



OF TWO MINDS

JAMES READING PLAN

How to Use the James Reading Guide

We hope you find this reading guide beneficial. Pastor Andrew is always encouraging the congregation to read the book we are going through along with the series, and we wanted to provide a tool that would both encourage you and help you in that endeavor.

This daily reading guide breaks down James into 1-3 verses a day, lasting through the entire series. At the beginning, we have provided an introduction to the book as a whole to help you get an understanding of the general context. We recommend reading through that before you begin reading James. Here are the steps:

01 Pray for Wisdom

Paul says that only the Spirit can know the deep things of God (1 Cor. 2:10-11), and James says that it is God who gives wisdom (James 1:5). So, praying to God for wisdom in studying his word is essential to Bible reading.

02 Read the Passage/Commentary

Read the verses selected, and try to interpret them on your own. Then, after you have thought about them, read the commentary for the day to see if there were some things that you missed.

03 Pray the Bible

Were there things that the passage told you about God that you can praise and thank him for? Were there things taught about the Christian life that you struggle to obey? Pray for the desire and the strength to obey those things.

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The most common adjective used to describe the book of James is “practical.” Because of its down-to-earth nature (which at times seems like a book of proverbs), many people cite it as their favorite book of the Bible. Readers of James will find in its verses instruction and wisdom for day-to-day Christian living, much of which can be applied to their life the very day it is read.

Now, it’s not that James doesn’t contain deep theology—it does (see 1:17-18)—but James spends more time and emphasis on how a Christian ought to live since we have been born again by the word of truth (1:18).

Date of Writing

James was probably written around AD 45 by James, the half-brother of Jesus. This means that it was written about ten years after Jesus’ death and resurrection and five to ten years before any other New Testament book was written. This plays an important role in how we read the book.

James’s Audience

James probably wrote this letter to Jewish Christians who lived away from Jerusalem. The opening remarks of James to his audience (1:2-3) hint to the possibility that these Jewish Christians had fled Jerusalem because of persecution. Let’s imagine the scene. You are ethnically a Jew, having fled from Romans and Jews who wanted to kill you because you are a Christian, and now you are away from the great temple in Jerusalem where you worshiped daily and are probably poor because of having to find new work. While some may have wealth in reserve, the majority did not. As far as being taught how to live, you only have what you have heard taught about Jesus (nothing from the NT was written yet) while you were in Jerusalem or through traveling preachers, and so, being far removed from the church in Jerusalem where the apostles were, you have to decide who would be a local teacher, how your worship services would look, and how your life should continue to change and reflect the character of Jesus. When people in close quarters are all going through this struggle, things can become tense. This seems to be the very general situation of James’s audience.

The Teaching of James

While James is written to a general audience of dispersed Christians, it seems as if James had caught wind of some things that were happening in these Christian’s lives and gatherings. And, as a result, like many scholars have admitted, an overall theme to the letter is hard to determine, even though there might be two or three themes. It reads like a collection of short sermons on specific issues but all put together so that the church at large can receive benefit.

One of the most striking things about the letter is how much it reveals that James was soaked in the teaching of Jesus. There are hardly any direct citations of Jesus’ sayings (probably because the gospels had not yet been written), but now that we modern readers have the gospels, we can see that James was a man who had heard Jesus teach, remembered what he said, and learned much from him. His goal in this letter is to apply the wisdom and teaching of Jesus to what these dispersed Christians were dealing with. And so, the letter as a whole is in obedience to the Great Commission as James is teaching these Christians how to obey the things that Jesus commanded.

Read James 1:1

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:
Greetings.

The opening of the letter is more profound than we might at first realize. James, who was both the head of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17-18), and the half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3; Gal. 1:19) identifies himself as a servant (lit. slave) of God and Jesus. This is an important identity of Christians (Rom. 6:22). If someone were to ask you who you are and how you define yourself, what would you say? Do you consider “slave of God” to be a foundational definition of your identity? If not, what is?

Read James 1:2-4

2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Perhaps the best way to understand this passage is to work through it backwards. If we are looking to be perfect and complete in our holiness (sanctification)—as slaves of God do—then we must develop the strength to remain steadfast (endure) in the faith through all the trials that life can throw at us. James says it is the testing of our faith in trial that produces this strength to endure. When we see the trials of life through this lens, we can “count it all joy” when we meet hardship. Christians know that whatever God has put into our life is for our good and his glory. What is your mindset when you are weighed down by hardship?

Read James 1:5

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Theologian F. J. A Hort defines wisdom in the bible as “the endowment of heart and mind which is needed for right conduct of life.” In other words, wisdom is the divinely given heart-posture and mindset needed to be obedient to God. And as Proverbs 2:6 says, it is God who gives wisdom; so, we must ask for it in prayer. But wisdom is a good gift, and God does not disapprove of any child who asks for a good gift (Matt. 7:11). How often are you asking God for wisdom to live your life according to his will?

Read James 1:6-8

6 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. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

James here gives us a note about our mindset when we ask God for things in prayer. We are not to doubt. This does not mean that God won't answer our prayers if we deal with occasional intellectual doubt, for many of the heroes of the faith dealt with different forms of doubt (e.g. Gen. 17:15-18). But, like James says, this doubting person is double-minded. To be double-minded means much more than doubting whether God will answer your prayer; it's rather a doubt in the character of God to hold true to his promises. A double-minded person holds on to earthly things just in case “this whole God thing doesn't work out.” This type of person should not assume that God will give him what they ask for. What areas of your life that are not God-honoring are you holding onto because you doubt God's character and his reality?

Read James 1:9

9 Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation

"Lowly" here means one who is looked down on by society, especially because of material poverty. The lowly Christian, while insignificant in the world, can boast because the Lord not only loves and saves them but has made them co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17). Perhaps shocking to us is that boasting is seen as a good thing here. But if one boasts in the right things, it can be God-glorifying. One of the best examples of a lowly person boasting in her exaltation is Mary's song in Luke 2:46-55. No matter how lowly our state becomes, we can rest in knowing that no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). How often do you spend time remembering what God has done for you and what he has promised to do?

Read James 1:10-11

10 and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. 11 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.

The poor is to boast in their exaltation, yet the rich in their humiliation. It is unclear whether James is referring to a rich Christian or unbeliever, but the point of the passage can be seen regardless. The rich person must come to Christ on their knees with nothing in their hands like the poor. Salvation is received and not earned. James also wants us to consider what it is that we are spending our time on throughout the day. If it has no meaning beyond this present life, then it is a foolish pursuit. We will die one day, and all those things will come to nothing. When you come to God, are you relying on what you are doing or what Christ has done? Do you regularly do self-inventory for how you are spending your time? How can your pursuits be more kingdom-minded?

Read James 1:12

12 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.

James returns to speaking about the benefits of enduring hardship (1:2-4). It's important to note that at the end of the trial, it is the crown of life which is given; meaning, it is the end of life in the present. James here is implying that all of life is full of trials and tests, but like we saw previously, they are for our good. And he encourages us to press on by reminding us that we are enduring in pursuit of God's gift of eternal life. This is given to those who love him, not those who are super spiritual or work harder or know more than others around them. But would anyone really endure in their faith and obedience through these trials unless they had a pure love of God? Is your love of God fueling your faith in the midst of life in this fallen world?

Read James 1:13-15

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

James gives a quick lesson on sin and temptation: 1) God is not doing the tempting when he allows/brings a period of testing into your life; it is against his very character. His purposes are for your growth (Deut. 8:2-6). 2) Temptation comes when our sinful nature begins to produce a desire to be disobedient to God in the midst of these hardships. 3) These wrong desires then produce action which is sin. 4) A life of sin that is allowed to rule our lives unchecked will produce eternal death. We can use James's teaching here to understand that it would be wiser to attack our wrongly placed desires before they become sin than to wait until sin is actually committed. What have you put in place in your life to guard against the desires of your sinful nature?

Read James 1:16-17

16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

If something received can be truly considered good and perfect, James insists that it must be from God. Why? Because that's always been true of God, and God does not change. He is the "Father of lights," meaning he is Creator and Sustainer of the stars, and so, he was before everything. If God created the stars so that the earth, animals, and humanity may have light (Gen. 1:14-18), we can trust that all good gifts that we receive have come from his loving, powerful hand. What have you been given that you have neglected to praise and thank God for? When you receive something truly great, is your initial reaction to thank God for it?

Read James 1:18

18 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Verse 18 is a continuation from yesterday. What is one good and perfect gift that God has given us? He has "brought us forth (literally, gave birth to us) by the word of truth." The word of truth is the gospel message about Christ, and James implies that belief in that word is how God brings people into his family. The title "born-again Christian" is often received with some disdain these days, but that's exactly what James is talking about here. Those who have faith in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have been reborn as his children. We have become glimpses of God's perfect kingdom in this fallen world. How is the health of your faith in the gospel? Do you need to talk to someone about some doubts that you might have?

Read James 1:19-20

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

This is something that we should stop and consider, especially in our time. We get these phrases mixed up and are often slow to hear and quick to speak. Obviously, our relationships in the church and in the world would flourish if we listened more than we spoke. Growth would be inevitable if we tuned our ears to hear what someone was saying before opening our mouths in response. Now, these are proverbial, meaning that they are general principles. Sometimes it is right to speak into someone's life, and sometimes anger is righteous. But, above all, we need to be careful with anger because, as James says, the actions that anger often produces are not in line with the righteous life that God desires from us. How are you doing with listening to others? Do you need to work on getting your anger under control?

Read James 1:21

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

The "therefore" points us to what came before. So, we can ask this question: since anger does not produce the righteousness of God, what does? James' answer is: 1) put away the evil and sinful things we did before we believed, and 2) humbly receive the "implanted word." The implanted word is the word of truth that James talked about before, and since that's the case, it is probably implanted in people when they are "born-again." So, to receive that word means to walk in the truth of the gospel and live our lives by it (as we'll see tomorrow). James says that this implanted word is able to save our souls. The gospel contains all we need for salvation; it is what produces right living in us. How have you let the gospel message change the way you live?

Read James 1:22-24

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

What does it mean to “do” the word (i.e. the gospel)? Well, the gospel message contains the proclamation that God has declared Jesus Lord of the world. If one truly believes this and lives in it, then they choose to follow Christ’s commands in scripture and build their life on them (Matt. 7:24-27). But anyone who hears the message and doesn’t change forgets that the gospel has declared them to be a great sinner in need of salvation. Like James says, it’s like someone who looks carefully in a mirror and sees that they need to trim their nose hairs and wash their dirty face, but then walks away without doing anything, forgetting what the mirror showed them. How have you been forgetting to “do” the word in terms of bringing more of your life into obedience to Christ?

Read James 1:25

25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Coming off of the mirror analogy from yesterday, James speaks of the one who uses the “perfect law” as a guide to see where they need to change. The law of liberty does not condemn its imperfect doers as the Old Testament law did. It is rather the law that flows out of salvation in the gospel: to love others in the self-sacrificial way that Christ has loved you. Those who have faith in Christ and pursue a life in alignment with that truth have no fear of condemnation. That’s why it is a law of liberty (cf. Rom. 13:8-10). James states that those who persevere in living a life by this law will be blessed. Using the “law of liberty” as a mirror of self-inspection, in what area of your life can you be more loving like Christ?

Read James 1:26-27

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

The word "religious" for James doesn't quite have the baggage that it does in our day. It probably just meant devotion to God. He says that if any "thinks" they are religious, and yet, they don't control their tongue, they don't know what religion even means. Think about the "perfect law" discussed yesterday. The one who gossips about, slanders, cuts down, and curses other human beings is not devoted to the Christ who commanded us to love our neighbor. In thinking they were religious, they deceive their heart. No, true religion to God is characterized by self-sacrificial love: visiting orphans and widows right in the mess of their "affliction" and denying oneself the sinful pleasures of the world to stay true to God. In what ways do you deceive yourself about your religion? Do the things you say reflect a devotion to God?

Read James 2:1

1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

The word partiality here means favoritism, and it literally means treating someone differently based on outward appearances (In this letter, James particularly talks about the appearances of wealth and poverty, but it could also be applied to race, ethnicity, age, etc.). The command, as we will see tomorrow, is in reference to the relationships that exist within the church (but we could also extend it to outside the church as well). James basically says that favoritism and faith in Christ have no partnership with each other. He ends the verse by calling Jesus the "Lord of Glory," which is probably a reference to Jesus being God's glorious presence in the flesh and the ruler over the church. James wants these churches to remember who it is they serve (Acts 10:34). Are you guilty of making quick judgments of people based on outward appearances? How can you begin to shift this mindset?

Read James 2:2-4

2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

James gives an example of how favoritism might work itself out within the church. Like we mentioned yesterday, James focuses on favoritism based on wealth and poverty, as these were probably some of the issues of the churches he was writing to. While we can imagine something very similar to this happening today (putting the rich in a favored position and forcing the impoverished to sit in a lesser place), in the West, this is more likely to happen in terms of who we let speak into the church or who we invite into our smaller circles. The emphasis is again on judging based on outward appearance, and James says that this comes from "evil thoughts." This is not how Jesus, the head of the church, judges people; so, neither should we. Are you watching out for signs of favoritism in your heart? When are you most likely to show favoritism?

Read James 2:5

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 has promised to those who love him?

In this verse we get a peek at God's sovereignty. It is generally true that when those who are materially poor come to faith in Christ, their faith exceeds the faith of the one who is rich. Their circumstances have formed them into people who know deeply that they have to be fully dependent on God for everything. But James says that it was God's choice to do it this way (Matt. 11:25-26). How amazing of God to offer salvation by grace through faith to a world where the poor and oppressed are more likely to be full of faith. But lest we think that it is their poverty that saves them, James once again attaches God's promises (here, heirs of the kingdom) to loving God. Regardless of where you are materially, how dependent on God are you? Can you make it a day without praying? This is a good indicator that you may not be depending on him.

Read James 2:6-7

6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

James continues his rebuke of his audience in showing favoritism to the rich (especially rich unbelievers). To understand the force of the word “dishonored,” we should know that the ancient world was an honor and shame culture, meaning that honor and shame held an important place in society. So, when James says that they have dishonored the poor, he is saying that they are shaming whom God has honored (see yesterday). He then says that it was the rich who had been oppressing them and were blaspheming the name of Christ. He is increasing his denouncement of this church by saying, “If you were going to sin by showing favoritism, why on earth would you show it to people who hate you? Even more, who hate God?” In what ways is your life more shaped around serving and sharing with people you like, rather than the people God has called us to serve (the poor, oppressed, and neglected; see Luke 14:12-14).

Read James 2:8

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.

What is the opposite path to favoring the rich over the poor? It is loving your neighbor as yourself. Since James refers to this as the “royal law,” it is probably the same as the “perfect law” and “law of liberty” referenced in 1:25. It is the law given and explained by Christ and demonstrated through the gospel. When Jesus explained this law, he defined neighbor as anyone whom you see in need, even if they are your enemy (Luke 10:25-37). And so, living by this royal law looks like helping people based on their need and your ability, not their appearance (although, for the poor, the appearance often signals the need). James says that those who follow this law are doing well. Are you compelled to service of others because of their needs or because of who they are?

Read James 2:9-11

9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

These verses depend on a knowledge of the Old Testament. Leviticus 19:15 says, “Do not act unjustly when deciding a case. Do not be partial to the poor or give preference to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly” (CSB). Therefore, those who show favoritism have willingly disobeyed the law. James then brings up a valuable theological point: if you break one law, you have broken the entire law and are guilty before God (Deut. 27:26). This shows that every one of us need Jesus to save us because we each have broken a command of God and have become guilty before him. But as people of faith who have been saved out from under God’s law and have become his servants, why would we want to continue to break the law? Do you consider that showing favoritism based on outward appearances is a grave sin? Are you seeking repentance for this?

Read James 2:12-13

12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

If we just read this verse with very traditional theology in our minds, it doesn’t sound right. What could it mean to be judged by the law of liberty? Once again, the law of liberty is the commands of Christ as summed up in loving others as Christ has loved you. So, Christians who are now free from the condemning law of the OT have come into salvation and have been given the Holy Spirit who empowers us for a life of love. But Christians whose salvation is secured are judged by their works for the giving of rewards or rebukes (2 Cor. 5:10), and we will be judged based on how we have loved others. That’s what James is saying here. So, he says, show mercy (especially to the poor and outcast in this context), because mercy is coming for Christians (even though we should be taking judgment for our sin). Those who do not show mercy have not understood the mercy that Christ has shown them (Matt. 18:23-25). How well are you showing mercy?

Read James 2:14

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

Following James' instruction to live a life of mercy as those who are going to be judged by the law of liberty, he anticipates an objection: why do I have to show mercy if salvation comes by faith in Christ alone? He begins his answer with verse 14. We can reword the questions this way: What is the benefit of having a type of faith in Christ that does not produce works of love and obedience? Is that truly a saving faith? James implies the answer no in the question. Think about your life of faith. How have you seen it produce works of mercy, love, and obedience to God? If it hasn't, is your faith a true faith?

Read James 2:15-17

15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 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? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

To illustrate what separates a non-saving faith from a saving faith, James paints for us a situation where a fellow Christian is in desperate need of food and clothing and another believer recognizes their need and pronounces a blessing over them without actually doing anything for them. James is using this analogy to show what a non-saving faith is like. It is the one who looks upon Christ and hears the gospel message and understands what it means but then turns and goes about their normal life without it having any impact on how they live. James says that this faith is dead. Is the gospel something that you simply have heard and agreed with, or has it become the story in which you find life, purpose, and direction?

Read James 2:18

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

This verse is a little confusing, but what James means is that someone might offer that they have faith (you) and that James has works (I), as if both are equal. James then sarcastically tells them to show him their faith without works (which is impossible). Rather, he will show his faith by his works. Is your faith visible to others through how you live your life?

Read James 2:19-20

19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

This may be one of the scariest verses in the Bible, but it causes us to check our hearts. Some who have faith without works actually believe the God of the scriptures is the true God. But James brings up a great point: even the demons believe that, and it terrifies them. If our belief is in knowledge alone, it is no better than the belief of demons. He then acknowledges that in the following verses he is going to show his audience that faith without works is useless for salvation. Be honest with yourself. Do you think that your faith is beyond just that of knowledge of the truth?

Read James 2:21-24

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?
 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

This is the most controversial section in the book of James because it seems to contradict what Paul teaches about faith. But we have to understand that James does not have to use words the same as Paul. For Paul, the word “justified” means to be declared righteous before God on the basis of faith. For James, the word means to prove one’s faith is genuine. He uses the example of Abraham who offered up his son Isaac at God’s command. Abraham was promised by God that a great nation would come through Isaac (Gen. 21:12), and the author of Hebrews says Abraham showed his faith in God and God’s promise when he offered up Isaac. And so, like James says, when God credited righteousness to Abraham based on his faith, this declaration of God was “fulfilled” in Abraham’s obedience. Abraham’s actions proved that he had a saving faith. And so, a saving faith is a faith that produces obedient action. True faith works. Look back over your life in the past year. Has your faith shown itself to be real?

Read James 2:25-26

25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

In the Old Testament, Israelite spies went to scout out the city of Jericho in the Promised Land, and Rahab hid the spies from the king’s men (Josh. 2). She believed that God was going to deliver Jericho into Israelite hands, and so, her faith fueled her obedience in hiding these spies and sending them away safely. And so, feeling as if he has made his point, James ends with a final analogy. Faith without works is like a physical body without a life-giving spirit. It is useless and dead. How does your faith need to show itself in obedience to God this week?

Read James 3:1-2

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Returning back to the theme of being slow to speak (1:19-20), James warns his audience not to pursue the role of “teacher” lightly. Why? Because teachers in the church will be judged by God with a greater strictness. Teachers know the bible and, therefore, are more apt to sin willingly than out of ignorance (Luke 12:47-48). Also, there is always the chance of teaching something about God that is not true and leading people astray (even unwillingly). James adds that we all stumble in many ways but then implies that it’s a lot easier to stumble in sins of the tongue (speech). He says that if you can fully bring your tongue under control, then you have the ability to bring your whole body under control. Are you quick to speak about the things of God and give biblical advice without thinking? Or are you quick to hear and pray, taking the role of teacher with the seriousness that God does?

Read James 3:3-6

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

These beginning analogies are meant to convey that small things can control and move bigger things (like a bit and a horse, a rudder and a ship). The tongue is a small part of our body, but it can speak of great things that it has done (great in size, not in morality). Words that seem so tiny have had large, destructive effects. So “the tongue” (James is using the term as referring to words) can boast of creating huge effects for such a small thing. Our words reveal what’s in our evil, human hearts. With James’ understanding of the extremely destructive nature of the tongue, it is no wonder he told his audience that not many should become teachers. How are you trying to harness your words for love and good and building up?

Read James 3:7-8

7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Unlike the animals of the earth that humans have tamed, no “human being” can tame the tongue. Why? Because the tongue reveals what’s in our hearts. Before Christ, our hearts are deceitful and desperately sick (Jer. 17:9). But in the gospel, we are promised a new heart (Ezek. 36:26). Humans can’t tame the tongue that is “full of deadly poison,” but God can through changing our hearts and empowering us by the Holy Spirit. How often do you pray that God would grant you control over your tongue?

Read James 3:9

9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

How true is it that we can be praising God with our mouths one second and then be condemning others in the very same breath? Those with road rage probably know this too well. These people whom we are slamming with our words are made in the image of God just like we are; their value is equal to our own, and they should be treated with dignity and respect. Do your words reflect that you believe everyone is made in God’s image and deserves to be treated as valuable?

Read James 3:10-12

10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.
11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Continuing with the theme from yesterday, James says that from our mouths we curse and we bless. He considers this as oxymoronic as a fresh-water spring pouring forth salt water or a fig tree bearing olives. Either the heart is cleansed and produces blessing and truth from the tongue, or the heart is evil, and it produces cursing and slander from the tongue. James knows that coming into Christlikeness is a journey and doesn't happen in an instant, he is still amazed that Christians speak in such non-sensical ways like this. Do your words show you to be a "double-minded" person or one who is wholly devoted to God?

Read James 3:13

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

When the words wise and understanding are used together, we can define them like this: having understanding means to have knowledge, and being wise means knowing how to put that knowledge into practice. James says that those who consider themselves both wise and understanding should show their works through good conduct and in the humility that comes from wisdom. So, the one who is truly wise knows too much to be proud; rather, they exhibit great humility. When you learn something about God or how to live in obedience to him, do you live this knowledge out humbly, understanding that wisdom is a gift of God (1:5)?

Read James 3:14-16

14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

This verse shows what might develop when someone thinks that they are understanding and wise, but these things have not come from God. This false wisdom shows itself in bitter jealousy and selfish ambition to get ahead in life by your “wisdom.” But James shows that this is not truly wisdom at all for it is “earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.” If we look back at 3:1-2 we might think that many people thought themselves wise and so were trying to become teachers in the church. But James here puts a stake in the ground, declaring that those who are jealous for teaching roles and making a name a great name for themselves (rather than Christ) in the church and the world are not gifted with wisdom from God but from Satan. Does your “wisdom” have the tendency to puff you up so that you are seeking recognition for that wisdom?

Read James 3:17

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

True wisdom is everything that false wisdom is not. It is “from above” and given by God; it is pure in that no moral evil can form from it; it is peaceable and gentle as opposed to fueling jealousy and graceless teaching; it is “open to reason,” meaning that it is willing to listen and submit to other and better perspectives; it produces mercy and good fruits of life; it does not fuel favoritism; and it is filled with truth and honesty. Not only is this a good bar to weigh what we feel like is our own wisdom, but it is also a good bar to judge the “wisdom” of others. We, as responsible Christians, must guard our minds against false wisdom. Who are you more willing to listen to: those who are presenting truth aggressively, without grace, and divisively, or one who is humble, loving, and peacemaking?

Read James 3:18

18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

The interpretation of this verse is hard, but we can say one thing about it: those who have wisdom that has been given to them by God are peacemakers. And the peace they make will bring a plentiful harvest of right-living, as opposed to the anger of 1:20. Are you known as someone who brings peace into situations?

Read James 4:1-2

1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

If we follow the logic from James talking about teaching and being seen as wise and understanding, it may help to better understand these verses. It seems that his audience was fighting because of desiring something that they had not received [murder doesn't have to be understood as physical, for Jesus says that anyone who is angry with his sibling is guilty (Matt. 5:21-22)]. With James's talk about "bitter jealousy" and "vile practice" coming from unspiritual wisdom (3:14-16), it is possible that the members of these churches were vying for a position of teaching authority, and this was causing intense division. But if the teaching position should be reserved for those with true wisdom, and God is the giver of wisdom, then it makes sense that they have not received a teaching position in the church because they have not asked him. Of course, James could also be talking very generally about any desire that is not asked of from God and causes division. Are you bringing the things you desire before God and asking him for them?

Read James 4:3-5

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?

There might be the case that someone is actually asking God and is not receiving what they asked for. But James says that their motives for asking is that they are going to use what they asked for for the purposes of worldly gain (e.g. wisdom/understanding for worldly respect and power) and not use it for the kingdom of God. This person is truly "double-minded" and "adulterous" because they are trying to use God to make themselves friends of the world. This is not possible because to be friends with the world makes you an enemy of God. These people have not understood that God is a jealous God and "yearns" for the spirits he gave us to be singularly devoted to him.

Read James 4:6-7

6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Rather than using God to gain the world, James exhorts his audience to run humbly to the God who is ready to extend grace. If one submits to God in whole-hearted devotion and resists the devil, they will find that God will be more receptive to their prayers and that Satan will flee in discouragement. Christians will find that this needs to be a daily practice. How regularly do you humbly submit to God and strive to resist the devil?

Read James 4:8-10

8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

This brings us back to James's emphasis on God's exaltation of the humble (1:9-11). Here he pleads with his readers to stop being double-minded, to stop pursuing sin, to stop seeking to elevate themselves through worldly wisdom, but to come humbly weeping in repentance to God. If we truly see the magnitude of our sin and double-mindedness, we will mourn over what we have done. This will produce a true and right humility and submission to God, which is exactly the heart posture of the people he loves to exalt. When was the last time you thought about how wicked your sin is before God? Have you used this to humble yourself before him?

Read James 4:11-12

11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

James brings back up a similar point that he made in 2:8-11. If you gossip about, slander, and curse your brothers and sisters in Christ, you are being disobedient to the command to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:16-18). This is like acting as a judge of the law, deciding which commands are worth obeying and which are not. This is not being a doer of the word but a judge, judging that this law is not worth doing. But Christ is the only lawgiver and judge, and he has the power to save and destroy, so not obeying his law is infinitely beyond a Christian's paygrade. Also, to act as someone else's judge is beyond our authority. Do you pick and choose which commands you want to obey? How will you go about trying to obey all of what Christ commanded?

Read James 4:13-14

13 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

James shifts gears almost completely and uses an analogy to teach against a very general and common mindset. He is speaking about any person who makes settled plans without even considering God and his sovereignty. This person lives life with a blatant disregard for God. James thinks this is foolishness because we are only mere humans whose time on this earth is very short in comparison with eternity. How can we say that we are going to do something when the outcome is always dependent upon God's will (Prov. 16:3)? How are you doing with remembering that God has control over every minute of your day? Does it make you more likely to pray and to live according to his desires?

Read James 4:15-16

15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

If we understand that God is sovereign over everything, we will understand that all our plans depend upon his will in order for them to happen. James says it is boastful and arrogant to live without regard for God because it is like saying that we have the ultimate authority and we can make things happen according to our wills. But since we are not God, this is not true. Not only is it not true, it is evil because we are putting ourselves in the place of God. How often do you pray, along with the Lord's Prayer, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10-11)?

Read James 4:17

17 So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

James gives a very general principle based off the analogy he was using in the previous verses. Someone who knows God is sovereign and, yet, lives their life disregarding God, knows that they should submit their life and all their dealings at the feet of God but do not. This is someone who knows what is right (submitting all their life to God) but they sin by not living according to this truth. James extends this principle to any situation in which someone knows what they should do but don't do it. In the church world, we call these sins of omission. What are some things you know you should be doing but are neglectful of?

Read James 5:1-3

1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.

James here seems to switch to pronounce the curses that are coming upon the unbelieving rich (probably the rich that were persecuting James's audience in 2:6-7). He is saying that the wealth of the rich is not going to be any benefit to them before God in the final judgment; rather, they should throw themselves into intense mourning and crying because of the misery that's going to come upon them. James does not mince words. Why he says that their riches have already "rotted" and "corroded" is probably because these riches are currently trapping these unbelievers in their unbelief by making them feel safe; they look ugly and deformed to a heavenly eye. James also mentions that they have stored up this wealth "in the last days." This is in line with the rest of the New Testament that says that ever since the resurrection, we live in the final days of history, awaiting the return of Christ to bring the kingdom he started in full. Is a life of comfort keeping you from a life of complete devotion to God?

Read James 5:4

4 Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

These rich people were oppressing their workers by holding back from paying them what they earned in order to line their own pockets. But James says that the cries and prayers of the oppressed are heard by God. God is their defender, and he will not let their cries for help go unanswered; this should cause these rich to shudder, for it is the “Lord of Hosts” (i.e. the Lord of the armies of heaven) who hears and will act. Do you share God’s heart for the oppressed? If you own a business or are in management, are you generous with your workers?

Read James 5:5-6

5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

James continues his rebuke of the rich by basically saying that they’ve gotten life backwards. The day of slaughter (final judgment) is coming soon, and instead of repenting and throwing themselves at God’s feet, they have lived lives of “luxury and self-indulgence.” They have brought judgment against the righteous, even though the righteous have done nothing wrong, for gain and power. This rich person is the epitome of someone who does not understand that the story of the Bible is the true story of the whole world; they believe that the goal of life is to be “fat and happy.” James says that this is completely ignorant for the day of God’s wrath is quickly approaching. How, perhaps, might you be pursuing a life of luxury and self-indulgence instead of a life of service to God?

Read James 5:7-8

7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Continuing with the theme of the Lord's coming being close, James turns his attention to his Christian audience to encourage them to remain patient in their endurance through all the trials that come in life. Just like the farmer who plants seeds but must wait for God to send the life-giving rains that causes the growth, so too must the believer endure until God acts. This is not a patience where the believer sits on their hands. Doesn't the farmer fertilize and till and prepare for the harvest while he is being patient on the rains to come? And so too, the Christian continues in their labor. They "establish" their hearts by living in the hope and confidence that God is coming soon, and they set themselves to finish the race of the Christian life strongly. How well do you patiently wait for the Lord to act? Does your life reflect that you are actively, but patiently, waiting for the Lord's return?

Read James 5:9

9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

When our patience begins to fail, we can often take our frustrations out on those around us. James warns these believers not "grumble" against one another, meaning not to complain and criticize one another. When we act like this, we are acting as if we are that person's judge, but if we keep in mind that our true Judge is near, we realize that he has more reason to judge us than anyone else. So, we should be quick to be gracious and understanding. Has there been people who you've been complaining about and criticizing that you need to extend grace to?

Read James 5:10-11

10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

In order to add biblical examples to how one should be patient through suffering, James points to the prophets of old and Job. The prophets are known for bearing through tremendous suffering and persecution while they were the carriers and speakers of the word of God, and yet we consider that they were blessed by God to have such a great task. Job had all his possessions and most of his family taken away from him, and yet, he fought to continue in faith. At the end, God was compassionate and merciful on Job, restoring and multiplying what he had lost. The Lord is purposeful in what suffering he allows to enter a believer's life. When you are enduring through suffering, do you remind yourself that this happened according to God's purpose, and he'll show himself to be compassionate and merciful?

Read James 5:12

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

Why James uses this as a culmination ("above all") is unclear. But we do know that this teaching comes directly from Jesus (Matt. 5:33-37). Perhaps this is the culmination of all the sins that come under the banner of "quick to speak." Just like with those who try to make plans without regard for God (4:13-14), humans are fools to make oaths because they have no power in themselves to guarantee any result, especially an oath made by heaven! The outcome, more often than not, lies hidden in God's will. And so, we can't guarantee anything with our words. We should simply say yes or no and try our best (depending on God) to bring forth what we have said we would or wouldn't do. Are you ever too quick to promise something? Do you have to work on giving more simple responses like "yes" and "no"?

Read James 5:13-14

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Firstly, James essentially says here that there is a proper response to God in every situation. Is anyone going through hardship, suffering, persecution? That person should continue to pray. Has God looked with blessing upon a believer and brought joy to their life? They should sing praise! Secondly, we have to deal with something that is not common in our day (although it still occurs and, perhaps, rightly). The sick person that James describes 1) calls for the elders and 2) is prayed over. These two points indicate that this person is probably bedridden by a terminal sickness since they couldn't go to the local church gathering to be prayed over. This believer is to call the elders who act as representatives of the local church body. They then anoint him with oil. The oil symbolically shows that the elders are setting apart this person to bring him before God in prayer (we'll see more about this tomorrow). No matter what's going on in your life, good or bad, do you find ways through prayer and praise to go to God first?

Read James 5:15-16

15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

James continues the description of the elders praying over the anointed sick person. There are a couple different ways to interpret this passage, but the plainest way is to say that when God answers the prayer of faith of the elders, the Lord will raise that person out of their sick bed (e.g. Mark 2:1-12). And if it was sin that made him sick (1 Cor. 11:29-30), the Lord who has the power to heal and forgive will do both. Now, we must say something about “the prayer of faith.” James described praying in faith as a prayer without doubt (1:5-8), but he also said that we must know that nothing happens apart from God’s will (4:15-16). Both sides of the spectrum should help balance out our prayers. Since, we know that God will forgive the sins of those who are prayed for in faith, we ought to confess our sins to one another so that they can pray for us. There is a power in the prayer of someone who has been made righteous in Christ in working in the life of sinners. Are you confessing your sin to people in your Community Group so that they can pray for you?

Read James 5:17-18

17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

James gives us a biblical example of the power of the “prayer of a righteous person.” He makes clear that Elijah was a human just like us, and yet, he was able to stop and bring rain through his prayer (1 Kings 18). James means to encourage us to 1) seek to humble ourselves before God and approach his throne confidently because of what Christ has done on our behalf (Heb. 10:19-20), and 2) believe that God wants to do what we ask. Are your prayers marked by boldness and confidence that nothing is impossible for God?

Read James 5:19-20

19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

As a final remark for his audience, James highlights the importance of being intentional with a brother or sister who is wandering from the faith. Those who do not persevere in the faith are headed towards eternal death, and when the wanderer returns, Jesus is ready to forgive their sins and empower them to stop the sins they may have committed in the future. Are there those in your life who you need to confront about their wanderings? Do you yourself need to stop wandering and receive the forgiveness of the Savior?