

Being Doers of the Word: 13 Lessons from James

Students Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

Produced in partnership with the Baptist General Association of Virginia

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A Being Doers of the Word: 13 Lessons from James Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (www.ethicsdaily.com)

Preface

The 1989 Steven Spielberg film “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” follows the tracks of Indiana Jones as he searches for the Holy Grail.

Unfortunately, Nazis are on the same quest and have kidnapped Indiana’s father in order to obtain his diary, believing it contains maps and other records that will aid them in their search. Indiana’s journey turns into not only a pursuit for the Holy Grail but also a mission to free his father and reclaim the diary.

Near the story’s end, Indiana encounters the knight who guards the Holy Grail. To get to the grail, one must choose between a number of cups from which to drink—cups made from a variety of lovely and valuable elements such as gold, platinum and silver and other, plainer cups from substances like terra cotta and wood.

“You must choose,” the knight warns, “but choose wisely, for as the true grail will bring you life, the false grail will take it from you.”

Another seeker—a bad guy—approaches and chooses to drink from a glittering gold cup. “This certainly is the cup of the King of Kings,” he says. Soon, however, after numerous frightening transformations, he dissolves into dust.

“He chose poorly,” the knight explains.

Indiana Jones then chooses to drink from a wooden cup. “That’s the cup of a carpenter,” he says.

“You have chosen wisely,” the knight tells him.

Writers of movies and books regularly weave into their stories themes related to the benefits of making wise choices and the consequences of making poor ones because these so accurately reflect a common human dilemma. The wisest and best choices are sometimes wrapped in plain or even unappealing packages. And the poorest and worst choices often come deceptively disguised as the most attractive.

The lesson, of course, is this: the wisdom on which we base our choices and thus build our lives is critical. The source of our wisdom makes all the difference. People of faith believe that scripture is a most valuable tool in unlocking true wisdom, and the success of Acacia Resources' Bible study *Living Wisely, Living Well: Lessons from the Proverbs* tells us that people want practical helps in applying the wisdom of scripture to their lives.

Like the book of Proverbs, the epistle of James warns against following the wisdom of the world, pointing instead to the wisdom from God that enables us to see life from God's perspective. Armed with this wisdom and living within this perspective, James wrote, we are equipped to apply the faith we affirm in our heads and profess from our mouths to every area of our lives.

In a pithy style similar to Proverbs, James's letter moves rapidly from one issue or area of life to another, often with no apparent connection, to tell us how to live in a way that authenticates the Christian faith we profess.

A call to authenticity that comes from a single-minded pursuit of God's wisdom underlies much of James's writing. We get into trouble, he said, when we allow ourselves to be deceived into following wisdom from other sources. Though we profess to have faith in God, when we allow sources

other than God to guide and direct our lives and decisions, we become double-minded and hypocritical.

More than what we say, what we do and how we act reflect the true nature of our faith. Faith is practical and concrete, not an abstract theological idea, James believed. Lives of genuine faith according to James are marked by moral purity, peace, gentleness, reasonable speech and actions, impartiality and mercy.

James went so far as to say that we can know the authenticity of a person's faith by their positive actions or "works." And the absence of those works means faith is dead.

The implications for missions are clear: it's not enough to tell others what we believe, and more often than not, the telling isn't what makes the biggest impression. Actions do speak louder than words.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia, our partner in the production of this Bible study, recognizes this reality and offers Virginia Baptists of all ages numerous opportunities to put hands and feet to the faith they profess. Adopting the term "glocal missions," they have accepted the challenge of scripture to become "doers of the word" and work to mobilize, train and equip individuals to carry the ministry and message of Christ both throughout Virginia and around the world.

James would likely have heartily embraced the term "glocal missions," because it is all-encompassing. Missions and ministry—being "doers of the word"—is both "here" and "there." Authentic Christian faith compels us to look both nearby and even farther than we can see to find and meet needs. It broadens and expands our capacity to care, our vision and our reach.

Often that means forming healthy partnerships with other Christian organizations and believers who can go to places we personally cannot and who can represent for all of us the God we serve. The late 2004 tsunami disaster offers but one recent example.

In the days following this unprecedented crisis, Virginia Baptists made some significant decisions that will allow their ministry efforts to have long-lasting effects. In addition to sending money immediately to help in relief efforts, the Virginia Baptist Mission Board and the Woman's Missionary Union of Virginia cancelled their annual spring 2005 Missions Celebration event so that those funds could be redirected toward an ongoing relief project in India.

Virginia Baptists had earlier established a partnership with the Indian Baptist Convention, so the tsunami's effects in that country were of special concern to them. Their bold action allowed the Precious Children's Home, an orphanage in Areeparambu in the state of Kerala, India, to take in 10 children who lost their parents during the tsunami.

The orphanage will also, as a result of these funds, be able to move ahead with plans to enlarge their facilities and take in an additional 100 children. Virginia Baptists who had planned to attend the Missions Celebration were encouraged instead to give the money they would have spent on transportation, food and lodging to the tsunami relief effort.

At a time when words could never have adequately expressed the depth of sorrow we felt nor the compassion we wanted to convey, actions such as these could and did.

Years after James penned his letter, St. Francis of Assisi succinctly summed up his message when he was quoted as saying, "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words."

Perhaps because St. Francis was not a Protestant, some Baptists and other evangelicals have bypassed his message and have instead reversed and consequently diluted it, also often ignoring the admonition of James to become "doers of the word." With the Baptist emphasis on "personal witnessing," our words have often far outweighed our works and in many cases have been frequently misunderstood and sometimes more harmful than helpful.

In fact, says EthicsDaily.com columnist and pastor James Evans, "A new evangelical mindset has emerged that intends to force people to live a version of the Christian life whether they want to or not. . . . So much for gentle persuasion. Many Christians are celebrating this get tough approach to spreading the faith, but they should not be too excited. This is not how faith spreads—this is how faith dies. History is littered with the debris of faith communities that have tried to force their way on others. In fact, it was just such an evangelistic group that nailed Jesus to the cross" ("Evangelism and the Hope of a Better World," www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=5200).

If we want others to join us in "doing the word," we will persuade them not so much by what we say as by how we live. They'll see it in:

our mature decision-making;

our ability to withstand temptation;

our positive attitudes and loving actions;

our impartial and nonjudgmental love;

our sincere efforts to apply God's wisdom;

our thoughtful speech;

- our pursuits of peace and justice;
- our confident assurance and identity;
- our God-based world view and priorities;
- our advocacy on behalf of the powerless and voiceless;
- our ability to exercise patience and take the long view;
- our determined focus;
- our confident praying.

Now more than ever, our world needs people who profess the faith to back it up with love-based actions that expect nothing in return.

Allow the message of James to show you how to be a more effective and authentic “doer of the word.”

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Developing a Mature Faith

James 1:2-8

Theme: Authentic Christian faith both forces us and equips us to make difficult choices.

Introduction

My friend Mark, in his early 50s, has recently experienced a spiritual awakening. He describes it this way: “Before, I was a depressed, cynical person. Now I am as happy as I have ever been. I don’t take anything for granted. I treasure every moment as a gift from God.”

What led to this newfound joy? What caused such a 180-degree turn in his life? His terminal cancer diagnosis.

I don’t know how I would respond to that kind of news. What would I do if a doctor came and told me that lung cancer was rapidly and aggressively stealing my life, and I might not see my children graduate? How would you respond? In the easy world of the hypothetical, I can claim that I would take the news as Mark has. In the harder, real world of unexpected and unexplainable trial, I can’t be sure until I face it.

Two older couples in a church I pastored had both lost a child in tragic circumstances. For one couple, it was the beginning of a life of bitterness, anger and outrage. The other couple became more compassionate, empathetic and caring. What was the difference? Why did they react so differently to similar difficulty?

A married couple I know had a revealing conversation. The wife told the husband that she really admired an older woman they both knew. “I hope that I will be like her when I get to be her age,” she told him.

Her husband jokingly replied, “I’m pretty sure you won’t be.”

“Why not?” she asked.

His answer revealed equal parts deep wisdom and the total absence of a desire for self-preservation. “You won’t be like her when you get older unless you start to be more like her now.”

Common wisdom reveals that trials develop character. But equally important and less articulated is the fact that trials reveal character that is already present. When life is easy, it is not very difficult to proclaim faith. Far from the fray of real life, it is easy to be brave and to make proud declaration. Within the protective walls of the church at 11 AM on Sunday, pietistic displays of faith are simple. Shallow trust is all we need when everything is going our way.

Faith that supports us in the hospital waiting room, the unemployment line, the valley of the shadow is a more valuable commodity. When troubles come and dig at the foundation of life, the true root of mature, complete faith or lack of it is evident.

A mature faith has an integrated voice that sounds the same notes of confidence in good times and in bad.

How does one nurture this sort of constant and perfected faith?

The Biblical Witness

James 1:2 Joy in Trials

²My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,

Some years ago now, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It addressed the simple question, “Why do trials come to people who are doing their best to live the right way?”

It is a question that has troubled people of faith throughout the centuries. Are trials the result of secret sin? Does God create the trials for growth? Are trials the unavoidable consequence of a universe that allows human choice?

James did not address these questions. His is an immi- nently practical address to Christians. Trials and troubles are simply a fact of life. To debate their reason for exist- ence is an academic question. The real question is the pragmatic one. If trials and troubles are part of our exist- ence, how should we handle them?

James’s words of exhortation, “consider it nothing but joy,” seem cold comfort to one in the middle of trials. But we must make an important distinction. James did not advise us to be happy during trials, but to have joy.

The word “happy” has the same English root as the word “happen.” Our happiness is dependent upon what happens to us. We are not asked to be happy about the trials that come to all Christians; rather, we are instructed to have joy, a condition that is not situation-dependent. To have joy is to know that no matter what happens, God is present with us. A mature faith provides joy even in the midst of trials.

James 1:3-4 **The Full Effect**

³because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

After exhorting his readers to experience joy in the midst of trials, James explained why this is the reaction of mature faith. Faith when tested produces endurance.

A runner does not go to a race without training. Through progressive training, the athlete develops the ability to go faster and longer. Building up muscles and increasing the ability of the lungs to provide oxygen are augmented through repetition of the skills that ultimately will be used in the race.

Faith uses a similar mechanism to produce endurance. By responding with faith in a consistent manner throughout life, we develop strength to meet the most difficult struggles with an enduring faith. We can develop Christian character by trials, but equally important, the habits of faith that emerge in trials reveal the foundation we have already prepared.

The purpose of endurance is to show a complete and mature faith. Some older translations used the word “perfect.” All of us would agree that a person’s faith cannot be perfect in the sense that it is free from defect, because we are all imperfect humans. It means rather that the faith that carries us at the beginning will, if it is mature, carry us through to the end. “Perfect” faith is one that accomplishes what it sets out to do, carrying a person through to the finish.

James 1:5 **Asking God**

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

This seems a rather abrupt transition. From a discussion of faith and endurance, James moved to the question of a lack of wisdom. In the Jewish tradition from which he drew, James affirmed that wisdom is not a human quality to be developed but one that God confers upon those who seek it.

Perhaps James here paused to consider what his words might sound like to those who would hear them. Taking joy in trials because they produce enduring faith may make sense to some, but to many it probably sounds foolish. We spend most of our lives avoiding unpleasant experiences at whatever cost. We want to live a life free of complication and trouble. Our response to trials is to do whatever is necessary to get away from them, not take joy in them. We do not pray for trials; we pray for their end.

But James promoted an entirely different world view. The greatest good is not a trouble-free existence but a faith-filled existence. The world’s wisdom tells us to avoid pain. God’s wisdom reveals that even pain helps us on our journey.

James 1:6-8 **Asking In Faith**

⁶But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ⁷for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, ⁸must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

People throughout history have often chosen to rip these particular verses from their context and use them to promote an egocentric Christian faith that names and claims God's blessings. It is quite ironic that the overall context of the passage is about trials and their value, but many ignore those verses to argue that God wants us to have an easy life without troubles.

Those who misuse these verses also fail to note that what is being asked for from God is not any material object, but wisdom. James did not promise that if you ask for a new car, without doubt you will receive it. He instructed us to ask for wisdom and promised God will give it. In asking, however, we must be careful not to try to keep one foot in the "real" world.

Often we want to rely on God's wisdom when it squares with our own and to reject it when it doesn't make sense to us. James said that it is a stark choice, either God's way or not. There is no middle path. Many of us are not comfortable with those terms. We want to have faith in God and faith in ourselves and our own judgments.

It is not doubt in general that James condemned here; rather, it is a particular doubt that wants to live a life of faith, but is unwilling to do it on God's terms. An immature faith requires everything to go on without difficulty. When trials arise, that faith is abandoned for some other way that promises that pain will be avoided. This sort of double-mindedness sees faith as useful only when it provides us with what we immediately desire.

The language of the waves that James used here is very rare for the New Testament. Talk of the sea was uncommon in Jewish circles. They were not a sea-faring people and believed that the land and sea were in constant struggle

with each other. The dry ground represented the forces of order and good, while the sea represented destructive chaos. James drew on these cultural understandings to emphasize that doubt creates destructive chaos in the life of the believer. By abandoning faith in the midst of trials, the double-minded person jumps from the boat that provides protection directly into the turbulent sea that will destroy them.

Enabling Faith to Grow

Several years ago, I came across a story about a man and his friend, the most wicked person in town. As the two walked together through the marketplace, they spotted a beautiful woman across the way.

"I will marry her!" the wicked man said.

"A person as beautiful as she will never have a wretch like you," his friend replied.

The conniving, evil man decided that the only way he might stand a chance with the woman would be to wear the mask of a good and righteous man. Wearing the mask, he approached the woman, and they fell in love. They wed and lived a blissful life together.

One day the wicked man's friend came back to the town and heard what had happened. He went to the woman and told her that her husband was not what he seemed. The woman confronted her husband, who broke down in tears. He apologized to her and pulled off the mask to show her who he really was.

Hidden behind the mask was the face of a good and righteous man.

Faith is like that mask. It is a habit of being that we assume when we become Christians. The daily practice of it reshapes our very centers so that when trials pull back the veneer of our lives, they reveal enduring, perfect, mature faith.

How can we develop a more than skin-deep faith? How can the words we use on Sunday become the truth we live every day? Consider these principles:

1. Faith grows when we recognize that it is not a protection from trials but a support through trials.
2. Faith grows when we recognize that trials are opportunities to express and strengthen our faith.
3. Faith grows when we live out of the wisdom of God rather than double-mindedness.
4. Faith grows to maturity when it becomes the primary reality out of which a believer lives.

One day, we will be asked to pull off the mask of faith and reveal our true identities. Will we find a thin and immature veneer, or will faith have changed us to the core of our beings?

Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.

Enduring Temptation

James 1:12-18

Theme: Christian faith enables us to withstand temptation and pursue goodness.

Introduction

As the Red Army advanced, inmates in a concentration camp within Poland faced a forced march through the snow to a work camp in Germany. Those who stumbled in the drifts and were unable to go on were shot where they fell. A Jewish *Shoah* survivor shared how a young Polish conscript among the guards, when ordered to shoot a fallen prisoner, turned his weapon on himself. He could not murder an innocent, so he resisted his Nazi commanders in the only way left open to him. The conscript's resistance witnessed to his ultimate allegiance.

As an angry crowd of white college boys harassed three African-American youths at the Nashville Woolworth's counter in February 1960, a petite grandmother boldly entered the fray. Confronting the ringleader, she challenged him to identify with the young black woman who was the target of his race hate. Would he tolerate anyone abusing his own sister with such blistering taunts? Would he stand by while a stranger tugged at her skirt, revealing her thigh? Faced with the option of being a silent accomplice to racial violence, that "steel Magnolia" brought Jesus' ethic of neighbor love to bear, exposing that ugliness. That

grandmother's resistance witnessed that she was captive to God's liberating word, not to her culture of oppression.

As their nation waged war across the globe, young adults faced questions of allegiance, duty and identity. Would they choose to make their nation's conflict their fight by enlisting in the armed forces, or would they choose to combat evil by nonviolent means? Love for country is natural and laudable; yet James proclaimed that God is Creator of all and gives to all peoples without discrimination.

The thirst for vengeance is a dangerous, deceptive passion—human anger does not promote God's justice (1:20). The temptation to do evil so that good may come is seductive. The guards at the Abu Ghraib prison who disregarded the Geneva Conventions and abused detainees did not enlist in the armed services in order to become torturers. And yet, that is what they became, likely through a series of choices that at first seemed benign. Some among their comrades, however, reported human rights abuses and agreed to testify against the abusers.

Often life confronts us with forced choices. We cannot opt out or dictate what options are available; our options are limited by the circumstances of our times. Still, our choices define us as people. Faced with systemic evil, will we be collaborators or a part of the resistance?

God is not the author of such hard choices. Too often we fashion our own hellish tests. Nor is God absent in such time of trial; God's promises are for those who demonstrate love for God by withstanding the test. God's goal is to birth just such people who are doers of the Word.

The Biblical Witness

James 1:12 Temptation as Blessing?

¹²Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

James regularly turned conventional thinking on its head, as when he called disciples to view multifarious trials as an occasion for sheer joy (1:2). James revisited this theme of joy in spite of trials that test believers' faith, loyalty and integrity in verse 12.

Here, James invited disciples to view their struggles from the triumphal perspective of those faithful who have given themselves to God's cause, endured under pressure and been found faithful.

A reverential phrase common in first century Judaism, "blessed is" (v 12) means "God blesses" or "God gives joy to." God rewards those who have endured in the struggle.

Rather than the NRSV's "temptation" (v 12), the original word *peirasmos* is better translated as "trial," "test" or "struggle." This struggle can be against external sources of injustice, such as discrimination against the poor (2:1-13) or abuses of agricultural laborers (5:1-6). Likewise, this struggle can involve internal forces, such as a wavering will (1:7-8), self-centered desire (1:14) or presumptuousness (4:13-17, i.e. "temptations").

The testing of the disciple's integrity and loyalty entails both the inner and outer struggle to be found actively engaged in God's cause out of a right heart. The struggle to master the self parallels the struggle to refashion society. "Endures" (v 12) is a military term for "holding one's ground" when under pressure to retreat.

James encouraged faithfulness among those assaulted by the values of an unjust world (1:27) and of their own unfaithful hearts (4:4). God has proclaimed (“promised,” v 12) that those who have persisted in the struggle for God’s cause will be rewarded with the trophy (“crown”), which is abundant life. These persistent strugglers have demonstrated love for God in many ways, such as by making common cause with the poor or by resisting their own narrow self-interests.

James 1:13 **Humanity’s Failure**

¹³No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.

James offered a partial rather than a full theodicy (a vindication of God’s goodness given the reality of evil), focused on God’s unquestioned character and on humanity’s questionable character. Tests and struggles are a given in this life; James did not credit God with natural or social evil. James viewed God only as the giver of good (1:17); God is not the author of evil (1:13) nor the architect of our trials of faith and integrity.

An inscription inside the Beth Elohim Synagogue in Charleston, South Carolina, charges congregants, “Know before whom you stand.” That challenge includes human acknowledgment of God, who is Creator of all that is good, and human responsibility before God, who commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves. James anticipated that some faced with hard struggles would blame God for their trying circumstances or their wandering hearts. He believed that the source of trials and temptations lies closer to home.

James 1:14-16

A Deadly Sequence

¹⁴But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; ¹⁵then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved.

Later James mentioned the devil (4:7); however, James’s perspective is akin to that in the Synoptic temptation stories—the devil can be resisted; when humans resist the devil, he flees. However, one’s own self-interest is a foe not so easily vanquished. Later, James identified self-centered desire and narrow, partisan spirit as the root of social evils, such as wars and social struggles (4:1-2). Here (vv 14-16), James introduced this threat.

What God has created is good, and yet, paradoxically, evil has been a part of that world throughout human history. James placed responsibility for this state of affairs on human shoulders. Evil takes root in the human will when we, like unsuspecting fish, take the bait of self-centered desires. We could resist but often we don’t. That unchecked desire takes on a life of its own, spawning all sorts of sinful acts. In the end, those acts prove fatal. Yet this natural chain of cause and effect can be interrupted; self-centered desire can be mastered. People are free, and though flawed, are responsible before God.

James 1:17-18 **Living in God’s Reality**

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Here James returned to the theme of God's good character. Though people often act out of selfish interest, God consistently acts out of love; God is always the generous Giver. Though the heavens are constantly in motion, their Maker remains unchanged. Though people vacillate like waves, God is ever faithful, ever true. Though humanity's self-centered desire leads to death, God's will produces life.

Martin Luther neglected James 1:18 when claiming that the Epistle communicated nothing of the gospel. Yet here is good news for flawed people: God's purposeful act is to birth a people who welcome God's Word. Once birthed, these doers of the Word serve as a prototype ("first fruits") of what God is doing. These first disciples were at once prototypes of God's grace toward believers and of believers' responsibility to be doers of the Word. These "first fruits" point ahead to a full harvest of salvation, justice and peace.

For James, the word of grace that saves is the word of truth that sets the standard for Christian living. Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to a similar conclusion in his *Cost of Discipleship*. Writing about God's generosity and our reciprocal responsibility, Bonhoeffer urged:

"Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person's very life, and it is grace because it gives [one] the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us."

Pursuing Goodness

On the eve of his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his "Mountaintop" sermon at Memphis's Mason Temple. As James did when he proclaimed those strugglers who endured "blessed" (1:12), Dr. King spoke from the vantage point of those who, through faith, withstood hard struggle—imprisonment, police brutality, assault—maintained integrity (through commitment to *nonviolent* resistance and *civil* disobedience) and won the prize of real life—life measured not in years alone but in significant service in God's just cause. Like James, Dr. King offered encouragement that is both realistic and optimistic:

"We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop and I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'"

Like James, King was a realist; those who work for justice for the poor and disenfranchised can expect staunch resistance. Like James, King was an optimist; God is the Lord of history whose "truth is marching on," whose kingdom is coming, who rewards those who endure in God's cause.

Written by Christopher Church, bioethics professor, Baptist College of Health Sciences; clinical ethics consultant, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Memphis, Tenn.

Being Doers of the Word

James 1:19-27

Theme: Christian faith completely transforms and directs both our attitudes and our actions.

Introduction

Outside Yoder's supply store in Shipshewana, Indiana, a group of southern evangelicals asked a Mennonite farmer if he was saved.

He found their question puzzling. As a faithful member of the Peach Bloom Mennonite Congregation, he had never been asked that question.

The farmer asked his inquisitors for paper and a pen. After writing down the names and addresses of his neighbors, he told the evangelicals to put their question about his salvation to folk on his list. He knew they could speak honestly to the depth of his commitment.

At Henlee Barnette's memorial service, a former seminary colleague and fellow member at Louisville's Crescent Hill Baptist Church recalled the long-time ethics professor's "credo."

He said that Barnette had written in a pew Bible in the rear of the sanctuary these words: "Remember you show your love of this divine word not by the words you say about it but by living it day by day."

St. Francis of Assisi reportedly said, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary."

A Mennonite, a Baptist and a Catholic shared a common belief system. They understood that real faith involves action. They knew that walking the walk is a better gauge of authentic faith than talking the talk. They had a living faith.

Yet within much of Christianity, especially within the Baptist family, saying what we believe is more important than how we live. Baptists emphasize right belief more than right practice. We tend more toward mental assent than daily practice.

In many ways, Baptists are heirs of the Christian tradition that asserts the primacy of the Apostle's Creed, which was not written by the apostles although it was adopted by the early church in the second century.

In fact, at the first Baptist World Alliance congress in 1905, Baptists recited the Apostle's Creed ("Proposal Sparks Debate Over Baptists and Creeds," www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4457).

The creed says, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. ..."

While the Apostle's Creed articulates orthodox Christianity, it skips Jesus' teachings. The creed bypasses the Sermon on the Mount, the commandment to love neighbor and the examples of how to live. The creed teaches that what we think defines faith—faith has nothing to do with the way we live.

The Letter of James offers another perspective.

The Biblical Witness

Some scholars argue that the Letter of James may be the earliest New Testament book. After all, the author found no reason to identify himself other than as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). He wrote authoritatively, showing deep convictions and prioritizing moral values. His writings parallel Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. Not surprisingly, Christian tradition held that James was Jesus’ oldest brother.

James 1:19-20 Triple Duty

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.

Speaking kindly to his beloved community, James told the emerging community of followers that they had a triple duty.

First, they should be “swift to hear” (KJV) the “word of truth” (v 18). The “word of truth” meant God’s message in the person of Jesus Christ. The concept of swiftness referred to an eager attentiveness.

If indeed the New Testament had not yet been written, then James was instructing early believers that they had a duty to learn from preachers and teachers. They needed to listen carefully.

Second, they should be “slow to speak.” Being slow meant exercising restraint or caution against overreacting. They

had a duty to speak slowly, only after thoughtful consideration.

Third, they should be “slow to anger.” The King James Version uses the word “wrath” instead of anger. Wrath carries the idea of rash, reactionary, reckless behavior. Anger distorted “righteousness” or “upright conduct.” Disciples had a duty to practice and exhibit an upright conduct.

James 1:21 Taking Off, Putting In

²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

One commentator translated the word “rid” as “putting off” and the word “sordidness” as “filthiness.” The image is of someone stripping off their dirty clothes. Disciples were urged to take off their morally unclean behaviors.

James switched metaphors from dirty clothes to agriculture. He shifted from taking off to putting in. He encouraged followers to “receive” or “welcome” the living word, meaning far more than passive acceptance. Welcoming referred to an energetic embrace of the seed of truth sown in the human heart.

James 1:22-25 Hear and Do

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going

away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

This is one of the most often quoted Christian passages, albeit sometimes incorrectly within some circles.

James said, “Be doers of the word, not hearers only.”

The word “doers” was one of James’s favorite expressions. He wrote, “Be doers of the word” (v 22), “hearers of the word and not doers” (v 23), “but doers who act” (v 25), and “not a doer of the law” (4:11).

While James urged disciples to be action-oriented, he did not discount the value of listening to preachers and teachers. He did contrast doing with *only* listening, however. Authentic disciples both hear and do, James said.

Inauthentic disciples hear and do nothing. They behave as those who look at themselves in the bronze or silver mirrors. Since glass mirrors were not available until much later, the mirrors of James’s time offered only an imperfect reflection. But the emphasis was not so much on the flawed reflection as on the fact that viewers forgot what they had seen, as those who heard forgot what they had heard.

Authentic disciples look into the “perfect law” or the foundation of truth found in apostolic teaching. They hear. They do not forget what was said. They take what they learn, and they act.

James 1:26-27 **Worthwhile Religion**

²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James contrasted worthless religion with worthwhile religion.

Worthless religion grows out of self-deception and shows itself through uncontrolled speech. Some believers thought they were religious, thinking their words displayed real faith.

One scholar said that self-deceptive behavior differs from hypocritical behavior. Self-deception is a matter of wrong perception of what is important. Hypocrisy is a matter of pretending to believe but behaving differently.

James’s concern here was with devotees who really believed that they were practicing real religion. Yet their religion was worthless, vain and empty.

Worthwhile religion, on the other hand, expresses itself in two concrete actions.

First is social concern. James prioritized care for orphans and widows, who represented the poor and powerless in his society.

The word “to care” is translated as “to visit” in the Revised Standard Version and King James Version. The Good News Bible translates the word as “to take care of.” The word means more than a social visit with a charity basket.

Reading from the big Bible, we discover that caring for the poor and powerless means helping fully meet their needs

so that they have a rightful opportunity to achieve their full human potential. Such care involves both charity and justice.

Second is moral purity. James urged his readers “to keep” themselves “unstained by the world.”

The King James Version uses the word “unspotted” instead of the word “unstained.” The Good News Bible translates the word “corrupted.”

The idea is for believers to be watchful for those pollutants in the world that would pollute one’s personal life.

Worthwhile religion finds expression in both social and personal action.

One of the standard Christian observations about this passage is a qualification: James was not substituting good works for real faith. When Christian teachers make this statement, they often offer an unintended result of de-emphasizing the doing good works and emphasizing faith as a matter of mental assent.

Authentic faith never severs behavior from belief, nor prioritizes one above the word. Behavior and belief are co-joined. Behavior informs belief; belief informs behavior. Faith-in-action and action-in-faith are inseparable traveling companions.

Being Doers of the Word

In 2000, a young South African boy spoke at an AIDS conference in Durban. Nkosi Johnson was born HIV-positive and abandoned by his biological mother when he was

2. When he died at age 12, weighing less than 22 pounds, he had already inspired the world into action.

Speaking about death in an interview with ABC newsman Jim Wooten, Nkosi said, “Do all you can with what you have in the time you have in the place you are” (www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4195336).

His words really frame a strategy for Christians to be doers of the word. We must (1) do all we can, (2) with what we have, (3) in the time we have, and (4) where we are.

Down through the years, Christians have found many reasons for inaction about social injustice and wrongs in the world. We have preferred occasional acts of charity, instead of doing everything we could. We have made excuses that we don’t have enough resources or power to make a difference. We have said we don’t have the time to work for the common good. We have lamented that we aren’t located in a place to make a constructive impact.

Yet an adopted boy dying from AIDS shows us the courage and responsibility to act fully regardless of our circumstances, power, position and place.

James, too, understood that a living faith engages the world continuously without excuses.

A number of years ago at a student conference, a long-time social activist asked the audience, “How many of you have a red-letter edition of the Bible?”

Students proudly shot their hands into the air. After all, these students had been taught to read their Bibles daily and pay especially close attention to the words of Jesus that were printed in red ink.

Then, he said, “How many of you have a green-letter edition of the Bible?”

The students looked at each other nervously. No one wanted to admit that they had never heard of the green-letter edition of the Bible. Everyone wanted to know what it was.

The minister explained that the red-letter edition contained what Jesus said. The green-letter edition contained what Jesus did. He urged the students to know the words of Jesus and to act as Jesus would.

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Living Impartially

James 2:1-13

Theme: Christian faith compels us to love without partiality both those the world holds in high esteem and those it deems disposable.

Introduction

At the beginning of his book *Divided by Faith*, Professor Michael O. Emerson recalls a telephone conversation when, in the course of a research project, he had to interview Chauntel Adams, an African-American woman. “After two rings,” he writes, “a man, likely her husband, answered.”

“Hello,” I said, “this is Dr. Michael Emerson. Is Chauntel there?”

“Just a minute.”

“He cupped his hand over the phone receiver to keep me from hearing his next words, but, as is often the case, I heard anyway.”

“Chauntel, the phone.”

“Who is it?” came her reply, obviously from another room.

“I don’t know,” he responded, “some white guy.”

“Beyond this man’s ability to accurately identify my race from just two short sentences uttered over a phone is the fact that my race had meaning for him,” concludes Emerson, who wrote this book to help churches identify those racial barriers and differences that keep us divided by faith.

Race, appearance, gender, origin, skin color, status, richness or poverty, political ideology, notoriety, lifestyle, the causes of human prejudice and bigotry are innumerable. One of the most terrible sins in the history of Christianity has been partiality and partisanship. Because of acts of favoritism, multiple problems have developed in the church and the world. Human prejudice has fomented internal strife, wars, crusades, killings, inquisition and the like.

In the context of a trial in the synagogue, James reminded his readers that true judgment comes from an impartial spirit (2:1-4), is sustained on obedience to the royal law (2:5-9) and finds its consummation in mercy (2:10-13). “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matt 7:1-2). These words of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount are not quoted by James, yet nobody can deny that this section is a great commentary to them.

The Biblical Witness

James 2:1-4

True judgment comes from an impartial spirit.

¹“My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also

comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”

Christians continued to assemble in the synagogues until the year 85. In these trials, rabbis and elders of the people would interpret the Law of Moses for a particular situation between two persons. This practice was clearly established in Deuteronomy 17:8-13 and also passed to Christian communities (1 Cor 6:1-8). James 2 deals with the same situation: In a trial held in the synagogue, the judges are not judging impartially, but with partiality.

Even if we are not judges, we all judge. Judgment is a capacity of the human mind that helps us form opinion of the most diverse things and move freely in the world. Nobody can prevent judgment, but we must learn how to judge with an impartial spirit. According to James, it is inconsistent that the faith in our “glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. Rom 6:4, 9:4; 2 Cor 4:4-6; Eph 1:17; Heb 1:3; 1 Pet 4:13), be mixed with partiality or favoritism. The negation James used in this text is emphatic: “By no means,” he said, can these two mix; they are incompatible.

In the example from James, one is a person with gold rings, literally “golden finger”—an evident reference to the size of the ring!—and—bright clothing—as of kings and angels (Lk 23:11; Acts 10:30). The other is a beggar, with filthy clothes. The problem, however, is not that the parties in the trial are so different, but in the differentiating attitude of the judges toward them. One is invited to sit comfortably, while the other is asked to “stand there” or sit at the feet of the judges. Their partiality is evident, and inappropriate.

With a rhetorical question, James asserted they are “judges with evil thoughts.” The phrase could also be translated “with evil criteria” or “with evil motives.” Many times our thoughts are not evil in themselves, but our motives are (Mk 7:21-23). Christian impartiality comes from a spirit of integrity, a firmness of the will, an independence of the mind and a resolution to not take sides with the rich because one is rich or the poor because one is poor. Only an impartial spirit carries in itself the spirit of Christ. Partiality in a judgment not only dishonors the poor, it dishonors God, the eternal Judge of all (Gen 18:25; Ps 50:6, 94:2; Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 4:12, 5:9), and Jesus Christ, our glorious Lord.

James 2:5-9

True judgment is sustained on the obedience to the royal law.

⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? ⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

With a couple of rhetorical questions, James advanced his argument a little further. The one who makes distinctions favoring the rich does not realize that it is God who has chosen the poor. God has chosen the poor because they have nothing to cling to. Because they have nothing, they can have God. The poor are the heirs of the kingdom and the true rich: they are rich in faith. In this James followed

closely Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3-10; Lk 6:20).

The same word that James used for “chosen” is the one that is used in Hebrew scripture for the election of Israel (Deut 4:37, 7:7, 14:2, 18:5), and in the New Testament for the election of Christians (1 Cor 1:27-28; Eph 1:4). Strong word indeed, made stronger by the middle voice James used, which can be translated “chosen for himself.” God does not choose the poor for positions of honor or privilege in the Christian community. God chooses them for Godself.

“Poor in the world” expresses the Hebrew phrase *aniy ha aretz*, usually translated as “poor of the earth” (Job 24:4; Prov 30:14; Isa 11:4; Jer 40:7; Am 8:4). James followed the testimony of the entire Old Testament regarding God’s preference for the poor (Ex 22:25-27; Lev 19:10, 23:22; Deut 15:11, 24:12-15). Hebrew scripture also has stipulations against favoring the poor in trials (Ex 23:3, 30:15). The purpose of the Law was equality and impartiality.

Forgetting the teachings of the Lord and the Old Testament, both the judges and the rich had “dishonored” the poor. The violence and arrogance with which they treated the poor are evident in the expression “drag into court,” always used in the New Testament in contexts of violence and injustice (Lk 12:58; Acts 8:3, 16:19, 21:30). The true scandal of the situation was that both the judges and the rich were obviously Christian. When a rich Christian oppresses a poor Christian, and when a Christian judge misjudges a poor Christian, they “blaspheme” the precious name that was called upon them in baptism (Matt 28:19).

These attitudes do not fulfill the “royal” law, identified by James as the first commandment of the law according to Jesus (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:35-40). Royal law refers either to

a law that was issued by a king, or a law that is the queen of all laws. In any case, the meaning of the text does not change: if someone fulfills the royal law, he or she will not make disproportionate distinctions.

James had no doubt: Deference toward the rich is a sin. The one who offends in one precept is convicted by the law as transgressor of the whole law (Lev 19:15; Deut 1:17, 16:19; Rom 2:25-27; Gal 2:18). Transgression means to go beyond what is permitted by law. The lack of equanimity, solidarity and respect of judges and the rich have made them transgressors of God's law, the royal law, the law of liberty (Jas 1:25).

James 2:10-13 **True judgment finds its consummation in mercy.**

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."

The law, however, is not everything. More important than the law is the principle of mercy. Every judge needs to remember that we are all sinners and transgressors of the law. Law and sin go hand in hand (Rom 3:20; 5:13; 5:20; 7:7-9, 25; 8:3). Keeping the law is not a question of quantity, but quality. Failing in "one point" of the law makes us accountable for all of it. The unity of the law is based in its Giver, not in its internal coherence. The same God, who gave one commandment, gave all the others. Failing the law is failing God.

The reason James mentioned adultery and homicide is not obvious. Yet both of them seem to relate either to loving or hating a neighbor. Someone who loves his neighbors in a true Christian way would neither kill them nor commit adultery with them. The lesson is clear, however: If we had to be judged only by the justice of the law, all of us are transgressors. Our only hope is in mercy. Our only hope is in God, who is "Father of mercies and the God of all consolation" (2 Cor 1:3), who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that only the merciful will receive mercy from God (Matt 5:7, 6:14; 7:1-4). Salvation and mercy have an immediate relationship, just as there is an immediate relationship between mercy offered and mercy received (Matt 18:23-35). All of us, judges and judged, rich and poor, all will be judged by the same law: the law of liberty, the law of Jesus Christ, the law of love, the law of mercy.

Mercy triumphs; equality triumphs; Jesus Christ triumphs. Making distinctions is forgetting Jesus' message of love, impartiality and justice, a message Jesus taught us in word and in action. If judgment had triumphed, we had no hope. But mercy triumphs, and we live.

John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, wrote: "Mercy is the highest art and the shield of those who practice it. It is the friend of God, standing always next to him and freely blessing whatever he wishes. It must not be despised by us. For in its purity it grants great liberty to those who respond to it in kind. It must be shown to those who have quarreled with us, as well as to those who have sinned against us, so great is its power. It breaks chains, dispels darkness, extinguishes fire, kills the worm and takes away the gnashing of teeth (Mk 9:44-48). By it the gates of

heaven open with the greatest of ease. In short, mercy is a queen which makes men like God.”

Pursuing the Dream

The life of Martin Luther King is a source of inspiration to all who dream with James for a world of respect and equality for all. In one of the greatest moment of his life, at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, in front of a quarter-million people, King delivered his famous “I have a dream” speech. His words included:

“I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to

stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

Four years later Martin Luther King had to die for his dream. He was assassinated while standing on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee, on the evening of April 4, 1968. He died, but his spirit lives. The dream of Martin Luther King is the dream of James: a world of tolerance, a world of equality, a world of love and mutual respect.

Is this an impossible dream?

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Completing the Faith

James 2:14-26

Theme: Christian faith reveals and demonstrates itself in loving and practical actions.

Introduction

Henlee Barnette was a pioneer in teaching and modeling Christian ethics who influenced generations of Southern Baptist ministers. At his death in October 2004, at age 93, he was remembered as an “unashamed Baptist radical.”

Barnette taught Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1951 to 1977. He wrote several books and was a popular figure on campus but was best known for controversial stands against the Vietnam War and for civil rights.

In 1961, the white Baptist minister helped bring Martin Luther King to the seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, to deliver a lecture series and speak in Barnette’s class in Christian ethics. King’s presence on campus, in an era when many southern churches were still segregated, was highly controversial.

It brought protests from some church leaders and was later said to have cost the seminary hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential donations. Asked later about the financial impact of his actions, Barnette reportedly quipped, “Money well spent.”

One of Barnette’s colleagues, Harold Songer, taught New Testament at Southern Seminary from 1962 to 1993. Songer died not long after Barnette, on January 23, 2005, at age 77. Writing in the 1972 *Broadman Bible Commentary* on James 2:14-26, he reflected Barnette’s credo: “Remember you show your love of this divine word not by the words you say about it but by living it day by day.”

In Songer’s words, “The relevance of James for contemporary Christianity is unavoidable. Christianity does not really exist when correct beliefs or statements of faith are of such concern that they can be substituted for moral obligations.

“Faith that does not lead to moral action and Christian involvement demonstrates its own character as profitless,” Songer continued. “Faith demonstrates its existence in obedience.”

The Biblical Witness

James 2:14-17 Authentic Faith

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

This section of James is written in a style from ancient Greek philosophy called “diatribe.” It mimics the style of a speaker engaged in lively debate. The speaker is involved in proving a point. He does this by interrupting his own arguments with those of an imaginary opponent. He then

refutes the logic of the hypothetical opponent, and so on. Paul used the same method in Romans 3:1-8.

But what exactly was James arguing against? The latter part of James 2 is perhaps the most debated scripture passage over the last 500 years, at least for Protestants. That is because many have held that it contradicts Paul's teaching of justification by grace alone through faith, apart from works, outlined in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

Martin Luther—who began the Protestant Reformation based on three Latin phrases: *sola fide* (by faith alone), *sola gratia* (by grace alone) and *sola scriptura* (by the Bible alone)—went so far as to label James “an epistle of straw,” which in his view should not have been included in the canon of scripture.

Opponents of James have suggested that it teaches the kind of “Jewish Christianity” described and rejected by Paul in Galatians 2:6-9—those “judaizers,” whom Paul said tried to argue that before Gentiles can accept Christ, they also must become Jewish and follow the Old Testament Law to the letter, starting with the men being circumcised.

Others, however, believe Paul and James differ more in vocabulary than in thought. “Faith” for Paul is saving faith—an intimate attachment to Christ in word and deed. In James, “faith” is “faith by itself”—belief in empty propositions, which can save no one. When Paul spoke of “works,” he referred to “works of the law,” legal righteousness achieved through works performed in an attempt to gain salvation. For James, “works” are the natural product of authentic faith. Paul called this the “fruit of the spirit” (Gal 5:22).

James said that right beliefs without right actions—faith by itself, with no works—is “dead.” He illustrated his point with

a brother or sister in need of food or clothing. To say to such a person, “go, be warmed and fed,” may be motivated by the best of intentions, but it accomplishes nothing. Such a faith is futile, James argued, and is certainly not Christian.

John Boy Isley of the John Boy & Billy radio comedy duo stumbled onto the same idea one morning in a broadcast. “I care,” he confessed. “I’m just not going to do anything about it.”

James 2:18-19 **Faith and Works: Indivisible**

¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.

Some interpreters have suggested that James’s hypothetical opponent might be a Jew, taking him to mean “You (a Christian) have faith and I (a Jew) have works,” meaning the two faiths may differ at that point. Others, however, ask how a faith-not-works doctrine could possibly be taught within Judaism, which affirms at its core that the Law is God’s unique gift to Israel, and obedience to it is every Jew’s obligation.

There is evidence in Paul’s own writings (Rom 6:15) that some had distorted his teaching into “anti-nomianism,” the idea that someone saved by grace is no longer obliged to follow moral law. “By no means!” he exclaimed.

At the very heart of Judaism lies a prayer known as the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-9). The Torah prescribes that it be recited twice a day. It begins with the words, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.”

While recognizing that God is One may be the starting point of true faith, James said, it is not enough all by itself. The demons also are monotheists, but that does not change their character or alter the fact that they are opposed to God.

James 2:20-26 **Faith Acts**

²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as a body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

In his third argument, James added to his diatribe a method used by the Jewish rabbis, applying proof texts. He appealed to Genesis 15:6, the same proof text Paul used in Romans 4, yet appears to draw an opposite conclusion.

It is important to remember, however, that they were arguing different points. Paul in Romans was concerned with the question: how does a person come into a right relationship with God? As a Pharisee with a spotless record of keeping the law and yet coming up empty, he concluded that God does not keep an account balancing his good against his evil to come due on Judgment Day. Rather, God reaches out in grace, and Paul responded with gratitude.

Arguing against those who said the Gentiles could not come into favor with God without circumcision, Paul pointed out that Abraham himself entered into a trusting relationship with God before he was circumcised. It was that relationship, and not slavish obedience to the hundreds of laws to be added later, that saved him.

In highlighting the example of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son, on the other hand, James made the point that anyone who is in a right relationship with God will demonstrate the reality of that faith through conduct. James contended that Abraham's faith was "working along with his works," using a Greek word that can be transliterated into English as "synergy."

Both concepts are valid and consistent with the gospel. In fact, Paul said as much in 1 Corinthians 13:2: "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

The contrast between the patriarch Abraham and James's second example, Rahab the prostitute, seems startling or even scandalous, but it is consistent with his contention that respectability in the eyes of men and value before God are not always the same. It also reminds us that Jesus surrounded himself with people from the lower rungs of society.

In Jewish tradition Rahab was viewed as a symbol of repentance. She was said to have converted to Judaism and in some stories is even portrayed as Joshua's wife.

In All Things, Love

When the Southern Baptist Convention revised its *Baptist Faith & Message* doctrinal statement in 2000, the media

gave most attention to its declarations that women should not serve as pastors and that wives should submit to their husbands.

Receiving far more attention in debate on the convention floor, however, was the removal of a phrase from the article on scripture: “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is what it all comes down to,” said a member of the committee recommending the change. “The issue is whether the Bible is the word of God or merely a record of God’s word.”

One messenger opposing the revision warned fellow Baptists to “look closely at a major doctrinal change” being proposed. “We must be careful not to elevate the written word above the one to whom it points,” he said.

While to many it might seem like splitting theological hairs, the implications of the debate actually go to the heart of what it means to live and work as a Christian.

Some Christians believe strongly that right doctrine is paramount and oppose any effort to water down or undermine “biblical faith.” They are fond of using terms like “truth, without any mixture of error,” when describing the Bible, and view their calling as to defend “orthodoxy” against forces like “liberalism” or “secular humanism.”

Others believe it is necessary to agree only on broad parameters in order to work together toward common goals. Thomas à Kempis put it like this: “In things essential, unity; in doubtful, liberty; in all things, charity.” They view following Jesus’ teaching and example as more important than simply believing propositions about him.

On May 7, 2003, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention fired 13 missionaries who refused to sign the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* as a matter of conscience, alleging that they held “positions contrary to what Southern Baptists confess to believe.”

The charge came as a shock to the missionaries, who after decades of faithful and sacrificial service, wondered what had changed to cause them to suddenly be viewed with suspicion.

“In all our years of service among Southern Baptists (serving the local church, serving through college ministries, serving as Journeyman missionaries, serving as seminary students, serving as home missionaries), no one has ever accused us of ministering in any way which is contrary to what Southern Baptists believe,” one couple wrote in an open letter.

“We don’t understand the basis of this accusation. Unless Southern Baptists have changed their beliefs to be something other than baptistic, our beliefs are still consistent with theirs, and this accusation is false.”

“In things essential, unity; in doubtful, liberty; in all things, charity.”

Written by Bob Allen, managing editor, EthicsDaily.com, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Speaking Thoughtfully

James 3:1-12

Theme: Christian faith employs speech that enhances and extends God's creative work and purposes.

Introduction

"You moderate Baptists are all alike," she said. "You twist and skew the Bible to meet your own agenda. On top of that, you don't preach the gospel or promote personal morality."

I had not anticipated her accusing and angry words. They caught me by surprise and penetrated my carefully-honed defenses, finding my soft spot of vulnerability.

I felt misunderstood and falsely attacked. My heart dropped. My face burned, while my hands turned cold.

What should I say in response? Confusion reigned, as an array of words rushed to fill the vacuum in my mind. Defensive words volunteered to save my honor. Attack words offered to retaliate. Excuses lined up to explain and divert attention. Eloquent words promised to impress and overwhelm. Each set of words held some hope for victory or retaliation. Each tactic promised a modicum of satisfaction and retaliation. But each set of words was some form of what psychologists call a "reptilian reaction," an impulsive, irrational response to flee or fight.

It was my turn to speak. What to say?

We've all been there—searching for words to address the accusation or question that challenges our integrity. We've felt the words queue up behind our teeth like an excited football team in the tunnel ready to take the field. We know that words have power and energy; that's why John's Gospel uses "Word" as one of the names for Jesus, the power and energy of God. We know the fallacy of the children's rhyme: "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." And we know that our response will determine the direction of the conversation and perhaps the relationship, for good or ill.

In the corner of my mind, waiting patiently, stood another set of words ready to be employed. Unlike the various reptilian words, these words made no promise of quick relief or victory. Instead, they formed a kind of speaking shaped by a maturing orientation toward love for the truth, as well as love for the listener. The agenda of these words was not toward self-preservation, but toward self-revelation and self-giving. Its focus was on deepening a conversation, rather than ending or winning it.

It is the language of love, of which Paul spoke to the Corinthians. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1).

James called Christians to the same high standard of loving speech. It is difficult and thankless, James acknowledged. But it is the only way.

The Biblical Witness

James 3:1 Caution to Teachers

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

James introduced his concern about loving speech with a warning about the unique role of teachers. The tools of the teaching trade are words, of course, communicating with students through facts, stories, inflection and tone in such a way as to shape the views and values of the student. James encouraged caution for potential teachers: you will be judged with greater strictness.

Why the stricter judgment? Because a teacher's words exert influence upon the thinking of another person. Our teaching, whether direct or indirect, seeks to alter the mind and affect an outcome. In a sense, we are doing a form of brain surgery by imposing our worldview into the mind of another. James's warning: Be very careful.

Those not in formal teaching roles may presume that James's words are not relevant for them. But almost all of us play the role of teacher at some point as parents, colleagues, mentors, friends, as we seek to persuade, instruct, challenge and test those in our circles so as to shape their views and values. As such, James's words find a wide audience.

James 3:2 No One Is Perfect

²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

James noted the obvious: we will all fail at some point to deliver loving speech, not just occasionally, but regularly ("many mistakes"). Mistakes are not rare relapses, but a reality with which we all must contend and grow. If we were able to avoid these "many mistakes," we'd be perfect, which we're not. By declaring our inevitable failure in speech, James placed us all on equal footing, himself included. We all have much to learn in the Language School of Love.

James 3:3-5a Taming Our Tongues

³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ^{5a}So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

James illustrated the reality that a small, seemingly powerless object like a bridle or a rudder can wield disproportionate results over the entire body—the horse or the ship—guiding its direction and determining its future. James contended that the tongue, the most animated muscle and thus the symbol of our speech, has a similar ability to shape our direction and future. Words steer relationship with others to the left or right, toward health or brokenness. Where does our tongue steer us? Who holds the reins, or pilots the rudder?

James 3:5b-6 Hot Speech

^{5b}How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our mem-

bers as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

James's exuberance led him to yet another, more ominous metaphor: the tongue is an out-of-control fire. This image focuses on the destructive effect of uncontrolled speech, with its rampant, hungry agenda of destroying everything in its path. Proverbs' writer shared this image, "Scoundrels concoct evil, and their speech is like a scorching fire" (16:27). Such speech is self-serving, utterly destructive and spreads like wildfire, far beyond the intended recipient of our flames. It burns its target, and leaves the ashes of hatred in its wake.

We're not always aware of the flaming effects of our speech. We may think we are simply warming up a conversation, when in fact our words start a grass fire that may spread and destroy beyond our understanding. James contended that this is because our tongue (speech) reflects "the unrighteous world," or translated literally "is a world of iniquity." Even more, the fire of the tongue is set afire by the flames of hell itself. That is, the mistakes we make in speech are not simply unintentional, insignificant "slips of the tongue." No, James said, they are much more deeply rooted. We are all surrounded by, and participate in, human evil. To amend a familiar church song, "it only takes a spark to get a fire (of hell) going."

Life is a tinder box; our tongue (speech) can ignite it with a word. Only grace from beyond ourselves can deliver us from scorching ourselves and others.

James 3:7-8 **Speaking with Forked Tongues**

⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the

human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James offered yet another metaphor: our tongues are akin to wild animals—untamed, loose, self-focused. But wild animals can be caught, trained, domesticated to serve another. Not so with human speech. We can be taught proper grammar and etiquette, but still the potential to speak a wild, self-serving word is only a breath away. James' image of the tongue as "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" paints the picture of a stirring snake, ready to strike at any moment.

Is James overstating the case against human speech? Are we really that capable of wielding destructive, snake-like words? Again, we recall the terminology of psychologists, who describe our instinctive response to a threat as "reptilian regressions." It is primal, irrational, reactive. Yes, "snake speech" is a human reality.

James 3:9-12 **Consistent Speech**

⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

So who will we be? What will be our native tongue? For James, the direction we choose is not simply a matter of choosing the right words. Rather, it is a matter of choosing the right life. It is an orientation. Lives oriented to "bless God," to live in a God-oriented way, cannot at the same

time curse (condemn, direct hatred toward) another human made in God's image. Just as the mouth of a spring cannot produce both fresh and foul water, the mouth of a disciple likewise cannot produce blessing toward God and curses toward God's creation. We cannot be double-tongued, like a snake. Granted, no one can speak perfectly (v 2), but there is no room within the vocabulary of a disciple for consistently uttering reptilian "snake speech."

Ultimately, one of the clearest evidences of the "works" of faith (from James 2) is how we speak. Do we bless or curse? Offer fresh or foul speech? Bear fruit consistent with the vine to which we are connected?

Loving Speech

Loving speech is a sign of the presence of God. The God whose words brought creation forth, whose visit to earth was described as the Word made flesh, whose biography is called "the word of the Lord," continues to tutor us in the grammar of love.

A church's missions and justice committee proposed relocating the pictures of members killed in war from a seldom-used hallway to the hallway leading to the youth room. To enhance the memorial, they proposed that an inscription from Isaiah be placed above the pictures: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is 2:4b).

The committee presented a rendering of the proposed memorial, but to their surprise, the proposal met angry opposition. "This verse implies that our boys died in vain, or worse that they did the wrong thing," the opposition said.

Emotions rose. In an instant, lines were drawn and sides were taken.

Then an amazing thing happened. The presenters spoke words from their heart. "We wanted to honor the sacrifice of these former youth of the church by placing their pictures in a more prominent place near the youth area. But we also had hoped to connect their deaths with the message of peace and hope that this church proclaims."

The other side heard their words as loving speech. "We appreciate your intention, but we fear that others will misunderstand the message implied with the Isaiah quote, just like we did."

From the silence came a new word. "What if we preface the scripture with these words: In remembering all who have died from the tragedy of war, we pray for the day when 'they shall beat their swords into plowshares...?'"

With one voice, everyone declared that this addition not only clarified the intention, but said even more by remembering all who have died.

Loving speech not only solved the problem, it also lifted the moment to new heights of wisdom and grace.

Written by Joseph Phelps, pastor, Highland Baptist Church, Louisville, Ky., and author of More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflict into Growth.

Pursuing Wisdom

James 3:13-18

Theme: Christian faith is marked by godly wisdom, peaceful living and thoughtful actions.

Introduction

“Wisdom is better caught than taught.”

“Wisdom is better felt than telt.”

“If you are going to talk the talk, you’d better walk the walk.”

The truth of these slogans is difficult for any of us to grasp, let alone for teachers who, one would think, would know better.

Is there wisdom somewhere in this pile of assignments that I am trying to grade? Is there wisdom in this sermon I am trying to prepare? Is there wisdom in this decision I am about to make? Is there wisdom in these words I am about to write?

It depends, the epistle writer James said, not on the answer I give but on the way I live.

A group of teachers in Kenya have become my dear colleagues and friends. One day, we were discussing how they will know that they have been successful at teaching the government-approved AIDS curriculum. As soon as the

question was posed (for truth often waits for the right question), the answer appeared before us like a mountain none of us was ready to climb.

We had been trained in the idea that educational success comes from the score on the test and from the grade on the report card. But with content that really mattered, life and death mattered, the score on a paper and pencil quiz would not suffice. Success would come only if our students’ lives were sufficiently affected by the truth of the content, by the person of their teacher and by the power of God’s Spirit to change the patterns of risky behavior advocated by popular culture.

Most of us had not signed up for this task when we signed our application to teacher training. But all of us who call ourselves citizens of the Kingdom of God have signed up to live lives whose “works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (Jas 3:13). That is, lives that are lived from a Kingdom perspective and with the understanding that relationships are our primary concern. That is, lives characterized by God’s wisdom.

The Biblical Witness

James 3:13 Gentleness Born of Wisdom

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

As citizens, we live our lives from a Kingdom perspective that produces the understanding that relationships are our primary concern. Not because we have to but because we cannot *not* live such a life. By committing ourselves to God

through Christ Jesus, we have become re-wired, so to speak. We are now plugged into a different energy source and the voltage it sends triggers a different kind of light.

The energy source is God. God is the alpha and omega, the author and finisher, and beginning and end of all of our thinking and all of our living. God is the hub of the wheel from which each spoke extends. God is, as my theology professor used to say, the hinge upon which all truth hangs.

The fear of the Lord, says the writer of the Proverbs, is the beginning of wisdom. The whole-hearted commitment to live life, not with a primary commitment to self, but a primary commitment to God, is the only way to gain the wisdom from above.

The voltage is wisdom. It is the understanding and acceptance of the truth that God is the center. It is choosing to live my life as a conduit of the love of God for God's world. It is reading the newspaper through God's eyes. It is sitting beside a person on the bus with God's compassion. It is speaking words to my students that inspire. And, it is reaching out my hand to my neighbor with God's healing power.

The light produced by this wisdom energy is gentleness. Wisdom produces lives that are marked by their primary concern for the good of others. Its fundamental focus is your good, not mine. It is your well-being that matters, not mine. Gentleness is therefore born of, or produced by, wisdom that is God's perspective on all aspects of life.

James did not use the metaphor of power source, energy and light to teach us this lesson. He used a case study—teachers and students in the school of Christian living. There are two levels to this case. On one level, James

himself was a teacher writing to his students, or, some would say, lecturing to his students. Right from the beginning of his letter, James made clear that he was writing to re-instruct his students, some of whom were teachers, in the way of wisdom.

James 3:14-16 **The Ugly Alternative**

¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

The teachers among the Christians to whom James wrote had misunderstood godly wisdom. They had become caught up in an “uncitizen-like” view of themselves. Their priorities were out of line. They were “unplugged” to the true source, so to speak. They had lost their focus on forming the citizens of the Kingdom of God and had become enamored with their own cleverness and certitude.

Such self-centeredness is of this earth. Its aim is to divide, not unite. It alienates one from another instead of reconciling.

James' indictment on them was not simply for exemplary purposes. He chose teachers and students for his case study because teachers and students are crucial to God's desire of having the divine will done on earth as it is in heaven. Teachers are to be the models of Kingdom living, but the teachers to whom James wrote had failed to demonstrate other-thinking. They were envious and ambitious. They were not living from the perspective of the Kingdom

which has the good of others foremost in our hearts and minds. Their concern was themselves—their cleverness, their quick-wittedness, their pursuit of worldly advancement.

This ugly alternative to Kingdom living is a world in which people think foremost of themselves, in which personal success is based on another's failure, in which relationships are severed to the degree of stranger, in which exclusionary lines are drawn closer and closer around my lifestyle, and in which neighborliness rarely extends beyond our own front door. These are the marks of an earthly, unspiritual and devilish world.

James 3:17-18 **Peaceful Living**

¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

James's description of the Kingdom alternative in these two verses is his definition of the "good life" as stated in verse 13. The contrast is staggering. Or, at least, it ought to be staggering. We ought to be stopped in our tracks having just run head first into a whole new way of living.

The good life, James said, is attained by living wisely. And, living wisely is marked by pure, peaceable, gentle service of others.

David Hubbard, in *The Book of James: Wisdom that Works*, describes the good life as marked by these attributes:

Pure means free from the defilements of jealousy and ambition that stain the lives of the clever; *peaceable* suggests the ability to maintain composure even under hostile or anger-provoking circumstances; *open to reason* describes a sensitivity to the other person's point of view and flexibility to change one's own mind when the evidence indicates; *full of mercy and good fruits* points to a disposition of love and compassion that reach out to the needs of the struggling; *without uncertainty* is a way of picturing a loyalty to God that does not waver in its commitment; *without insincerity* indicates a freedom from the hypocrisy that pretends to do what it does not, to be what it is not, and to care when it cannot.

James's final statement in this section contains a significant shift in focus. He had been describing what wise living looks like when the individual citizen of the Kingdom of God lives it. Then, with the final few words, he pulled back and viewed what our world would look like if all of God's people lived this wise good life.

The picture is one of peace—unmistakable and thorough peace. Peace will certainly be the mark of the individual who lives with wisdom from above, but can we dare to imagine a world influenced with God's wisdom? It would be like sowing and harvesting. Each act and every decision made by God's citizenry would be an act and a decision towards new life, new hope and new justice. Righteousness is the result of such living. It is the harvest that comes from God's wisdom incarnated through the lives of God's people.

Pursuing God's Purposes, Perspective and Priorities

One response to this section of James's epistle is to throw our hands in the air and declare in exasperation, "He can't be serious! How, on earth, can James begin to presume that trying to live by God's wisdom can come close to addressing the hurt and injustice in our world? He knew our world. He knew its jealousy, its selfish ambition, its disorder and its wickedness of every kind. Me, show by my good life, that this does not have to be?"

The other response, the response that both James and Jesus hoped for, is, in humility to admit, "Of course. Justice and mercy and goodness and especially peace will only be made evident in our world if I live according to God's wisdom. Heaven on earth will only come when I live with God's purposes, God's perspective and God's priorities as my own."

We are citizens of God's world order. The wisdom we are to embody is not the wisdom of this world. As a matter of fact, some may not recognize it as wisdom at all, at least not until they start wondering from where all the good is coming.

A Rwandan friend of mine who is a genocide survivor tells the story of a friend of hers who witnessed the godly wisdom of a priest. At a large Catholic church in Kigali near the city center, this priest welcomed hundreds of Tutsi people and even some moderate Hutus as they sought to take refuge in the church. Churches had always been places of refuge and safety before the outbreak of the genocide, and people, like my friend's friend, again sought its peace during those horrific times.

The militia did not honor the church's protection. When they approached the church, this priest did what many in our world would think a very unwise thing to do. He went out to

meet them. He deliberately put himself between those who came to kill and those who were to be killed. He lived peace.

"There are no Hutus and Tutsis here," he declared, "only Rwandese. If you want to kill Rwandese then you will need to kill me first." Perhaps the members of that militia are still shaking their heads in bewilderment at the wisdom demonstrated that day.

Actions of justice, mercy, hope and peace born of godly wisdom: this is what James hoped to see from the people of God. This is what James would hope to see from us.

Written by Carla Nelson, educational facilitator, Canadian Baptist Ministries, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada.

Living Single-Mindedly

James 4:1-10

Theme: Christian faith leads to a single-minded focus that humbly submits to God and looks for God's will in all things.

Introduction

"I know God wants me married," said Ellen sounding very sure. At age 24, there was no reason she wouldn't get married one day. But I knew there was no young man in her life at that moment, and her confidence intrigued me. She was a close friend to our family, so some gentle teasing wouldn't be misunderstood.

"You seem certain about that, Ellen," I said.

"I am," she replied, her eyes sparkling.

"Well, like a lot of churches we've about twice as many women as men in the congregation. The odds are against you, aren't they?"

"Yes, but God wants *me* to be married."

"All right," I said, "but how do you *know* God wants you married?"

Her words were very definite. "God wants me to be married because I wouldn't be happy unless I was married, and God wants me happy."

That was her logic, and it was entirely convincing to Ellen. God loved her, and therefore was invested in making her happy. Life without a husband wouldn't qualify as happy for Ellen, and therefore God's will had to be that she'd be married.

It was not wrong that Ellen hoped to get married. But there was a very great deal flawed elsewhere in her attitude. Who was the Lord and who the servant for her? Ellen's reasoning wasn't that she existed for God's happiness, but that God existed for hers. Ellen's world was centered on Ellen, and the role of everything and everyone, including God, was to serve her wishes.

God must be the center for a Christian. When we get our lives off center, we're in deep trouble. When we put ourselves or any other person or thing where God should be, our lives quickly go far wrong.

James homed in on that truth and encouraged his readers to get their focus right, to recognize who is the Lord and live humbly before God, a single-mindedness that looks for God's will in all things.

The Biblical Witness

Good preachers and counselors don't serve up false comfort. They don't tell people that things are fine when they're not. Jesus didn't. He told a great Jewish leader like Nicodemus that he needed to be "born again" (Jn 3: 3) and commanded a rich ruler to sell all his goods and give them to the poor (Lk 18: 22). These were hard words and tough commands. But you don't really love someone if you tell them less than what they must hear.

James certainly didn't back off from letting his readers know they had things to sort out. He wrote to Christians, of course, and one of the sad realities of church life ancient and modern is the mix of best and worst, godliness and wickedness, success and failure. It's not that some are all good and others all bad, but both good and bad lie in pretty much everyone. James had a hard message for people who were allowing the downside to dominate.

James 4:1-3 **The danger of giving control to worldly desires**

¹Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

James called the misbehavior of these Christians “conflicts” and “disputes.” Things were much worse than a brawl in a bad-tempered football match, because these words were normally used about armies at war.

James wasn't describing minor disagreements in the Christian fellowship, but outright antagonism between members. Perhaps even that's an understatement, because he said that they “commit murder” to get what they want. Some believe James is saying these Christians had literally killed, but more likely he used the strongest of metaphors because their hatred was so serious and severe. Jesus taught that there's a level of antagonism which, in God's eyes, is as dreadful as murder (Matt 5:21-22).

What had gone wrong? Why this warfare between Christians? James was quite specific that it was “from your cravings” (v 1). His key term was *h-donMn*, source of our English word “hedonism,” and it means “pleasures.” These folk weren't being led by God but by their desires. They chased what attracted them. When they couldn't get anything they wanted they got angry, argued and fought with the people they saw as getting in the way.

Runners learn to focus on the finish line, as if they have tunnel vision and see nothing but the tape. They're not distracted and use all their energy to drive them to their goal. If only these Christians would focus on God like that. If only they'd “ask” God, seek God, look for God's way. But, when they did ask, James said, they did so out of their hedonism, to get their own way, to fulfill their own agenda.

God is good and will give us anything we ask that is right for our lives, and also so good so as not to give anything we ask that isn't right for our lives. Any of us can go wrong with our motives when we pray. We can look pious to everyone yet be living for ourselves, with our prayers and energies directed only to meet our whims and pleasures.

That's a route only to disaster. A child who runs off in a busy street—maybe to see a friend, maybe heading for the toy shop—may dash into traffic and danger. Straying from God's grasp on our lives risks spiritual death.

James 4:4-6 **The danger of finding you're not on God's side**

⁴Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God

yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

The word “adulterer” (v 4) is gender-neutral today and therefore used in modern translations, but James actually used the feminine form “adulteresses.” In his mind was the Old Testament image of Israel as the bride of God (Is 54: 5) and, sadly, as an unfaithful wife (Jer 3: 20; Hos 9: 1).

Like a woman deserting her husband to chase other men, so these Christians had abandoned God. Every time they made other desires their god, they were unfaithful to the true God.

That put them against God. They said they were loyal to God, but actually they’d become God’s enemies. Maybe they never knew. Maybe they thought that as long as they prayed, listened, learned and met with other Christians they were all right. But God knew their hidden longings, and those longings were not for the things of God’s kingdom. Despite appearances, their lives weren’t God’s. They loved the world, a world that lured them from God. That world was God’s enemy and so, knowingly or not, they’d crossed to the enemy’s side.

But God hadn’t given up. “God yearns jealously…” James wrote (v 5). No one’s sure what part of the Old Testament he quoted, or even exactly what he meant, because the grammar of v 5 is complicated. But the general meaning is clear enough: God doesn’t wipe his hands of his people, even when we go astray. God is jealous for our love and commitment. The Greek word translated “jealous” is *z-los*, a word linked with intense heat. God longs for us with a deep, intense passion and longs to get us back. And God makes that possible. Quoting Proverbs 3:34, James wrote

that God “gives all the more grace” to those humble enough to accept, to people who admit their failings and know their weakness. By that grace we can return to God and live for God. Grace is undeserved favor. God doesn’t have to take unfaithful people back, but he does and makes our return possible.

James 4:7-10

The plea for a new submission to God

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

James rattled off ten commands in these four verses: Submit. Resist. Draw near. Cleanse. Purify. Lament. Mourn. Weep. Be turned. Humble yourselves.

Each verb is in a tense that implies immediate and complete action: this preacher called for a response. Time to act. Time to get lives sorted. Time to live what they believe.

The way up is the way down. To “submit” isn’t just to obey, it’s first to surrender. James said that we must lay down our own rights, own agendas, own desires and put God above them all.

That done, all the rest flows from it. We then have the will and strength to “resist the devil.” The devil is no equal of God, and with God in our lives Christians find the devil flees (1 Jn 4: 4).

We can't only turn from the devil. We must also get near to God. Wonderfully, Christians find that the moment we reach out to God, God stretches out, grasps our hands and pulls us in. God does not play hard to get.

But this cannot be an empty gesture, a one-time altar repentance prayer not lived out in the days ahead. James used powerful metaphors of cleansing hands and purifying hearts—sorting out conduct and sorting out motives. Like these Christians, we have decisions of the will to make. Discipleship always requires discipline. And there's a serious call to be sorrowful over what's gone wrong.

We should "lament," a very strong word meaning distress, wretchedness, misery. Adultery toward God is no small thing, and James said we must recognize the pain we've caused. So we should "mourn and weep," words conveying passionate, visible grief. Laughter should become mourning and joy dejection. James wasn't advocating a miserable, long-faced Christianity. But these people had lived for pleasure and it was time for them to crucify their hedonistic attitudes. So must we.

His last sentence sums up his recipe for a new life: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (v 10). It's what Jesus taught too (Matt 23:12; Lk 14:11). A simple principle stands behind this. As a youngster I always thought I knew how to do things. "I'll manage!" I would say stridently, shooing Dad or Mom away. Only when I failed over and over would I say, "Show me." The arrogant, self-justifying, always-right person never learns and never changes. But the person who knows what it is to be weak and to fail comes humbly and allows God to grasp their life. It's that person who is restored and renewed.

Submitting to God

My friend found a bird trapped inside a large glass canopy over a stairway. The poor creature flew this way and that, crashing into the glass it could not see as, in panic, it tried to escape. For a moment it settled on a step. He reached to rescue it, but, frightened, the bird started up again, crashing back and forth against the glass. Many times my friend tried to save it, but each time it flew off. Finally, with a dreadful thud, the bird crashed again into the unseen glass, this time falling to the ground dead, its neck broken. "If only..." my friend said. "If only it would have let me capture it and save it..."

"If only..." God says to us. Too often we thrash this way and that, trying to win the world and finding nothing but pain and frustration. In our arrogance we think we know better than God. We think our ideas, our ambitions, our desires are best. But they're not.

God takes our sin very seriously but doesn't give up on us. God bends down, longing for our willing submission so that he can pick up our lives, rescue us from the sins that have trapped us and exalt us to a wonderful new life of freedom. Now is the time to let God do this, and to live what we believe.

Written by Alistair Brown, general director, BMS World Mission, United Kingdom.

Knowing Who You Are

James 4:11-12

Theme: Christian faith results in personal identity that eliminates the need to feel superior to others, condemn them and use speech to destroy them.

Introduction

Because my early career was primarily focused on producing a magazine for teenaged girls, some of my church responsibilities also involved working with teenagers. I had the privilege of teaching many of the same girls at church over a number of years, so I observed firsthand several interesting slices of adolescent life.

Our church's youth group included the stereotypical and easily-identifiable members: the academically gifted; the natural athletes; the cheerleaders; the musicians; the clowns; the rebels-without-causes. Some of these youth seemed to have a fairly clear sense of who they were and how they fit into the social structures of their respective schools. They had found their niches, and at least for that time, their identities. They moved fairly easily and comfortably from their various worlds of home, school, peers and church.

Others in the group, however, appeared uncertain about who they were and how they fit in, particularly at school. A few of the younger girls seemed to try on new personalities about as often as they changed clothes. Their identity search could be occasionally frustrating for their teachers,

but it was no doubt even more baffling for their parents and an emotional roller-coaster ride for the girls.

While their moods were unpredictable, their clothes occasionally strange and their other choices sometimes equally perplexing, it was their attempts at humor that I often found most troubling. Humor for them was regularly in the form of sarcasm and put-downs. They habitually took direct jabs at each other, most likely stemming from their own inferior or insecure feelings. And the way they talked about those who weren't present was even more disturbing. For a few, making fun of someone else was a highly developed art form.

What each most wanted, I gathered, was to appear "normal" in the eyes of their peers. That they achieved this at the expense of someone else didn't seem to matter.

Trendy clothes, unconventional hairstyles, outlandish jewelry in predictable and not-so-predictable places, inappropriate and sometimes irreverent humor, a language that should come with a decoder ring—all are part of the typical adolescent's process of growing up, of discovering who they really are.

Thankfully, most of the teenagers with whom I worked developed an emerging sense of personal identity based on their relationship with Christ. Armed with newfound self-confidence, they began to modify both the way they talked and the way they acted. It was a joy to watch them become the people God created them to be. They discovered that identifying with Christ changes not only who we are but how we think about others and ourselves, and consequently how we speak and act.

The people to whom James wrote, although they professed to be Christians, failed to display this understanding,

prompting some of James's strongest warnings. Like each of us at times, their attitudes, speech and actions did not always convey the faith they professed.

The Biblical Witness

James 4:11 Doer or Judge?

11Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, 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.

With these words James returns to a subject he had earlier discussed at length: the problems resulting from unbridled speech and dissension within the community of faith (see 3:1-4:10). His use of the imperative, "Do not speak evil ..." indicates that this harmful behavior had already been established, and "brothers and sisters" indicates that Christians were the guilty parties.

What were they saying? What did speaking "evil" involve?

Although both Hebrew scripture and New Testament writings deal with the concept of evil, it carries a broad range of meaning within both canons. "Evil" can refer to something that is bad, offensive or displeasing; something that is of no value or inferior; or something that is morally wrong or sinful. It can even refer to the personification of evil.

Much of James's epistle seems to draw from Leviticus 19:13-18, laws with which his readers would have been very familiar. We might best understand "evil" here, then, to mean "slander," something Leviticus 19:16 expressly prohibits. Webster defines slander as "the utterance of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and

damage another's reputation," or "a false and defamatory oral statement about a person."

Slander goes beyond thoughtless or careless speech. It is instead deliberate and intentional and seeks to lower the status or defame the character of one person in the eyes of another. And because it is subtle and often covert in nature, it can work freely within the faith community and cause serious damage quickly.

Slandorous speech, James said, was in violation of the law, and those who disobeyed the law put themselves in a position of superiority over the law.

To which law did James refer? The term carries a number of meanings in New Testament writings: part or all of the Old Testament; part or all of the Pentateuch; specific commandments; the will of God; Jewish tradition.

For James, it was probably a combination of these. Although he wrote with the understanding that Jesus replaced the law as the key to relationship between God and people, he nonetheless kept the law and its intention—to love God and to love neighbor—clearly in focus. We keep the law in its fullest form, James said, when we focus our being, our speech and our actions around loving God and loving others.

The one who "judges" or slanders is not primarily concerned with demonstrating love of God and others but is instead thinking only of making himself or herself look better. In the process, the slanderer shows extreme arrogance and puts himself or herself in a position of superiority not only over another person but also over the law.

Whether what a person said against another might be true was irrelevant to James. The fact that one would speak disparagingly against another person was equivalent to

speaking disparagingly of the law and to thinking that the law did not personally apply. Further, doing so was simply unloving, and therefore, uncharacteristic of those who claimed to follow Christ.

James's logic is easy to follow: When we speak evil against someone else, we judge them. When we judge another person, we break the law and thus place ourselves above the law. By putting ourselves above the law, we put ourselves in the place of God as judge.

Like a number of other verses in James, this one parallels some of Jesus' teachings from the Sermon on the Mount. James here clearly echoed Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1-2: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."

James 4:12 Who, Then, Are You?

12There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

The process of discovering who we really are also involves determining who we are not.

We are not God, James said. Yet when we judge others, we act as though the law of loving God and loving others does not apply to us and we assume God's roles as both lawgiver and judge. We live as though we have a better or higher law than the one God has given. This is blasphemous.

Only God is God. Only God can give the law and judge another person. And, James said, only God "is able to save and to destroy." We are, by comparison, completely power-

less, and we are foolish to think we can claim God's role as judge of another person.

Vibrant, active Christian faith results in our knowing who we really are. We are God's people, designed to reflect God's loving character. Any feelings of superiority we may feel toward others are false and work against our Christlikeness.

When we focus our lives on loving God and loving others, we discover who we really are, and in the process, find freedom and happiness.

Who We Are Created to Be

In spite of the efforts of almost everyone to discourage or dismiss him, Simon Birch believes that God has a special and heroic plan for his life. Simon Birch knows without a doubt who he is.

The title character in the 1998 movie "Simon Birch" (based very loosely on John Irving's novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*) has many strikes against him. When he was born, he was so tiny doctors said he wouldn't survive the first night, then the first week. He proved them wrong.

Simon was born with dwarfism, and even as a 12-year-old, he is so small that he still plays the baby Jesus in the church's Christmas pageant. His parents are aloof and uninvolved. His amazing self-awareness, intellect and determination to fulfill his destiny usually have him at odds with just about everyone else in his small, 1964 New England town. Simon is outcast both at home and in his community.

Simon's best friend is one of the town's other outcasts, Joe Wentworth, the illegitimate son of a beautiful Christian

woman named Rebecca who refuses to reveal the identity of Joe's father. Simon is determined to fulfill his destiny by helping Joe find out who his father is.

With a deep faith and spiritual insight, Simon quickly recognizes and challenges the superficial religiosity of others in his church and community. Though they are full of religious talk and busy with religious activity, they lack the faith, love, compassion, mercy and joy that characterize followers of Christ. Though they are hearers of the Word, they generally fall well short of being doers. They do not really know who they are.

Pastor and EthicsDaily.com contributor Randy Hyde noted in a sermon that "There is a tendency in all of us ... at least at certain times in our journey of life and faith, when we tend to think of ourselves in terms of what we are not rather than what we are. But when we come to know Jesus—or perhaps it is more accurate to say, when we come to be known by Jesus—we discover who we are, who and what we have been created to be. We find our true and eternal purpose in that relationship. Regardless of what we might do for a living, we are not defined by that, or by any other thing we do or relationship we have. We are defined by who and what we have been created to be, not what we do along the way" ("Confessions of an Amateur Preacher," www.ethicsdaily.com/doclib/upload/confessionsofanamateurpreacher.doc).

"Maybe we should all consider who we are not," he concluded. "It might lead us to understand who we are in relationship to Christ."

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Living with Faith's Perspective

James 4:13-17

Theme: Christian faith results in a unique relationship with God and a perception of reality that is markedly differently from commonly held world views.

Introduction

"We're not going to be trapped by debt," he said. "Sure, it's going to be tough to meet the monthly payments, but today we signed the paperwork for a ten-year mortgage on the house."

"Tell me what that means," I said.

"Well, it means that we will pay about twice as much each month as we would have paid for a 30-year mortgage. That's the hard part. The good news is that we will save a great deal of money in interest payments and own the house free and clear in one-third the time."

He settled back into his chair and crossed his arms. His wife took up the conversation.

"You see, both of us work. I'm a nurse, and he is a manufacturing representative. We make good money. He is due for a promotion in about a year, and I can always pull some overtime. In two or three years, our income ought to grow to

the point where the increased mortgage payment won't be a problem."

The conversation turned to other matters. Afterwards, as I drove to another engagement, I found myself pondering their decision. What if the expected promotion and overtime failed to materialize? Did they have a backup plan in the event that one of them became seriously ill? What if one of them became unemployed for some reason? Would they be comfortable over the long term with nearly all their income committed to a house payment, so that nearly nothing was left for emergencies or recreation or charity? As Christians, had they prayed about the decision?

The more I thought, the more I became convinced that their decision owed far more to the American dream than to a Christian perspective. Like most of us, they needed to reconsider the implications of their relationship with God for the daily decisions of life. James insisted that Christians ought to view reality in a way markedly different from more commonly held world views.

The Biblical Witness

James wrote to Christians immersed in commerce, family and politics. Even a quick read of the letter reveals his concern that they learn to make wise choices and thus build lives more in accord with God's priorities than the ways of the world. James 4:13-17 deals with the matter of perspective. What perspective should a Christian bring to planning and life in general?

James 4:13 Tomorrow, Tomorrow

¹³Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money."

Business played a large role in the life of the Roman Empire. From our vantage point in history, we look back at that era and think most often of the Roman army, emperors, gladiators and the like. We seldom remember that a sizeable contingent of business people existed. Goods traveled along the Roman road system; large sums of money were raised and invested in business ventures; agricultural products moved through a series of vendors before arriving in Rome and other cities. Each village and town boasted a set of small business and crafts people, ranging from leather workers to bakers to fishermen to dealers in fine dyes.

The church addressed by James appears to have drawn its members from across the spectrum of society. James spoke to the treatment the church accorded its poor and rich members. The underlying assumption of the letter is that most of the church members fell somewhere between the two extremes. Some no doubt were day laborers or employees of business or land owners. Verse 13, though, suggests a significant portion of the church family came from the business class.

What mindset might such Christians have brought with them from their pre-Christian lives? Like business people across the ages, they were accustomed to thinking in terms of risk versus potential gain, investments of money and time and schedules. Making and implementing decisions was part and parcel of life. Caught up in the conceptual world of first-century business, they probably never dreamed there might be another way of viewing reality.

They simply tried to fit Christ into their pre-existing way of seeing and managing life.

James captured their mindset in a sentence. He said they were the kind of people who believed it right and sensible to say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town, and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” How could anyone object to treating life as a business plan over which one had control?

Try to imagine the setting. The letter of James would have been read aloud to the congregation. I suspect many of the people heard themselves described by the words of verse 13. At first, they probably thought James meant to commend them. To paraphrase, they heard James saying: “Many of you know how to plan a successful business venture; give yourselves a pat on the back.”

James, though, had something else in mind.

James 4:14-15 **What Is Your Life?**

¹⁴Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.”

James surprised his listeners when he wrote, “Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring” (v 14). He drew a vivid contrast between their operative belief in their power to order the future and the reality of their future’s unpredictability.

I remember a frustrating but enlightening conversation with my grandfather. He had asked me about my plans for the

future. With all the assurance a 12-year-old could muster, I told him I planned to finish high school, win an academic scholarship and graduate from college. He gently affirmed my aspirations, but then he added: “Now, keep in mind that none of us knows what the future might bring. We do not even know what tomorrow holds. It’s good to make solid plans. It’s best to remember that we have only today and to make something good of today.” Looking back, I’m certain my grandfather had more than a passing acquaintance with James.

James used two illustrations to drive home his point. He invoked the image of a mist that soon vanishes, such as a light morning fog that swiftly burns away under the light of the sun. Our lives, even those who make enormous impact on the world in their own time, are of short duration and leave no permanent mark on God’s creation. When the mist has vanished, the world goes on, and so it is with us. Given our place in the larger order of creation, humility is in order.

Such humility is expressed in a phrase James urged his listeners to adopt as their own: If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that. James seems to have drawn the phrase from Greek culture, in which the expression “if the gods will” was commonplace. If this is the case, James made a rather telling point: if even those who do not know Christ recognize their limits and submit their plans to the judgment of false gods, how much more so should the Christian place all plans and hopes in the hands of the true God.

James 4:16-17 **Arrogance and Boasting**

¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

James increased the stakes. He now argued that his listeners' failure to take into account their mortality and the rightful place of God in their planning represented something more than mere carelessness. James charged them with boasting and arrogance. To boast is to glory in one's own power, accomplishments or dreams. Arrogance reflects presumption on the part of a Christian, a state of mind in which we act as if we are God.

Such arrogance often resents anyone who questions the rightfulness or realism of its plans. James's tone makes clear his hope that those who receive his letter will lay aside resentment and turn from their boastful ways.

He calls the mindset which leads Christians to act as if they are in control of the future "evil." Such strong language must have shocked his listeners. The term may have reminded them of the words of the Lord's Prayer, one phrase of which asks God to protect his children from evil. Could those who pray such a prayer actually fall into evil, that is think and act in ways opposed to God? James's language warned them: through carelessness, pride, greed or simple inertia Christians can adopt and implement mindsets directly opposed to the perspective and hope of God.

James offered stern counsel in verse 17. He assumed Christians knew it was sin to try to take charge of their lives as if God did not exist. James saw himself as one given the task of recalling Christians to their senses. He believed his listeners could choose to do the right thing, if only they would do so. They did not have to continue in sin. If they so chose, they could learn how to manage their lives in light of the reality of God.

What Now?

Do we believe James's vision is applicable to us? Is it possible for us to start the process of retooling our way of looking at our lives and the world so that our perspective takes into account God's presence and will? Christians throughout the centuries have found it feasible. If you want to test the possibilities for yourself, consider trying the following suggestions.

Pray that God will open your mind and heart to God's desire for the world and you. Ask to be filled with a yearning to know the mind and heart of God insofar as is humanly possible. As unbelievable as it sounds, some of us become Christians yet resist the idea that we must then do some work in order to learn how to think and act like a Christian. We are a bit like the young man who claimed he wanted to become an engineer only to balk at being expected to learn calculus! We take a big step toward learning to live with faith's perspective when we cultivate the desire to do so.

Practice resetting priorities. Like the people to whom James wrote, we fall into the trap of acting as if our earthly lives will go on forever. As a result, we fill our days with attempts to secure wealth, position, power, pleasure or even self-esteem. Try playing a mental game. Imagine that you have only six to twelve months left to live. Then make a short list of the things you would feel good about asking God to allow you to accomplish in such a time. You may be surprised to see how much your list accords with the priorities of James, or for that matter the Sermon on the Mount.

Put some of the priorities into practice over the next six to twelve months. For example, if one of your new priorities is to better integrate faith and business, take a look at how you treat customers, employees and competitors. Ask and answer hard questions about honesty, fair play and com-

passion. Try praying for all those with whom you come into contact or who are affected by your decisions. Keep a record of what happens. Don't be surprised if you begin to care more deeply for others, make sacrifices for their sake and respect yourself more.

Test your emerging perspective and actions in dialogue with a trusted, Christian friend. Select a person whom you admire as Christian, perhaps someone you've secretly longed to imitate. Share your hopes with him or her, ask for prayer and ask for feedback as you share what you believe God is starting to do with your life. Ask your friend to be a kind of James to you, someone who loves you enough to tell you truth, whether the truth flatters or hurts.

James's vision calls us to believe and act as if it is possible to get in touch with God's perspective and begin to act on it. Given the tone of his letter, I can almost see James patting his foot, favoring us with a long stare, and saying, "Why are you standing around? Get started!"

Written by Mike Smith, pastor, First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Knowing What Really Matters

James 5:1-6

Theme: Christian faith is marked by a merciful lifestyle that advocates for a meaningful existence for all people.

Introduction

She was nine months pregnant and sitting on a cot in our church gymnasium the first time I met her. "She is due any day now," was the word from the director of the homeless shelter program that had brought her and several dozen other homeless persons to the church building for a hot meal and a warm bed on a cold winter's night.

Before the night was over, this single young woman was in labor and on her way to a local hospital to give birth. This was not her first child, nor would it be her last. Before the week was over, she was back in our gym with her newborn.

What began that week was an unanticipated journey by a growing number of persons in our congregation. We had participated for many years in CARITAS (Churches Around Richmond Involved To Assure Shelter). Overcoming initial resistance, the church had committed itself to one week a year to minister to homeless persons by providing them with meals and hot showers, washing and mending their clothes, socializing with them and providing them a safe place to spend the night.

Our church, like so many others in the Richmond, Virginia area, always found the week to be a rewarding immersion

in hands-on ministry. This young woman with the new baby, however, opened our eyes in a deeper way to the origins, daily reality and uncertain future of the least among us.

This homeless mother might as well have been from another planet, compared to the upper-middle class culture of our congregation. But she and her children won the hearts of several of our women, who began to explore how they (and ultimately our entire church) might work with her to offer her a home, an education, a stable income and basic necessities to lead to a more secure and hopeful future.

As you can surmise, our relationship with her continued beyond the one week. Tutoring, childcare, food preparation, financial planning, furniture gathering, transportation, emotional support and spiritual direction became part of the fabric of the church's ministry with her. It would seem that we have done a lot on her behalf; but she has taught us much in the course of our years together, as well.

She has been more than a "mission project." She has been an education in the cruel cycle of poverty and survival. Many in our church have rejoiced in her triumphs, wept over her struggles and been offended by lies, questionable choices and ingratitude. The gulf between her culture and ours, her values and ours, not to mention her lifestyle and ours, has been wide.

Such is the price and nature of ministry.

The Biblical Witness

James 5:1

A Prophetic Warning

¹Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you.

Sounding much like a Hebrew prophet, James returned to a theme that is repeated throughout his letter (1:9-11, 27; 2:1-7, 15-16; 4:13-16): keep both wealth and poverty in perspective. Wealth is not an irrefutable evidence of God's favor upon a life, nor is poverty unmistakably indicative of God's disfavor.

James issued the same summons to careful consideration of one's life before God as does Isaiah (1:18): "Come now." Note that James had already used this same summons in 4:13. James' warning was consistent throughout his letter. Riches can lead one away from God (cf. Lk 12:16-21); their pursuit can take priority over serving God and others (cf. Lk 18:18-25); and valuing them can ultimately lead to personal corruption and the unjust treatment of those in need (cf. Lk 16:19-31). James saw the gulf between rich and poor widening and creating both economic disparity and a dangerous potential for spiritual impoverishment.

It is difficult to imagine the "rich" to whom James addressed the warning as being anyone other than outside the community of believers. The more important point is that they were to be the recipients of a very unexpected future: misery and woe. Rather than reveling in their abundance, James called upon them to shriek with terror at what awaited them.

As we will see at the end of the focal passage, what condemned them was not their wealth, but the means by which they had obtained and maintained it. Their preoccupation with accumulation was symptomatic of a lifestyle devoid of divine priorities.

James 5:2-3

Musty, Rusty and Dusty

²Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days.

Wealth has a short shelf-life. Ample food, clothes and money, all signs of prosperity, simply do not last. James used the Greek perfect tense, which portrays the wasting away of earthly wealth as if it had already happened! The greed and arrogance the author spoke of in 4:13-17 resulted in an accumulation of goods that had no lasting value. The inevitable decomposition of these goods stands as stark evidence of their fleeting nature.

The passionate declaration of James echoed the words of Jesus: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:19-21). The difference is that where we may consider Jesus’ words as a call to repentance, James simply made a declaration of judgment upon those who built wealth on the backs of the less fortunate. The ruling wealthy were, in fact, ruled by “their” wealth.

What the materialists had stored up for themselves turned out to be judgment (cf. Romans 2:5). The consumers had become the consumed.

James 5:4-6 **The Problem with Me, Myself and I**

⁴Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You

have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

We might have expected these words to appear before the words of judgment contained in verses 1-3. Their appearance now gives the reasons for the indictment of the callous rich.

One clear message of this passage is that God hears the cries of the oppressed and of the unfairly treated. Justice is God’s standard and God’s ultimate goal for all. Those who choose to live at the expense of others and to ignore the plight of those in need will answer for that choice.

Exploitation is the theme of verse 4. Not paying a fair wage in a timely fashion is a sin against God. James called the deaf ears of the “haves” to listen to the judgment of God upon their mistreatment of the “have-nots.” The Lord of hosts, Lord Sabaoth, Lord of power, the Lord who rules— hears the anguish of the powerless. The Law was very explicit on this point: pay the laborer at the end of each day what is due him or her, for his or hers is a day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14-15). This principle was reaffirmed by the prophets (see Jer 22:13) and recognized by Jesus (Matt 20:8; Lk 10:7).

Selfishness draws James’s attention in verse 5. The implication is that luxury (“softness” is the sense of the original language) and pleasure (this could also be translated “self-indulgence”) have been obtained at the expense of others. Lack for the unfortunate means excess for the fortunate.

Rather than fattened hearts that grow out of the unjust treatment of the poor, God calls us to purified hearts and cleansed hands (4:8) that apply themselves to humility, obedience and service. What Jesus called the second

great commandment, loving one's neighbor (cf. Lev 19:18), issues in equal regard for and just treatment of all people. Verse 6 charges the unjust materialists with oppression of the righteous. To whom does "the righteous one" refer? Amos 2:6-8 uses this term in reference to the poor. In James 2:6, it is the rich who oppress or condemn the poor; and in James 4:2, it is the greedy who murder to obtain what is not theirs. The righteous one surely represents each one whose day in court has not yet come—those who wait for justice to be served. Thus there is a call for "patience" (cf. 5:7) until the coming of the Lord to set things right.

Could this term refer to Jesus? Undoubtedly it can. The chilling words of Jesus in Matthew 25:45, words of judgment upon the nations, are, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." The ones who cannot resist their unfair treatment and the one who did not resist unfair treatment upon the cross will unite when all are brought to the same level in the worship of God: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6b).

Integrating Faith and Life

James called for every follower of Christ to be a "doer of the word" (1:22). In so doing, every Christian strives to make his or her faith and life consistent. Is it any wonder that the hallmarks of the early church were that they loved one another and that they diligently looked after one another's material needs as well as one another's spiritual needs?

The earliest followers of Jesus shared their resources with each other and with any and all who were in need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). Can we do any less? In a world created and gifted by God, our ministry ethic will lead us away from exploitation of others and toward servanthood. The church

is to set an example not of accumulation, but of giving self away.

The next time you see bargain prices on clothes the label of which reveals were manufactured in a third world country, remember those who work for less than a fair wage to make that attractive discount possible. Perhaps it's time to write the letter to a corporate headquarters or to your legislator that you've been putting off.

The next time you become weary with a television appeal to contribute to the monthly financial support of a child living half a world away, remember the experience of Tony Campolo. He tells of a woman in an impoverished country he visited who ran after the small chartered plane as it was taking off to return him to the United States. In her arms she carried her baby. She held out the child, screaming over the roar of the plane's engine, begging Campolo to take her baby home with him so that it would not die. Could you afford the modest monthly expense of supporting such a child?

The next time your heart becomes hard at the thought of ministry to the unprivileged in your community, remember the young, pregnant, homeless woman my church took under its wing. Although her life is far from perfect, it is far better than it was when first we met. I had the privilege of baptizing her several years ago. Whether our church's ministry with her has been "successful" or not will not rest on her turning out the way we think she should. It will rest on whether we have been faithful in following God's desire that we be the presence of Christ in her life.

To whom is God calling you to minister?

Written by Bert Browning, senior pastor, Huguenot Road Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.

Practicing Patience

James 5:7-11

Theme: Christian faith results in focused, honest living that places all of life's circumstances in perspective.

Introduction

One of the most grueling of all bicycle races is the Tour De France. The race covers about 2000 miles, including some of France's most difficult, mountainous terrain. Cyclists eat and drink on the run and encounter extremes of heat and cold.

One contestant, Gilbert Duclos-Lassalle, described the event in a *National Geographic* article titled, "An Annual Madness." To train for it, Lassalle rides his bicycle 22,000 miles a year.

What kind of prize makes people endure so much hardship and pain? \$10,000? \$100,000? No. It's just a special winner's jersey.

What then motivates the contestants? Lassalle sums it up: "Why, to sweep through the Arc de Triomphe on the last day. To be able to say you finished the Tour de France."

Christians, like professional cyclists, must train hard and overcome various barriers and distractions as they prepare for ministry and mission in the world. They also need to exercise patience and develop endurance capabilities as

they move toward the "finish line," the point of ultimate victory.

James 5:7-11 encourages us to stay focused, to keep the big picture in view, to promote relational health and to draw inspiration from the examples of others who have already reached their goal.

The Biblical Witness

James 5:7-9

Stay Focused

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!

If, as James 5:1-6 suggests, God judges the wicked, God also rewards the righteous. But such rewards may not be immediately apparent. In such an environment, Christians cultivate an attitude of patient endurance, learning to live as people of integrity and grace as they confidently await the return of Christ and the final victory of God.

The New Testament assures us that Christ will return just as he departed (Acts 1:9-11). He will judge those who reject him (Matt 24:37, 39; cf 2 Thess 2:8) and reward those who love and serve him (1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19). But God is patient, and that is why the return of Christ has been delayed. God desires every person to have the opportunity to choose to repent and find salvation through Christ (2 Pet 3:8-9).

James encouraged his readers to exercise similar patience as they live and work, waiting expectantly for the Lord's return, even when times are tough. Suffering builds perseverance; waiting strengthens character. I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 8:22-25 in *The Message*, which in part reads: "Waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting." We grow and bear fruit as we wait.

To illustrate his point, James used the image of a farmer sowing seed and waiting in hope of a good harvest. He was probably thinking of a poor tenant farmer whose livelihood—perhaps even the survival of his family—depended on adequate rain and other uncontrollable variables. In the eastern Mediterranean world, a good harvest depended on two periods of sustained rainfall: October-November (or December-January), and March-April—the "early and late rains." Familiar with the Palestinian climate, James used the image as a graphic illustration of expectant, patient endurance and trust in the goodness of God.

In verse 8, James again counseled patience. As they wait, Christians are to strengthen their hearts. Paul gave the same advice to the Christians at Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:13; cf 2 Thess 2:17). Waiting for rain, or waiting for union with Christ, it was quite possible to grow depressed or disillusioned through adverse circumstances, or false teaching, or unsupportive friends.

How might they strengthen their hearts? By mutual encouragement, corporate worship, learning from the past, praying for divine help, exploring the nature of the Christian hope and living as if their generation were the last before the return of Christ. James clearly showed that the reason why they needed to strengthen their hearts was the immi-

nence of the Lord's return. God has not changed; God is Lord of history: sovereign, faithful, compassionate. God deserves our allegiance and obedience (see 2 Pet 3:11-12a; 18). God will give us strength to persevere in the work to which he calls us.

There is nothing wrong with grumbling—as long as it is limited to groaning within ourselves in response to painful circumstances. But sometimes our eyes are not on the Lord and his promises but on the successes or failings of others. We all know the temptation to grumble and complain and even slander others in response to hard times, injustice or unrealized hopes.

James called his Christian friends not only to exercise personal patience but also to encourage relational harmony as they awaited Christ's return. He warned of imminent divine judgment for those who deliberately persist in discordant behavior (cf 4:11-12; Matt 7:1). The promise of Christ's return is an encouragement that God will dispense justice to wicked sinners; it is also a warning to Christians to examine their lives and change their behavior so they are ready to welcome Christ when he returns.

James 5:10-11 **Learn from Others**

¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

James returned here to the theme of patience. His readers would have been familiar with the wonderful stories from

Hebrew scripture and the intertestamental literature—stories of uncommon fortitude and faith amid persecution and apostasy (e.g. 2 Maccabees; Heb 11). To do the will of God and proclaim the Word of God is no protection against hardship and persecution. Indeed it may invite martyrdom; it often has. For example, in Matthew 10:11-25, as Jesus sent out the Twelve on mission, opposition mounted: as sheep among wolves, they were warned of being arrested, betrayed, hated, attacked, persecuted and killed.

A few decades later the church historian Tacitus observed that “In their deaths Christians were made a mockery. They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire—so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night.”

We might not expect such horrific physical opposition today, but that is not to suggest that we will not feel persecution for the sake of Christ. Persecution can take more subtle forms.

Paul Windsor is principal of Carey Baptist College in New Zealand. When he was a pastor in Invercargill, on the southernmost tip of that nation’s South Island, his church hosted a team of missionaries from Operation Mobilization’s *Doulos* ship. They had sailed from port to port, evangelizing all around Australia and New Zealand. “I have never seen such a bunch of disheartened, discouraged Christians,” Windsor reflected. “The antipathy to the gospel in our two nations had got the better of them. In so many places Christianity, and the church, and Jesus, are just a joke.”

Reflecting on biblical, historical and contemporary stories of godly believers would show that suffering Christians are following in noble footsteps. Read the biblical narratives.

Discover these prophets who spoke God’s word! Read good biographies of missionaries, evangelists and advocates for social justice. Communicate with cross-cultural Christian workers. Use the vast resources of books like *Operation World*, mission agencies and mission websites. Take an interest in the activities of Amnesty International and other similar organizations. Learn from their examples of godly suffering and patience.

In verse 11, James congratulated those who endured. But why did he mention Job, who appears somewhat less than patient with God’s seemingly ambivalent response to his tragic circumstances! Job’s story was a favorite among first-century Jewish audiences, and James’ readers might have been expected to have known it.

Job experienced enormous undeserved suffering, yet he endured and emerged whole, his faith in God enriched rather than depleted and his loyalty to God strengthened rather than eroded. Job’s experiences teach us that righteousness does not exempt us from life’s difficulties. Bad things do happen to good people, as we all know. But Christian faith, enriched through experience, equips us to deal with these difficulties and view them from a broader perspective. And, as Job eventually discovered, God is not only great and holy but also compassionate and merciful.

Advice for Living

James gave us clear, practical advice for living as followers of Jesus in a hostile environment. In this passage, he drew attention to the need for patience in ministry and mission; the rich narrative resources of the Bible and the history of God’s people; the compassionate and merciful character of our God; and the imperative to live and work in the con-

scious knowledge that Christ will soon return as Savior and Judge of all.

How could you be more patient? Does the awareness of the imminence of the Lord's return make you feel anxiety or peace, fear or joy? How does the story of Job, or Jeremiah, or John the Baptist, or a great figure from church history help to strengthen your heart? How do these stories inspire you to endure suffering or persecution? When have you experienced God's compassion or mercy, and what effect did this have?

Father Zossima is the wise old monk who forms the spiritual center of gravity in Fyodor Dostoevsky's last and greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. On his deathbed, Zossima recalls how, as a boy in church, he was deeply moved as he watched incense rising from a censer to meet a ray of sunlight high overhead, and as he heard the ancient story of Job read aloud:

Ever since then—only yesterday I took it up—I've never been able to read that sacred tale without tears. And how much that is great, mysterious and unfathomable there is in it! Afterwards I heard the words of mockery and blame, proud words, "How could God give up the most loved of his saints for the diversion of the devil, take from him his children, smite him with sore boils so that he cleansed the corruption from his sores with a potsherd—and for no object except to boast to the devil, 'See what my saint can suffer for my sake!'" But the greatness of it lies just in the fact that it is a mystery—that the passing earthly show and the eternal verity are brought together in it. In the face of the earthly truth, the eternal truth is accomplished ...

What a book the Bible is, what a miracle, what strength is given with it to man ... And what mysteries are solved and revealed! God raises Job again, gives him wealth again. Many years pass by, and he has other children and loves them ...

It's the great mystery of life that old grief passes gradually into quiet, tender joy. The mild serenity of age takes the place of the riotous blood of youth. I bless the rising sun each day, and, as before, my heart sings to meet it, but now I love even more its setting, its long slanting rays and the soft, tender, gentle memories that come with them, the dear images from the whole of my long, happy life – and over all the Divine Truth, softening, reconciling, forgiving! My life is ending, I know that well, but every day that is left me I feel how my earthly life is in touch with a new infinite, unknown, but approaching life, the nearness of which sets my soul quivering with rapture, my mind glowing and my heart weeping with joy.

Written by Rod Benson, Director of the Centre for Christian Ethics, Morling College, Sydney, Australia.

Praying with Confidence

James 5:13-18

Theme: Christian faith results in confident and powerful praying.

Introduction

Few aspects of Christian faith elicit as much certainty, confusion or conversation as prayer. What constitutes prayer? How should one pray? How often should one pray and for what? Volumes have been written and many sermons preached on this topic, and yet it often seems that we prefer talking about it to doing it.

Church history offers us many examples of spiritual giants through the ages who placed prayer at the center of their faith lives. Martin Luther has been frequently quoted as stating that the busier he became, the more he needed to pray; he was known to rise at three in the morning to pray for three hours. More recently, Mother Theresa has shone as one whose life was suffused with prayer.

My own life has been graced with a friend whose life is a living testimony to the power of consistent prayer. Marti Wilson has suffered since early childhood from a painful and debilitating disease, and yet as a mature woman, she radiates joy and peace. She cannot remember a time when she did not recognize the presence of God in her life and her dependence on God.

For many years now, Marti has devoted several hours each morning to scripture reading, prayer and journaling. The most tangible outcome of her disciplined prayer time, she says, has been a growing awareness of the sovereignty and imminence of God—an awareness that is almost visceral; when for some reason she misses her prayer time, she experiences discomfort. “I don’t feel right in my skin,” she says.

Marti’s prayers grow out of her immersion in scripture, her involvement in community and her concern for familial relationships; sometimes they are a gift from God, as the Holy Spirit speaks to her. She has witnessed the effect her prayers have had on family, friends and acquaintances—prayers of which they may not have been overtly aware. After Marti has prayed for them, people have experienced a lightening of their burdens and spirits; been granted physical and emotional comfort; and realized peace and joy in their lives, sometimes for the first time. She is also convinced that her wonderful relationship with her husband owes much to their mutual prayer support. Although Marti is often housebound, she says that her prayer life helps her to feel deeply connected to her community and church family.

The Biblical Witness

James 5:13

At Life’s Extremes and In Between, Pray

¹³Are there any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

James began his directive on prayer with the observation that all of life’s realities are part of God’s concern. He emphasized this point by drawing attention to the opposite extremes of human experience—suffering and cheer. In

such circumstances, and by implication everything in between, God waits to be approached. In so doing, James ended his letter on the same note as he began it. God, “who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly,” (1:5) is to be praised as the generous giver, just as God is to be importuned (“ask” 1:5) when one is in need.

James’s approach to prayer should be viewed in the context of prayer as understood by the Jews. As so clearly revealed in the Gospels (and indeed, throughout the Bible), prayer is characterized not as a shopping list but as an ongoing conversation with God. Jesus spent much time in prayer, simply communing or being with God. As has often been said, prayer is the heart’s conversation with God.

It is also important to note that James spoke of prayer in the context of the faith community (“any among you,” v 13), not as solely a private and personal exercise.

James 5:14-16 Praying in Faith

¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

The next section of James’s discourse on prayer has received a great deal of attention over the centuries. Again, we must be careful to understand it in the context of life in the Jewish communities of the time.

Visiting, praying for and anointing the sick were all common activities in the approach to illness among the Jews. Oil was widely used for medicinal purposes in the Greco-Roman world. Its effectiveness would be derived as much from the hands that applied it as from any intrinsic merit of the oil itself, as it cleansed and soothed and (perhaps most importantly of all) connected the ill and wounded with the healer.

Only in recent years has modern science begun to rediscover the therapeutic properties of touch, which was so prevalent in ancient times. For the Jews, oil also had profound religious symbolism, as it was used for the anointing (consecrating or setting apart) of priests, kings and prophets.

The very nature of illness in James’s world had another communal component that we often overlook, for it threatened the community as much as it threatened the individual. Many illnesses in the ancient world would have invoked social ostracization of the individual as the community attempted to protect itself from a potentially infectious disease. With the advent of vaccines and antibiotics, the western world has largely forgotten the ancient overwhelming fear associated with illness, until the last decade when new and virulent diseases such as AIDS, SARS and the Ebola virus have suddenly reminded us how vulnerable we are.

In this context, James’s instructions are revolutionary. He actually empowered the sick by encouraging them to summon the elders of the church, using the word *ekklesia* (church or assembly) for the first time in his letter (v 14). Since the elders represented the assembly in an official capacity, the implication here is that the sick are not to be isolated from the community, but to be enfolded by it.

Specifically, the community's appointed leaders (the elders) were to pray over the sick and to anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord (v 14). This formula is consistent with early Christian usage, other examples being found in Acts 3:6 and 4:10. The "name" of Christ was equivalent to Christ himself, and as manifesting God, took the place of the name of God (see James's earlier comment in 2:7). To anoint in the name of the Lord was to do so on the authority of Jesus Christ, Godself.

Verses 15 and 16 offer parallels to Jesus' healings as recorded in the Gospels. James shared the Gospels' confidence in the power of prayer ("the prayer of faith," v 15) to heal and to save. The connection between healing and the forgiveness of sins for an individual is obvious, but James went on to apply the healing to the community as a whole: "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (v 16).

Scripture does not distinguish clearly between spiritual and physical healing, as demonstrated in Jesus' own ministry (see Matt 9:5-7 and Jn 5:14). Although physical sickness is not the same thing as spiritual sickness (sin), both have some of the same effects on communities. This is as true for contemporary society as it was in the first century. Both threaten the health and the stability of the community, and the human tendency is to isolate and shun those who are ill so that the threat is removed. We can see evidence of this tendency in the response of many communities to those who first contracted AIDS (including children), or to those who have broken the law.

In contrast to this isolating tendency, James mandated a counter-cultural response. Those in the community are to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another so that they as individuals and the community as a

whole may be saved and healed. James recognized that it is not only those who are obviously ill who need healing but that all have weakness or sin. James presented a vision of an intentional community that is built on mutual support and prayer instead of fear and exclusion.

James 5:17-18 **Praying with Results**

¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

To underscore his confidence in the "prayer of the righteous," James drew on Jewish history for an example that would have immediate name recognition for his readers. Elijah was one of the great prophets of Israel, having campaigned vigorously and fearlessly on behalf of Yahweh against the Canaanite worship of nature and later of Baal; the book of 1 Kings records his many miracles and exploits. Jesus referred to John the Baptist as an Elijah, and Elijah appeared with Moses on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

James referred to the story in 1 Kings 11-18 in which Elijah prayed fervently for a drought which subsequently ensued, lasting three-and-a-half years, and only ended when Elijah prayed for rain. These chapters also record the defeat of the priests of Baal at the hands of Elijah and Yahweh.

In describing Elijah, James included two small elements that carry significant weight. Elijah is identified as "a human being like us." The Greek is literally "of like feeling" and suggests a point of identification with James's readers; the

implication is that if Elijah could accomplish great things through prayer, so could they. Considering the reverence that the three disciples extended to Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, we can see the intention behind James's description.

The second element is the implied link between a "righteous" person whose prayer is powerful and Elijah; the implication here is that there is a connection between the persecuted prophet and the oppressed community James addressed. The abundant rain and harvest that were the outcome of the prayers of this righteous man could be theirs also if they prayed likewise.

God Is Able

In one of the churches I pastored, I was asked to lead a healing service for a young wife and mother who had suffered debilitating pain from a back injury for over eight years. Her glowing faith and patient trust in God, undergirded by a strong prayer life, had carried her through excruciating periods, such as her pregnancy, and had enabled her to minister to other young women in the congregation.

Eventually, circumstances led her to a point at which she could confidently ask God for healing. Following James's directions, I led a simple home service to ask for God's intervention in her condition. In a moving manifestation of the Holy Spirit, she received a physical healing that has been permanent; she and her husband have had a significant ministry of encouragement and witness.

When other people do not receive such a response to their prayers, we are brought up short. Why this one, and not that one? What's the point of praying?

But as my friend Marti's life demonstrates, prayer is not just about sending out SOS's: save our ship, send our stuff, save our souls. Prayer that is consistent and confident has the power to change lives—our own and others'—in quietly significant ways. That is not to say that prayer cannot affect dramatic results. When Marti was in her twenties, her disease had progressed to the point that she had become bed-ridden; she believes that it was the sustained prayers of her church family that led to a marked physical relief of her condition, albeit not permanent.

But for Marti, the most important benefit of prayer is the intense awareness of God's presence and the peace and joy that brings, as well as the deep connection to the people around her. Marti's prayers are raised in the unshakeable confidence that God "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20), and they are rooted in a strong sense of community that allows her to offer them up on behalf of those who do not know how to pray with confidence or who may be too weak to pray for themselves.

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