

James

Operation Me

Collection of Sermons from 2008

Table of Contents

Contents

- Table of Contents 2
- Introductory Note 3
- Mind 4
- Ears 10
- Eyes..... 15
- Hands..... 20
- Tongue 25
- Heart..... 31
- Wallet 39
- Feet..... 45
- Knees 50
 - Bonus Content: How To Get Answers to Prayer 54
- Home Group Study Guide 57
 - Week 1: Mind 58
 - Week 2: Ears..... 59
 - Week 3: Ears..... 61
 - Week 4: Hands 63
 - Week 5: Tongue..... 65
 - Week 6: Heart 67
 - Week 7: My Wallet 69
 - Week 8: My Feet 70
 - Week 9: My Knees 71

Introductory Note

Thanks for taking interest in reading this collection of sermons. I hope it blesses you. I just want to say a couple of things up front before you get started.

First, this is a collection of the scripts that I wrote for myself to preach on Sunday mornings. They have not been edited or updated or corrected or *anything* since they were first delivered. I've tried to go through and make them readable but I didn't change them. Therefore, if the illustrations seem dated, the grammar is clunky, or the wording is weird at times, that's why. (Though, if something is woefully indecipherable, please let me know!)

Second, and this is related to the first, many of these sermons were written when I was only a few years out of seminary and still trying to figure a lot of things out. It's possible that some of the wording is brash, the concepts simplistic, or the conclusions erroneous. I hope they're not, but hey – I was (and am) still learning. Please read generously.

Third, I wasn't as good at footnoting back then as I am now. I've tried to track down the sources but sometimes it was impossible. My intention isn't to steal content or share other's ideas as my own, so if you come across something that seems familiar and you know where it's from, please let me know so I can update.

Thanks again! I honestly hope these collections bring glory to God and serve His church. 😊

Mind

Have you ever had a serious operation? One that required you to be sedated, wheeled in on a gurney and sliced open by a skilled surgeon. What about a different kind of “operation”? One where a bone was set, or where something was cleared out, or they had to... gulp... scope something?

I haven't had many operations in my life. I had my tonsils out when I was little and fractured my wrist when I was a teenager, but all in all, I haven't spent a long time around doctors or operations. Perhaps you've had heart surgery ... or an operation on your ears to help you hear... or an operation done to help you use your hands – like carpal tunnel... or maybe brain surgery... maybe you've had some kind of operation on your eyes, feet or knees.

It's no surprise to people who believe in the world-wide effects of sin, that our bodies are falling apart, piece by piece, and that they need special interventions sometimes to keep us going. Artificial hips, mechanical heart valves, shunts, tubes and all manner of hardware stuffed into various parts of our flesh so that we can try to carry on in some normal fashion for another day.

I have a new baby now. You all can see her next week. This morning, as I speak, Eowyn is only two days old. She was born on Friday morning at 4:16am, weighing a healthy 8 lbs 12 oz. She is bright, alert, happy and feeding well. And though I think she's perfect, I know that there's going to be something wrong with her physical body someday. I'm not being morose, just realistic. I know that her genetic code isn't perfect, and she's going to have some kind of problem... it's just the way life is. And someday, whether she's 3, 30 or 90... she's probably going to need an operation to fix something. Heck, now that I'm 30, I'm probably looking forward to some medical interventions in my future as well!

For the next 9 weeks or so, we are going to be looking at a letter from the New Testament, near the back, called simply, James. It is a letter written to the whole church... something called a “general epistle”. And, it's a sort of “medical intervention” of its own.

What surprised me most as I studied the book, is how he approached the individual issues he wants to address... he uses body parts. Mind, ears, eyes, hands, tongue, heart, feet and knees are all either mentioned or implied in this book. How to use them, how we can honour God with them, and how we can misuse them to hurt ourselves and others.

And so, I've decided to call this series, “Operation Me”. The idea here is that just like a doctor would look at a body part, so does the Holy Spirit, through James, look at our various parts and diagnose the problems, and tell us how to fix it.

If we reject or ignore a doctor's advice and try to go about our lives as though we don't have the problem... it doesn't mean the problem has gone away. You can't will away a sore throat, cancer, or a broken bone. And, chances are, without the operation, it's just going to get worse. But if we have the humility to say to the doctor, “I need your help, this is causing issues for me, I can't fix this on my own, and I'm willing to do what it takes to make it better”, then we have a much greater chance of living a healthy life, reaching maturity, and being most effective in what we want to do.

So there's the introduction, but before we get too far into the study, I want to give you a basic outline and background on the book that will hopefully ground it in reality, and help us understand the author better.

Let's start with the Author, a man who only identifies himself at the beginning of the letter in 1:1 as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The first question is simple. Which James is this?

There are 4 major options of who this could be. Just as James is a popular name today, it was also popular back then.

1. The first option is that it is James the apostle, son of Zebedee, brother of John... the two that Jesus calls "The sons of Thunder." The fisherman that Jesus called to follow him. It probably wasn't him, because he was beheaded as a martyr in 44 AD... we read about it in Acts 12. This letter was written somewhere between 47 and 49 AD.
2. The next choice is another apostle named James, the son of Alphaeus. We read about him in Matthew 10. Not much is known about this man. Some people think that Matthew and James were brothers based on Mark 2:14, but that's about it. There is really no indication that this is the James who wrote it.
3. The third option is actually a father of one of the apostles, James, the father of Judas – not Judas Iscariot -- which we read about in Luke 6:16. This guy is even more obscure, and very likely would not have been the one to write such an authoritative letter to the church.

So this leads us to the 4th option. James, the brother of Jesus. This is the most likely guy, and the one that the majority of scholars agree wrote it.

Let me give you a bit of background on this James:

He was another son of Mary and Joseph, and one of the little brothers of Jesus. Jesus, according to Matthew 13:55-56, had at least 4 brothers and a couple sisters. Jesus was the eldest, of course, and one theory says that the reason he waited until he was 30 to begin his ministry is that his father Joseph had died and that he had to care for the family until the next brother could take his place.

What do we know about this guy? First, we know that James thought Jesus was wrong, and possibly even crazy throughout his earthly ministry. John 7 tells us that none of Jesus' brothers believed in Him, and even mocked him and made fun of him. Mark 3 tells us that at one point Jesus' mother and brothers made a special trip to where Jesus was staying to take him away because they thought, "He is out of his mind." They hear Jesus is doing miracles, gathering followers, and saying some pretty far-out things... and they want to gather Him up and stick him in the funny farm.

So how does this James become the author of a letter that begins, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."? Well, if we read 1st Corinthians 15:7 we get an idea. Paul is telling us about what happened after Jesus rose from the dead, and how many hundreds of witnesses there were to see the event... and Paul says in verse 7, "then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles." Jesus made a special trip to show Himself and to talk to His brother. I believe this was such an act of love. I would imagine that even though James and Jesus had their issues like any brothers do, they were probably still close, and Jesus' death would have hurt.

So Jesus appears to James. What I wouldn't give to know what happened at that moment! And after that, James' whole world is rocked, and his whole life changes. Meeting Jesus has a way of doing that.

Galatians 2:9 tells us that James becomes a pillar in the church, and we know from other scriptures that James was the first to see Paul after his conversion. When Peter was released from Prison, the first person he sent a message to was James, who was probably the leader of the Apostles! When we read about the first "Jerusalem Counsel" in Acts 15, when the whole group had to find out what to do with all of these new gentile believers, it is James who stands up, assimilates the information, leads the meeting, gives the biblical evidence to the group of Apostles, renders the judgment, and writes the letter!

This man goes from a mocker of Jesus, and thinking he's crazy... to calling himself a "servant of the Lord Jesus Christ." The word servant there is the word "bond-servant"... in other words, "slave", someone bought at a price and under the Lordship of a Master. Fox's book of martyrs says that James truly did believe Jesus was the most important person in the world by dying for his faith at age 44,

martyred by being thrown off of a high wall in the temple by the Jews, and then smashed on the head with a club. He died in 62 AD.

Briefly, I want to talk about the setting of the book. Where was it written to? James probably wrote this letter from Jerusalem, where he lived and served as one of the leaders of the Church. Verse 1 of James 1 tells us who he wrote it, “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.”

Jerusalem is where the Christian church really got started. Jesus walked the streets of this great city, taught in the temple, healed the people, and even wept over them. Jerusalem is where He was tried, crucified and buried. It’s also where He rose again and toured around showing Himself to many. The disciples, though the power of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, which we read about in Acts 2, preached in this city without fear to thousands of people who responded to the message.

Of course, the vast majority of these people were Jews. Now, “the twelve tribes” that James writes to weren’t the same one that we think of from the Old Testament... they didn’t really exist at this time. They had been scattered and deported all over the world long before. This was God’s way of getting the world ready to receive the message that there was a Saviour for the whole world, and that He had come through the Jewish nation.

Now Jerusalem wasn’t the best place to be if you were a Christian. The apostles were persecuted often, and as we said, even martyred for their faith... this letter is written 10 years after the martyrdom of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It was a place in religious turmoil, with opposition from all sorts of various groups. It was also a place of political turmoil; a land ruled by foreigners, in occupied territory. Christians had no political pull here at all and they were forced to accept the fact that because of their faith in Jesus Christ, people would be against them and that the atmosphere would be hostile. Economically, the Jews were poor, and the Christians were poorer. Eventually, as we read about in Acts 11, a terrible famine came upon them, and it was even harder to live.

But yet, Christianity grew. And because of the persecution and famine in Jerusalem, people would leave and go live in other cities, but they would take their faith with them and start churches there.

James’ heart was for this body of believers scattered throughout the world. This letter is probably the first written in the whole New Testament, predating the gospels, and every other letter, except maybe Galatians. It was carefully circulated and copied over and over, and sent around to each church. James was concerned for the people as individuals, and for the churches they worshipped in. He wanted them to guard themselves, to live good lives that would honour God, to seek God in prayer, and to pray for, and take care of each other.

So let’s get into the first chapter and see what James talks about first here.

We don’t have a lot of time left this morning, but I wanted to point out a few things here. In light of what we’ve learned about James, and about the situation of the people in Jerusalem and that have been scattered, there is not too much surprise that when James starts his letter, he starts talking about “right thinking”. The very first word is the word of the letter in verse 2 is, “Consider...” That’s really where all operations start: Right thinking. In our mind. What goes on in our brain is just as critical to any operation as what is going on in the rest of our body.

We wouldn’t even go to the doctor unless our brains interpreted some kind of a problem. Whether it is pain, discomfort, depression, anxiety, stiffness, or some other ailment, it is the mind that first diagnoses the problem. So James’ first concern, and I believe one of God’s first concerns... is Right Thinking. James wants us, before we go on looking at the rest of our issues, to get our heads on straight. We are going to go through this very quickly, so I hope that you will be able to get into a home group this week and talk about it further.

Of course, writing to this group of persecuted, tempted and confused people throughout the world, the first thing James wants us to get right in our heads is how we view Joy and Trials. Now, these are seemingly opposite ideas, but James Joins them. Let's start reading at verse 2, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

The condition of many of these Christians was not that great. Many were poor, under persecution for their faith, had doubts about who Jesus was. They really were under "trials of many kinds". So James says to them, and to us, "consider it pure joy" when we go through this stuff... these "trials"... these unavoidable difficulties in life... these temptations and messes within and without, tests of faith, hard moral choices, and tragedy. Considering that all "pure joy" is all about right thinking. Not... positive thinking... right thinking.

Joy is not the same as happiness. James does not say, "Be happy" throughout this stuff... he says, "consider it pure joy". Joy, like love we talked about last week, is more of a decision than a feeling. It is a deep sense of well being that, even though at the time we may feel sorrow, tears, laughter, anger or pain, we choose to be joyful. It is a choice to live above feelings, not to deny them. It is not happiness, though choosing joy sometimes produces happiness. Joy is a choice that Christians make, because we believe in God's sovereignty over all things. Joy delights that God is good, and has a plan, and is grateful despite the context of what is going on.

James also gives us a "why" in verses 3 and 4. He says that when we go through these things, the potential is there to develop our character. It builds perseverance. And that perseverance creates maturity, and completeness. Through these bad things that will happen, we can learn to have right thinking, and learn more about God, the world and ourselves... and through this knowledge of God, and of life... we can have joy.

James here calls them "brothers". This is not the chiding of a mean older brother saying, "Suck it up", nor is the rebuke of a father saying, "Grow up!". Neither is it the harsh tone of a superior saying, "Leave your problems at home." This is a loving brother, who has been through a lot himself, saying "When life gives you lemons, God can help you make lemonade." "When there are clouds surrounding your life, there really is a silver lining in Jesus." "I know you're going through a lot now, but God isn't going to waste it... so consider the joy of the thought that these trials will lead to your maturity and completeness. You will be seasoned, experienced and well developed, able to help others. You will be better trained and fit for the tasks God has for you. Your weak spots and blind spots of the past are being corrected and cleared up... if you are willing to find your joy in God, and be open to what Jesus can teach you in this... you will find joy in your trials"

Next James wants us to have right thinking about wisdom. All of these trials, faced with joy, if you are listening to God, will end up in wisdom. Let's read verse 5, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." James seems to make the point that if we can't figure out how to live with joy, then we need to ask God for wisdom.

The root of right thinking is wisdom, and wisdom is the anchor of life. Without this anchor we will be tossed around all over the place. We can't see past the end of our nose, we end up getting very self centred and don't see the whole picture. We begin to think that we really are the center of the universe. Wisdom helps us to see God's plan in the middle of the mess, and that leads to Joy. James says, "If you need wisdom, ask God for it... he wants you to be wise, and is a generous giver."

And Verses 6-8 talks about right thinking about asking God, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That

man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

Some people take this passage and think that “not doubting” is connected with not having faith, or having weak faith. But that’s not the case, or none of our prayers would be answered! We all have weaknesses in our faith.

The word “doubt” there has nothing to do whatsoever to do with having a saving faith in Jesus, or a doubt that God can do something, or a lack of clarity about the situation... the word there is rooted in the concept of having a divided mind. Divided between self and God; my will and God’s will. James is really saying here is that when someone asks God for something... they need to make sure where their loyalty is placed. The picture that James uses of a person being tossed around by the waves one of someone who is tossed between the loyalty to themselves and their loyalty to God. A divided mind that wavers between choices, between thinking that God loves them, or doesn’t... between being focused on what they want, and what God wants. A divided mind takes God’s promises and commands and gives them equal authority with our feelings, desires and the world’s ideas... That is a divided mind. Faith in God recognizes that we have an absolute dependence on Him, and that He loves us so much that He wants to be involved in every aspect of our life. And that He knows best.

Verses 9-11 tells us to have right thinking about Prestigue and ego, “9The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. 10But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. 11For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.” James seems to be telling us that how much money we have in this world has nothing to do with how much God loves us... and that we need to understand the temporariness of life and riches. We’ll study this more in the coming weeks.

Verses 12-15 tell us to have right thinking about Sin and Temptation, “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

It is a rare thing for someone to be tested, tempted and tried, and not to succumb to sin... and James says so. Temptation is the word here. What is a temptation? “Something that tests one moral strength to resist sin.” James tells us to get our thinking right about this temptation stuff. First he says, “God doesn’t tempt.” God doesn’t want us to sin, and therefore won’t put things in front of us to cause us to do so. He doesn’t put stumbling blocks in our path... it is counter to His nature as a just God and loving Saviour. He does, however, because of the gift of free will, allow our “own evil desires” to “drag us away” and “entice” us.

That’s the picture of temptation that God gives us through James here next. That it comes primarily from our own minds. The devil may stick a thought into our minds, or there may be things around that play on our weaknesses... but the desire for sin is ours and ours alone. God says that we are tempted by our own evil desires... those are the thoughts, wants and needs inside each one of us... some that are healthy... like food, companionship, or justice... but when the way we fulfill those desires run counter to the will of God... we sin.

James uses the language of pregnancy and childbirth here to describe it. A thought enters our mind... one that tells us to fulfill a desire we have. We are hungry... and a thought tells us to eat. We are lonely, and the thought compels us to find companionship. We are angry, and the thought tells us we need justice.

Now, according to James, if we don't check that thought against the way God wants us to do it... we sin. Having the desire for food because we are hungry is not sin... but satisfying that hunger with only unhealthy food, addictive substances, or gorging ourselves until we are fat, sick, and bloated... is sin. Having the desire for companionship because we are lonely is not sin... but satisfying that desire by surfing for porn or making a booty call... is sin.

If we let that desire drag us away, we get enticed... the desire is "conceived"... and then we give in... and "give birth" to sin... and the end result of sin... as it always is... is death. Spiritual death, separation from God, a deadness inside that overwhelms and destroys our relationship with Jesus, the Father, the Church, and those we love, and destroys our joy. Sin always destroys, even though it may look like a great idea at the time.

Finally, in verses 16-18, James asks us to have right thinking about God. "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."

He says, "Don't be fooled!" God really does give perfect gifts, and really does love you passionately. Sin and temptation lies to us making us think that God doesn't give good gifts, and that His ways are a barrier to feeling good... and so we step outside of His ways and we try to go it ourselves! And there are always consequences. So James says... Don't let temptation and your own desires lie to you... Every good and perfect gift comes from God.

He doesn't change, and He hasn't changed. He will always be Good. The same God that took care of everyone in the bible, and all of the Christians before... will take care of you and me. We think that the sun and the moon are as fixed as it gets... but even they move... like shifting shadows. God has given to us words of truth! He loves us so much that He gives us the Bible to lead us and guide us. It's not like He's made this all a secret!

My hope and prayer for this series, as we work through it is that we will listen to those words, understand them better, study them in our homes, and let God diagnose us as we look into our own minds and souls to see what needs to be operated on, and have the courage to do it.

Ears

Shhhh... ok... listen. Just stop for a minute and listen. What do you hear? -- -- -- -- --

For some of you that time of silence was uncomfortable. Your brain was searching everywhere for some kind of noise to latch on to, because you are simply not used to being quiet. Granted, it's not all your fault. Silence is a commodity these days. In fact, I read somewhere that for a movie sound technician to get an hour of "nature sounds", they have to spend something like 16 hours in the forest to record it. There's always a jet, or a big rig truck somewhere far in the distance, or some other kind of noise that gets in the way.

We are inundated with noise everywhere in our lives, and it's forced into our heads. However, more and more often, it is we who chose to put the noise in there. Let me ask you this... do you have a quiet time? A silent time? A time where you go, by yourself, unplug and get quiet? A time where all you do is listen? Today we are going to talk about Right Listening.

I noticed five lessons about listening in this short passage that we are going to study here in James 1:19-27. Please turn there. Last week we talked about Right Thinking, and this week we are talking about Right Listening. It shouldn't be much of a surprise that these follow each other. If we are going to get our heads right about really important stuff... we need to be good listeners. Not good talkers. For us to be good thinkers, we need to be good listeners. In order to be a good listener, we need silence and focus. If you have an NIV you'll notice that this section is called listening and doing. There's no talking here, and no noise here... there is listening and doing. And Lesson one in how to be a good listener is this:

Verse 19, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Lesson 1: Keep mouth shut. The English translation of the beginning of this really downplay how this comes across when James is writing it. The first word of this section is actually the word *ISTE* or "KNOW". Important words came at the beginning of sentences in the Greek to give them emphasis. If they had exclamation points back then, it would have three of them. "Know this, my dear brothers!!!", James begins. We would say it today. LISTEN UP! The picture I see here is of a group of brothers and sisters in a big family that are running about, having fun, some are fighting, some are playing ball, others are running... and then one of the brothers yells out, "LISTEN UP! Everybody stop and be quiet!"

Lesson 1: Shut Up

In order to listen, everybody needs to stop, and keep their mouth shut. Remember last time when we talked about Right Thinking – about God, sin, prayer, prestige, wisdom, joy and trials? James follows it up with... "the only way that you are going to get your heads right about this stuff is if you stop moving, stop talking, and listen. Only then can your hearts and minds be changed."

It's the same with any relationship. Some people just have more words than others, and they talk more. And that's ok. We need people who like to talk. Jesus loves them too. The problem comes when all they do is talk, and when they are done talking, they close their ears, put on their headphones, walk away, and don't listen. That destroys a relationship. It bugs me to no end to watch people drive along in cars together and see one of the people with ear-buds in. C'mon! You're in a car, with your mom, or dad, or brother or sister... now is not the time to crank up your iPod! That's just rude. Just listen! You never know what might happen!

Another interesting point here is the term "slow to become angry". It seems a little out of place there. "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." What does being angry have to do with listening and speaking? Well, the anger here is the one that erupts when our egos are bruised... not one that comes when there is an injustice done. This is not righteous anger... this is the anger that happens

when we are personally hurt because our opinions aren't being heard, or when we are losing and argument, or when we feel offended or neglected, or we are so busy talking that we jump to conclusions and get upset about what we think the other person means... but we don't give them a chance to say it.. It's a prideful anger based on not being allowed to speak, or not listening.

Do you ever do that? Your in a meeting, or at the dinner table, or you want to talk to someone, and they just won't let you... and you get angry because they have the gall not to allow you to speak! Don't they know who you are? Don't they know how much my words can help them? If I'd only be allowed to speak, then I could solve all the problems! And we become angry.

Or this one: Some walks up and, "Hey, I just wanted to say..." And then we jump down their throat and accuse them of all sorts of things, in anger, because of what we think they are going to say? And they still haven't said 10 words! Those are the kinds of anger described here.

Lesson 2: Filtering

And so we move on to Lesson 2 on Right Listening: Filtering. Pure listening. Verse 21, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." Now this is where we get some context to the listening here. James isn't just talking about listening in general, though the principles do apply, but he's talking about listening to God's word, specifically. But, it goes both ways. Before we can listen, we need to filter out the garbage.

The original Greek here for "get rid of" denotes a "once and for all" action. The picture behind this term is one of a person who is wearing filthy, dirty clothes, and strips them off, and throws them away and never puts them back on. Progress in our spiritual life, which means our relationship with God... or progress in any other relationship for that matter... requires us to filter what we listen to. Spiritually, the only way we can "humbly accept the word" of God that He has "planted" in us, is to see sin for what it is, to stop justifying our sin, and decide once and for all to reject it. To filter the good noise, from the bad.

God, in 1 Kings 19:12 describes His voice as "a gentle whisper". It's not too often that God will shout to be heard... though sometimes He does. More often, He speaks through a clear, but quiet voice in our hearts. But that voice is easily drowned out when we fill our ears with noise. The noise of gossip, of harsh language, of paranoia, or with voices that tell us how great we are, or how stupid, ugly or annoying we are. That noise drowns out the God that is telling the truth about us, and about what's going on around us.

James calls it "moral filth". It's like cotton in our ears, or static on the radio. Our morality, how we conduct ourselves... our thought lives, the movies and TV we watch, the magazines and books we read, the websites we visit, the friends we listen to, the people we look up too... each of these either helps to filter out the noise, or adds to the noise. Immoral and foolish choices create more static and it becomes harder to hear the "still, small, gentle whisper of God". Moral choices are like a filter that clears out the cotton and helps us hear and focus on God's voice better. If you haven't heard God for a while, or ever at all: check what you are feeding your ears, eyes and mind, and ask if it is making too much noise for you to hear God.

Lesson 3: Acting On It

Verse 22, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."

There are some people in this world who need things spelled out, and others who refuse to listen. When I started thinking about things that were written down, that needed to be listened to, I started to think about some of the warning labels I've read on some of the products I've bought or seen, and thought I'd share them with you.

- On a Sear's hairdryer: "Do not use while sleeping."
- Hairdryer: Do not use while taking a shower.
- On packaging for a Rowenta iron: "Do not iron clothes on body."
- Windex : Do not spray directly in eyes.
- Bic Lighter: Ignite lighter away from face.
- Pillow Soft Earplugs: These ear plugs are nontoxic, but may interfere with breathing if caught in windpipe

Other Pictures:

1. Remove Child before folding
2. Nuts May Contain Nuts
3. Keep Right / Left
4. "This product moves when used" – written on a motorized scooter.
5. Don't put your baby in a box and close the lid
6. Wii – Pic of kid with bag... why do they make it look so fun?

James says, after listening to the whole thing and reading all the instructions, after quieting out hearts, getting rid of the noise, clutter and static, and listening to the Word of God that is planted in us... or conversely, in human interaction... after focusing our attention on the person and allowing them to speak everything they have said... then act.

The picture that James paints here is a somewhat comical one. It is a picture of a guy who walks up to a steel mirror and stares at himself. He sees that his hair is out of place, his teeth are green, his eyebrows are all over the place, he's still got peanut butter on his lips, he hasn't shaved and his clothes are wrinkled and filthy. And so, as he's looking at the mirror he sees that he's a mess... and then he takes one step away from the mirror... and immediately forgets what he looked like and goes about his day assuming that he looks great.

The mirror, in this illustration of James' is the Bible -- the words of God, the words of Jesus, and God's prophets and apostles, given to us for how we are to live best in this world. But, there are some barriers that we naturally seem to have to listening to God's word.

1. Some of us have access to God's word, we have a bible on our shelves, but we refuse to read it. We simply leave it there next to the dictionary and the world maps, and know that it's nice to have, but not really something that we're going to pick up and read very often... unless there's a movie that mentions it, or a question on Jeopardy that sparks something.
2. Some of us allow so many distractions that we simply cannot listen to what God is saying to us in the Bible. When we are reading it, we have music on, we're checking our e-mail, we are answering the phone, we are talking to our friends, wife, kids, or dog. Yes, the book is in our hands, and we are skimming the pages, but we are not giving it any kind of attention to allow it to impact us.
3. Some rely on an outdated translation of the Bible that is far too difficult to understand. There are some people who, for whatever reason, think that the original King James Version from the year 1610 is the only Bible that can be read. As though God speaks King James English. There are others who can't bring themselves to spend the five bucks to buy a new translation, and just use the excuse to say that they "don't really understand the bible". The Bible was written in everyday language, that everyone could speak and relate to, and has been translated into the common tongue of people since the beginning of when it was circulated. It's meant to be read and understood!

4. Some people are not accountable to anyone for their obedience to God's word. There are people who are never asked the question, "So, have you read your bible this week?" We, as believers, and as brothers and sisters who attend the same church, should have full licence to ask someone else in the church, "Did you read your bible this week?" Of course, there are many of us who don't want to answer that question, and so we're afraid to ask it of someone else! Can you imagine how different a church could be if everyone was holding everyone else accountable to reading their bible regularly?

Let me encourage you to remove as many barriers as you can to allow you to get into the mirror of God's word. Pick it up, read it and concentrate on it, buy a version that you can understand, with text big enough to read comfortably, make a plan on how you are going to read it, and then ask someone who knows you to hold you accountable to the plan.

Verse 25 tells us the secret, which isn't really a secret, to success in this life. "But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does." There's another word picture here for that term "looks intently." It's the Greek word PARAKUPTO and it means to bend the head and body down to inspect something curiously. It is the picture of someone who is stooping down with their head and body bent forward to examine something more closely.

Like when you're walking down the street and you see something on the ground that catches your eye. You don't give it a passing glance, but you stop, crouch down, squint your eyes, and inspect it. That's what James, and God, wants us to do with the bible. Stop what we're doing, stoop down, with our heads bowed, and study what is in front of us curiously. Look into it! What does that word mean? What website can I check out to find what this passage means? Maybe buy or borrow a commentary and do a whole bunch of squinting and intent study on the whole book! Maybe call Pastor Al and ask him what this means. Maybe get into a home group and look at it closely.

And then James says, after you have done your squinting and intent looking... go do something about it. Look into the Bible, study it, and then, instead of the man who walks away and forgets what he looks like, we move forward in life allowing those words to change how we do things. And then God says, we will be blessed in what we do. And that makes sense. If we listen to God, study His word, and allow it to change and enlighten us... then of course, we will know how to live in His world better!

Lesson 4: Remember

Verse 25 has an interesting part to it that I want to pull out of there. "But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does." Notice that middle part: "not forgetting what he has heard". The word there, EPELASMONA, has its root in the word that means to "neglect" or "stop caring for."

Anyone who plays an instrument, or a sport, or is learning a new language, or anything that requires practiced skill, understands this concept of "forgetting" because of "neglect." For a while I played the bass guitar in a band, and I'm not ashamed to say that I wasn't too bad. But it has now been years since I practiced! I picked it up the other day, and though I still remembered a lot, the fingers wouldn't do what I wanted them to. Neglecting practice, made me forget how to play.

It was the same when I was taking Greek in school. If I didn't go over my flash cards or do Greek for even one night, it was like someone had flushed out the whole thing. I needed to keep it up or I would forget.

Let me encourage you, and in this I am also speaking to myself, to make ways to remember. Once we have heard something or read something... whether the words of a trusted friend, a mentor, or

the scriptures... let us find a way to remember them. Write them down in a journal, or on a note card. Do something so that information doesn't slip away.

If you have ever been consistent in your devotionals, then you will know that there are some mornings when things happen. God speaks! His word is crystal clear for your situation in life, and you know that something special has happened. There has been a conviction of sin, a great encouragement, a song, or some other kind of encounter. And what do we do with it? So often, (and me included), we just let it pass by, and not record it. Wouldn't it be great, if during those times of doubt, fear, depression or temptation... that we would be able to look back and remind ourselves of our encounters with God because we have taken the time to remember them. Let us be consistent in remembering, and not neglecting our daily time with God, and also consistent in recording what is happening there.

Lesson 5: Be Diligent

And the last lesson that James gives us this morning about listening seems to be a restatement of the rest, and a reminder of the first. Lesson 5: Be Diligent. Verse 26, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

James reminds us that anyone who considers themselves "religious" should prove it with their actions. What is interesting here is that the word "religious" probably has its roots in the word "cry out", and can also be translated "worship." It's the word that describes religious rituals, liturgies, routines and ceremonies. Normally, the word that is used of genuine, God honouring, and God pleasing worship is the word EUSEBEIA.

James, throughout this book, makes this point over and over: There is a big difference between being religious, and being a Christian. There is a huge difference between practicing a faith, and having a faith that changes your life.

According to statistics I've read, most of Canada considers themselves to be "religious" in one way or another. Whether they are a part of an organized religion, or just "believe in God", or a "higher power", many people claim to be "spiritual." James lays it out for all to see.

If you really are religious... if you really believe in God... if you really are a devout follower of God... [and remember he's talking to the Christian church here]... then here's what it'll look like.

You'll listen more than you talk, keep a rein on your tongue, and look after the people that need looking after. If we really have had an encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, and the Creator of the universe and of every human being... the one "so loved the world that He sent His only Son" to die for it... and we actually do claim to be His people... then we will listen and act differently than the rest of those who don't.

Religion that doesn't squelch our pride and silence our tongue is no religion at all. Religion that doesn't open our ears to the still, small voice of God, is no religion at all... it is worthless. I hope you see this! What we claim to believe... if we claim to believe in Jesus... should radically change our life, and forever alter how we see, and act in the world.

Right Listening is a major part of this. I hope that this week you will find a place to be quiet. To listen to God. I hope that in your interactions with people, you will listen to what they say, even if it's hard to hear. And I hope that you remember the encounters you have with God and are diligently pursuing a moral life that opens your ears to hear Him more clearly.

Eyes

The bible actually talks a lot about our eyes. At the beginning of the story of humanity, in Genesis, the devil said that if Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that their “eyes would be opened, and they would be like God, knowing Good and Evil.” The first temptation was framed in a way to make them think that they weren’t seeing the whole picture. People hate thinking that there is something they are not seeing...

In the Proverbs we are told about some things that the Lord hates, and one of them is “Haughty Eyes.” ... eyes that are filled with self-righteous, arrogant pride.

Over and over the lovers in the Song of Solomon tell each other how much they love each others eyes, and how their eyes are connected to their passion for one another.

Jesus talked a lot about our eyes, and the importance of perceiving things rightly. In a very famous passage, Jesus uses an extreme illustration to describe how important it is that we deal with our sin problems when He says, “If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.”

Turn with me to Matthew 13:13. When someone asked Jesus why He taught with parables and stories, He answered, “This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.’” For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.”

Jesus seems to say that some people have their eyes open to the truth, while others refuse to open their eyes at all. After explaining why He used stories to teach, Jesus commended those around him saying, “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.”

It is amazing how important it is to our understanding of the world, of God, and of each other, that our eyes are working well, and that we are perceiving what we see well. Someone once told me that “our perception is our reality.” How we view things, no matter how distorted, or how wrong... is our reality. If we see ourselves as ugly, we will live as though we are ugly. If we perceive the world as against us, we will live in fear. If we perceive that we are loved and protected, we will live with security. How we view religion, how we perceive people, and what we feed our eyes is absolutely critical to this “Operation Me” because our perception becomes our reality. So it is very critical that the way we perceive things ACTUALLY IS in line with reality! In our passage today, James talks a lot about Right Perception.

We talked about right listening last week, and about how important it is that we hear well. Today we are going to talk about how important it is that we see well. And what James wants us to perceive rightly, is Religion.

James 1:27, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

What do you see religion as? When I say the word, “religion”, what picture springs to your mind? Long robes, long sermons, boring liturgy, smells, bells, traditions, incantations, monks, special prayers, incantations, idols, prayer books, large gothic buildings... what picture does the word “religion” conjure up in your mind?

James says that when God sees “pure religion”, it has nothing to do with the trappings and stuff that we see as religion. For God, “pure and faultless” religion looks like this: “to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

That’s true religion to God. To see people who are hurting, and in need, and to help them. To look out for those who are in distress and be the one to take the step in their direction... that’s one side of “pure and faultless” religion. The others side is “to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

When God looks into our hearts, or into any church... and He is going to evaluate them on how “religious” they are... there seems to be no place on His chart for the kind of building, the form of liturgy, the songs that are sung, the smells in the air, or the pictures on the wall. There seems to be two questions on the “how are they doing?” chart. “How do they treat each other?” and “Are they keeping themselves from being polluted?” And in many ways, the only way that we can pass this test, or do well on this chart, is to have the right perception of what God’s priorities are. We need to have the right perception of how He sees the world. We need to have His eyes.

And so, as a sort of case study, James seems to give us an example of how God’s eyes work in regards to how we see each other. Let’s read Chapter 2:1, “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in...” [hold there]

So here’s the eye exam. Everyone is sitting in church getting ready for the service. It’s a packed house, only one seat left. And in walk two people. One just got off the bus, has been walking towards the church rather slowly... you recognize him as Joe. He’s been coming to the church for a while. He doesn’t say much, but he can always be counted on to do some dishes after potluck, or stack the chairs after service. He’s walking slowly because he’s been trying to work the wrinkles out of his torn and stained jeans that he wears every week, but it’s no use. His hair is out of place, and he’s carrying a back-pack which seems overfull with stuff. He’s always got that back-pack! A couple of empty Subway sandwich bags are hanging out of the pocket on the side, and there’s a half drunk bottle of coke on the other side.

The other man has just gotten out of a 2008 Lexus ES350 with all the trimmings. His suit is perfectly pressed, his hair is perfect, and his fingers and neck gleam with gold. He’s been coming to the church for a while too, though he’s always late. He always sings loud, and since he’s been coming, the church has finally been able to afford a few new things that they’ve been wanting. In his hand is the biggest, leather covered bible you’ve ever seen in your life. From his belt you can see the silver chain leading to his back pocket... obviously connected to a very fat, very full wallet. Your friend leans over to you while both are out of ear shot and says, “Hey! How cool is it that one of the defensemen for the Senators comes to our church?!”

The test is this... You’re the usher. Where do you put them? There’s only one seat left, and they’re both standing at the door at the same time? This case study is all about how good our eyes are. How well we are perceiving things. It’s an eye test! How do we perceive these people? How do we know a successful person from an unsuccessful one? How do we know who has God’s blessing, and who doesn’t? How do we know who has a right relationship with God, and who doesn’t? Do we see those poor in possessions as cursed, and those who are rich with stuff as blessed? Another question... When we look at someone, do we see some people as more valuable, or worthy of love, more worthy of the best seats in the house than others... just because of the way they look? Do our eyes see what God’s see?

Keep reading in James 2:3, “If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here's a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

James says that if we discriminate between the two based on their pocket books, their clothes, or any other earthly thing... then our thoughts are evil and we are bad judges.

Let’s keep reading in verse 5, “Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”

What an amazing first sentence James gives us about God’s perception of people – how God’s eyes work. He says that God actually “chose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith”. As though God has a special gift for those who are poor, and that is a deeper faith – a more

meaningful relationship with Him. James is almost directly quoting Jesus from the beatitudes in Luke 6 when He says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied."

Most commentators agree that the blessings that Jesus is talking about are not earthly, but spiritual. Jesus doesn't guarantee that every believer will be well fed, rich and comfortable... in fact He says quite the opposite. But He does say that those who seek Him will ultimately find their satisfaction, and comfort, and wealth in God, not their stuff.

James goes even further by saying in verse 6, "But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?"

He says to this church... don't insult these people... God has a special place in his heart for them... open your eyes! These churches were full of mostly poor people, or at least what we would call "middle class", and James says, "Who is causing you the most amount of grief? The rich or the poor? Who exploits you? Your bosses and rich government officials, or your fellow blue-collar workers? If you have a problem with someone, who generally shows more mercy, your poor friend, or the rich land-owner?" He seems to be saying that it doesn't make any sense for us to be in awe of these richly adorned people, since they are generally the ones who are making life the most miserable.

Now... before I get too far along here, I just wanted to pause and say that it is not a sin to be rich, nor does Jesus dislike rich people. Yes, Jesus says that it is difficult for a rich person to accept that they need a saviour, but we also know that Jesus liked to hang out with rich people and eat with them, and go to their parties, and there were even some fairly well off people among the disciples. What James, and God, seems to be talking about here are more along the lines of generalities. There is such a thing as a very greedy, unmerciful, ungrateful poor person. And there are such things as generous, humble, thankful, rich people. If there is anything that we need to learn today is that we need to see far beyond the outside and look inward to the person's heart before we can know what's going on in there.

James says just that in the next verses. Verse 8, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

God and James seem to be saying here, "If you really want to love God and love your neighbour as yourself, then you need to look beyond the skin, beyond the wallet, beyond the clothes, and beyond the outward appearances." We need to look at each other, at religion, at the rich and the poor and everyone in between... with better eyes.

The word that James uses to describe what was going on is the word "favouritism." Other translations use the word "partiality." To look at someone with favouritism or partiality is to look on them with very poor eyes. But, why is it wrong to do this? Why is it wrong to be partial to some, or show favouritism to others?

In this context, James is specifically talking about showing partiality, or favouritism, to the rich... because they are rich. Wealth may be in indication of intelligence, or the ability to make wise decisions, or show that someone is a hard worker. On the other hand, it may also mean that the person has been born into a wealthy family. It could be a sign of greed, and dishonesty and selfishness.

Here's the thing... if we honour someone, or dishonour them based on how they dress, or how they look... then we make appearance more important than the person! If God's first criteria of "pure religion" is to "to look after orphans and widows in their distress", and yet our eyes cannot see the importance of the person, or the gem hidden in the mess... then we will never have the motivation to take that step in their direction, to give assistance, or look after them. If we see them as worthless, we will treat them that way.

What is really interesting here is the argument that James gives after he talks about partiality, and seeing people with good eyes. He tells us in verse 9 how serious the offence of favouritism is. He

says, "if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker."

I think his argument here is that there is no difference to how God sees the repercussions of sin. Even the smallest amount of partiality because of outward appearance is morally wrong. No, it's not as wrong as murder, or adultery... but the same God who says, "thou shalt not kill", also says, "thou shalt not play favourites."

I like the illustration that says that we tend to see God's Law... God's Word... like a fabric that can be torn and mended, and where the hole will be the size of the rock we throw through it. James says that God sees His Word it more like glass. No matter what size stone we throw through it, it will shatter the whole glass. This doesn't mean that breaking one commandment is the same as another... stealing a loaf of bread is not the same as murdering a person... but it does mean that deliberately breaking any of God's laws shows our contempt for all of God's laws and toward His desires for the direction of our life.

Now, why does God see it as wrong to play favourites?

1. Because it is inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus. He says He came for the sick, not the healthy... spiritual sickness is common to all humanity. He was sent because "God so loved the world", not to only a select few. Even Jesus enemies, in Luke 20:21 comment that when He taught, He showed no partiality to who His audience was... He just told the truth.
2. It results from evil thoughts. James makes the case that our favouritism, at its root is the result of evil thinking.
3. It insults people made in God's image. When we see people as better than others, or more deserving of mercy, grace, love, or help... we are saying that someone that God specially designed, loves and died for... and who bears God's image, as all humanity does... is somehow less than someone else.
4. It goes against the biblical definition of love. 1st Corinthians 13 defines love saying, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." To show partiality to one person because of how we perceive them... is to automatically "fail" another.
5. Because God takes how we view and treat others very seriously. Look at verse 13, "judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!" Jesus says that how we view and treat others is directly correlated to our relationship with Him... and that those who do not show mercy and forgiveness to others... will not receive mercy and forgiveness themselves!

Now, before we go, I wanted to talk about the other side of God's view of "pure and faultless religion", from our original verse (James 1:27). Remember it says that God's view of religion means a person "keeps oneself from being polluted by the world." James makes the point even stronger in 2:12 saying, "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom." Keeping with our theme of our eyes and right perception, I believe this means that we need to be abundantly careful as to what we feed our eyes... because it steers how we perceive things. And remember what we said before... our perception becomes our reality.

James, saying that we need to watch how we speak and how we act... encompasses all of human behaviour. And I want to make the statement that our behaviour is directly related to what we see and what we feed our eyes.

- I'm sure we've all heard the statements "You are what you eat" or "garbage in – garbage out." It doesn't just apply to our mouths.
- If we feed our eyes lustful, sexually explicit images, we will be lustful and will have a warped view of sex.
- If we feed our eyes gossip and slander from gossip magazines and TV shows, then we will produce gossip and slander.
- If we feed our eyes violence, we will become more violent.
- If we feed our eyes lies, we will become dull to the truth.
- If we feed our eyes profanity, we will become profane.

What we feed our eyes will affect our lives. That's why it's so important to guard what we see! James says, "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom." In other words, if we live our lives within the guidelines that God has set, and live as though what we do matters to God and others... it isn't life lived in handcuffs, but one lived in freedom. I wish I had more time to flesh that out, but we can talk about it more in Overtime after service.

Job, in 31:1 says, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl." Some men count it their right and even their privilege to look lustfully at all the girls they want... it's like free entertainment. But what they don't understand is the garbage they are feeding their hearts and the effects it is having on their soul. David went even farther in Psalm 101:3 when he said, "I will set before my eyes no vile thing." He recognized that what he fed his eyes changed his behaviour. How did he fall into adultery with Bathsheba? He was wandering around on the roof alone, and started starting lustfully at a naked women. Was Bathsheba "vile"? No, she was attractive. What was the "vile thing"? The fact that it was someone else's wife and he was married. David forgot his promise, and it lead to trouble.

It is SOOO critical that we are careful as to what we feed our eyes. Remember James' words in 1:14 where he said, "but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." How is that evil desire put there in the first place? Probably because of something we've seen! "Boy, would I like to try that." "I wonder if I could get away with that." "It sure looks like that person is enjoying themselves, I wonder how it would feel?" "I guess if it's ok for that person, it must be ok for me." "Everybody does it." "Looks good in the movie." And that desire is conceived in our mind by what we are feeding it.

Let us be careful how we view others. Let us have right perception that is guided by the word of God. Let us be proactive in what we feed our eyes, realizing that it will affect how we live, think and feel.

Hands

James is a book of action. I read somewhere that there are over 50 imperative statements (54) in the book of James. In other words, 54 different commands. Things to do, things not to do, ways to act, and ways not to act. We, the North American church, are not too keen on the do's and don'ts of scripture. In fact, we tend to deemphasize them as often as we can. The evangelical church would much rather talk about the grace of God, saving faith, worship services, and Christian freedom than the dos and don'ts of the bible. But the truth is that they are there, and since God put them there, we should listen to them.

Today we're talking about *what we do*... what we do with our hands... right deeds. Think about that word "deeds"... what we do with our hands everyday. With our hands we show love, in hugs, in service, with a gentle touch, or a pat on the shoulder. We show frustration and anger with our fists, or a wagging finger. We create with our hands, and shape our world with our hands. If we want to travel from St Johns to Vancouver... and there are trees, mountains and lakes in the way... we cut them down, carve holes in them, and build bridges over them. Nothing stops our hands from doing what we want to do.

The bible talks a lot about our hands.

- Proverbs 10:4, "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth."
- Proverbs 22:29, "Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men."
- Jesus in Matthew 5:16 says, "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven."
- Paul gives a message for Timothy to preach to his church in 1 Timothy 6:18, "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share."
- In Hebrews 10:24 we read that the church should, "consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."
- Peter, when he's writing to a church surrounded by non-Christians says in 1 Peter 2:12, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

It's amazing how many times in scripture our faith is tied to our hands. What we preach is inextricably tied to what we practice. It shouldn't be too much of a surprise for us, but this question has dogged so many people throughout their faith, and in the history of the church, that eventually... it was this question that sparked Martin Luther to nail his 95 Thesis to the wall of the Wittenburg church and start the Reformation movement. The confusion was all about faith and deeds. What saves us? Our deeds, or our faith? Do we save ourselves, or does God save us? How much of our deeds are needed to save us from hell? Some? A little? None? Will we ever know?

It gives some people great confidence to think that their eternal state is in their hands. They have control of where they end up. That all they have to do is find a check-list of things to do before they die, and they will end up in heaven. Others are terrified by this, and it drives them to desperate action. I'll give you a quick example.

In the Islamic faith, there is no confidence of where you will end up when you die. Basically, they believe that there are two angels that follow everyone around and keep track of every deed they do... one angel for good deeds, and one angel for bad. At the end of time, if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds... then you get to go to paradise. If not, you go to punishment. The only way to be *absolutely sure* that the scales tip in your favor is to die fighting for the faith... fighting against the *infidel during a jihad*. Desperate people, doing desperate deeds to find and earn salvation. It's a scary thing.

James, here, begins with a very logical question about the balance of faith and deeds. If you remember, I told you that this is a letter that was written to the whole Christian church, not just a single church like Paul's letters. It was sent to all the Christian churches in the area, and it is probably the earliest letter we have in the New Testament.

And one of the earliest questions that probably needed to be answered was this, "If our salvation is by Jesus Christ... if He died for all of our sin, and all we need to do is have faith in Him... then why does it matter what we do with ourselves?" And James addresses this question in the next section of his letter starting in verse 14. We've already been talking about what "true religion" is to God... now we're going to talk about "true faith" and how that works itself out in our life.

James says, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him?" The Greek in this question tells us that the answer is a resounding "no". It's a rhetorical question. That's the question that was being asked, and is still being asked today. How do people "get saved", and what does God "expect of us". A faith that has no deeds cannot save anyone.

And that makes sense to us, I hope. What is the point in saying that you have faith in God, and trust in His mercy, believe that you are a sinner worthy of hell, and were saved from the clutches of the devil by the work of Jesus Christ dying on the cross for you... if that doesn't change your life? That news... that faith... should change how you life.

This is a "what does it matter what you say, if you're not putting your money where your mouth is" question.

My car is the fastest car on the street... I keep it in the garage and I've never raced it.

My house is the nicest house on the block... but no one is allowed inside to see it.

My girl is the prettiest... but she lives in Japan.

My wallet is the fattest... but I left it at home.

My computer is the latest... but I've never turned it on.

My joke is the funniest... but I can't remember it.

What good is a faith, or anything else, that cannot be shown, has no evidence, and doesn't change or effect lives? Talk is cheap, as they say, and unsubstantiated claims are worthless. A faith that doesn't change our lifestyle is meaningless. If someone claims to be a Christian... saved by Jesus... in relationship with God... but still treats their body like a piece of junk, is a pervert all the time, cusses like a sailor, treats people with contempt, and is selfish with their money and time... shows their faith to be worthless.

And James gives us a case study, just like he did last week, to explain what he means practically. He says in verse 15, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes or daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

What a ridiculous situation! To look at someone in obvious need and then say something as dumb as, "Be warm! Be well fed! Have a super-duper day!" And then wander off on our merry way!?! How naïve, how foolish. Our words, and claims, and faith need to be backed up by our actions. "Be warm!... because of the blanket I gave you, or the cup of coffee I bought you." "Be well fed... because of the soup kitchen we set up, or the sandwich I bought you, or the job I helped you find."

James says that a faith that does not change our life, and work itself out in our daily actions... in reality... is dead. Dead! It's like a fruit tree, planted by a farmer that bears no flowers, leaves or fruit. For all intents and purposes, that tree is either dead or very, very sick. We are designed to bear fruit!

Keep reading at verse 18, "But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."

Let me give you two pictures that might help us remember the importance of genuine faith. I read these this week, and I found them helpful.

“On one side are people who project confidence in their standing before God and yet show no evidence that their faith affects any of their actions. They may even take pride in the fact that they can believe what they want and that no one has the right to challenge their faith. After all, “only God really knows for sure,” they may say.

We can agree that allowing oneself to be forced to prove something can, at times actually be evidence that we are not sure ourselves. For instance, when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he was challenged to prove he was the Son of God. The proof was easily within Jesus’ ability. Yet, Jesus rejected the challenge because trying to “prove” he was the Son of God would have subjected him to the influence of Satan. If Jesus had felt compelled to prove his divinity, that feeling would have betrayed self doubt. Jesus did not doubt his identity—he demonstrated who he was many times, but not at the whim of others. Similarly, we must not attempt to demonstrate faith “on cue,” or at the command of others, but our faith must still result in action.

On the other side are people whose lives demonstrate such a frantic flurry of activity that they literally have no time to think or talk about their faith. Those people, whose lives at first exhibit the marks of someone who believes, turn out to have real doubts. They doubt God’s acceptance and feel compelled to work very hard in the hopes of gaining that acceptance. But trying hard to build merit with God becomes a substitute for faith. We must first come to God by faith, receiving what we could never hope to earn. Then, out of gratitude we seek to serve the one who loves us in every way we possibly can. Our faith leads to grateful work.

James helps us see that genuine faith will always combine deep trust in God and consistent action in the world. ... It is not the one who claims to have faith, but the one who actually has faith who is saved.”¹

Let’s read verse 19, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”

Our hands need to work of our minds and our hearts. If we claim to have a great imagination, and be a brilliant inventor and scientist... but never draw, design, invent or study anything... if no one ever sees the fruit of our claims... we are a fool!

And we say, “I believe in God!” So what. Most people claim to believe in God, a power, or the big guy upstairs. Even the most secular news anchor, when something really bad happens, ends the segment with “our prayers are with those people.” James says... big deal! So what that they claim to have faith! Demons believe in God! Belief means very little. It is our actions that show our allegiance, our faith, our loyalty and our commitment. How does that belief in God translate into daily action? Or does it?

This is not a discussion of “how are you saved” or “salvation by works”... but a study of “How do your *hands and actions* evidence what you say with your mouth and *seemingly* believe in your mind?”

What I hear James saying that *you do not really believe if there is no evidence* of that belief. I can cause you to be afraid you, if you believe I am scary. If you do not believe that I am scary... you won’t be afraid. You will treat me as a friend if you believe I’m your friend. If you believe that I’m a

¹ Life application Bible Commentary – James – Emphasis Mine

hypocrite, you won't believe anything I say. In truth, when our actions don't follow our words or beliefs... we are a hypocrite ourselves!

I think that this is why James addresses this issue to the early church in the first circulated letter. He knows what happens when the church is seen as a bunch of hypocrites! How can a church help a community, tell people the story of Jesus, or be used by God to affect hearts... if everyone in that community thinks (and knows) that the church is full of hypocrites!

There are droves of people who will not step their foot into a church because of the hypocrisy they see here. They hear the preacher read passage after passage about God's standards for our words, our deeds, our sexuality, our friendships, and forgiveness... and they know darn well that this person is going to leave the church to go to the bar, this one is living with their girl-friend, this one is a foul-mouth jerk, this one is a gossip, and this one is harboring so much bitterness that all week they look like they've been sucking on lemons! And they think, "Christianity is a joke. It's a farce! It doesn't change hearts, it doesn't change minds, there is no Holy Spirit that lives inside... there's only a bunch of people who have been duped into coming once a week to punch their card in hopes that they'll win a pass to a heaven that they aren't even sure exists." And that church... *is a joke!*"

Verses 20-23 are another couple case studies about faith and works. James says, "You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the alter? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?"

To drive the point home, James picks out one of the most amazing acts of faith and deeds in the Old Testament, found in Genesis 22. How much faith did Abraham have in God? Lots. He spoke to Him, he walked with Him. But how did he show that God was the most important thing in his life? He was willing to put his faith into action, even though he was given a very strange order from God... to sacrifice his beloved child. This was the child who would be his heir, the miracle child he had in his old age, and the one who would be the fulfiller of God's promises!

What was Abraham doing when he offered Isaac on the alter? Trusting God. One way or another, our faith, like Abrahams... though in a smaller way we hope... *will be tested and will have to grow from an internal trust to an external action.*

How do we know how deep Abraham's faith was? By his extreme willingness to obey despite how strange he thought the order was. He trusted God.

James also brings up Rahab. Why would he do that? After bringing up the shining example of the man who was the great father of the nation of Israel... he brings up a pagan woman with a bad reputation. You can read about her in Joshua 2. But even though these people were as opposite as they get, both were declared righteous and faithful in the sight of God... because of their faith, lived out in their actions. Rahab was the woman who helped the two spies of Israel get away from the enemy because she recognized that God was delivering the nation into their hands. She trusted God, more than she trusted her army. She feared God more than she feared the repercussions of turning in the spies to the soldiers looking for them. Even though it seemed strange, her faith was rock solid and she put her money where her mouth was.

Are we willing to do the same as Abraham and Rahab? In what ways are we willing to trust God, even though his orders seem strange?

- God says that he has a standard for relationships and that we are not to profane the marriage bed. We're to keep our pants on unless we are married. God says so. And if we are married... we are supposed to stay totally true to the one that we are married to – in

our eyes, our mind, and our hands! It sounds strange. But are we willing to trust God, even though his order seems strange?

- God says that we are to seek our forgiveness. The world says, “Don’t worry about it! Just avoid the person until they cool down... it’ll blow over.” Jesus says that we should seek that person out and ask their forgiveness, and make restitution for our wrong. Sounds strange, but are we willing to trust that God’s way is better.
- God says we need to be careful what we watch and listen to. The world says don’t worry about... no one will get hurt. Do we trust God? Does our faith match our actions?
- God says that our faith is to be lived out every day, with every decision. The world tells us that faith is for Sunday, and that the rest of the week is ours to do with what we will.
- God says our money and our stuff is His, not ours, and that we rob him if we don’t give Him a portion of it. Do we trust him with our stuff?
- God says that our time is his, not ours. Do we trust him with our time?

In verse 26 James drives the point home, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

A person is own shown for what they are... by what they do. I only know what is in your heart and your head because of what your hands are doing! I can tell my wife that I love her until I’m blue in the face... but it doesn’t mean a hill of beans if it is not backed up with my actions.

We cannot embrace Jesus as our Saviour, and not as our Lord. We cannot accept God’s free gift of salvation, and not accept the Adoption into His family. We cannot claim to be Christians and not “take up our cross daily” and follow Him.

We must never get confused and begin having faith *in our works*... as though they have the power to save us. We cannot save ourselves by anything we do. Jesus did it all. Our salvation is based on a faith in the perfect work of Jesus Christ to die for our sins... and that faith is lived out daily by our works.

I want to close by reading something from my study bible reminds me and convicts me saying, *“When James says that faith without works is dead, he is describing a faith that knows the gospel and even agrees with it, but has fallen short of trust in God. Failure to grow, develop and bear fruits of righteousness shows that the free gift of God in Christ has never been received.... Even when we have believed, the good works we do are never perfect. They are acceptable to God only because of the mercy of Christ. We express our love for God through doing what pleases Him, and He in His kindness promises to reward us for what we do.”*

Tongue

Let's start with a few quotes:

- "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." – Jesus (John 14:6)
- "Let my people go!" – Moses (Exodus 5:1)
- "God helps them that help themselves." – Benjamin Franklin
- "Statistically 100 percent of the shots you don't take don't go in." – Wayne Gretzky
- "All pro athletes are bilingual. They speak English and profanity." – Gordie Howe
- "A proof is a proof. What kind of a proof? It's a proof. A proof is a proof. And when you have a good proof, it's because it's proven." – Jean Chrétien

Tongues are good things. I like my tongue. How's that for a quote? How many people do you know have uttered that sentence? My tongue is a big part of my life! I gain a lot of pleasure through my tongue... and a lot of pain because of it. Think of how your life is impacted when your tongue gets involved.

Candy... that changes lives. At one point in our history, there was no such thing as refined sugar. We had sweet fruit for dessert, but they always had those pesky vitamins and healthy stuff getting in the way. Now we have refined sugar. "Refined" ... sounds much better doesn't it. We've taken the fruit away, and the vitamins, and the fiber... and we have simple, refined, sugar. Candy. My kids live for candy! I can get them to do anything I want if I offer them candy. That's why we teach our kids not to take candy from strangers! Because if someone the kid doesn't know pulls out candy... they will follow them to the ends of the earth.

Pierced tongues. Decorated tongues. Here's an interesting thing. Tongues now come with fashion accessories. I would never do this myself... but hey, if you want to poke holes in your tongue, have it blow up like a balloon... deal with all the stuff that comes with piercing it... go ahead. Ask your mom first... but then go ahead. Pastor Al says it's ok. He thinks your dumb, but there's nothing in the bible against it that I can find.

Kissing... I don't know how much I want to say from my pulpit on this one... particularly since we're talking about the tongue...

Spicy foods. Like them or hate them? I love hot wings! I had a friend once who went to a restaurant with a group of buddies on a business trip and saw on the menu something called "18-22 wings". That would be 9-11 x 2. Him and his buddies looked at each other and ordered three each. He knew something was up when the entire kitchen staff and all of the waiters and waitresses came to observe what he was about to do. Of course, he manned up and ate one. It was the hottest, most painful thing he's ever experienced. He managed to finish one wing... but gave up after that. He said he tasted it for the whole night, and the next day. One of his buddies ate all three... that created new problems the next day that we won't get into here.

Just think of all the ways we find pleasure and pain in regards to our tongues. How much fun we can have, and how much trouble we can get in because of our tongue. And the tongue is the next thing that James addresses in this letter to the early Christians.

If you remember last week, we talked about faith and deeds. How *what we proclaim*, and *what we believe* about God *should and will* impact how we live in our daily lives. Well, James gets very specific here in one area of our lives that will certainly tell where our allegiances lie.

The Bible has lots and lots of passages about how we are to use our tongue, and about the pain, pleasure, trouble and help it can be when it is used well or poorly.

The psalmist says of the enemies of God, "There is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue." Psalm 5:9

The writer of proverbs has a lot to say about the tongue, "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts; but the tongue of the wise brings healing." Proverbs 12:18. What a crystal clear picture of how some of us, including me, use their words... like sword thrusts.

Proverbs 6:16-17 God says, "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to Him, haughty eyes, a lying tongue..."

Consider how many of the 10 commandments have to do with our tongue.

Commandment 2, "You shall not make any idols... and you shall not worship them"

Commandment 3, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God."

Commandment 9, "You shall not give false testimony."

God is very serious about how we use our tongues. Jesus was too.

Turn with me to Matthew 12:34. Jesus has just healed someone from demon possession, and is speaking to a group of religious teachers that have just accused him of being in league with the Devil. He says, "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

Jesus was passionate about how carefully we choose our words, and wanted to be sure that we knew how important our tongues were. Later, Jesus was speaking to another group of teachers who were all concerned about why He and his followers weren't obeying all of their complicated hand-washing rituals. Flip over to Matthew 15:10-11, "Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

The next verse is interesting, verse 12, "Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" Isn't that interesting? They pull Jesus aside and seem to be saying, "Jesus, you don't seem to be practicing what you preach! You just said that what comes out of a man is what makes him unclean... and we know you were talking about your words... but *your words* just tore a strip off of some very prominent people... and it made them feel bad!"

Jesus replies in verse 13, "He said, "Every plant that my heavenly father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."

"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes to the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'" For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean', but eating with unwashed hands does not make him unclean."

Lets open up to James chapter 3 and let's see how James echoes the teaching of his brother Jesus.

James has already said in 1:19 that everyone the church should be "slow to speak", and now he seems to be elaborating on that thought. He says in 3:1, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

James picks up where we just left Jesus, talking about how important it is for *people who teach* to be careful how they use their words. One reason that Jesus was so upset with what these men were saying was the fact that they were *supposed to be* the teachers of the people!

They were *supposed to be* the ones who would be able to instruct the rest of the nation on what God was doing... and *they should have got it right*. And yet, Jesus comments on how wrong they were,

and how their words and tongues were not only getting themselves into trouble, but were leading many people astray.

James says the same thing... be careful if you are a teacher. Or even further to the point... *don't rush into becoming a teacher*. The people listening to this would have been mostly Hebrew people, Jews who converted to Christianity, and as soon as James started talking about faith versus deeds... their mind would have jumped to the greatest deed they could think of... and that would have been teaching... being a rabbi.

Teachers were the celebrities of their day, in Jewish *and Christian* culture. And they were seen as the hands, mouths and voices of God, and were therefore revered. To become a rabbi, or teacher, was the greatest and highest calling that a Jewish child could hope for. Teachers were the influencers of the community and they had great status in the early church.

But just like today, some teachers would use their study and verbal skills to promote the message of Christ and teach truth... while other teachers would use their skills to present wrong doctrine, create divisions in the church and even promote themselves rather than Jesus. I'm sure you can think of a few modern day examples (Osteen, etc.)

Just as a carpenter's tools are hammers and saws and a pipe-fitter's is a pipe-wrench, so a teacher's tool is their tongue. James reminds those who would be teachers that they have been given a special position, and a special gift... and to use it wisely and rightly. They have the authority and power to sway opinion, to create a person's world-view, and have a good deal of responsibility in this world. And James says, "Watch your tongues, you teachers, because God is going to hold you accountable for what you say."

This makes me think of the passage in Luke 17:1-3 where Jesus says, "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves." Jesus is talking about teaching... and specifically... teaching that results in people sinning, rebelling against God, or that causes them to fall away from God. I hope you hear how seriously Jesus takes this.

James continues in verse 2, "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check." Now first, that word "*perfect*", should probably be translated "complete" or "mature". James knows that we are going to stumble, fall and sin. And James knows that we are going to stumble in lots of ways. But of all the ways to stumble, our words seem to be the easiest, or at least the most frequent. Have you ever regretted anything you've said?

You're in a conversation and someone says something... and then out from your mouth jumps something that you wish you could grab and put back in. Someone says, "Oh, I *really* shouldn't eat that doughnut"... and out of your mouth pops a "no kidding!" It just slips past the gate and it's out before you know it. That seems to be what James is talking about here. The idea of how amazing a person is, and how mature and complete they are, if they are actually able to keep their mouth bridled properly, and have control over what they say. Actually, that phrase there, "able to keep his whole body in check" is actually the Greek word for *bridle*... as in the bridle of a horse.... Which sets up the next illustration he uses.

Verse 3, "When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

Wow... if that's not encouragement enough to be careful about what comes out of our mouth, I don't know what is.

Here's some truths about the potency of our tongues:

1. Our words can kill at a distance. I don't know who said, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me," but they're dumb. Can you remember a time in your past when someone nailed you with the perfect insult, or knocked the wind out of you with a word? I used to be great at this, and am still pretty good. I'm not bragging, because my mouth has spewed some evil in its day. I was never a person to swear or yell someone down... but since I was the smallest person in my class, I had to learn to defend myself somehow. So I'd use my words. A well placed insult, with the right amount of truth, and the right audience can decimate a person. And I was good at it. Our words can kill at a distance, and can have a long-term effect. I still have some of the worst insults in my life come out when I am at my weakest.
2. We can't control the effects of our words. Some people are like wet wood... the spark of our mouths won't do any damage. Others are like dry tinder where the smallest word can set their whole lives on fire. We don't give words too much credit, and we tend to throw them around like they don't mean much, but once they are out there... we can't get them back... and we will never really know the full range damage our words can cause.
3. Words are potent. We can spend years working on a friendship or marriage, and then destroy huge parts of it with only a few well-placed words. Like a small drop of poison, poorly chosen words, or hard words on the lips of an expert, *are potent* and can infect a person, destroying them from the inside out. And no one can take back their words. Once they are out, they are out. Our speech has the power that few other capabilities possess. Parents, grandparents, and anyone else that works or lives with children need to know the potency of their words. "You are Lazy!" "You are Stupid!" "I Hate you!" Three small words, on the lips of a parent, teacher, or someone the child loves or respects can tear them apart.

Let's keep reading in James, verse 7, "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

So all is lost, right? If no one can tame the tongue, then we are cursed by it. But let's keep reading. Verse 9, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

This passage is all about taming the tongue. And since James says that *no man* can tame the tongue, what are we to do? It's like taming a lion or a venomous snake. Even the best of the best still get bit... the Crocodile Hunter Steve Irwin taught us that. We can fool ourselves for a while, but eventually our tongue, if left solely to our control, will bite us, or bite someone else.

James reminds us that we can use our tongues for so much good! We can praise God, we can build people up... we can use our tongue for amazing things! But that same organ, moments later, can curse God's favorite creations, the people around us. One commentary I wrote said this, "We should not use any word or name that reduces [another person] to anything less than their full stature as God's created being." If that was our rule... how would that change the way we related to one another?

A knife in the hands of a skilled surgeon can do a lot of good things. It can heal, clean wounds, even save a life. That same knife in the hands of a sociopath is a weapon of murder and destruction. Same knife, different motivation. In the same way we all have the same tongue... but what is it being used for?

James reminds us that we can't change the way we speak on our own... but God can. He uses the illustration of the sources of a stream, or of fruit on a plant.

A fresh source makes fresh water, not salty... or "bitter" water... as this word would be better translated. A fig tree makes figs... a grapevine makes grapes. We look at the source, and we expect the result.

The DNA of the sources tells us what it is going to do. The question here is all about the source of our words. Where do we have our source? Have we turned our tongue over to the Lordship of Jesus, or is that a part we still keep to ourselves? Do we take our words as seriously as God does? Are we a surgeon with our words in one moment, and a sociopath the next?

Here's a tie in to the last few weeks. Our source can be tainted. We can say that our source is Jesus, and even be living a fairly Christian life-style... but we can taint our source if we are feeding it bitter water. God provides good, clean water as our source... but what are we pouring in it? God is a great vine, and will create perfect fruit, but what kind of herbicide are we feeding ourselves to sicken our fruit?

The question here is, "What kinds of speech are you feeding your mind?" Sexual speech? Course joking? Crude language? Gossip? What we feed ourselves, *will* come out in our speech! It's monkey see-monkey do... and we're the monkey!

Our tongue will reveal our maturity, or our immaturity. It will reveal to us, and others, what the sources of our life is. It will show the kind of impulses we are running under... the love of God, or the fickle, instabilities of the world.

To those who were seeking Him, and had questions, and wanted to know the truth... to those who showed mercy, and sought forgiveness... Jesus had kind words and a gentle tongue. It didn't matter where they were in life. A prostitute, a terrorist, a thief, the outcast of society... if they came to him, he spoke kindly to them, and had infinite patience.

To the religious elite who considered themselves to be holy rollers and better than everyone else... to those who taught lies... to those who lead others into sin... to those who should have known better... Jesus spoke directly and fearlessly to them.

Let us commit to letting the source of our words be God, and to let our tongues be under God's control.

And so what do we do? We pray. Instead of fighting against the urges, we begin to learn how much God loves those around us, and begin to mimic the way Jesus spoke.

How to do that? Here are 5 ideas of how we can clean up our words:

1. Count our blessings. If we can focus on what we have, and not what we lack, we can ward off the bitterness and anger that comes with thinking others have what we deserve. It will help us to get rid of the negative comments and accusations that we level towards others if we are happy where we are.
2. Get in touch with the Love of God. Learn to worship. As we seek God to satisfy our hearts and our spiritual needs, we will have less need to strike out at others. As the Holy Spirit works in us, we will begin to show the fruits of the spirit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."
3. Write it out before lashing out. We can write out our feelings into a note... and then read the note. OR THE E-MAIL. You know... just because you wrote it, and just because you feel like sending it, doesn't make it a good idea, or the right thing to do! Write the letter, and then give it a while. Ask God to give the right words, and the right spirit behind what we want to say.
4. Wait before responding to a comment. Wait before responding to criticism. Wait before responding to gossip. Just give it a second to ruminate. I struggle with this one... just pausing before we speak.

5. Season our comments with salt. Colossians 4:6 says, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." The idea here is that our words should be profitable to the conversation, and to the person. The opposite here would be words seasoned with foul-tasting crud. The words don't need to be sugary-sweet all the time... but useful, profitable, helpful... designed to attract, rather than repel. Not tasteless talk.

Heart

As we're going through our study of James, I hope you're realizing why I called this series "Operation Me". James has some very challenging things to say about how we conduct ourselves, about how we live out our faith, and about what it means to be a Christian. Last week, the last thing we said, was that the words we use will be dictated by "our source". James uses the illustration of a water spring, or a tree, or a vine... saying that what we have inside of us: our DNA... will dictate what comes out of us: our fruit.

And for the Christian, our source is supposed to be Jesus. He is the one who is to be dictating how we live, and what we do. And today, we're going to talk about The Heart... the center of what motivates what we do. If our heart is bent towards Jesus, then we will seek to obey Him. If our heart is bent away from Him, then we will live for ourselves, in rebellion.

Paul says it this way in Romans 8:5-8, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."

Our NIV throughout this passage uses the word "mind"... which is the Greek word PHRONEMA. This word means more than what we would equate with our understanding of "the mind". It means "to think", but it also means, "to purpose", "to have understanding", "to strive for" and to "have an opinion." Basically it is all about the motivations of what a person is doing, and the thought process behind their actions.

We often delineate between the processes of the mind and the heart. We do math with our mind, and love with our hearts. We are supposed to argue from our minds, and not from our hearts, or we are called "irrational" and "too passionate". But we must realize that these are invariably tied together. We think and feel at the same time. Even when we do math... some of us hate math... others of us love math. Emotional responses to mental processes.

And that passage in Romans is very important to how we understand the motives of our heart and the thoughts of our mind. Look at verse 6 again, "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace." The Greek is very interesting here: "το γαρ φρονημα της σαρκος θανατος το δε φρονημα του πνευματος ζωη και ειρηνη" See those two phrases: "PHRONEMA TES SARKOS" and "PHRONEMA TON PNEUMATOS"? SARKOS means "Flesh" and PNEUMATOS means "Spirit".

I'm not sure if you get this... but here's the bottom line. Paul in Romans 8 here says that we can't have it both ways. We will either have minds, or motivations that are "set on what that nature desires" or what "the flesh" desires... Or, we will have minds, or motivations that are "set on what the Spirit desires", or what "God" desires.

This is why it is so critical that we get the motivations of our heart right. This is why it is so important that we get our "source" right. We simply cannot please God if the motivations of our hearts are bent towards pleasing our flesh or the rest of world. We can do a lot of things... but not be pleasing God with any of them. If we claim to be Christians, then we need to live with Jesus as the motivator of our hearts and behind what we do.

So to begin, I want to talk about how we get this new heart. And there are 2 things:

First, we need to recognize that Our new Heart is a gift from God. Ezekiel 36:26-27, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." This is not something we do on our own, but is something that is a gift from God. Titus 3:3-7

says it this way, "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."

If today you wonder why you are living in defeat under some kind of sin, it may be because you think that the changing of your heart is your job. It's not. If there is something you've been trying to change in your life, a sin that you've been trying to let go of, or a habit you've been trying to change, a relationship you're trying to fix... and you just can't... it's probably because you've been trying to do it in your own strength. You might think that you need to clean yourself up before you can come to God for help. As though you need to reach some kind of level of purity before you think God will accept you back... that's a lie. He wants you the way you are, and HE will do the work to change you as you give more and more of your heart to Him.

And that's the second thing that we need to remember, that Jesus Died so we can have a New Heart (to buy us back from spiritual death) – 1 Corinthians 5:16-21, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

When Jesus went to the cross, the Bible says, "God made him who had no sin [that's Jesus] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That means that if it wasn't for the death of Jesus... if God wouldn't have set up the one who saved us from sin and took the penalty for all our sins... we would be hopeless. We couldn't do good for God at all... we could have no righteousness.

Isaiah 64:6 says it this way, when describing life before God intervenes, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." If you want a disgusting illustration of how our supposedly righteous acts, that we do in our own power, look to God before we have turned our hearts over to Jesus... the term "filthy rags" is the Hebrew term for "used menstrual rags." That's how our good deeds look to God before we have a regenerate heart that is given to Jesus... like used menstrual rags. We cannot please God without God's help.

Before we know Jesus and have our hearts given to Him, Philippians 3:18-19 says that we are, "Enemies of the cross of Christ. [Our] destiny is destruction, [our] god is [our] stomach, and [our] glory is in [our] shame. [Our] mind is on earthly things." Ephesians 2:1-3 says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

Why am I driving this point home? Because so many of us are under the false pretence that either a) we can save ourselves because God is going to be impressed with our good deeds, or b) that we are so bad that God could never accept us, or c) that we need to get to a certain stage of holiness before we can be accepted by God. All of those are totally untrue.

The truth is that we will never be good enough for God, and there is no chance of us ever into His good books by our own merit. We will never live righteous lives in this world if we are doing it on our own, and we simply cannot please God if we are trying to do it ourselves. I don't know why God loves us! But... He does! And because of the work of Jesus, we can become "new creations" and have new hearts.

Consider the words that the New Testament writers use when describing our salvation through Jesus:

Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Ephesians 2:8, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

Our salvation, just like the changing of our hearts, and the power to do good, please God, live well, have joy, and be free from death, hell and sin... is a "gift" from God. Not something we can earn, and not something we can buy, not something we can learn, and not something that God gives grudgingly. He wants to give us these gifts! If only we would have the faith and the heart to ask. And so, this is where we find James leading us today: talking about the motivations of our hearts.

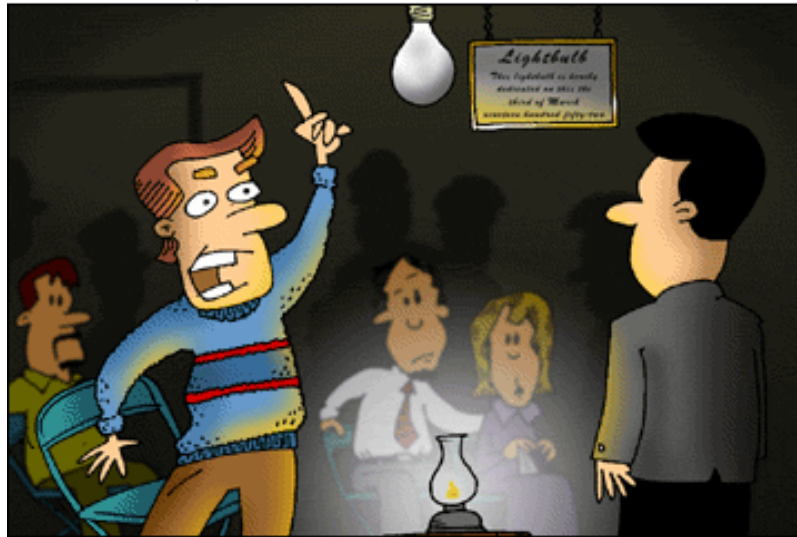
We don't have a lot of time left, so I'm going to skim over this pretty quickly. James seems to be saying here that our hearts, if they are motivated the right way... but the Spirit and not the Flesh... will have certain qualities, and our lives will exhibit those qualities. And I just want to go through and see what He has to say about the motivations of our heart.

Let's read James 3:13-18 first, "13Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."

James seems to first say that a good heart is wise and its motives are pure. If the motives of our heart are governed by God, then we will be wise. But James seems to want to make an important distinction here. He says that there are two kinds of wisdom, wisdom "from heaven" and wisdom that is "earthly." Just like the dichotomy before between THE FLESH and THE SPIRIT in Romans, where there are two kinds of motivations, so here we find two kinds of wisdom.

And I don't think it's a stretch to think that there are two kinds of wisdom. James says that if the person's heart is full of "envy and selfish ambition" then their wisdom is "earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil." And that kind of wisdom leads to all sorts of "evil practices."

The picture of this earthly wisdom is the kind that we see when a person has all sorts of zeal and fire, and motivation and smarts... but it results in contentiousness... fighting with others, battling for power, and pushing people down. Like the guy in this comic...



Thanks to Joel Rainey

03-03-2003

**WE CANNOT CHANGE THE CHURCH LIGHTBULB
... OUR FOUNDERS PUT IT IN, NEW
LIGHTBULBS MAY BE DANGEROUS, IT'S NOT
IN THE BUDGET ...**

These are the “wise” people who will stand up in a meeting, or in an organization and sound so pious, or so smart... but instead of being “peacemakers”, they split the group. They say things that make the leader of the group sound bad, or make the programs sound bad... and they begin to rally their little flock to themselves.

Instead of using wisdom that is best for the group, this person’s “envy and selfish ambition” really only wants to take the power away from whoever they see as the leader, and is motivated by pride and what they get out of it. Then they start to get fanatical about their side of the argument, and even want to wipe out the competition and those who oppose “us”. And then jealousy and bitterness sets in. I want to win... I want to be right... I should be in charge... I want to have the last word at all costs... I should be in the limelight...

The other kind of wisdom James calls “heavenly wisdom”. It is characterized by being “pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” We see this wisdom when we know that it has a moral and spiritual integrity to it; normally because we’ve seen the life of the person who is saying the words. They are moral people and they have integrity and purity in their life. We know that what they are saying is not for themselves, but for the good of others.

Heavenly wisdom uses pure and peace-loving words. Now words that split the group, but seek to bring the group closer together.

They are considerate words. The person realizes human weaknesses, and stressed time schedules, and says thing that make allowances for others. Not allowances for sin, but words that are tempered with mercy.

They are submissive words. Words that aren’t stuck hard to the sacred cows in the room. They are willing to change their minds because God is changing them. God starts to do something different and the wise person puts down their pride and says, “ok, let’s go that way God.”

The words are full of mercy and good fruit. In other words they change lives. They lead to practical ways that help people. They are not just pious platitudes or hot air, but words that lead people to Godly action.

And finally wise words are impartial and sincere. They are free from prejudice towards people for any reason, and are unhypocritical. The person is willing to back them up. Not just suggest things “for the rest of the group”, but things that they would be willing to do themselves.

Let’s read James 4:1-3, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

James seems to be saying here that a good heart is not quarrelsome and its motives are unselfish. A heart that is guided by God, and that is turned over to Jesus isn’t one that fights and quarrels with people. Now, this is not the same as “contending for the gospel”, or what we might call apologetics. Galatians 2:11, Philippians 1:27, 1 Peter 3:15, Titus 1:13 and Jude 3 are all passages that tell us that we should be intelligent in the way we communicate about our faith, know what it means, know the history of our faith, and be able to have an answer ready for people who have questions.

James here is specifically targeting the church, and is talking about fights and quarrels among church people. Like this one...



AND I SAY WE HAVE PEOPLE STAND DURING
VERSES 1 AND 4 OF SONG 2, VERSE 4 OF
SONG 3, AND PRAYER 2

The word “fights” is the term for “armed conflict”, as in a battle with weapons. The word “quarrels” is the term for fighting without weapons. James says that among a group of people with regenerate hearts, that have been given new life by Jesus Christ, there shouldn’t be a bunch of fights and wars between them.

And then he says why we fight. Because we are selfish. When the motives of our hearts become selfish, and we start wanting things that we don’t get, we will quarrel and fight. “I want that!” “I deserve that!” “That’s mine!” “It should be done my way!” When we get selfish, it means that we’ve stopped trusting God to take care of things, and we are taking our provision into our own hand. We make the object in front of us... whether it’s a toy, money, the bulletin, or anything else... more important than the person.

Believe it or not, but there are churches out there that are permanent battle grounds. Their desires become selfish, no one wants to give ground, they split into parties and factions, and everything is a fight. I don’t like this song, I don’t like this sermon, I don’t like this colour pew-bible, I don’t want this carpet, We need this program, We need to buy this, My demographic is most important, I don’t feel fulfilled when I leave church, I’m not getting anything out of service, Gimme, Gimme, Gimme.

James says in verse 3 that when our desires go unchecked by God, we begin to covet what other people have, we begin to have evil desires, and we start to do things with wrong motives, and fights and quarrels break out. It’s a vicious cycle that can destroy a church when we start to think that we need to form the church around us, our wants and our desires.

Then, new believers find themselves caught in the cross-fire of arguments, and resentments, and power struggles that seem to have the covering of some kind of spiritual truth... but are really just personal conflicts, grudges and problems between people. In the process, innocent by-standers are hurt and sometimes deeply wounded. Ask any Christian that was part of a church split and ask them what their view of Christianity and the Church is.

Finally, let’s read 4-17, “You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbour?

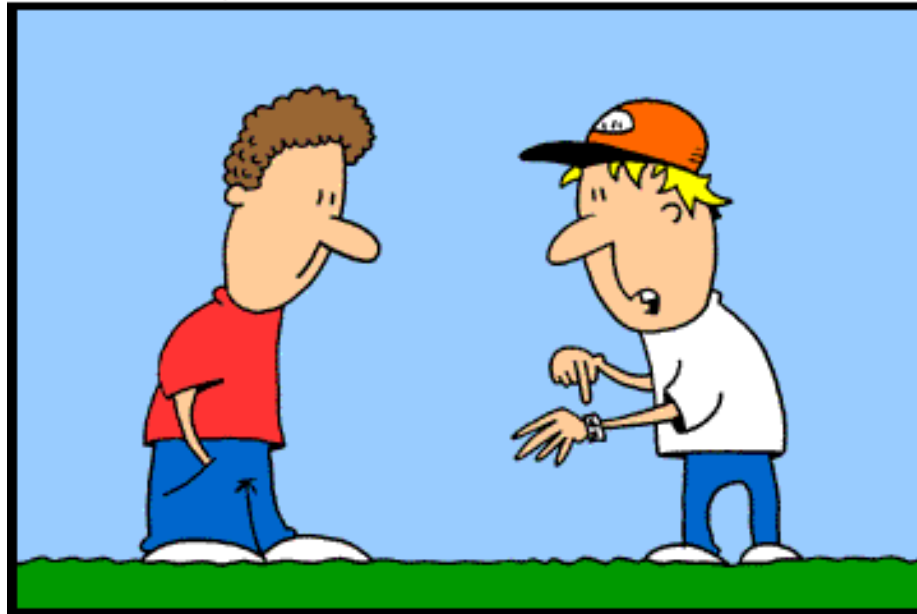
Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

This last section has a lot to it, but I believe at its core, James is saying that a good heart is submissive and its motivations are humble.

The first words of this section are this, “You adulterous people.” This is a graphic way for James to tell us what is going on in our hearts when we claim to be Christians and yet are living for ourselves. It’s intended to make the listener sit upright and pay attention.

The whole concept of adultery is taken from the Old Testament where we have, over and over, the story of God's people Israel turning to idolatry and worshipping something else other than the One, True God. The illustration that is used is of an adulterous wife... who wants the security of a husband and a home, but also wants to have a lover on the side. James is about to describe these believers as adulterous because they are trying to have the security and love of God and have an affair with the world. Like this guy...

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07-16-1998

WHEN I AM DOING SOMETHING NAUGHTY, I
TELL PEOPLE THAT THIS BRACELET MEANS
"WHAT WOULDN'T JESUS DO?" SO THAT THEY
DON'T THINK THAT I AM A HYPOCRITE

There is no middle ground here. We can either have friendship with God, or friendship with the world. The term, "the world" might not be what you think. It's not "everything on the earth." There are some good things on the earth. What James means is that there is only room for one thing in the heart of a Christian: God, or the system of evil on earth which is controlled by Satan and is opposed God. We can't fit both. In this context, James is specifically talking about the evil desires that try to lure our hearts away from God. We cannot have a warm and friendly relationship with the evils of this world, accept them into our homes and lives, and still expect to have a good relationship with God. We either submit our hearts to God, or we don't.

- We can't say, "I want a computer filled with porn" and be a friend of Jesus.
- We can't say, "I want to feed my mind gossip and garbage", and give God our attention.
- We can't say, "I want to treat my body like it is my own", and use our body for worship.
- We can't say, "I want to be angry and bitter", and also accept God's forgiveness.
- We can't say, "I want to find security in my money", and also find our peace with God.
- We can't say, "I want to get my happiness and pleasure and emotional balance from a certain substance", and then say that God is the source of our joy.

Or like verse 13 and on says...We can't say, "I'm going to do this, and going do that, and be here, and buy this" and still say that we believe God's in control. We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. And, who are we to brag to others about what we are "going to do"? That's in God's hands, not ours.

The concept here is about being submitted to God in humility. We resist the devil, and all of his lies that say that we should find our peace, happiness and security in ourselves or some other thing... and we submit to God's word. We say with Jesus, "Not my will, but yours be done." The devil says, "Depend on yourself", and God says, "Depend on Me". If we do that, Satan loses his power over us. Humility is not weakness. It is the only place where we are going to find the courage to face all of the temptations and mess of life with any kind of strength... because it is God's strength.

James says in verse 8, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." We do not have to come very far when we "come near", but we do have to come. Perhaps today that means that you need to recommit your life to Jesus, right here and now. Perhaps God is telling you that your heart isn't right, and you need to be purified in your motivations. Perhaps there is someone you need to ask forgiveness from, or give forgiveness to, but you've been hardening your heart against it. Perhaps this means you need to recommit your life to reading God's word, to preparing yourself for service, or to encourage someone. Perhaps there is something in your life that God has been telling you has been getting in the way of your relationship with Him and it's time to let it go.

Now's the time. Commit your heart to Him, and He will come near to you.

Wallet

I wonder if the first time you looked at your handout today if you didn't immediately think... "A wallet isn't a body part." Throughout this series that we're calling "Operation Me", we've looked at this letter from James through the lens of body parts. Our Tongues – right speaking, Our Hearts – Right motives, Our Eyes – Right perception. And some of you might be thinking that we've left that framework. But no... before we get into the letter, I want to make the case that our wallets *are in fact* a body part.

I went to Dictionary.com and looked up the term "Body Part" and found this definition: "any part of an organism such as an organ or extremity."

So I looked up the word "Organ" and found this definition: "a grouping of tissues into a distinct structure.... that performs a special task"

And I looked up "extremity", and it sent me to the term "limb", and I found this definition: "a part or member of an animal body distinct from the head and trunk, as a leg, arm or wing."

So here are a series of questions, based on the extrapolated definition of a body part that we can ask to see if our wallet really is a body part.

1. Does a wallet have a "grouping of tissues"? Yes... that would be the money, credit cards, receipts, ID and the fabric holding it together.
2. Does it have a "distinct structure"? Yes... everyone's wallet has a distinct structure.
3. Does it perform a "specialized task"? Yes... each wallet is structured to perform the specialized task of holding and making accessible important information, identification, money and credit cards.
4. Is your wallet "distinct from your head or trunk"? Unless you keep your wallet in your mouth, then yes.
5. Does your wallet represent "a part" of you? I bet your wallet has personality. I bet you chose it to represent you in some way. Some of you might a pink one with flowers, others may have one with a Harley Davidson logo on there. Is yours made of leather, nylon, or duct-tape? What does your wallet say about you? If you lose your wallet, do you have an emotional reaction? You even have a little picture of yourself in your wallet, with your name, where you live and pictures of your favorite people. Does your credit card or bank card have part of your personality? What picture is on it? Something you chose that represents you? What about your cheques? Do you have a picture that you picked?

I believe that our wallets are as much a body part as anything else, and how we use them is just as important as how we use the rest of our body. And that's why I believe that this is the next thing that James addresses in our study here. Please turn to James Chapter 5 and we're going to talk about Right Wealth.

Right on the heels of 4:17 where James says, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins"... and a warning about being adulterously seduced by the world... James seems to take a deep breath and turn his attention to a discussion of wealth in 5:1-6. Let's read the whole thing together.

"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten all your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and

self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.”

Ok, that’s enough. But what’s going on? Why does James seem to explode in one direction this way? What can we learn here?

Well, before we start taking apart the passage and looking deeper into what James is saying here, I want to make a couple of introductory statements.

First, there is a difference of opinion among the commentators as to who this section is written to. Is it written to the Christians in the church, or is it written to the Non-Christians in the area that are oppressing the Christians? We have a few clues. Number one is that James tells them to “weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon” them. That seems to tell us that they are still under judgment, and are therefore non-Christians. However, the problem here is that the whole letter was designed to be read *in churches to Christians*. It wasn’t something that would be shared outside of the church, but was written as an authoritative letter to the churches scattered around the land. And throughout the passage, James uses the word “you”, not “they”.

What makes most sense to me, in light of the context, and the fact that James is writing to the church, is that, just like today, there were rich people and poor people in the church who were claiming to be followers of Jesus, and yet James needs to take a moment to speak to and condemn some of them for the wrong ways they’ve used their wealth.

My second introductory statement here is that the Bible talks a lot about wealth; in both positive and negative ways. The Bible DOES NOT teach that being rich in money and stuff is a sin. What the Bible does teach, is *how we should use* our wealth, where it comes from, and where it is going. Paul wrote both of these statements in 1 Timothy 6, “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (v. 10) AND “Command those who are rich... to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” (v. 17) The Bible says that we need to be careful with our money, and that we need to realize where the money comes from... that being God. God gives us money, and lots of other things for our enjoyment. The Bible teaches that money is a means to an end, not an end unto itself.

I read somewhere that Jesus taught more about money than any other subject. I haven’t counted it myself, but I do know that He does address how we use what we have on many occasions. Jesus taught this way in Luke 16:10, “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with *true riches*? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?” And then He says something we need to take very seriously in 16:13, “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

The third introductory statement I want to make before we get into it is this, and I’m paraphrasing from something John MacArthur says in his commentary, “Nothing more clearly reveals the state of a person’s heart than their view of money and material possessions.” If we are someone who professes faith in Jesus Christ, but live an opulent, indulgent, materialistic lifestyle, that claim is invalidated.

So let’s turn to James and take a look at how James builds on what Jesus teaches and how disappointed, and downright angry he is with the way the people in his churches were using their

wealth. Verse 1, “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten all your clothes. Your old and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.”

James here is walking the paths of Old Testament prophets like Isaiah (10:1-4), Amos (4:1-3), Jeremiah (5:27-29) and others who condemned those who used their wealth in sinful ways. The weeping and wailing that the wealthy are supposed to do are *the tears of repentance* in light of the wrong they have done with their wealth. He is saying, “Turn to God and ask for true forgiveness. Your lives, and the way you use all of the riches and resources He’s given you doesn’t match up with your claims of being a follower of Jesus, and you need to turn from your sin.”

He reminds them to get their priorities straight in verse 2 the same way that Jesus warned people about in Matthew 6 when He says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” James says the same thing in verses 2 and 3.

There are lots of things on this planet that can fool us into believing that our treasure should be on earth. However, someone who has a right view of wealth won’t get sucked in. If we have a right view of wealth we will **realize that earthly wealth is temporary, faddish and unstable.**

Three words: “Tickle-me-Elmo.” Remember how nuts people were to get those when they came out? Remember Beanie Babies, or all that other collectible nonsense that people were spending gobs and gobs of money on? What about Furby’s ? What about those fashions that people paid so much money for that are not worth a dang even a few years later. Like fanny packs. or this pair of Dolce & Gabbana jeans worth up to \$800. Stock markets will crash and crumble, houses will collapse, and even gold will loose it’s value... and a person who has the right perspective on wealth will know that.

A person who doesn’t get this will weep and wail over the loss of their stuff, or the loss of their value. If they have their identity caught up in their stuff, when it looses value, so will they. But if our value and our riches are found in the things that God finds to be important... like relationships, generosity, service, worship, mercy, peace, family and friends... then they will have riches that will endure.

In verse 3 James reminds us that a person who has a right view of wealth **knows that earthly wealth is meant to be used.** James accuses these rich people saying, “You have hoarded wealth in the last days.” The picture we have here is of vast piles of riches that have been stored away for no other reason than to be accumulated and added to. Scrooge McDuck diving into his piles of God... pinching every penny.

I read a commentary this week where the author said that “hoarding, tragically, is one of the most widespread sins of our time.” His argument was basically that anyone who would spend their time and energies amassing such futile and transient things as material goods, whether food, clothing, toys or money, cannot be the same people that worship God.

The Bible makes it clear that God gives us our money to be used, not stored away. We are supposed to use these resources to do things like:

- 1 Timothy 5:8 – Provide for our Families.
- Galatians 2:10; 1 John 3:16 – Care for those in Need
- Galatians 6:6; 1 Corinthians 9:4-14 – Support what God is doing on earth.

Many places in the Bible God mocks those who would store up a bunch of wealth, thinking that it means something, little realizing the shortness of their days, and the worthlessness of their riches in the light of eternity.

In verse 4 James reminds us that a person who has a right view of wealth **will gain it use it fairly**. “Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.”

James is so shocked that this is happening in the church that he starts this sentence with the phrase “Look!” or “Behold!” He seems to say, “Do you know how selfish you have become with your money? There are those of you in the church who won’t even pay the wages of those who have earned it!”

Now, we can say without the shadow of a doubt that if you are a business owner, and you have workers, and you don’t pay them for the work they do, that God is not happy with you. In fact, the phrase “Lord Almighty” at the end of that passage there is actually the phrase “Lord of the Sabaoth”, meaning “The commander of the armies of heaven.” The picture here is that when someone defrauds the poor of their money, that God calls the power of His angelic angel armies to enact the judgment. Now perhaps we aren’t business owners, but do we still seek to gain and use our wealth fairly?

Christians should be people who gain our money in a fair way, not in some shady kind of way. We keep the words of the contracts and pay them in full. We pay back all that we owe. We don’t defraud the government or anyone else. If someone were to ask how we got something, we should never be ashamed to tell the story. “Uh... well... I tricked the guy into giving me a certain percent off.” “I swapped the sticker from a different item and got away with it.” “I borrowed this thing so long ago that I’m sure that they’ve forgotten by now... I’ll just keep it and not tell them.” “I bought the Big-screen TV for the Superbowl knowing all along that I’m going to take it back.” “I bought the video camera for the vacation, knowing that I’m going to take it back.” If anyone asks how we got something, we should never have to be ashamed to tell them!

And also, James says, we should be fair in what we pay people. A good example is Like tipping in a restaurant! I believe that Christians should be good tippers. Let’s read the passage again, “Look! The wages you failed to pay the waiters and waitresses who served your food are crying out against you. The cries of the servers at the restaurant have reached the ears of the Lord God of the Angel Armies.”

In verse 5 James reminds us that a person who has a right view of wealth will **remember that money can make you fat**. “You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.” Does being wealthy always make us fat? No, but it certainly makes being fat easier. And by fat I mean self-indulgent, luxurious living that is totally self-involved and thinks of no one else.

The picture that comes to my mind is what I like to call Post Thanksgiving Turkey Dinner Syndrome. Sleepy, fat, useless... all I want to do is sit in front of the TV, unbuckle my belt a couple notches, and watch sports. I’m so full I can’t even see straight... and yet when someone offers me pie... somehow I can fit in another piece!

How much good am I to society, or my family in that condition? The house could burn to the ground around me and it wouldn’t matter! And yet, some people live like that year round. Our wealth makes us lazy and useless. The wealth becomes about *what we can get*, how much *more we can get*, and how much pleasure we can derive from it.

“I don’t have any to give you... I need it... to buy something for myself.” John MacArthur once said, “a life without self-denial soon goes out of control”. Like the story of the Prodigal Son, sometimes those with money close their eyes to those around them with needs and they live solely to grant their own selfish desires. And that callous over their heart begins to form and they become selfish. And that selfishness drives people away from them. And the appetite gets bigger until it becomes all consuming. “A life without self-denial soon goes out of control.”

If you would, turn with me to Ecclesiastes 2 where Solomon, the wisest one of the richest men to ever live, in a kind of scientific research project in hedonism, decides to pursue every source of worldly pleasure imaginable... just to see what would happen.

He says it this way, "I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter", I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

"I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the reassurance of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

Solomon went to the best comedy clubs, had the best movie collection, had all the best toys, the best drinks, the biggest CD collection, the most land, the most money, had the biggest farm and industry, had slaves, and men, and women, and a harem of females for his every whim. He was it. And this is what his little research project concludes in verse 10

"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for my labor. **Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless**, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."

He says in effect. All I did was just make a bunch of noise, move around a bunch of things on earth, and create huge piles of things that will eventually *just blow away*. After the experiment was conducted the conclusion was simple. The only right way to look at wealth is God's way... because to use it selfishly makes it meaningless in the end.

And finally in verse 6 James reminds us that a person who has a right view of wealth will **know that it can give you a false sense of power**. "You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you." In this downward spiral that was happening among the rich people, this was the pinnacle. They were literally condemning and putting people to death innocent people *so that they could gain more wealth*. Someone challenges their kingdom, their lifestyle, their choices... and instead of repenting, or listening... they turn their hatred and affluence against that person. The idea here is that the rich there were using their wealth to *influence the courts* to get rid of some of the poor people that they had been abusing.

Perhaps some of the poor people had taken these rich folks to court to get the wages they were owed... but the wealthy land owners hired the best lawyers to destroy their case and pervert justice, or they just paid off the judge and had these poor people sent off to labor camps or even killed.

Money can give us the illusion of power. And the truth is that the rich have more sway in this world than those with less money. And sometimes they use their power and influence for good, and sometimes they use it to harm others.

How many families have suffered because a rich guy or a rich corporation was selfish? People get hurt when money is fought over. People get hurt when they get in the way of two people fighting about money. It's not called a "hostile take-over" for nothing! In marriages, the children and the relationship suffer when the love for money and petty fighting creeps up among the parents. The kids become collateral damage in a war about money.

When we look at this limb of ours, this body part we call our wallet, I hope we can see it as something that we can use to give life, or take it away. Just like our hands, our eyes, our heart or our tongue, our wallet can be used to worship God, or ourselves, or something else. Wealth is given to us as a blessing... a gift from God that gives us the opportunity to do good. Our wealth and wallet can be a source of blessing if we are not hoarding it, but using it well... if we are being fair with how we use it... not growing fat on it... and not thinking that it gives us some kind of power. Let's use our wallet well.

Feet

When I think about “Feet”, I think about “Walking Jokes”. Do you know “Walking Jokes?” They start like this, “A man walks into a ... whatever.” Or “a priest, a rabbi and a goat were walking down the street...”

So I figured I’d start out today with a couple of “Walking Jokes”.

Two men, who were good friends, were walking through the woods one day when suddenly a huge mountain lion walked out in front of them, about 50 feet away. Both men stopped and stared at the beast, hoping that it wouldn’t notice them. It did. As the mountain lion slowly began coming towards them the first man dropped his backpack to the ground and quickly started to take off his hiking boots and laced up a pair of running shoes.

The second man looked at the first, quite confused, and said, “What are you doing? Running shoes aren’t going to help you outrun a mountain lion!” The first man turned to the second and said, “I don’t have to outrun the mountain lion... I just need out outrun you!”

Ok... so here’s the second. Two blondes are walking through the woods one day enjoying themselves and talking about the nature that surrounded them, when suddenly they came upon a set of tracks. The first blonde, trying to impress the other, said, “I think those are deer tracks.” The other said, “No, silly, those are moose tracks.” They argued and argued for some time... and were still arguing when the train hit them.

Walking jokes. Gotta love them. Today we’re going to continue our study of James’s letter to the church and we’re going to look at a section that I believe talks all about “right walking.”

Walking has actually become an important descriptive word for the Christian life. And it’s an appropriate one. In many ways, the daily life of a Christian is very much a “walk” of sorts. Each day, each choice, each moment we see as a new step, and new opportunity to step towards God, or away from Him. We talk about the “valleys” and “mountaintop experiences” of life.

When God gave the 10 commands to Israel, and all throughout Deuteronomy, God framed His Laws as a way to walk in this world saying, “So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.” (Deut 5:22-23) He then said later that if they keep “walking in God’s ways” that, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.” (Lev 26:12)

When the sons of the prophets and kings would not be obedient to God, or would worship false idols it was said “But his sons did not walk in his ways...” (1 Sam 8:3). “Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David...” (1 Kings 3:3)

The psalms often talk about our relationship with God in terms of a walk... the most famous example probably being Psalm 23 which reminds that God is with us “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...” Or Psalm 26:3, “for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth.” Or Psalm 128:1, “Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways.”

Over and over Jesus invites people to follow Him on His walk. There is a phrase in the Mishna (which is a written form of the ancient Jewish oral traditions) that says, “May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.” The idea was that if you followed behind your rabbi on the dusty roads, you would get covered in his dust. Meaning, you were following him so closely... and wanted to be so much like him that you are covered with the dust he left behind. That is how close a disciple wanted to be to his rabbi.

Matthew 4:19, "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."", Matthew 8:22, ""Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."" Matthew 16:24, ""If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Luke 18:22, "When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.""", John 10:27, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.", John 8:12, ""I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.""

Jesus never beat around the bush when He talked about the journey of this life and the cost of following Him. Throughout the Bible we learn that God expectations of His people, that they walk the path that He has placed before them. Jesus never promises that it's going to be the easiest path, or the most comfortable path, but He does promise that it's the right path. He even calls Himself, "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6) telling us that there are many paths in this world that can be chosen, but there is only one that is the right way to walk.

James seems to be making the same point in our passage today, but in good James fashion, he wants to give us some practical advice on how the walk should look. And so I want you to turn to James 5 and let's take a look at how James says we should walk this path called Christianity... this "Way of Jesus."

Let's start in verse 7, "Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains." The first thing that James seems to want us to know about Right Walking is that we need to be patient. I don't know about you, but I really don't like being told to be patient. I didn't like it when my mother was making cookies, I didn't like it when it was a week away from Christmas and I wanted to open presents, and I don't really like it now. I think that's why I love the idea of the transporter in Star Trek. I'm not that big on walking, or running, or biking... but I love going to different places. If I could just beam there... I'd be all over that.

But patience is key for the Christian walk to be a successful one. We don't get instant success or instant character building, or instant relationships, or instant purity, or instant anything in this walk. God's way is almost never the quickest way... though it is always the most right, and most complete way.

F.B. Meyer once said,
"Don't judge the Lord by His unfinished work. Be patient till he unveils the perfect patter in the glory. Await the 'end of the Lord.'"

The impatient people, like me, want to see God's end goal and cannot fathom why I need to go through this or go through that in order to accomplish something. Why can't God just zap me with the ability to do it? But that's not His way. Come to think of it... most of the things that I've just been given... I haven't really cherished that much. But those things that I've had to work through, sacrifice for, and sweat over have been some of the best things in my life.

Verse 8, "You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." The next thing that James wants us to do is to Stand Firm when walking. How do we walk and stand firm at the same time? I guess the idea here is to walk in such a way that we are not easily knocked over. As God is working on our character, and as we are being patient, there will inevitably be tests, and trials and hurts and messes that come up in our walk. The other team, the enemy, will cross-check us, surprises will throw us off, and there will be things that we need to live with day-in and day-out that drag us down.

Standing firm is hard in the face of temptation, persecution, problems, trials and suffering. The word "stand firm" here is the Greek word *STERIZO* and it literally means to "make fast" or to "establish." The same word is found in Luke 9:51 and used of Jesus. "As the time approached for him to be taken up

to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” Jesus knew that He faced false accusations, torture, insults and death in Jerusalem, but He went there anyway. He had established in His heart and His mind that the path of His life led there. To obey His Father, to save mankind, He needed to get there no matter what. STERIZO is a word that is used for courage and an attitude that says that the person will stay the course and walk the path no matter how severe the trial that is happening around them.

The root of the word STERIZO is one that means “to cause to stand” or “to prop up” something. James is telling Christians that during their Christian walk, when things are going on around them, to have the courage and the determination to walk forward on the path God lays before them, but also to prop themselves up with the hope of Jesus’ return. We’re not supposed to be people who just “let go and let God” take care of everything. I like the way that John MacArthur puts it,

“[Christians] are to live as if everything depends on them, known that it all depends on God.”

In Ephesians 6 Paul takes the walking illustration a step further and says that not only are we walking a path that God sets before us, but waging a war on the way. He says, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

We put on the full armor of God and we fight and stand in His power. And after all is done, and after all the temptations and battles are fought... we still stand. We are not pushed side to side, tossed along the road, but we walk with strength, courage, determination and character, knowing that God is refining us and propping us up along the way. We stand fast, girded well, under attack, pressing forward... knowing that Jesus is coming back soon, and fighting spiritual battles in our lives to claim the victory He has won for us.

We fight the battle the way one of David’s mighty men, Eleazar fought in 2 Samuel 23:9-10, “Next to him was Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one of the three mighty men, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered at Pas Dammim for battle. Then the men of Israel retreated, but he stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day.”

A book I was reading about Eleazar this week said this,

“Eleazar refused to be ensnared anymore. Everyone else was running from the enemy, but he put his foot down and said, “I’ve had it with this running. I’m going to fight until I drop dead or until I drop to the field in victorious exhaustion. This is my moment to live or die.”

We stand firm and fight the spiritual battles in our life with ferocity, and at the end of the day, trust that the Lord will bring the great victory.

Verse 9 reminds us that we cannot do this alone, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” Sometimes we think that this Christian walk is one that we walk alone, but we need to stay together.. Sometimes when we need people the most we push them away. I think that’s what James is talking about when he says, “don’t grumble against each other.”

The church that James is writing to, and the Christians in the church today, are facing persecuting from the outside and have problems on the inside. And the most natural response in the world is to grumble and complain and criticize each other. James doesn’t want us to be filled with resentment and bitterness toward one another—because we need each other! The most human thing to do when our patience is maxed out and we are frustrated with life is to strike out at others. Or we avoid facing the weaknesses in ourselves by pointing out the same weaknesses in others! And so we push people away and we try to walk this walk by ourselves.

“I’m so sick of following that guy!” “I’m so tired of stopping to help that person!” “I don’t want to carry her anymore.” It’s natural to get tired and frustrated with those around us and to push them away... but God calls us to be unnatural and to actually work together, be vulnerable with each other, and to bear each other’s burdens and to battle along side each other. We’re reminded in Galatians 6:2 that working together is not an option, but a command that Jesus gives to us, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” What is the “Law of Christ?” John 15:12, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

Do you realize that in this church today there are people who are suffering in silence, afraid to tell others their issues because they are scared that they will be judged, hated, rejected and hurt? There are also people here today, and many who are not, who have known problems... we know what’s going on... but have not been visited, loved, cared for, talked to, encouraged, challenged or made aware that the rest of the church is even thinking about them?

Jesus came to us. Why are we so afraid, or so lazy, to go to them? It’s not just the “pastor’s job”, or the “deacon’s job”, or the “elder’s job” to visit the hurting, confused, afraid and lost... it’s “the church’s job”. If we claim to be followers of Jesus, then we are under the command to love each other as Jesus loved us, and to carry each other’s burdens, and battle along side one another. Yes, that means praying for the person at home, but it also means a phone call, a visit, a gift, a coffee... or whatever else. We need to know that we are commanded to care for each other, bear with each other, battle together and get out of our comfort zones and get over our fear factor and be with each other during the week.

Can you think of someone, right now, who is in this church, or is not here this morning that you have been purposely avoiding because you don’t want to get dirty with “their issue”? That’s sin. That’s wrong. That’s selfish, arrogant and unloving. Let me encourage you to do something about it. Today. Tomorrow. This week.

Verse 10, “Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” As we walk this path, we need to remember that we’re not the first, and we won’t be the last. There are many who have walked it before, and who we can take encouragement from them, and they are an example to us.

We need to look at those who have traveled the road before us. 1 Corinthians 10:13 reminds us, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.” There’s nothing that we are going through now that someone hasn’t gone through before. Whether it’s someone in the church, someone in Church history or someone in the bible, there is an example of someone who has been through it and done it right!

David, Moses, Paul, Peter, me and the person sitting next to you... and of course the ultimate example... Jesus. When we travel this road, and we walk along it, we don’t need to think that we’re trodding a new path. This is a very well worn one, and there are many stories of others who have walked it before... in the Bible, in church history, and around us, that can inspire us, teach us, correct us and help us understand what God is doing in and through us and the situation if we are willing to read about or talk to them.

And Verse 11 reminds us of another ultimate example, “As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” James reminds us that in all likelihood, we’ll never have it as bad as Job. But we’ll probably never have it as good as him either! This man had an insanely hard path to walk, but he walked it very well. He lost his friends, children, wealth, health and joy... almost in the same day.

Today we think that Job is a hero! But did he think he was a hero when he was going through all of the mess that he did? Probably not. But because of his faithfulness we count him among the blessed

because he persevered. Perseverance is patience stretched out over a long period of time. Did Job complain? Absolutely! Did he question? Yes! Did he sob and scratch and get angry? Yes he did. But all throughout he never stopped trusting and obeying God, and today we count him as a hero of the faith.

James says, "You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about." We would love to think that Job's troubles were only a couple of days long and then God blessed him... but perseverance is never instantaneous.

James also reminds us that "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy." It may not seem like it when we are in the middle of it, but God does not enjoy watching his people suffer. The phrase "Full of Compassion" is actually a pretty neat word. It's the word *POLUSPLACHNOS* and is only used once in the whole New Testament. It literally means "many-boweled"... "The Lord is many-boweled." Ancient Hebrew people saw the bowels, or the stomach, as the seat of emotion. When James says that the Lord is "many-boweled" he is saying that God has an enormous capacity for emotion and compassion. Today we would say that God doesn't just have a "Big heart", but he has "many-big-hearts". If we ever doubt God's love, let us never forget what He did for us at the cross.

Finally in verse 12, James says, "Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned."

James seems to make this the epitome of how to walk the Christian walk. He says, "Above all"... the most important thing that you can do to walk this walk... is to walk in a straight line.

In Light of God's mercy and love... in light of the grace He has shown us... in light of the community surrounding us, and the many saints who have come before... in light of the armor God gives us to stand firm... walk in a straight line.

Not doddling in the walk of faith, playing with this, messing with that... but walking straight. If we say we're going to do it, then let's do it. If we aren't, then don't. James seems to be imploring us to walk with conviction, but to also walk as trustworthy people who are worthy to be followed.

This passage is not forbidding Christians to take oaths. The Bible acknowledges that in a world that is filled with liars that there are times when taking an oath is necessary... like getting married or testifying in court. The problem is the abuse of oaths.

Do you know anyone who has a bad reputation for exaggeration or lying and can't get anyone to believe anything they say? They are always the ones who have to say... "No, seriously!" or "I promise!" or "I swear!" or "Trust me!" No one can trust the path that they are walking, or the one that they are suggesting for someone else.

Christians should never become like that. Our words should be honest in all things so that people will believe our simple "yes" and "no". We avoid lies, and half-truths... and we become the kind of person who people can trust. So that when they look at us, and their life needs adjustment, and their path is leading them astray... and they finally get to the point where God is calling them to start walking down His path... that they can come to us and say, "I've watched you walk your path... and it's a straight one. I want to walk the one you walk, and know how you stay so straight. I want to have what you have, and walk with the confidence that you walk with. Teach me how to walk the way you do."

And when they ask that, let us lead them to the One who sets our way, and sets our path... the one who lights it, and was the first to cut the path properly. Let us point them to Jesus.

Knees

I thought I'd start with a quick, simple definition of prayer. The dictionary defines prayer as "A spiritual communion with God or an object of worship, as in supplication, thanksgiving, adoration, or confession." I like that definition, but I think I have a simpler one. Pastor Al's definition of prayer is this, "Communication with God." That's it.

Prayer is Communication with God. Yes, that means talking, but it also means many other things. Singing can be prayer, so can weeping. Writing can be prayer, and so can cursing. Any form of communication directed to God is prayer... no matter what the content. Certainly, supplication, thanksgiving, worship, adoration and confession are all the classic forms of prayer, but it doesn't have to be limited to merely holy and spiritual exercises. Prayer doesn't necessarily have a distinct form. It can be asking God questions, pouring out anger, asking for a miracle, or even just sitting quietly, or loudly rocking-out to music. If the activity is directed towards God, as a way to communicate with Him... whether that be us communicating to Him, or us waiting for Him to communicate with us... we're praying.

I struggle with this all the time. I'm still learning what prayer is. When 1 Thessalonians 5:17 commands me to "pray without ceasing", I struggle with that. I read a book about an ancient French monk named Brother Lawrence called "The Practice of the Presence of God." As I read, I was challenged and encouraged by his struggles to keep his mind on God and to be in prayer. He lamented the fact that he kept losing concentration, and that he would not be able to pray for long periods of time without his mind wandering off. And so he set his life towards being able to "pray without ceasing". By the time the book was written, Brother Lawrence had been trying to do this for 40 years... in a strict Carmelite monastery, living the life of a monk. Despite his environment, he still struggled with keeping his heart and mind directed towards God... in a monastery... and that gives me great encouragement.

It encourages me to keep trying! I obviously still struggle with it... a lot... and there are times when I don't want to pray! I don't want to go to Home Group, I don't want to go to a prayer meeting, I don't want to wake up in the morning and pray, I don't want to listen to "Christian music", I don't want to do any of it! And I still struggle.

Let me ask you a couple of questions before we start our study. When you were singing this morning... where was your focus? Who were you thinking about? I struggle here to. Often I'm thinking about whether I'm in tune, what the person next to me is doing, and whether they like my singing. I think about the grammar and punctuation and spelling of the PowerPoint. I think of all sorts of things. And there are times when I really have to work on focusing my words, my thoughts, and my attitude on the God who I'm supposed to be singing to.

When I was praying earlier... what were you doing? Where was your focus, and what was on your mind? I know that sometimes my own mind wanders during public prayers, especially when they are long and drawn out, repetitive and monotone, I just tune out. Again, sometimes it's work for me to pay attention to the person who is supposed to be bringing the group... me included... before the throne of God in prayer.

I'm, reminded of one of the stories in the book that told of how much Brother Lawrence hated doing dishes. He was the cook for the order, and was generally able to pray and have a good attitude when cooking, but from what I gathered... he really didn't like doing dishes. And so instead of moping through it, or dreading it... he turned it into another prayer time. Since no one really wanted to do dishes either, it was a time for him to be alone, to sing, to talk to God, and to listen to Him. And it became one of his favourite places to be. Not because he liked doing dishes... but because that was a place where he communicated with God.

God has been teaching me more and more about prayer as the life-line of my life. When I'm not talking to God... I'm far more of a mess. I'm grumpier, more frustrated, and far less focused. But when

I'm talking to God throughout the day... I'm centred, more peaceful, and have a much longer fuse. And it is directly connected to my prayer life. Sometimes things in my life are hard, and seem unfair. For example, there have been situations with my children... with their health and other things... that I really had it out with God over. I wasn't very nice, clean, pious or even quiet. I certainly wasn't bowing my head and folding my hands. But as I brought it to God He would answer me with scriptures that came to mind, a peace in my heart, and even a good, restful sleep to recover my strength. I do enjoy praying, and I wish I could learn how to discipline myself to do it more... because I have never been more at peace than when I have been consistently communicating with God.

Before we go through our study in James, I wanted to pull out a few notes about prayer from the scriptures that I think may help us be better informed about it. There have been a few people here at the church that have mentioned to me that they would love to pray more, but they don't know how... or why. So let me just lay out a few things about prayer, and then we can talk about it more in Overtime after service if you want to.

First, it has always been the intention of God to interact with humanity on a meaningful, personal, intimate level. Adam and Eve spoke face to face with God in perfect communion. They walked with God and talked with God just as you and I do... but sin changed that relationship. Adam and Eve were not content with their place before God and wanted instead to usurp His authority and be gods themselves. And then God, because He cannot be in the presence of sin, could not have that face to face relationship with them anymore.

Throughout the scriptures we learn that we cannot see God's face or we will die. He is too Holy and too powerful for our sinful, human, earthly mind to handle. We cannot hear His true voice or we will be shaken to the core. So God, by His mercy, allows us to address Him... and by His grace, answers us and most often gives us His gentlest, most patient voice (1 Kings 19:10-14) in response... condescending His immense thoughts to allow us to understand... providing us with conscience, the scriptures, other people, and the Holy Spirit to speak to us. We simply couldn't handle it if God spoke to us in His true self. And so now since He still desires meaningful, personal, intimate communication with us, He veils Himself for our sake.

Second, prayer is not the exclusive province or right of any person, race or religion. There is no one group or person that has the special ear of God. God opens Himself to listen to the prayers of all people. Isaiah 45:22 says, "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." Isaiah 56 talks about God hearing the prayers of all nations: Verse 7 says, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

If you remember the story of Jesus cleansing of the temple, Isaiah 56:7 is one of the scriptures that Jesus quoted. Mark 11:15-17 tells the story: "On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, 'Is it not written: "'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"" What got Jesus so upset? The Jewish shop-keepers had set up their stores, and brought their tables, and animals, and money into the place that was called "the Court of the Gentiles." It was the High Priest's job to make sure that this area of the Temple was open for the whole world to come and praise, and pray to God... and they turned it into a noisy, smelly, mall. How could anyone pray amidst all of that mess? Jesus takes the prayers of all people very seriously, and for anyone to prevent another from praying to and worshipping Him is highly offensive to Him.

Third, there is no right posture for prayer. Why do we fold our hands and close our eyes? It's more tradition than anything. I teach my kids to bow their heads out of respect for God... and to close their eyes to keep from being distracted... and to fold their hands so that they're not doing anything else with them! But there are many passages in the bible about how people addressed God in prayer.

There was Bowing (Ex 4:31), Kneeling (Psalm 95:6), Sitting (Judges 20:26), Face to the Ground, (Matt 26:39), Standing (Mark 11:25), Lifting up Hands (1 Timothy 2:8), Looking Upward (John 17:1), Heads between their Knees (1 Kings 18:42), Pounding on their Chest (Luke 18:13), and Looking out a Window (Daniel 6:10)... they're all in the bible.

John MacArthur says something very important about the question of prayer posture. He says, *"Rather than external positioning, the Bible emphasizes the posture of the heart. Whether you are standing, sitting, or lying down, the important thing is that your heart is bowed in submission to the lordship of Christ. False religion places a premium on external behaviour, while true Christianity is concerned with the heart. And true prayer is characterized by an attitude of humility before God-not the physical posture of the person praying."*²

Fourthly, prayer is commanded. When I say that sometimes I don't feel like praying. The answer in one respect is... too bad. It may shock some of you to see how many times prayer is not just encouraged, but commanded in the bible.

- 1 Chronicles 16:1, "Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always."
- Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."
- Luke 18:1, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."
- Eph 6:18a, "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests."
- Phil 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."
- 1 Thess 5:17, "Pray continually"

Fifth, prayer is sacrificial worship. Yes, prayer is a command, but it is also a sacrificial act of worship that we bring to God. Many times in the bible, prayer is equated to fragrant incense that rises up to God, a worship offering that was brought to the Temple to symbolize the prayers of God's people (Exodus 30). The expensive incense would be burned and the smoke would rise upwards to the heavens... and would be a pleasing aroma. The Psalmist said this very thing in Psalm 141:2, "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice." God is honoured by the time that we make, take and carve out for Him during the day. He knows our proclivity to get focused on other things, and He knows our weaknesses... and He is honoured by the time that we take with Him.

Of course He wants more. Just like I want more time with my kids, so God does with His. Sometimes our prayers are a long conversation with God, like when my kids come to me and we talk on the couch. Other times, they are just a quick hug... and then they are off. Sometimes my kids and I just sit together and say nothing, or we snuggle on the couch. I think that God wants all of these things from us... the long conversations, the quick hugs, and just spending time together.

Sixth, and this is where we open up James, when are we to pray? Open up James 5:13. James is a very practical book and so James seems to give us some practical times and ways to pray in this last bit here. He starts his letter talking about prayer, and ends it with prayer too.

So the first answer to "when we are to pray?" is found in James 5:13, "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." James seems to be saying that the first time to pray is Prayer for Life Situations. Praying for the good, bad and ugly stuff that life brings.

² <https://www.gty.org/library/questions/QA156/is-there-a-correct-posture-for-prayer>

James seems to be talking more about individual prayer, as opposed to a congregational one. There are lots of ways that people respond to the stuff that goes on in their life, whether it's good or bad stuff. Some people worry and stew, or vow revenge, or self-medicate, or grumble, or a host of other things. James says that the right response, first... is to pray. Communicate with God about it first...

Take a second, or a minute, or even an hour to talk to God about it before charging ahead, falling apart or seeking counsel elsewhere. If you remember the Nehemiah study, he prayed all sorts of different prayers. Some were quick, little telegraph prayers, others were long and drawn out. But he brought everything to God first, and then worked in God's strength. I struggle with this part too. Many times, I have to force myself to pray before I do something.

Next are verses 14-15, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." This is Prayer for Recovery or Healing and is a petition to the elders of the church. The most confusing thing about this verse is the term "sick". Many take this verse to mean that if someone is "physically ill" then they should call the pastor or elders to anoint them with oil and they will be healed. But the term "sick" doesn't necessarily mean "physically ill", it means "weak." Let me explain this a little more.

Half of the time in the Bible, the Greek word used here, ASTHENEIO is translated "sick"... as in physically ill. But it is also used half the time to refer to emotional or spiritual weakness. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:10 when he says, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am WEAK, then I am strong." If we translate the word in James as "weak" instead of "sick", then we can read it in a much different light. James seems to be saying that those who have become weak in their spirit... or weak in their wills... or weak in their heart... because of their suffering... those who have fallen and have been defeated in the spiritual battles of their life... should come to the pastor and elders for prayer and help.

These people are the *"fallen spiritual warriors, the exhausted, weary, depressed, defeated Christians. They have tried to draw on God's power through prayer, but have lost motivation, even falling into sinful attitudes. Having hit bottom, they are not able to pray effectively on their own. In that condition, the spiritually weak need the help of the spiritually strong."* (MacArthur)³

They are to call on the spiritually mature people in the church to come along side them... so they can draw on their strength for a time. They call up the pastor and elders of the church and say, "Please pray for me, please pray with me... I can't do it right now... I need your help."

The anointing with oil is actually a very neat symbol for the encouragement, strengthening and refreshing of the person. The term here is actually the word "rub", or "massage." The spiritually mature in the church, coming along side the broken and help them... rubbing them, encouraging them... massaging them back to spiritual health... "in the name of the Lord."

Now, the third time to pray is also a prayer for recovery and healing, but this is a petitioning of the congregation... the larger Christian group of the church. Verses 16b and 19-20, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.... 19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

The whole concept here is a petition from James for the church to pray with and for each other, hold each other accountable, and take care of each other. It is not part of God's plan for a person to be alone in this world... otherwise they will wander. We may feel alone, or want to be alone, but God's plan is that the people in the body of Christ should be able to count on each other for support and prayer and

³ <https://www.gty.org/library/bibleqnas-library/QA0034/what-is-the-prayer-of-faith>

direction. The pastor and the elders should be “on call” to respond to things that are happening, but the whole church is designed to be a place where people can lean on one another.

If we would take James seriously here, life would be so much easier. And I know it’s hard. No one wants to tell someone that they resent them, or that they are angry with them, disappointed in them, that they sinned against them, that they are jealous of them, that they stole from them, or abused them in some way... or any number of other things. We’d much rather sweep it under the rug and not mention it... and just avoid the person and the problem. But the church should be a place where we can confess to each other what is on our heart, even publicly – to the whole church – and have that person or the church forgive them, encourage them, and then pray for them. The whole concept of “healing” here is not one of physical healing, but of emotional, relational and spiritual healing. As this happens, the church will grow deeper.

We carry each other’s burdens and pray for each other, and get to know each other, and support each other. And then, through that interaction, God brings healing, and hope, and love, and peace, and help.

When we come before God, we need to be thankful for the gift He is giving us called prayer. Because of our sin, our rebellion, and our predilection towards idolatry and gluttony and greed... God doesn’t have to listen to us. In fact, God doesn’t need anything from us at all. But He does desire to be in relationship with us, and gives us an enormous amount of patience and leeway in how He deals with us.

Let’s remember that prayer is a gift, and that we have the privilege of coming before God any time, in many ways. And that we can come before Him alone in our room, driving in the car, over the dinner table with our families, or in a large group at church. The only reason we can come before Him so boldly is because of the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ, and His work on the cross to take away our sins. That should be where our prayers start. With worship and thanks for what Jesus did for us, and the acknowledgement that His ways are higher than our ways, and that it is because of His mercy that we are able to communicate with Him at all.

Bonus Content: How To Get Answers to Prayer

Let’s read James 5:16b-18, “The prayer of a righteous man the prayer of is powerful and effective. [That would be better translated literally, “The prayers of the righteous are very strong.”] Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

I just want to give a couple words on “effective prayer”. There have been so many books written on “how to get your prayers answered”. So what does the Bible say? Let’s not forget the context in which this is said. Remember James is encouraging the individuals, the elders, the spiritually mature, the spiritually tired, and the rest of the church to hold each other up in prayer. And then he tells them not to forget how powerful the prayer of a person who is praying righteously is. There are lots of answered prayers in the Bible, and there are lots of promises that God will answer prayers (Psalm 91:15, Isaiah 58:9, Luke 11:9). But what gets one answered and one not? James seems to give the qualifier that the person who is praying is “righteous”. What does that mean?

I want to start by saying that I’ve seen and experienced answer to prayer in my own life. Some of you have too. Paul often solicited prayers from the churches that he served, and I do to. I have often asked many of you to pray for me... and it’s because the prayers of the church have been powerful and effective in my life. Whether it be the prayers of those who are praying for me, or those that I have talked to God about myself -- I’ve seen answers.

God has answered urgent prayers for emotional and physical comfort and healing in my life. I asked for prayer for that anxiety, stomach thing that I was having, and since I’ve asked I haven’t had it

once. I've had prayers answer to prayers for peace, direction, character building, patience, softness of heart, sermon and ministry ideas, help finding ministers to serve in positions in the church... and have seen many miraculous answers. Each in God's time, not my own.

So I did some reading about the barriers to answers to prayer in the Bible, and the conditions of being answered favourably by God. And here's what I came up with. There are more scriptures than these, but they get the point across.

Our prayers will not be answered if we ask with:

1. Secret Sins in our life, or Selfish Motives

Psalm 66:18, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

James 4:3, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

We can't fool God into giving us something that we're just going to use to further our own destruction or sinful wants. You may be able to convince me to give you 50 bucks to buy something you say you need ... and then go turn around and buy alcohol, or drugs, or porn, or something else... but we can't fool God. He knows what we want to do with it.

2. Stubbornness / Pride in our Heart

Proverbs 1:28-31, "Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the LORD, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes."

This is the prayer that goes, "God, I know what I'm doing... and I'm not really asking your advice... but I could use some supernatural help to get it going. If you could just bless what I'm doing... instead of messing with the why's and how's... then that'd be good." God says that people who won't ask God what He wants, but just want Him to bless their own plans will "eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes." That's bible talk for "they'll get what they're asking for." Which isn't good.

3. Unrepentant Sin

Isaiah 59:2, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."

Micah 3:4, "Then they will cry out to the LORD, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done."

Sin is like cotton in the mouth of our prayer life. God will stop listening if we have sin in our lives that He wants us to get rid of.

And conversely, our prayers will be answered if they are asked with:

1. Humility, Contrition, Repentance

2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

The condition of our heart is paramount in our prayer life. Are we walking before God, flaunting our sins before Him, boldly proclaiming our own plans... or are we humbling ourselves, seeking God, and turning from and rejecting sin?

2. Whole Heartedness

Jeremiah 29:13, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

This seems like the opposite of the person in James 1:8 who is "double minded" and "unstable" because he doesn't know whether to seek God, Himself, or something else. Proverbs reminds us to "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Let God mark our path, and let us walk it wholeheartedly.

3. Ask with God's glory and His Kingdom' health as our motivation

Matthew 6:33, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

John 14:13-14, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

Again... why are we asking for it? For our own glory, or God's? God is more concerned with who we are than what we have, and so He's not going to be giving us things that are going to draw us farther away from Him. He wants us to trust Him more, and learn how to be better stewards of what He gives us, so He's probably not going to answer that prayer to win the lottery, or bump off the rich uncle.

Home Group Study Guide

Welcome to the *Operation Me: James* small group discussion book! My hope is that through this book, your discussions, and the fun you will have in your small groups, you will begin your relationship with God, rebuild it, or be encouraged to keep going!

This book is designed to be used by anybody, and to be a supplement to the Sunday sermons. There is no need for a “small group leader” to spend a lot of time in preparation. All that’s needed are friendly hosts. Simply choose some people to read through step-by-step, ask the questions, and let the discussions roll.

Feel free to move your dates and times around to what works best for the group, but note that a consistent schedule is usually works best for everybody.

Note: Don’t worry about getting through every question every week. There is no prize at the end for those who finish first. If you want to linger over one or two questions, or skip others for time, go ahead. However, as a rough estimate, I suggest spending about 10 minutes for the first section, 30-45 for the second, and 10 for the rest. The whole study should take about an hour. My hope is that your group will have great discussions... not finish too late or too quickly. For the sake of others, try not to let it go too long!

Here are descriptions of the various sections:

Reflect: Simple and not-so-simple questions to get the discussion started.

Read: Read the passage(s) and answer the questions together. Go ahead and use any help notes your Bible may have. Don’t get too bogged down in the details, but neither tread too lightly. If this section is getting too long, agree to take the rest home and perhaps e-mail each other some of your thoughts later in the week! (Note: Many of these questions are from “A study of the Book of James” by William R. Reed)

Respond: Either take this one home, or begin to challenge each other on how you will respond to these questions, depending on how open the group is to such things.

Relate: A fun, interesting or poignant quote that will either help the discussion or give people something to ponder on the way home.

Record: For those who want to, I’ve provided a space for them to record notes, personal thoughts, or exchange recipes!

The biggest things to remember are to ask God to guide your talks, and to have fun together. May God bless you on this journey, and may you begin or continue to build a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Pastor Al Descheneau
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Week 1: Mind

This week we talked about *Right Thinking* in a variety of areas, but noted that most of all, *Right Thinking* is where all operations start. How we think about joy, trials, temptations, wisdom, faith, prestige, sin and especially God, will govern our entire lives. When our minds are off, the rudder of our ship is warped, and we cannot live well, act rightly, or have anything but mere momentary joy.

Reflect:

1. Are you a cat person, or a dog person? Why?
2. What is the first place you go when you need to find the answer to a question? (Ex: Parent, Friend, Google, Encyclopaedia)
3. In what ways are you “double minded”? Are you different at work, at home, or with certain people?
4. Why do you think someone would blame God for the trials / temptations they are going through?

Read: James 1:1-12

1. Define, in your own words: Trial, Perseverance, Wisdom
2. Why do you think that James writes about “asking for wisdom” right after talking about undergoing trials? What’s the connection?
3. Two questions quickly come to mind when we go through difficult times are, “How could God allow this to happen to me?” and “How can I get through this difficult time?” How can wisdom help us live “righteously” while going through trials?
4. How do these verses relate to James 1:6-8?
 - a. Matthew 13:58
 - b. Mark 16:14
 - c. Hebrews 11:6
5. Suppose you are going through a trial and don’t feel any faith in your heart. How do you “make yourself” have faith? How do you make yourself “rejoice” over your trials? Can you? What do “faith” and “joy” have to do with the way we *feel*?
6. In light of the fact that James is written to Christian believers, what do you think “death” refers to in verse 15 when it says that sin “gives birth to death”? (Hint: “death” *does not* mean loss of salvation, but something bad... “spiritual death”.) Consider the following verses:
 - a. Romans 7:9-11
 - b. Romans 8:5,6
 - c. Romans 6;13

Respond:

What are you looking forward to learning, experiencing, clarifying or doing in the next eight weeks of this study?

Find someone this week to “go for coffee” with that you know will give you an honest evaluation of yourself. Ask them, “Am I a joyful person?”, “Am I a wise person?”, “Am I a double-minded person?”

Relate:

“There is a wisdom of the head, and a wisdom of the heart.” ~ Charles Dickens

“The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.” ~ Socrates

Week 2: Ears

Right Listening is the most logical thing to come after *Right Thinking*. Our thinking is so affected by what we listen to, and what we let into our minds. This week we looked at six different lessons on listening:

1. Keep mouth shut. 2. Don't jump to conclusions. 3. Filter. 4. Act on it. 5. Remember. 6. Keep mouth shut.

Reflect:

1. How much time do you spend in front of the mirror each morning? Be honest.
2. Are you a good listener? How do you know?
3. Do you know anyone that is a "doer", but not a "listener"? What about someone who is a "listener", but not a "doer"? Explain.

Read: James 1:9-26

1. Why do you think the Holy Spirit, through James, exhorts readers to get rid of "all moral filth" and "evil"? How is this connected to James 1:14?
2. Read and discuss how faith and deeds interrelate:
 - a. Colossians 3:5-10
 - b. Galatians 2:16
 - c. Ephesians 2:8,9
 - d. Hebrews 11:6
3. One interpretation of James 1:23 is the following: *"A Christian who reads the Bible and does not do what it says is like a person who forgets his true identity. Scripture teaches that we are "new creations in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17) who "Delight in God's law in their inner being" (Romans 7:22). A Christian who doesn't follow through on what the Bible teaches denies his true nature."* What do you think of this interpretation?
4. In what ways is God's Word a mirror?
5. According to James 1:26, how important is the way we speak? Why?

Respond:

Can you think of an example from your life when you "looked intently" into God's truth and embraced it deeply so that you were led to take specific actions in your life? Is God calling you to do so?

7 Ways to Listen Intently to God's Word⁴

- Read the Bible aloud to yourself with expression.
- Use small cards with verses printed on them to refer to throughout the day.
- Whenever a verse includes a command, think of at least three ways you can put that command into action that same day.
- Ask someone else (maybe even a Christian friend that you don't know very well) to comment on the verse that you are trying to understand and obey.
- Ask for an explanation when someone mentions a verse or passage you don't understand.
- Memorize sections of God's Word.
- Meditate on the parts of God's Word you have memorized.

⁴ From "Life Application Bible Commentary: James" by Bruce Barton et al.

Relate:

“We have two ears but only one mouth that we may hear more and speak less.” ~ Zeno of Citium

“Passive Christianity is morally wrong.” ~ Bruce Barton

Week 3: Ears

This week we said that our perception becomes our reality, so it is important to perceive things rightly. How we view our religion, what we feed our eyes, and how we perceive people is critical.

Reflect:

1. What is your greatest “pet-peeve”?
2. Do you ever avoid certain topics with certain people because you know the discussion will get out of hand? (Ex. Politics, Religion, Kids, Marriage)
3. Have you ever worked / volunteered for a charitable organization? What was it like?
4. What is it about certain people that makes it difficult for you to associate with them?

Read: James 1:27-2:13

1. Who are the “orphans and widows” of our society today?
2. According to James 1:26-27, what does genuine Christianity look like?
3. How could one make their church / home more “poor friendly”? Do you think that is something your church / family should be more concerned about?
4. Do you think that James 2:5-9 is teaching that God prefers poor people over rich people? If yes, why? If no, what are these verses teaching?
5. Consider and discuss God’s view of the poor:
 - a. Matthew 25:34-36
 - b. Mark 10:17-23
 - c. Luke 6:20
 - d. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29
6. Consider the following answer to question 4: *“The issue isn’t economic poverty, but poverty in spirit. God ‘prefers’ those who have a spiritual need for Him. Often this is related to economic poverty, because the economically poor know that they have needs. In contrast, those who are wealthy can “afford” to not be dependant on him. In this sense, God has a preference for those who are ‘poor.’”* What do you think?
7. What areas of sin do we generally tolerate as “acceptable”? While we would never say this publicly, do we ever accept sin in one part of our lives (or others) because we consider ourselves to be doing well in other parts? What does James 2:10-11 say about this?

Respond:

What about you? What is your attitude toward the poor? Who are you drawn to? Who do you socialize with and spend time with? Why is that? Do you think your attitude towards the poor is one of those areas that God wants you to grow in?

Give some money to a charitable organization this week (over and above your tithe).

Pause this week and re-read James 2:12a again, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged...” Does this exhortation motivate you see life differently than you might otherwise? Journal your thoughts.

Relate:

“Miracles happen everyday, change your perception of what a miracle is and you'll see them all around you.” ~ Jon Bon Jovi

“There's something really great and romantic about being poor and sleeping on couches.” ~ Ben Affleck

Week 4: Hands

This week we talked about the famous battle between faith and works. What is the point of saying that we have faith in God and trust in His mercy and life changing power if there is no evidence of that faith in our lives? Our hands will do the work that our minds and our hearts set for them. One cannot say that they really believe if there is no evidence of that belief.

Reflect:

1. What are some of your favourite oxymorons? (Ex. Pretty ugly, Deafening silence, Jumbo Shrimp, Instant Classic)
2. Have you ever had to depend on a piece of safety equipment for your very life? What was that experience like?

Read: James 2:14-26

1. Consider the following verses:
 - a. Romans 3:28
 - b. Romans 4:1-4
 - c. Galatians 2:16
 - d. Ephesians 2:8,9
2. Now re-read James 2:14-17. Is there a problem here? The verses clearly state that a person is saved/justified by faith, not works. In contrast, James states that a person who only has faith but no works is not saved. How do you think these verses can be reconciled? (Note: One might be tempted to think that the resolution lies in understanding the “works of the Law” as something unique to Judaism, and only applies to OT Law. However, when the New Testament speaks of “works” it means ANY actions done in the power of the flesh, not merely those done in obedience to the Law of the Torah.)
3. The distinction here is vital. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that this is the essence of what separates Christianity from all other religions of the world. Unlike every other religion, Christianity does not teach that people should try to produce righteousness by working harder or being more diligent. Rather, Christianity is unique in that it teaches that righteousness is *received by faith* -- not *produced by human effort*. Read:
 - a. Romans 8:3,4
 - b. 1 Corinthians 1:30,31
 - c. 2 Corinthians 5:21
4. Would you agree that the verses above teach that righteousness is received by faith, not produced by human effort?
5. Is it enough to just believe Jesus’ promise of eternal life through faith in Him, or does one also need to display a minimum amount of works in order to please God?

Respond:

Grace is the foundational framework of God’s promises to mankind. Grace is God’s work in man’s life, given as a gift, entirely of God, without human contribution.”

Faith is man’s response to God’s grace: God gives. Man receives.

In order to become a Christian, a person needs to be convinced that they are a sinner, guilty in God’s sight and deserving of judgement. They must believe that Jesus’ death on the cross is

sufficient to save them from eternal judgement and secure eternal life for them. By Grace, though Faith. Have you responded to God's grace, in faith?

Are you in a situation right now where God is asking you to respond to a command in scripture, in faith, but you don't want to do it? Can you put your faith into action this week and obey?

Relate:

"Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian, that's a tough call. That's rebellion." ~ Alice Cooper

Week 5: Tongue

This week we said that it was tantamount to a miracle if someone could bridle their tongue and not stumble. It's amazing the power of speech, and the trouble it can get us into. James reminds us that the tongue may be small, but it can change lives. He also reminds us that it is critical that the source of our words be Holy, or we cannot produce good, helpful or meaningful speech.

Reflect:

1. Identify the famous movie quote:
 - a. "I'll be back..."
 - b. "My Mama always said, 'Life was like a box of chocolates...'"
 - c. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!"
 - d. "Dave, this conversation can serve no purpose anymore. Goodbye."
 - e. "I'll never let go. I'll never let go, Jack."
2. Do you know anyone who has had their tongue pierced? What was it like for them?
3. Do you have a favourite non-biblical quote?
4. Do you know anyone who asserts themselves on a regular basis, always saying what they feel, and rarely stopping to check if it should be said?

Read: James 3:1-12

1. What does James 2:26 ("faith without works is dead") have to do with not stumbling in what we say?
2. What title would you give James 3:3-8?
3. Why do you think the tongue is so difficult to tame?
4. Consider these verses in light of James 3:11,12. What's the connection?
 - a. 1 Corinthians 3:16,
 - b. 2 Corinthians 5:17
 - c. Galatians 2:20
5. The verses in James seem to suggest that it is impossible to tame the tongue. However, this does not make any sense if the main point of James 3:1-12 is to exhort Christians to use their tongues for good rather than for ill. Consider the following interpretation: "James is saying that it is impossible for unregenerate, non-Christian men and women to tame their tongues. They do not have a new nature, nor the indwelling Christ / Holy Spirit to empower them. However, Christians do. As a result, we should expect that Christians, unlike non-Christians, should be able to gain control over their tongues and use their speech for good rather than ill." What do you think of this interpretation?

Respond:

Have you ever said:

"Somebody has to tell that person off!"

"I'm glad I got that off my chest."

"I'm going to give them a piece of my mind!"

Upon reflection, was this a holy and good use of your tongue, or were you rationalizing the unrestrained use of your tongue?

How can you apply James 3:1-12 to your life this week?

Relate:

"If a cup is filled only with good water, it cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, no matter how badly it is jarred." ~ Oswald Chambers.

"The wise ones fashioned speech with their thought, sifting it as grain is sifted through a sieve."
~ Buddha

Quote Answers:

- a. Terminator
- b. Forest Gump
- c. Rhett Butler (Gone with the Wind)
- d. HAL (2001: A Space Odyssey)
- e. Rose (Titanic)

Week 6: Heart

This week we said that a good heart is wise, and its motives are pure. A good heart is not contentious, and its motives are unselfish. A good heart is humble, and its motives are submissive. God makes available to us the opportunity to have a re-built heart, one that is focused on Him, and that does things out of loving care for others, and ultimately in obedience and out of passionate love and gratitude to Him.

Reflect:

1. Who is your favourite comedian of all time? Why?
2. Do you know anyone you would call a *wise-guy*? What about someone that is full of wisdom? Who is easier to be around, listen to, or talk to? Why?
3. What address do you use when you pray (Ex. "Father", "Dear Lord", "Jesus", Heavenly Father)? Why?
4. Have you, or do you know anyone who has ever received a clear answer to their prayer? Was it yes, or no? How did you/they know?

Read: James 3:13-4:17

1. Are you somebody who wants others to view you as wise and understanding? Is that something a Christian ought to aspire to? (Consider Romans 12:2, 1 Timothy 4:12 & Titus 2:7)
2. James 3:14-16 speaks of wisdom that is "earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil." What does that kind of wisdom look like? Imagine somebody who is recognized as being skilled in giving spiritual advice to others. What are some "clues" which help us determine that this wisdom is not from God?
3. James 3:17 has a series of words which describe the "wisdom that comes from heaven." I've given the Greek:
 - a. "Pure" = *hagnos* (same root as "holy")
 - b. "Peace-loving" = *eirenikos* (meaning, promoting harmony between Christians, and between man and God)
 - c. "Considerate" = *epieikes* (same root as "reasonable, fair." Conveys the idea of being sensitive towards somebody's weaker/vulnerable position)
 - d. "Submissive" = *eupeithes* (Conveys the idea of being approachable or easily entreated)
 - e. "Mercy" = *eleos* (Coveys the idea of providing practical help to others.)
 - f. "Good Fruit" = *karpos agathos* (also "good crop" or "good harvest")
 - g. "Impartial" = *adiakritos* (meaning: not influenced by others)
 - h. "Sincere" = *anupokritos* (Conveys the idea of "practicing what one preaches")
4. For each of the characteristics above, give an example from Jesus' life where He showed that *His wisdom* comes from Heaven? How did He embody these characteristics?
5. Consider these verses about "asking in faith": Matthew 18:19, Matthew 21:22 & Luke 11:9-13
6. How does James 4:3 qualify these promises of Jesus above? (Consider: John 15:7, James 1:6-8 & 1 John 5:14)

Respond:

Next time you pray, check your heart's motives. When you ask God for something ask these questions: Do I really need what I have asked for? Am I asking for special treatment from God? Is it in the best interests of God's kingdom and his will that I receive this request? What do I plan to do when God grants my request?

Relate:

"God made man to go by motives, and he will not go without them, any more than a boat without steam or a balloon without gas." ~ Henry Ward Beecher

Week 7: My Wallet

This week we talked about God's expectations for how we are to hold on to all of the resources God gives us. We noted someone who is wise with their wallet has a right view of wealth. It is temporary, meant to be used, meant to be given generously, can make a person fat, and can give a person a false sense of power. Money is not the root of all evil, but *the love* of money sure can be (1 Timothy 6:10)!

Reflect:

1. Are you a packrat? Why or why not?
2. What is the oldest thing you own?
3. Do you have a favourite shirt, pair of pants, PJ's or other piece of clothing that you wear? When do you wear it? How does it make you feel?
4. When you think of a person or organization that uses their money for evil, which comes into your mind?
5. Have you ever been underpaid for work you have done? What about overpaid? What was the situation?

Read: James 5:1-6

1. Where do you draw the line between enjoying what God gives you and living a life of luxury?
2. Is it ever okay to have more material wealth than other believers, or should equality be the goal? Why?
3. Is the Holy Spirit through James condemning saving, or hoarding? What is the difference between *saving* and *hoarding*?
4. What does the fact that James 4:17 ("Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins") comes immediately before this passage about the use of our God given resources tell us?
5. Consider Jesus' story of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" in Luke 16:19-31.
 - a. What does it mean to be "self indulgent" (James 5:5)?
 - b. In what ways did the Rich Man's life show he was "self indulgent"?
6. Consider Matthew 6:19-24:
 - a. What does Jesus mean when He says to "store up treasures in heaven"?
7. What does the term *stewardship* mean?

Respond:

What do you do with your wealth that shows that you are neither a "hoarder", nor "self indulgent"? Is there something that you need to change in the way you use your money?

Relate:

"In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of." ~ Confucius

Week 8: My Feet

This week we said that we need to walk with diligence, perseverance and courage in the direction that God sends us. Letting our “yes” be yes and our “no”, no” means that we walk well in this world, not wandering through it aimlessly and without care. To walk well means walking patiently, firmly, with support, looking at those who have travelled before, and in a straight line.

Reflect:

1. Do you know any farmers? What do they farm?
2. Are you a patient or an impatient person? Give examples.
3. Do you know any whiners? What makes them a whiner?
4. So you know anyone who is suffering, or who has suffered in the past? What is/was it like for them? Was it hard to watch? How did you try to help?

Read: James 5:7-12

1. How can Christians find patient endurance as they wait for Christ to return? (Consider: Hebrews 10:25, 12:1-4, 13:9)
2. Why do faithful witnesses to God often undergo suffering and persecution? Where is their reward? (Consider: Psalm 59:1-4; Lamentations 3:20-23)
3. What does God accomplish in Christians through suffering? (Consider: James 1:2-4; Romans 5:3-5)
4. What should someone do (or not do) when they find themselves in the midst of suffering?

Respond:

Set aside some time to read and meditate on Psalm 37 this week.

Relate:

“To endure the cross is not tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.” ~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“Job’s is not grovelling, passive, unquestioning submission; Job struggled and questioned, and sometimes even defied, but the flame of faith was never extinguished in his heart.” ~ William Barclay

Week 9: My Knees

This week we saw that James closes his letter just like he started it, with a call to prayer. Prayer is the lifeblood of the Christian walk, and is an essential tool in relating to God, but it cannot be used to manipulate Him. What is effective prayer? Prayers that praise God, intercede for others, and are meaningful and honest confessions of the heart.

Reflect:

1. When would someone find you singing? Are you a shower singer? A car singer? Be honest!
2. What is your favourite song? What was your favourite song 10 years ago? Do you still know all the words?
3. What was a time in your life when you've felt the closest to God? Where were you? What was happening in your life?

Read: James 5:7-12

1. Define in your own words, these word from James 5:13-16:
 - a. "Trouble" (vs13)
 - b. "Happy" (vs 13)
 - c. "Sick" (vs 14)
 - d. "Righteous" (vs 16)
2. What part does modern medicine have in healing our illnesses? Why? (Consider: Luke 10:34, 1 Timothy 3:8, Philippians 2:27, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
3. Vs 16 encourages us to "confess our sins to each other." What damage can be done if sin is confessed *beyond the circle of its influence*?
4. What is the difference between the "many words" in Matthew 6:7, and being persistent in prayer?
5. What does it look like for someone to "backslide" or "wander from the truth"? What does it mean to "bring him back"? (James 5:19)

Respond:

Do you have a regular time that you read the Bible and talk to God? What are some of the problems you have when you try to establish and maintain a regular prayer time? How can you overcome them?

Ask someone this week to hold you accountable in your Bible reading and prayer times. Ask them to call, e-mail, or talk to you at church each week with a simple "How are you doing?" Then promise that you are going to be honest with them.

Relate:

"If your lifeguard duties were as good as your singing, a lot of people would be drowning." ~ Simon Cowell

"I then realized that I could never be satisfied again with the mere natural charm of my voice, that I had to constantly paint when singing, melting all the colors, expressing reds and blacks that had to be less primary but bursting with subtly coloured combinations." ~ Placido Domingo