

Undivided Loyalty to God Studies in James

By

Randall W. Crenshaw, BS, MBS, MD

(Appendices by the Rev. Dr. Justin S. Holcomb)

Christ Episcopal Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

www.christchurchville.org

Undivided Loyalty to God Studies in James

James, called by some scholars “the first bishop of Jerusalem”, wrote this letter to Christian Jews dispersed across the region to combat the worldliness he saw surfacing in the churches. Writing with full pastoral authority and concern he encouraged them to live up to their faith, and he rebuked them to correct errors, misunderstandings, and backsliding. His message could not be more appropriate and timely for us today. In America and Europe it is often hard to tell the difference between the world and the church. The primary theme of the letter is undivided loyalty to God, and it is summed up in verse 4 chapter 4: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”

Outline of Study

Session 1:	The Shield of Faith	1:1-18
Session 2:	The Obedience of Faith	1:19-2:26
Session 3:	The Fruit of Faith	3:1-4:12
Session 4:	The Humility of Faith	4:13-5:6
Session 5:	The Prayer of Faith	5:7-20

Session 1

The Shield of Faith--James 1:1-18

Imagine what James must have thought. He and his family were worshiping in the synagogue at Nazareth when his oldest brother stood up to read. The usher handed Jesus the book of the prophet Isaiah, and he opened it and began to speak:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor and to proclaim release to the captives.”

He closed the book and gave it back to the usher. The people couldn't take their eyes off him. Then Jesus looked at them and said, “Isaiah was writing about *me*.” I can just hear James muttering under his breath, “has he lost his mind?”

After his resurrection from the dead Jesus made a special appearance to James. (1 Cor 15:7) Perhaps as a result of that meeting James believed Jesus was who he'd said he was- the Messiah. The Christian Jews around Jerusalem then acknowledged James as their undisputed leader. In his maturity he saw the need to write to them on the subject of spiritual maturity.

Maturity comes, said James, by patiently enduring the various forms of evil that besiege us. Sometimes those attacks take the form of rejection or persecution; other times they come as car wrecks or cancer. Frequently evil comes not from outside of us, but as temptation, from the corrupt desires that remain inside us as long as we live on the earth. Good and evil are at war in this world and in us, but God has already determined the outcome. Using our faith as a shield, we will get our reward - an unblemished life with God and the Lamb!

Since our suffering has a predetermined purpose and divinely defined limits, we can regard our trials and tribulations as occasions for *joy*. No, they're not pleasant at the time, but they are essential for killing the remnant of sin within. They also give us hope, the one thing we all need.

When we don't know how to escape temptation's assault, ask God, says James; He delights in helping us. But don't pray like this: “God, if you're up there...” When you start off that way you'll get exactly nothing from Him.

And don't blame God when you're tempted. When we're tempted it's our own unwholesome desires and longings drawing us out and enticing us. Everything God does is good. There's nothing shady about Him. This new life we enjoy He spoke into being, creating a new order among His creatures. In this “life in the Spirit” there are no rich or poor, so don't despair or be arrogant!

Quotes

“A prophet is not without honor except among his own relatives.” Mark 6:3 & John 7:5

“That I may know him (Christ) and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death.” St. Paul in Phil. 3:10

“Life under the cross is a joyous life, for it is in our weakness that we can see the grace of Christ most clearly.” H.L. Senkbeil, *Sanctification*

“Anyone who comes to God must believe He exists and that He rewards those who search for Him.” Hebrews 11:6

“O Lord, grant me purity, but not yet.” St. Augustine, *Confessions* vii.17.

“Prop me up beside the jukebox if I die; Lord, I wanna go to heaven but I don't wanna go tonight
Fill my boots up with sand, put a stiff drink in my hand. Prop me up beside the jukebox if I die.
Sung by Joe Diffie

Questions

1. Have you ever, like James with Jesus, realized you were wrong about someone? What did you do about it?
2. Are you learning to enjoy it when you find yourself in a position of weakness or vulnerability? What new perspective on life enables you to feel that way?
3. Do you sometimes feel like you have one foot in the world and the other in the kingdom of God?

Notes

- **12 tribes in the dispersion** suggests that James was writing as a Christian Jew to Jews, in the hope Jews as a whole would turn to Christ.
- **Greetings** is the standard Greek letter salutation and can also be translated ‘joy be to you.’ It provides a natural segue into the second verse.
- **Consider it all joy** does not mean pleasant and total happiness all the time, but it refers to our satisfaction in our progress toward Christian salvation (and pleasure in our brothers’ and sisters’ progress as well). That salvation is the sure reward of our patient endurance under the hardship of various trials. It is reminiscent of Jesus’ beatitude: blessed are you when people insult and ostracize you.

- **Perfect and complete** is the goal toward which we strive as Christians by God's grace. However, we will not achieve the goal in this life. Our perfection must wait until we get to heaven.
- **Ask in faith doubting nothing** means praying in complete confidence God is able and willing to deal with our problems. It does not mean He always answers, "Yes", but we trust that His perfect wisdom and grace are sufficient for us.
- **Double minded** is literally "two-souled" and we get our word *psychosis* from the Greek word James used. Its opposite is the singleness of heart St. Paul writes about in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.
- **He himself does not tempt anyone**, because tempting others to evil would require a delight in evil, of which God is incapable. In the Scriptures God is said to tempt His people in the sense of giving them a test. His command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, is a superb example. But God's tempting, unlike the devil's, is a test in which he wants us to succeed, not fail.
- **Brought us forth by the word of truth** reminds us of the teaching of Jesus, when he told the Jewish ruler, Nicodemus, "Unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) Both passages affirm that God is exercising His sovereign will when He delivers us into a new life in Christ by the word of the gospel. Our decision or cooperation plays no more part in this spiritual birth than it did in our natural conception and birth. (John 1:13) To this idea of God's sovereignty our corrupted nature screams, "I object!", because the flesh must always be clever and in control.

Session 2

The Obedience of Faith--James 1:19-2:26

In our English prayer book we say, “Most merciful Father we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed...by what we have done and by what we have left undone.” In this section of his letter Archbishop James rebukes his flock when he sees them wandering from their faith in all three of these domains.

Jesus made one thing crystal clear to us in the Sermon on the Mount. The thoughts of our hearts and the speech from our mouths are just as important as our actions—the things we do or don’t do. So James begins at verse 19 to correct some errors in thinking when he raises the subject of anger. It’s true in my life and probably in yours too: we get mad when we don’t get something we *think* we deserve or *think* we must have in order to be happy. Sometimes the thing we want is, in itself, a good thing. We want to be reconciled to our children, for example. Other times we want things simply for our pleasures or to enhance our reputations. (See James 4:1-3)

In chapter 3 James calls the tongue “a fire; the world of iniquity; an unruly evil full of death-dealing poison.” Wow, our words have the power to destroy! So we must, insists James, use them carefully. He tersely warns us “our religion is worthless if we do not bridle our tongues.” (1:26) In session 3 we will see why James spends so many words on the subject of speech-sin.

Wrongful acts of omission and commission plague us as long as we go about on the earth. These first Christians were making the same mistake some Christians today are making. The well groomed were showing disrespect to the shabbily dressed believers from lower socio-economic classes. In some cases they were even taking them to court and exploiting them financially. Why in the world, wonders James, are you showing the rich preference in church? Beauty trumps love in Hollywood, but not in God’s house. When we fail to love the poor among us, we are breaking the Royal Law of King Jesus.

The modern expression “her walk doesn’t match her talk” could have been coined by James when he chided his flock for ignoring the plight of the poor. It sounds so noble to shower a blessing on someone’s ears, but when they really need a place to stay and something to eat, what good are empty words? They contain no calories! Faith that goes no deeper than that is dead. An intellectual agreement with certain theological principles never saved anyone. For example, you say you believe in God? Well, Satan believes in God, and he and his rebel angels are smarting from the licking they got for disobeying. They’re scared to death of Him!

Now Abraham had real, living faith. He *gave visible proof* that he loved God and believed His promises by willingly obeying when it cost him dearly. It seemed he and Sarah had waited forever to have a son. When the long expected Isaac finally arrived they were overjoyed. Imagine their dismay when God ordered Abraham to kill his only son as a sacrifice for sin. At the moment Abraham raised the knife to Isaac’s throat, with the unsophisticated trust of a little child, God

provided a lamb to serve as a substitute. Abraham was saved, not because he added works to his faith, but because his genuine faith included works by its very nature. Likewise, we obey God not to *win* His approval but because we already *have* it in Christ Jesus. The Spirit of Christ lives in us now, and good works crop up in our lives like peaches on the tree.

Quotes

“Snot is running down his nose, greasy fingers smearing shabby clothes. Feeling like a dead duck, spitting out pieces of his broken luck.” Jethro Tull in “Aqualung”

“Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire.” Martin Luther in *Preface to Commentary on Romans*

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” St. Paul in *Galatians 2:20*

“Those drifter’s days are past me now. I’ve got so much more to think about...deadlines and commitments; what to leave in, what to leave out.” Songwriter Bob Seger in “Against the Wind”

“In one view it (perfection) is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God...giving God all our heart...devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God.” John Wesley in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*

Questions

1. Many politicians and preachers today are fond of saying “people are basically good.” How do you reconcile that with Jeremiah’s description (in note #1 below) of the human heart as “desperately wicked”?
2. Have you ever thought uncharitably of a shabbily dressed stranger who has innocently taken your favorite pew?
3. What are some of the ways we make distinctions among fellow Christians today?
4. James makes a lot of statements that sound similar to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5) Have you read it recently and noticed that sin goes deeper than our “acts”, down to the thoughts and intentions of the heart?
5. The Sermon on the Mount is heavy. Now read these promises God makes to everyone who relies on Christ for redemption: Matt 11:28; John 6:37-54; John 11:25
6. James (and Paul in Galatians) both refer to the Christian’s freedom from the Law. How does that square with James statement that a profession of faith without works is useless?

Notes from James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*

- **Filthiness and enormity of evil**-the first term literally denotes dirt or filth but is used as a metaphor of moral defilement; the second phrase refers to the evil which abounds in the human heart. Jeremiah said, “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” (Jer 17:9) Even after God gives us a new heart (Jer 24:7) breaking the *power* of sin over us, the *pollution* of sin remains in us during our earthly life.
- **Law of freedom** refers to the condition of the Christian “begotten by the word of truth.” (Jas 1:18) This regenerating word frees us from our enslavement to sin. It is the fulfillment of the promise given to us through the prophet, Jeremiah: “I will write My law on their hearts.” (Jer. 31:33)
- **Religious...deceiving his own heart** reminds us of Jesus’ warning to the outwardly (only) religious Jews: “Be careful not to make a show of your religion before men.” Matt 6:2-6
- **Pure, undefiled, unspotted** all indicate that Christian faith means trusting our lives to God. We cannot serve Him with part of our minds, for part of our life while giving part to the world, the flesh, and the devil. James, like Paul, is firm in preaching our duty to live up to our faith.
- **Respect of persons** equates to a denial of Christian brother or sisterhood. James is warning us against trying to combine faith in Christ with worship of people’s social status. Every time we try to “serve God and Mammon” (Matt 6:24) it always leads to a failure to oppose injustice for fear of the powerful.
- **Made distinctions or discriminated** comes from a Greek word denoting judges facing both ways; i.e., to Christ in name only and to worldly snobbery. James is saying, in effect, this is a church-not a court of law. Do not make judgements for or against another Christian by examining evidence, such as what they are wearing.
- **Dishonored the poor man** means to hold him in contempt, to despise or disdain him. This verse indicates that James was seeing, not merely snobbery, but physical, almost violent, acts of oppression against the poor in the church by the rich outside the assembly.
- **Faith without works is dead** sums up James’s argument in verses 14-26. He is not contrasting faith and works, as some have said, and this is not a debate between Paul and James. This section contrasts faith based on knowledge *about God* (dead, barren faith) and faith based on trust *in God* (real, saving faith). The latter *always and everywhere* produces the fruit of good works. James is simply saying faith that has no works doesn’t work!

Session 3

The Fruit of Faith--James 3:1-4:12

In this section James expounds a subject he introduced in 1:26, where he bluntly calls a public show of religion a sham if it's adorned with an "unbridled tongue." On the contrary speech-sin, he adds, is a sure sign of *worldliness*. Critical speech almost always accompanies arguments. In these first century churches it was causing dissensions and disputes, and in our own day it's threatening to tear apart the Episcopal Church in the USA.

With the wisdom God gave him James dug beneath the symptoms and discovered the root cause of the trouble. Hearts filled with *bitter jealousy and selfish ambition* were flooding the churches with arrogance and lies. Confusion, disorder, and tumults invariably break out where Christian leaders are more interested in pursuing their own ambitions and partisan causes than in building up the body as a whole.

James, a true shepherd of souls, did not heal this wound lightly. He prescribed the perfect cure for selfish envy: "Quit pretending you're so clever and in control!" He knew that only radical repentance (a humbling of oneself before God) and a dose of "wisdom from above" could restore mutual love and humility-the fruit of unfeigned faith.

Some of us are not taking envy and jealousy seriously today. We believe they spur us on when used as instruments for "self improvement." A recent magazine headline went so far as to claim "Jealousy can Lead to Lasting Love." The Scriptures take a less sanguine view. They ascribe to *envy* the chief priests' decision to deliver Jesus to Pilate. (Mark 15:10) They also reveal *zeal* as the motive behind the persecution suffered by the early church. (Acts 5:17 and 13:45) Is not this same covetous zeal the driving force behind militant Muslims bent on destroying Israel? Irish Christians killing each other? American clergy trying to seize the ECUSA?

Some of us are incurably smug and confident we can get what we want. If we cultivate that attitude we will reap only pain and sorrow, because it is worldly, unspiritual, and demonic. We will harvest judgement instead of mercy. James is calling us to an undivided loyalty to God. In a statement that perhaps summarizes the central message of the letter he writes, "You unfaithful creatures, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." (4:4) Quit flirting with the world and dabbling in sin! You are the bride of God, and He is a jealous lover.

Not inclined to political correctness or polished speeches, James draws a clear line in the sand for 21st century Christians. Some of us are living with one foot in the world and the other in the kingdom of God. The gulf between the two is growing larger day by day. Which way will you jump when you can no longer straddle the divide? Will you opt for a life of envy and striving, or will you choose loving kindness and joy? Gentle mercy and grace wait for those who yell "no" to the devil and whisper "yes" to God.

Quotes

“I have often marveled that people who profess the Christian religion should quarrel with such rancorous animosity...and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred.” 17th century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza

“Please allow me to introduce myself; I'm a man of wealth and taste. I've been around for a long, long year, stole many a man's soul and faith...I rode a tank and held a general's rank, when the *blitzkrieg* raged and the bodies stank.” The Rolling Stones in “Sympathy for the Devil”

“How can you say, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye?” Jesus in Luke 6:42

“Repent...that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that he may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you.” Peter preaching in Acts 3:19-20

“We are invited here to pray for ‘all Jews, Muslims, Infidels, and heretics...that they may be saved among the remnant of the true Israelites.’ The conviction is that the non-Christian needs converting. The claim of Christ's Lordship, to use the Pauline phrase, is absolute and universal. Can you swallow this?” Paul Zahl in *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer*

“A poor, weak, dying worm.” John Wesley's answer to the question, posed in 4:12, “And who are you, that you pass judgement on your fellow?”

Questions

1. Are you more likely a) to see people as basically good b) to see evil in other people but not in yourself c) to recognize the potential for evil in all people so you're not surprised or shocked at the things we all sometimes do d) to see the whole human race as hopelessly corrupt and beyond healing?
2. In our science worshipping culture can you bring yourself to believe in “the devil” and in demons relentlessly assaulting us in our new life in Christ?
3. Have you experienced in your own life the difference between godly sorrow and the sorrow of the world? The difference between being sorry you got caught and made to look bad in the eyes of others, and being sorry deep in the core of your being that you hurt another person?

Notes from James Moo in Tyndale New Testament Commentary on James

- **The tongue...defiles the entire body** agrees with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 15. What goes into the mouth passes through the stomach and is eliminated. "The things that proceed out of the mouth (evil thoughts, adulteries, murders, etc.) come from the heart and those defile the man."
- **Who among you is wise and understanding?** James aims here especially at those who pride themselves on their intellectual prowess. The Old Testament concept of wisdom as a way of life and an attitude typical of a godly person is certainly in mind here. But James also goes on to say wisdom must be practical, must issue in good works done in meekness and humility. Humility was *not* considered a plus in the Greek culture of the time. They judged meekness an ignoble debasement, and that is one reason Jesus did not appeal to them. His self-description found in Matthew 11:29, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart" was pure foolishness to the Greeks.
- **The wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle etc.** The description of heavenly wisdom is the fruit it produces in those who possess it. These characteristics resemble Paul's list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, though the words differ. What Paul attributes to the Spirit, James refers to wisdom. (In his letter James does not mention the Holy Spirit, with the possible exception of a vague reference in 4:5.)
- **Be miserable and mourn and weep** describes *true* repentance. It is a deep, heartfelt sorrow for sin. Paul calls it a "godly grief...that leads to salvation and brings no regret." (2 Cor 7:10) James is not a Christian killjoy; the laughter he has in mind is the scornful laughter of the fool who flips off sin. It is the mark of those who prosper in this world without regard to the world to come.
- **Do not speak against one another** encompasses many kinds of harmful speech: questioning legitimate authority; slandering someone in secret; and bringing incorrect accusations.
- **Judges the law** might refer to the extreme seriousness the law of God attaches to slander and critical, condemning speech. In the literature of the Jewish Rabbis it was said that "the man who begins by disavowing his neighbor will end by denying God." In Numbers 12 God took Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron, to the woodshed for rebelling against the authority He himself had vested in Moses. Jesus confirmed in his teaching (Matt 7) that judging another person carried the very real risk of implying that you are superior to God, who has reserved for Himself the sole right to determine the destiny of every person He creates.

Session 4

The Humility of Faith--James 4:13-5:6

The weeping and howling on Wall Street can be heard around the world as I write these words in the Spring of 2009. The clever denizens of that domain have scammed thousands of working people of their life savings. The losses might total \$ 1,000,000,000,000 - a staggering sum. To repay it would require an amount of money equal to one million dollars a day *every day* since the Lord Jesus Christ died.

In Session 3 James called the churches back to an undivided loyalty to God, and he reminded them “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” In this session he describes the life of the proud in more detail, making it clear they lack the *humility* that accompanies a living faith. They think they *deserve* their hard earned prosperity because they pulled themselves up by their boot straps. They believe the affluence they enjoy is solely the fruit of their own labor. Blind to the spiritual world, they ignore the government of the universe by its Creator God. He alone, declares James, determines who will be rich and who will not.

Despite their protestations, James lays out very specific examples of their abuse and misuse of riches, and he issues a warning to them (and to us) about the great dangers associated with great wealth. The rich in the churches have at times been guilty of defrauding the weak. This was the immediate cause of the Protestant Reformation in Germany in 1517. The hierarchy in the Church of Rome convinced the peasants their dead relatives would have a better chance of getting to heaven if the living bought *indulgences* from church officials.

Business owners, even the outwardly religious, routinely cheat their customers and their employees. The fabulously wealthy live opulently in “wanton pleasure.” James warns, “you are fattening your hearts for the Day of Slaughter,” a reference to the Day when everybody will have to give an accounting of the resources entrusted to them in their earthly life. Charles Dickens’s stories portrayed the cruelty of the powerful businessmen of his day. His images of debtors’ prisons and sweat shops are indelibly etched in the contemporary English consciousness.

The humility of faith does *not* require us, on the other hand, to pretend money is wicked or unimportant. It faces squarely the dilemma of us who feel “caught between the longing for love and the struggle for the legal tender.” (Jackson Browne) The Bible makes clear that wealth is not inherently evil. Jesus taught that the *compassionate use* of wealth pleases our heavenly Father. Exhausting ourselves to pile up possessions does not. Anxiety over accumulating money is like a warning light on the dashboard of your car. It signals trouble in the heart and soul from a loyalty divided.

Quotes

“The banks became a gambling house and crashed with an awful sound. Brokers, traders jumping off the ledges; insurance agents runnin’ out of town. When the mountains crumbled they were looking for a place to hide. Wanton pleasure turned to terror, and molten lava buried them alive. Smoke on the water, fire in the sky. Smoke on the water, etc.” Randall Crenshaw to the tune of *Smoke on the Water*

“There'll be women and their fortunes, who just want to mother orphans. Are you gonna cry while I'm squeezin' them dry, takin' all I can get, no regrets, When I openly lie and live on their money. Eric Burdon in *It's My Life and I'll Do What I Want*

“Money it's a gas; grab that cash with both hands and make a stash. New car, caviar, four star daydream, think I'll buy me a football team.” Pink Floyd in *Money*

“The borrower is the slave of the lender.” *Proverbs 22:7*

“If we have food and clothing we will be satisfied. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil.” *1 Timothy 6:8-10*

“Make as much as you can; save as much as you can; give away as much as you can.” John Wesley

Questions

1. Do you see any application of these passages in James to the world wide financial contraction of 2008-2009?
2. Can you think of examples of wealthy Christians using their riches to improve the lives of others?
3. If you are heavily borrowed in, do you *feel* like you are a slave to those who are loaning you money? What would it feel like to be free?
4. Can you honestly say on most days you are content with what you have? Why or why not?

Notes from James Moo, Tyndale New Testament Commentary on James

- **You who say, “Today or tomorrow”** James is describing people who are self-confident planners. They decide when and where they will go and how long they will stay. Extremely confident, they are certain they will make money in whatever venture they enter.
- **You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow** They left out of their calculations one basic fact: this world is transitory. To plan so confidently is the height of foolishness. Just as the morning sun burns off the fog, illness or accidental death, imprisonment, or the return of

Jesus can cut our life short. The writer of Proverbs 27:1 had it right when he said, “Do not boast about tomorrow; you don’t know what a day might bring.”

- **You boast in your vauntings** James is warning the careless about leaving God and his values out of their plans. They got a certain pride in themselves in planning their future with such confidence. Compare the words in 1 John 2:16, “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life is not from the Father.” James is exposing the insidious sense of self-sufficiency infecting some of the congregation.
- **Weep and howl, you rich** In the Old Testament, especially the Proverbs, “rich” occasionally becomes a synonym for “unrighteous”. See Proverbs 10:15-16 and 14:20 for the best examples. Jesus had a lot to say about the dangers of wealth. In Luke 6:24-25 he said, “Woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.”
- **Their rust will be a witness against you** James is not issuing a blanket condemnation of wealth. This verse and the next four make clear it is the *improper use of wealth* that brings misery and destruction to the unrighteous rich on the Day of Judgement. Here James indicts them for (5:2-3) selfishly hoarding money; (5:5) senseless luxury; (5:4) defrauding their employees; and (5:6) persecuting the righteous. The hoarding of wealth is wrong not only because it comes from utterly wrong priorities, but also because it deprives other people of their very life. At the Judgement the rust and the rot will be incontrovertible evidence that the wealth was wasted.
- **The wages you kept back from your workers cries out and it has reached the ears of God.** The poor day laborers, widows, and orphans who worked in the fields of the wealthy landowners pleaded with God for justice when the rich failed to pay them at the end of the day. Living hand to mouth, they needed the money to buy their supper after sweating it out in the fields. In the same way, God said the blood of Abel kept crying out to Him from the ground where it was spilled in Cain’s murderous act, recorded in Genesis 4.
- **Lived luxuriously and in pleasure** implies an uncaring self-indulgence. It refers to living voluptuously or dedicating oneself to indulging in sensual pleasures. The Greek word translated “wanton pleasure” is found in the New Testament only here and in 1 Timothy 5:6, where St. Paul says, “She who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives.”
- **You condemned the righteous man; he does not resist you** The rich Jews had a habit of perverting the legal processes to accumulate property and to gain wealth. Often the righteous poor did not fight back; instead they trusted God to protect and deliver them. Perhaps they remembered the words of Jesus, “But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Sermon on the Mount Matt 5:39)

Session 5

The Prayer of Faith-- James 5:7-20

Now ends James his letter to the poor Christian Jews of his flock in Palestine. He finishes the same way he started, by encouraging them in their afflictions to wait patiently for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. When He comes back He will punish the wicked, who have been oppressing and persecuting the flock, and He will rescue the righteous. Because His *presence* might come any day, we do not need to envy the unrighteous rich or be angry over their evil assaults. (See also Psalm 37) When we refrain from grumbling against each other and complaining about our lot in life, we demonstrate the patient endurance James here advocates.

Most of us have prayed at one time or another when we were suffering. How few of us have summoned the elders of the church when we were sick! We prefer something a little more high tech, though the best evidence shows many of the most popular treatments cure very little disease. On the contrary, the prayer and the touch of a person called by God to this ministry are strong medicine. Some of you can attest to this fact.

The physicians of His day failed to impress Jesus. His interaction with a woman who'd had a hemorrhage for twelve years stands as Exhibit A. (Mark 5:25) Like this poor woman, Americans have overestimated the ability of medical science to make a difference. Some reliable estimates of our spending on medical services might surprise you. Last year we spent \$2 trillion on health care. About half that amount, a trillion dollars, made no difference in the *health* of those who received the care.

My wife's grandmother gave me her husband's medical textbooks when I graduated from med school. Some of the treatments made me laugh out loud. Now, having practiced medicine and done research for forty years, I am not laughing. Many of the "cures" we apply today will seem as silly as those ancient methods when the next generation reads about them.

Another disturbing notion crops up in some corners of Christianity from time to time, the idea that God eventually saves everyone. No matter how cruel and conniving, how ruthlessly, selfishly or carelessly they lived, all is forgiven at the end by this God who cannot help Himself, so full of mercy is He. James (and Jesus) did not believe this for a minute. At the end of his letter he reminds those who will read and hear his message that people on the wrong path in life are running headlong to their death. In both the Old Testament and the New, God promises rich rewards to us who care enough to seek out those who are wandering away from the true faith. Many who are straying from the fold of God are dazed and confused, wracked by bitterness, anxiety or guilt. We perform an act of supreme mercy and kindness when we lead them back into the arms of the Good Shepherd.

Quotes

“Perseverance is a powerful medicine and endurance provides many good things.” Joseph, after successfully fighting against the temptation of Potiphar’s wife in *Testament of Joseph 2:7*

“The reward for faithfulness in the Old Testament was prosperity; in the New our reward is suffering.” Francis Bacon

“In the shuffling madness of the locomotive breath, runs the all-time loser headlong to his death. He feels the piston scraping, steam breaking on his brow; Old Charlie stole the handle and the train won’t stop going--no way to slow down.” Jethro Tull in *Locomotive Breath*

Questions

1. Have you caught yourself fretting over the success of people who are visibly evil, wicked, mean and nasty?
2. Are you sick, and getting frustrated by being shuffled around the medical system? Have you asked your ministers to pray for healing for you?
3. Psalm 139:16 teaches that God determined how long we would live before He created us. Why, then, do Americans get more cancer screening tests than any other people?
4. Do you believe all people are eventually saved? If you do, why do you think James encourages us to “turn a sinner from the error of his way and save his soul from death?”

Notes from James Moo *Tyndale’s New Testament Commentary on James*

- **Be patient until the coming of the Lord** As the farmer waits patiently for the seed to sprout and the crops to mature, believers must wait patiently for the Lord to come back to deliver them and judge their oppressors. While we wait we need to *establish* our hearts. By this James means we need to fortify ourselves for the struggle against sin and hardship.
- **You’ve heard of the endurance of Job** seems at first an inappropriate reference. Job grumbled about his circumstances, self-righteously proclaimed his innocence, and generally questioned God’s way with him. However, in the face of intense pressure by his wife to “curse God and die” Job stood firm in his faith. God, in his great mercy and compassion restored Job’s fortune after a while. (See Francis Bacon quote on this.)
- **Do not swear** sounds very similar to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:34-37. Many sincere Christians believe James and Jesus are prohibiting any oath taking, even in courts of law. It seems more likely they are saying our truthfulness should be so consistent and dependable that we need no oath to support it; a simple “yes” or “no” should suffice.

- **Elders of the church** are mentioned by both James and Peter. Paul gave instructions to Timothy and Titus to appoint elders in every place they planted a church. The New Testament uses two words, synonymously, when speaking about this office in the church: *presbyteros* and *episkopos*. It probably includes the pastors, or ministers, of the local church as well as lay leaders and ordained bishops.
- **Anointing with oil** Oil was widely used in the ancient world as a medicine. Because it was not used for every disease, James probably has a different (religious) use in mind here since he recommends it to all sorts of sick people. He could be thinking of it as a sacrament, serving as a vehicle of divine power. More likely, though, he means it as a symbol of being set apart for God's special attention and care. Either way, the oil is not the main thing that brings about healing--prayer is.
- **Prayer will restore the one who is sick** This is the only passage in the New Testament *epistles* that directly addresses physical healing. Saying "the Lord will raise him up" makes it most likely James means physical healing rather than spiritual (for mental or emotional sickness). Since we are body, mind and spirit, however, too much emphasis on dividing healing into neat compartments probably misses the main point here. All the apostles declared it was by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ that people were made well.
- **Prayer offered in faith** James does not have in mind here the strength of the faith of the one praying. Mature faith always recognizes the sovereignty of God in the government of human affairs. Devout Christians die in spite of pleading with God to heal them. The prayer offered in faith says, "Lord, heal her, please; but *your will* be done."
- **If he has committed sins** The Bible affirms (1 Cor 11:30) that sin *can* cause sickness and death. James points out confession of sin can lead to healing when it has caused the sickness. *Not all* sickness, though, comes as a direct result of sin. Jesus' answer to the question about the man born blind (John 9:2-3) proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt. We, then, should not automatically assume that some specific sin is causing our prayers for healing to go unanswered. Undoubtedly it's not God's will that all sickness be healed.
- **Prayer of a righteous person** is strong and effective. James is not talking here about the "super stars" among the faithful. All Christians who are whole-heartedly committed to God and sincerely seeking to do His will make effective prayers that accomplish much. Our prayers do not always bring the results we want to see, of course. God's secret plan for the universe trumps our requests, so we add to our prayers, "If it's your will, Father."
- **Cover a multitude of sins** The Greek construction does not make clear whether the covered sins are the wandering one's or the ones of the person turning him back to faith, or both. Paul told Timothy (1 Tim 4:16) he would "save both himself and his hearers" if he would take heed to himself and his teaching. See also Ezekiel 3:21