them, keeping the lid on so that I can remain out front. Who cares if their gifts are more impressive? Who cares if they're godlier? Isn't that an advantage? Of course, the other side is, if you are the one being trained, if you start competing with your boss because you want to look smarter (because you are smarter), and you want to look godlier well that'll be fundamentally destructive and there will be disorder and every vile practice if you do that you can be sure.

Fourthly and encouragingly in ministry what is most powerful – most powerful – is not brilliance but goodness. We need to take that to heart. In the culture in which the expert is king, we often feel that only the brilliant can be useful. Only the super clever can ever do anything useful in life. It is not so in ministry. Don't we recognize that at the individual level? Who are the individuals who have been most useful in your life? The chances are they weren't the super brilliant. They were the ordinary person who was working at being godly. And, says James (3:18) such people raise a harvest of righteousness by sowing in peace.

Prayer

Let's pray together.

Gracious God, we thank you for the warnings and the encouragements of this passage. We pray that you would deliver us from operating out of selfish ambition, jealousy, envy. We recognize that these

things are so close to our hearts. We pray that you would help us to repent of them and to keep repenting of them.

We thank you that despite the way we are, we can be useful in your hands, not because of brilliance or cleverness or putting on a good face, but simply by godliness. Thank you that that's something by your grace that we can all give ourselves to. We pray that we would indeed do that, and that this might bring glory to your Name, and peace and order to your people.

This we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.

SERMON 3 – Exposition for Expositors – James

Let's pray as we come to God's word.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, for a beautiful day and for the magnificent privilege of your word in our own language, and freedom to meet with brothers and sisters gathered round it. We thank you for these amazing gifts. And we pray, please, for the help of your Holy Spirit, that we being hearers of the Word might not merely be hearers but doers also.

Hear us we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.

James chapter 5. I can almost guarantee that you will not fall asleep in the next 45 minutes. It is the end of a long week, and I'm sure many are tired, but the subject matter this morning is too exciting to miss – too dear to the heart to be treated with indifference. If anyone falls asleep that will be showing extraordinary powers... of whatever it is you have powers and if you're good at falling asleep. Imagine if you can what the world we live in would be like without these four areas of interest:

Talking about other people, planning your future, getting rich, and staying healthy.

Any speaker, any time can talk about those things and guarantee that people will listen. What would normal British life be like if we took away talking about other people, dreaming about the future, thinking about what to do if we won the lottery, and thinking about how to stay healthy. This is the stuff that makes people get up in the morning, keeps the workplace interesting, fuels dreams and ambitions, and generally makes the world go around.

But... this morning we meet these issues from a particular perspective. From an angle not normally considered in day-to-day conversation by the coffee machine. We meet these things with *eternity in mind*, and that changes everything.

Let me remind you where we are in this letter. James is writing, it *seems* to deal with Christians behaving badly towards one another. He deals with this not *symptomatically*, by telling people to just stop doing those nasty things to one another, but theologically by showing them that their behavior towards one another reflects a terrible dividedness of being towards God.

At the beginning of chapter 4, he takes the lid right off this dreadful spiritual disease, and brings the gospel to bear on it sharply. 4:4, "You adulterous people, you whoring people," he says. "Think you can be friends with the world? Well, only by making yourself an enemy of God." He wants the whole of you. He did not put his spirit within you to be lodger but possessor. Amazingly, says James, verse 6, he wants you still. And his grace is bigger than your unfaithfulness. And so, while God is an opponent to the proud, He gives grace to the humble. And therefore, verse 7,

submit to God,

resist evil,

draw near to God,

cleanse your hands,

be single again,

weep for what you've done,

humble yourselves,

and because God is a God who gives grace to the humble, He will in the end exalt you.

That final phrase, verse 10 looks forward to the last day. Amazingly, because of God's grace, to vindication at the last day and life beyond it. That's what the gospel of the Lord Jesus does, isn't that an amazing thing? It brings about the exaltation and glorification of the spiritually adulterous. Isn't that amazing thing? It is so kind of God to be like that. So undeserved that he should be like that. He opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. "Humble yourselves," says James, "and he will exalt you."

Now two things remain in the letter, and both of them have that forward-looking, last-day perspective to them. And we're going to try and give the rest of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the whole of it, a bit of attention in the time that remains. We're going to have to go very quickly. Let me sketch out the territory.

First, from 4:11 onwards, we get three examples of what this humbling yourself looks like in practice. And then from 5:7 onwards, we get an exhortation to patient endurance until the last day arrives. Now we're going to go quickly, we won't look at all the detail, but we will pay attention to two recurring themes. And to begin with I'll flag them up as we meet them.

First, the Lord and the end that he brings are always in view in this section.

And second, the bad behavior issues of the letter are always in view all the way through this section.

The First Example of Repentance

Let's look then at these three examples of repentance. I'll read and then comment briefly on each and suggest some applications, particularly in the realm of ministry. Three examples of repentance.

First, speaking against people. Verse 11,

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, He who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Now, bad speech has been a major feature of this letter so far. Most of what we do, we do by speaking. Most of the destructive stuff we do, we do by speaking. When we speak to and about others, we need to be very careful that we are not putting ourselves in the place of God. He is the judge of all. He alone saves and destroys on the last day (the last day is in view here). So who are we, says James, to speak against and judge our brother? There's the bad behavior in view.

Let me observe that Christian ministry, Gospel ministry, necessitates both making proper judgments about people *and* talking to and about people, sometimes about their wrongdoing. Such activity is essential if ministry is to be done well. And this letter is full of James doing precisely that to this group of people. But in this necessary activity, great care needs to be taken lest we think that we are God. There is one lawgiver and judge. Who are you, says James, to take his place? Do not speak evil against one another.

The Second Example of Repentance

Second example of repentance. Presumptuous planning. Verse 13.

Come now, you who say today or tomorrow will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit, yet you don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

-- There's the end, an end anyway, the end of life. --

Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'

-- There's the Lord and his control over the end. --

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whether whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him, it is sin.

-- There's the bad behavior. --

Sometimes our plans for the future functionally ignore God's total control over our lives and our complete dependence on Him. Sometimes our preoccupation with the future, and all the things we think we have to do to make the right future come out for us, makes us careless about things we ought to do for others in the present. There's the link I think between verses 15 and 17. We have absolutely no control over the future – that's in God's hands – but we do have responsibility for right action in the present *which is easily neglected* if all we're doing is thinking about the future.

One wonders whether the theoretical people in the example of chapter 2 verse 16, who say to the brother in need “Be warmed and filled,” but don't do anything to make that wish a reality, we're just too busy worrying about their future to pay attention to doing something about that problem in the present.

The Third Example of Repentance

Third example of repentance, covetousness. 5:1; note that it starts on the same note as four fifteen:

-- let me say the Lord and the end and bad behavior are interwoven all the way through this example. --

Come now you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you

-- we're talking about the last day here --

and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you've kept by fraud, are crying out against you. And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You've lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You've fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned. You have murdered the righteous man. He does not resist you.

Several things important to say about this. As elsewhere in James, you see it in chapter one, the language used of the rich is much more ambiguous than that used of the poor. The poor is called a brother in chapter one, the rich person is just called the rich man. Now this may reflect two things. First it may reflect that in general riches are a great snare spiritually, a greater snare than poverty. It may reflect, also, a particular situation in which there are some rich persons within earshot of this letter who have been particularly prominent in the bad behavior that James is writing against. At any rate, the rich are, James thinks, within earshot of this letter. Why else would he mention them? And I take it that this section, though very severe, and not brimming over with hope, nevertheless still constitutes instruction for deep repentance and at least leaves the possibility of rescue open.

Of course, the wealthy are not always proud, and they're not always exploitative. Though having riches does breed a carelessness sometimes for those who have less. Notice that all the way through this section, all that seemed so solid and could have been so useful in this age will be of no use whatever on the last day.

And the imagery here is the stuff of nightmares.

Imagine, in your dream, that you get up in the morning and go to put your clothes on, you open your drawer, your beautiful clothes, which you spent loads of money on, are full of holes, totally useless, moth-eaten. In panic, you go to your safe and unlock it. The gold and silver inside is rusting away. You can't believe that. That doesn't happen, does it? You reach out and touch it and it eats its way through your skin and begins to destroy you.

A voice is heard. "You gathered all this in the last days. This is not what the last days are for. These are Gospel days. What were you thinking of?"

At the same time, shouts come through the window from outside. You look out, your hired workers are standing there, pointing at the window. "There he is, there he is," crying to the heavens. "Here's the one who didn't pay us. Here's the one for whom we starved." And you know that heaven hears their cries.

The dream switches to a wonderful banquet. You're having a fantastic meal with your friends. You're having them around for dinner. It's a great time of fun and food and friendship. You go to the door to show them out. You thought it was the front door to the outside world, but actually it turns out to be the door to the slaughterhouse. You thought you were entertaining your guests and enjoying the fruits of your labors. In fact, it turns out that you were fattening yourself for the knife.

That's the imagery that James uses here. It's horrific. You say to yourself, "Why am I here?" The answer: "You have condemned and murdered the righteous man, he does not resist you."

Almost certainly, James is alluding to Jesus here, the righteous man, Himself condemned and murdered, going silently, unresisting to death like a sheep before its shearers, dumb. The way you've treated the brothers, says James, is so like the way others treated the Lord himself. It's a nightmare picture.

Weep and howl, says James. It's a very strong warning. It is not bursting with hope, but it does belong to a section about repentance. And the last day has not arrived for James' readers yet, only in bad dream form. And so maybe the door is still open for these people, whoever they were, to turn round.

Riches are a terrible snare. They dull our perceptions of what is really important, and of where true security is to be found. They make the present world seem solid and desirable, and the world to come dull and distant and uninviting.

Ministry, Gospel ministry, especially if chapter three done for selfish ambition has often offered both rich financial reward (you handle lots of other people's money potentially), and also a degree of social standing in this world. And these things too can dull our awareness of the world to come, and bleed us of the kind of zeal fitting of the last days.

Three examples then of the kinds of repentance that James's readers need to engage in.

Patience

Now let's just catch our breath for a moment and let's look ahead from 5:7 onwards to this exhortation towards patience.

"Be patient therefore brothers."

And I think that the "therefore" here is a, "Because of everything I've said up to this point" - it's that kind of "therefore." I think it's a summary section of the letter, drawing together the big ideas of the letter and a final conclusion.

Notice, in the first section, in the need for patience section, the issue of speech is still very prominent all the through.

First, we find two imperatives in verse 7:

Be patient therefore brothers until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth being patient about it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also be patient. Establish your hearts. For the coming the Lord is at hand.

The first is a positive imperative. Be patient therefore.

Now patience is one of those things which is urged on people on a regular basis all the way through life from their earliest days. Ever since you were a small person your parents have urged you to be patient. You go past the shop window; you see something you long to have; you say "I want this or that." They say, "Well you can save up for it. If you wait patiently and save up, you'll enjoy it more when you get it." Do you remember that being said to you, and you thought to yourself "Well I'm pretty sure I could enjoy it fine right now."

"Patience is a virtue" your friends tell you to your irritation as you express your longing for something. "Good things come to those that wait" they say, and you think to yourself "I don't want to wait I want them now!"

There are two kinds of waiting of course. There's the kind that makes no difference to life, like waiting for a letter to come in the post. It's nothing you can do, it's on its way, it'll come in time, and you don't have to be there to get it. There's the other kind of waiting and that does make a difference to life, more like waiting for the delivery of a large piece of furniture. You've got to be in for that kind of waiting. You've got to organize the rest of your life around that event. Well James is talking here about the second sort waiting patiently.

Indeed, in this chapter I think already (and through the letter) he's been describing what patiently waiting for the Lord's coming is like. It's the kind of waiting which will reorganize the way you talk to and about others. The kind of waiting that will completely transform how you plan for the future and your attitude to your money and career. The sort of waiting that doesn't view this world as an end in itself. This sort of life-changing waiting is what James is talking about. A whole life waiting for the coming of the Lord.

Now one's got to ask the question, "Why would you do that?" Why would you organize the whole of your life waiting for an event to do with the arrival of a person that you've never seen or talked to, or met face to face? Why would you do that? Think of all the other things you could be doing. Building your own empire, making a name for yourself in this world, planning your future, planning your preaching program, planting your church, living for the present. Your preaching program and your church plant can be just as much about you in the present age as anyone's career ever was. A friend of mine said "Before I was a Christian, I wanted to be rich and famous. Now I just want to be the best preacher in the world."

Why would anyone give up all that? All the stuff that can be gained in this world, in order to wait for a returning person from a faraway realm?

Answer: because it's worth it in the end.

See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient, until it receives the early and the late rains? At the end, there will be a valuable crop.

If you're a farmer, you live for the harvest. That's why you do all that you do, because of the future that's coming. That's the aim of it. It's valuable. You wait for it. You work for it. You do everything to produce that end. What James is saying here is that the coming of the Lord Jesus will be worth having lived and waited for.

Now let me say that the future is not described in great detail in this letter. There are a few pointers in that direction. 1:12, "The crown of life which the Lord will give to all who love Him." Perhaps the clearest statement about the future is in chapter 4 verse 10. "Humble yourselves now before the Lord and he will exalt you," looking to the future.

"Humble yourself and he will exalt you." So many people live life in pursuit of the uncertain business of exalting themselves in this age. To achieve something. To be someone. To make your mark on the world. To be recognized as being someone in your profession. To be known in ministry circles. But for everyone who waits for the return of the Lord Jesus, by humbling themselves now, God will exalt them.

To be lifted up by ourselves is precarious and uncertain. To be lifted up by God is something quite different. For the Ruler of the universe to say to you, a little human being, "You have a place here forever. A position that's yours personally. You are someone in my new world." That's something else, isn't it? Wait patiently. It'll be worth it in the end. Verse 8, "Be patient, establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

The second exhortation is a negative one:

Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged. Behold, the judge is at the door.

Now I'm going to say a little more about this one in a moment. For now, note that one of the signs of waiting patiently for the coming of the Lord is that I'm patient with other Christians in the present. Again we have this relentless pursuit of the link between our attitude to people and our attitude to God.

Two Examples of Patient Suffering

James gives two examples of suffering and patience, verse 10. We've already learned that it's worth being patient despite the fact that we might have to wait. These examples have a slightly different angle on patience. Be patient despite the fact that it might be hard.

The Examples of the Prophets

The first example is the prophets.

As an example of suffering and patience brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast.

Two things are mentioned about the prophets. First, they spoke truthfully for God, and they had difficulty doing that. And we now look back on them and think well they are the blessed people they did the right thing. It was not often easy for them to do that. They were often hated for doing that. For often, looking back to the prophets of the Old Testament, the words they have the message they have to bring is a negative one. But they were brave enough to speak when they had been told to speak, and now we, says James, look back on them as blessed people.

I used to work in Whitechapel in East London and just outside the hospital where I worked is a statue on Whitechapel Road of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. They hated William Booth when he was alive. They hated him. When he was dead, they put up a statue. It's absolutely typical. It's typical in the Bible as well. Jesus' words about your ancestors who hated the prophets and

honor them now that they're dead. We know they did the right thing, but it was not easy for them at the time.

The Example of Job

The other example is the example of Job.

You've heard of the steadfastness of Job and you've seen the purpose of Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

So little is said here about Job. What ties him in to the argument? Well, we know the story of Job well enough. A good man, not perfect, but righteous according to God's judgment, and he suffers greatly. And he doesn't know why he suffers, but he does suffer. And he suffers not only physically, but also at the hands of "friends" who assume that he must be in this situation because he's done something especially wrong. And his wife tells him to curse God. But at the end of the book, what is said about Job is that he has spoken the truth about God. The issue of faithful speech is embedded in the story of Job. God says to his so-called friends, "You have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has." And in the end of course God blesses him. At first his reward is a reward in this world. That's not what God promises to us through James, but he uses the example of how God did this for Job to show that God can in the same way do it for us. To reassure us that when God says he will lift us up, He will, even if it's hard in the meantime.

Notice that these are both examples of speaking properly in the present age, waiting for God to do the thing that God is going to do. And, says James, **"the Lord is compassionate and merciful,"** and then he finishes this off in verse 12 with an exhortation to speak truthfully:

But above all, my brothers don't swear either by heaven or earth or any other oath but, let your yes be yes, and your no be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

I think the point of this is simply "Well, let your words be truthful words then."

So a twin exhortation while we wait for the Lord. Patient waiting, speaking the truth of God and to God, even if it's hard. And don't forget, says James in verse 12, that right speech to God and about God needs to be matched with truthful speech to one another. That's what patience looks like. That's what patience needs to look like for James's readers. They need to wait patiently for the Lord's coming – and the big issue practically for them is going to be will they speak truthfully rightly to one another. Speech has been such an issue in this letter.

Once again, whether or not we're faithful to God's truth will be seen in the way we speak to people. If we grumble about others or tell lies to them, we are not true to God no matter what we might like to think theologically. And given the prominence of bad speaking in this letter, that is an ominous note.

And before we move on to verse 13 and following, let me just mention the contrast between eight and nine. Do you see the symmetry there between verses 8 and 9?

Be patient. Establish your hearts for the coming of the lord is at hand. Don't grumble against one another brothers so that you may not be judged. The judge is at the door.

Do you see the symmetry there?

The coming of the Lord is at hand.

Be patient.

The judge is at the door.

Don't grumble against one another.

And I think that idea of the judge being at the door sets the scene for what happens beyond.

What's this about Healing

Now here we have the very difficult section the you've all been waiting for, no doubt. Let me read it and then we'll try and make sense of it.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who's sick and the Lord will raise him up.

Notice that idea of the Lord exulting.

And if he's committed sins he'll be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and he prayed fervently that it might not rain and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Two problems.

First, verse 15 is problematic. The prayer of faith will save the sick. The Lord will raise him up. It's an unqualified statement. The prayer of faith will save the sick and it raises, of course, as many of us know in practice, significant pastoral problems. If the person is not healed, *was this not a prayer of faith? Did we not bring the right elders along? Was there something wrong with the leadership team? Maybe I need more faith, that's why I haven't been healed*, etc., etc. We all know the kinds of problems that arise from the generalization of this statement.

Second problem, not quite so obvious, but a conundrum really. The prayer example that's given to us. Why does James quote this prayer, verse 17, as his example of praying for healing? The prayer is the prayer that it wouldn't rain, and then the prayer years later that it would start raining again. But if you wanted a prayer from the life of Elijah to illustrate that prayer is significant in the business of healing people, would you not be much better choosing the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17? That would be a much better healing example of prayer, would it not? Why on earth does James choose this one, not that one? It would have fitted brilliantly, that one. That's the one I'd have used.

No, he doesn't use that one. He uses the example of the prayer for the rain to stop and then to start again. We've got to ask the question, *why is that prayer to be an encouragement to James's hearers for the sort of prayer that's described here?*

Well, in order to address that, let's just delve into the Elijah context. I'd like you to turn back to 1 Kings 17. Keep a finger in James 5, you'll need to flip back there quickly in a moment. 1 Kings 17.

Now Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbi in Gilead said to Ahab, as Yahweh the God of Israel lives before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.

There's the no rain initiative that Elijah takes.

What is the context of this prayer? Well, it's a prayer in a context where Israel as a nation is limping along between two opinions. Turn to chapter 18 verse 21. Here we are at the climax of the *No Rain* episode, three years later. 18:21. Here is the challenge to the people of Israel:

How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow him. But if Baal, then follow him.

Do you recognize that set of ideas anywhere? Two opinions? And then look on to 18:36. For here is the climax of this whole episode, the whole *No Rain* episode.

At the time of the offering of the ablation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, 'oh Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, oh Lord, answer me that this people may know that you are Lord our God and that you have turned their hearts back.

James 5:19 -

my brothers if anyone among you wanders from the truth and **someone brings him back** let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and cover a of sins.

Why is this the prayer that James uses an example? Because this is a prayer of restoration from double-mindedness about God. And that has been James' major theme all the way through the letter. And that is his concern at the end of the letter, verse 19, **bringing back the double-minded to singleness of heart towards God**. The situation James addresses is a situation of people dithering between two opinions, divided in their response to God *as witnessed* by their divided behavior towards one another.

Now then, how does help us to make sense of this particular example? Well, many have noted that the language of sickness here in this section is not unambiguous. For example, verse 14 is probably best most literally translated, "is anyone among you weak." And that word is used elsewhere in the New Testament for not merely physical sickness but spiritual malaise. So there is an ambiguity about the language which makes you think both of physical illness and spiritual malaise. And so some people, and did I have in the past, taken the view that actually this prayer here is all about the bringing back to single-mindedness of the spiritually ill, the spiritually wavering. Because you don't have to make it mean physical healing here. However, I do think now that physical healing is in view here. And I think

that the answer to our problems is to be found in assuming that this is a letter to a particular situation, where bad behavior is particularly important.

“Don't grumble,” says James in verse 9, “so that you may not be judged. The judge is at the door.” Might it be, in response to their very bad treatment of one another, that God has already begun to exercise judgment among them, and some of them are ill as a result?

And having made that observation, let me make the observation that there are other passages in the New Testament which have very similar things going on. Ananias and Sapphira, lying to the church in Acts 5 and winging up dead. And especially 1 Corinthians 11, where at the church meal the Corinthians treat one another very badly. Some pigging out, others being left with nothing. Here in James, just as in 1 Corinthians 11, socio-economic issues seem to be a very significant player in that divided treatment of one another. And Paul says that the Corinthians have treated one another so disgracefully that that is why many of them are “weak,” same word as in James 5, and ill, and some of them have died. Their bad behavior, says the Apostle, has brought God's judgment on them *already* in the shape of illness and even death.

So many of the details of this passage might reflect that. Why do we need elders to come and pray? Probably because they represent the body of Christians that have been sinned against. Why the anointing? Because anointing in the Bible is as often a symbol of consecration and set apartness as it is a physical healing. Why confession of sins to one another? Because there are big sins to be confessed. Note the bad behavior that the letter is full of. And note also the wonderful assurance that as has already been mentioned in the letter, “though God opposes the proud, He gives grace to the humble.”

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he's committed sins, he'll be forgiven. Even people who've fallen ill because of God's judgment on their dreadfully bad behavior that they've dealt towards one another. Even them! God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. For what it's worth, I think that's what's going on here. And I think this is the part of the letter which is easiest to read if you assume that this is a more *specific* letter to a particular *situation*, rather than a general letter, in which case this has to be applied to every example of sickness and it can become rather problematic.

Generous promise from God, God will restore, God will forgive. But notice, as ever in James, that God's generosity is to be matched with corresponding obligations among his people. On the one hand, in verses 14 to 16 we have God accepting people who come back. On the other hand, verse 19, we have believers who “bring the wanderer back.” You see? God is like this towards adulterous people. The believers are to be like this towards adulterous people.

A Few Conclusions

We've talked about the stuff that makes the world go around:

Talking about others.

Planning your future.

Getting rich.

Staying healthy.

But we've seen all of those from the angle of God's control and the last day that's coming. One or two closing observations.

First, Bad behavior is much more important than we usually allow. Much more important. It must not be ignored. God does not ignore it. It is folly to deny it. Often Christians, though having a firm robust doctrine of sin (we know that sin is a reality), have an extraordinarily detached doctrine of bad behavior. "Yeah, we believe in sin, but bad behavior? No, we don't do that here." Well, we do do that here. That's the thing. And James puts his finger on it.

And look how James wants his hearers to reflect the character of God in dealing with it. He wants the brothers to share the concern that those behaving so badly are brought back to the truth about God, and back to fellowship with one another. That is a very costly thing to do when the malicious speech and bad behavior has been directed towards *you*, but in the same way God absorbs in himself the hurt of our double-mindedness. *He* is willing to forgive. *He* is eager to bring back. And His people must be too.

How very important this is for churches undergoing hard times. One of the characteristic features about churches undergoing hard times is that those you thought were your friends behave badly towards you. They may speak maliciously against you. Act hurtfully towards you. How important it is that they are given room to repent of that! That is what James does here, that is what God does.

Second, sickness may be more significant than we normally allow. We are often at pains to say that there is not a direct line on the whole between a person's sickness and their particular sins, *but* sometimes there is. Certainly in Acts 5 and 1 Corinthians 11 – and I'm arguing probably here. And I think this ought to at least make us the question, if we fall suddenly and severely ill, might we at least want to consider how our relationships with our brothers and sisters are? Might this be a warning, in advance of the last day, that I need to turn around from the way I've been behaving to my brother or sister? And if I look at my life when I fall in and wait ill and wake up to the fact that actually I have been harboring grudges and speaking maliciously and acting badly, then action must be taken *for the judges at the door*. Sickness may be more significant than we often allow.

Third, speech is very, very important. All the way through the letter that has been emphasized. Let me make some applications to ministry in particular. Beware the subtly seductive sense of being "in the know" about others that being in gospel ministry gives you. In ministry there is much that you come to know about others, but there is more that you do not know.

Sometimes that sense of special knowledge is multiplied by being on a staff team, or a cooperative eldership. Have you noticed how necessary conversation about someone can turn into a habit of talking about someone in a particular way, and that can turn into a fixed corporate judgment about someone that allows for no new information, no transformation of character, and no repentance on that person behalf. Beware, lest you start behaving like God as a church leadership team. There is a Savior and Judge, and you are not Him.

Beware also claims to knowledge and understanding. I'm going to qualify this massively now having said what I've said, but in my own very limited experience, the person who habitually says, "Over the years I've learned that..." has almost without exception in my experience been someone who has not learned much, is quick to make judgments about people, is closed to learning new things, and unwilling

to allow for the transformation of other people. I hasten to say that I am just about open to new information on that one... just about.

The same can happen in a ministry of marriage. You know so much about people as a couple, and you talk so often about people as a couple, that you can begin to feel like God to your congregation. And you can position yourself beyond criticism, and beyond repentance. And you often experience lots of hurts from Christians, and allowing for repentance can be very costly. But there is only one lawgiver and judge, and you are not Him.

Beware of seeing yourself as the answer to your congregation's problems. Yes, you have responsibilities, but there is one Savior, one good shepherd, and you are not Him. You can point people to Him, but you can't sort all their problems out any more than James by sending this letter could guarantee that the problems in this congregation would be sorted out.

He closes on such a helpfully godlike note. If God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, my brothers, "If anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins." It's such a Godlike attitude that. It reflects the God that he believes in.

Closing Prayer

Let's pray together.

But His grace is greater, therefore the scripture says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

We thank you, gracious God, that you are God.

You are the Creator,

the Lawgiver,

the Judge,

the Savior.

You have complete and perfect knowledge of everyone and everything at all times.

Thank you that you oppose the proud, but give grace to the humble. Please help us, Heavenly Father, to submit ourselves to you today, and indeed every day. Please help us to demonstrate that in the way we relate to and speak about other people. We pray that you deliver us from being double-minded people. We pray that in those areas where it's costly to be God-like, you would help us to remember the grace that you've shown to us.

Hear us, we pray in Jesus' Name.

Amen.