

# Study of James

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## Introductory to James

### I. The Writer

Three men in the NT are named James: (1) the son of Zebedee and brother of John (Mark 1:19); (2) the son of Alphaeus, one of the apostles (Matt. 10:3); and (3) the brother of our Lord (Matt. 13:55). It is likely that James, the brother of our Lord, wrote this epistle. During Christ's ministry, James and his brothers were unbelievers (Mark 3:21 and John 7:1–10). James was given a special resurrection visit by the Lord (1 Cor. 15:7) which undoubtedly brought him to salvation. We see him with the believers in the Upper Room (Acts 1:14). After Peter moved off the scene as leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17), James took his place. It was James who directed the conference of Acts 15 and who handed down the final decision. In Gal. 2:9–10, Paul acknowledged the leadership of James, but in Gal. 2:11–14, he seems to criticize James for his legalistic influence. Acts 21:17–26 bears out the fact that James leaned heavily toward the Jewish law.

### II. The Letter

This Jewish emphasis is seen clearly in the Epistle of James. James addressed the letter to Jewish Christians (1:1–2) who are “scattered abroad” in the Dispersion. See also 1 Peter 1:1 and John 7:35. The Dispersion was composed of Jews who had left Palestine but kept in contact with their “fatherland,” returning home for the feasts when possible. Note in Acts 2 that there were multitudes of devout Jews in Jerusalem from other nations of the world. Some of these Jewish communities were the results of Israel's various persecutions and deportations. Others were formed voluntarily for business reasons. Of course, Acts 11:19 informs us that many Christian Jews were scattered abroad because of the persecution in Jerusalem. These Jews would maintain separate communities and continue their way of life in these foreign lands. It was to Christian Jews scattered in the Roman Empire (possibly Syria in particular) that James addressed his letter. It was written about a.d. 50.

The Jewish emphasis in James is seen in several ways. For one thing, “assembly” in 2:2 is the word for “synagogue” (although the word “church” is used in 5:14). Christ's name is mentioned twice (1:1 and 2:1). The illustrations are all from the OT, or from nature. There are strong parallels between James and the Sermon on the Mount, which was Christ's spiritual explanation of the Law. There are also many parallels between James and 1 Peter (which was also written to Jews of the Dispersion). These Christian Jews were true believers, but they still maintained their Jewish ways in their Jewish communities. They were born again (1:18) and expected the coming of the Lord (5:7).

Do not expect to find in this epistle the well-developed doctrines of the church that we find in Paul's letters. The temple was still standing; many Jewish synagogues were Christian synagogues; and the full understanding of "the one body" had not yet dawned upon all the believers.

### **III. Basic Theme**

Woven throughout the letter are two themes: persecution from outside the fellowship, and problems within the fellowship. The believers were experiencing trials, and James sought to encourage them. But there were also divisions and sins within the assembly, and James sought to help them confess and forsake their sins. One of the key thoughts is perfection or spiritual maturity (see outline). These people needed to grow up in the Lord, and their various trials could help to mature them if they would obey God.

### **IV. James and Paul**

There are no conflicts between James and Paul on the matter of justification by faith. James could not be contradicting Galatians because Galatians had not yet been written! Paul explains that sinners are justified by faith (Rom. 3–4); James explains that a person's faith is dead unless it is proved by works. We are not saved by works, but the faith that saves us leads to good works. Paul wrote about our standing before God; James wrote about our witness before the world.

## **James 1**

One of the best tests of Christian maturity is tribulation. When God's people go through personal trials, they discover what kind of faith they really possess. Trials not only reveal our faith; they also develop our faith and Christian character. The Jews to whom James was writing were experiencing trials, and he wanted to encourage them. The strange thing is that James tells them to rejoice! The word "greeting" in v. 1 can mean "rejoice!" How is the Christian able to have joy in the midst of troubles? James gives the answer in this first chapter by showing the certainties Christians have in times of tribulation.

### **I. We Can Be Sure of the Purpose of God (1:1–12)**

The experiences that come to the children of God are not by accident (Rom. 8:28). We have a loving Heavenly Father who controls the affairs of this world and who has a purpose behind each event. Christians should expect trials to come; James does not say "if" but "when." (The Gk. word for "temptation" in 1:2 means "testings or trials"; while the Gk. word for "tempt" in 1:13 means "solicitation to do evil.") What is God's purpose in trials? It is the perfection of Christian character in His children. He wants His children to be mature (perfect), and maturity is developed only in the laboratory of life. Trials can produce patience (see Rom. 5:3), which means "endurance"; and endurance in turn

leads the believer into deeper maturity in Christ. God put young Joseph through thirteen years of testing that He might make a king out of him. Peter spent three years in the school of testing to be changed from sand to rock! Paul went through many testings, and each one helped to mature his character. Of course, it takes faith on the part of the Christian to trust God during testings, but knowing that God has a divine purpose in mind helps us to yield to Him.

In vv. 5–8 James deals with this matter of faith, as expressed in prayer. We do not always understand God’s purposes, and often Satan tempts us to ask, “Does God really care?” This is where prayer comes in: we can ask our Father for wisdom, and He will give it to us. But we must not be double-minded. The word suggests hesitation, doubting; it literally means “two-souled.” Double-minded Christians are not stable during trials. Their emotions and their decisions waver. One minute they trust God; the next minute, they doubt God. Faith in God during trials will always lead to stability; see 1 Peter 5:10.

Both rich and poor worshiped in the assemblies to which James wrote (2:1–9; 5:1), and James pointed out that trials benefit both groups. Trials remind the poor that they are rich in the Lord and therefore can lose nothing; trials remind the rich that they dare not live for riches or trust in them. Verse 12 is a wonderful beatitude and promise for us to claim in times of testing and trial.

## **II. We Can Be Sure of the Goodness of God (1:13–20)**

Many people seem to have the idea that because God is good, He should not allow His people to suffer or be tempted. They forget that God wants His children to grow up and experience new blessings of His grace; and one way they can mature is by going through trials and temptations. In this passage, James emphasizes the goodness of God and warns Christians about rebelling against God in times of trial (1:13, 20).

First, he makes a careful distinction between trials and temptations. God sends trials to bring out the best in us (see Abraham, Gen. 22:1), but Satan sends temptations to bring out the worst in us. Believers should not say that God tempts them, because temptations to sin arise from our very nature. He describes the “birth” of sin: enticement from without generates lust within; lust conceives and gives birth to sin; and sin brings death! The words “drawn away” and “entice” (v. 14) are hunting terms; they form an image of a hunter or a fisherman using bait to lure the prey.

Then, James reminds these believers that God gives only good gifts, and that good gifts come down from heaven. God is light; His goodness does not flicker like some faraway star. We are God’s children. He begat us through His Word, and we are the firstfruits of His creatures, the “sample” of what is to follow at Christ’s coming (Rom. 8:23). Therefore, Christians should not be swift to speak and complain when trials come. Rather, they should be swift to hear the Word, trust it, and obey it. After all, God works out His will in our lives when we are patient, not when we are angry.

## **III. We Can Be Sure of the Word of God (1:21–27)**

The phrase “swift to hear” (v. 19) reminds us of how the Christian should hear and obey God’s Word, the theme of this section. James uses an illustration from agriculture in v.

21 when he talks about “firstfruits” and “the implanted [engrafted] Word.” James may be referring to the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23) in which the heart is compared to soil and the Word to seed. If believers are going to receive the Word and get strength from it in trials, then they must pull out the weeds! “Superfluity of naughtiness” can be translated “rank growth of wickedness”—weeds! The soil of the heart must be prepared to receive the Word. If we have unconfessed sin in our hearts, and bitterness against God because of our trials, then we cannot receive the Word and be blessed by it.

In vv. 22–25, James changes the picture and compares the Word to a mirror (glass). The Word of God reveals what we are on the inside, just as a mirror reveals how we appear on the outside. When Christians look into the Word, they see themselves as God sees them and thus are able to examine their hearts and confess their sins. But it is not enough merely to look into the Word and read it; we must obey what we read. A person who merely hears the Word but does not obey it is like a man who glances casually into the mirror, sees that his face is dirty, and goes on his way without doing anything about it. Such a man thinks he has bettered himself spiritually when he has actually harmed himself.

Verse 25 tells us we must gaze carefully (not glance casually) into the Word, study it, and through it see ourselves. We must then obey what the Word says. If we do, we will be happy (blessed). It is not reading the Bible that makes a person happy; it is obeying what it says. He calls the Word “the perfect law of liberty” because obedience to the Word produces spiritual liberty (John 8:30–32). Living the Christian life is not bondage, it is wonderful liberty!

Verses 22–25 speak of the private life of believers as they look into the Word; vv. 26–27 describe their public life, their practice of the Word. The Gk. word for “religious” (v. 26) means “the outward practice of religion.” The Bible nowhere calls the Christian faith “a religion”; it is a miracle, a new birth, a divine life. “If any man imagines himself to be religious,” says James, “then let him prove it by the life he lives.” What are the characteristics of pure religion? They are: (1) self-control—a bridled tongue (see 3:2); (2) love for others; and (3) a clean life. The word “visit” (v. 27) means “care for”; it suggests sacrificial care for those who are in need. True religion is not a matter of forms and ceremonies; it is a matter of a controlled tongue, sacrificial service, and a clean heart.

James uses the word “perfect” several times in this chapter. In vv. 1–2 we have God’s perfect work; in vv. 13–20, God’s perfect gift; and in vv. 21–27, God’s perfect law. God’s perfect work is His purpose to mature us; His perfect gift is His goodness to us in times of testing; and His perfect law is the Word that strengthens and sustains us.

## James 2

In Gal. 5:6, Paul describes the Christian life as “faith working through love” (NKJV). These two aspects of faith are discussed in this chapter. The basic idea is that true Bible faith is not dead; it reveals itself in love (vv. 1–13) and in works (vv. 14–26). Too

many people have an intellectual belief in Christ, but not a heart belief. They have faith in the facts of historic Christianity, but not saving faith in Christ personally.

### **I. Faith Is Proved by Love (2:1–13)**

“Have not” (v. 1) really means “practice not.” We are not simply to have faith; we are to practice it in our daily lives. We must not believe in “God” in a vague, general way as many church members do (and even Satan—v. 19); we must have a personal faith in Jesus Christ specifically. It is not a “hope-so” faith in God that saves the soul; it is a definite commitment to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Here Christ is called “the Glory” (omit the words “the Lord of”), since He is the very glory of God (Heb. 1:3). To the Jews reading this letter, “the Glory” would identify Christ with the Shekinah Glory of the OT, the glory of God that dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple. That Glory now dwells in the believer and in the church (Col. 1:27; 3:4; Rom. 8:30; John 17:22).

How do we show love to others? By accepting them for what they are and seeing them as persons for whom Christ died. We are not to judge others or condemn them. Preferring the rich to the poor is a terrible sin, for Christ became poor that we might be rich in Him. See Rom. 2:11 and 1 Tim. 5:21. James states boldly that when a poor man comes into the Christian assembly (here the word is “synagogue”), he is to be received in love and shown just as much grace as a rich man. Man may look on the outward appearance; God sees the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). The “gold-ringed man” (suggesting that he is wearing many “flashy” rings) is no better in God’s sight than the man in humble (“vile”) clothing. Some Jews loved places of honor (Luke 14:7–11) and the admiration of great men (Matt. 23:5–12). Unfortunately, many Christians do too!

What is so sinful about showing respect to wealthy persons? For one thing, it makes us judges, and only God can honestly judge a person (v. 4). The word “partial” here means “divided” and takes us back to the double-minded person of 1:8. This kind of judging shows false values (vv. 5–6), for Christ clearly stated that the poor would inherit the kingdom (see Luke 6:20; Matt. 5:3). James reminds them that the rich oppress the saints and even drag them into court! By refusing to receive the poor, these believers have dishonored the poor whom God loves (see Prov. 14:31).

In v. 7, James reminds them that the rich even blaspheme the name of Christ “which is called upon you” (referring probably to their baptism; Matt. 28:19–20). Furthermore, the “royal law” for the believer is the law of love. He quotes Lev. 19:18, 34; but he is also referring to Christ’s words in Matt. 22:34–40. See also Rom. 13:8–10 and Gal. 5:14. It is a sin to show favoritism to persons; to break one commandment is to be guilty of breaking the whole law! The same God gave all the commandments, and all must be obeyed and practiced. Of course, James is not putting the Christian back under the Mosaic law; he is referring to the moral law which still abides under the New Covenant. We are to speak and act as those who will be judged, not by the law of Moses, but by the more severe “law of liberty,” the law of love written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

### **II. Faith Is Proved by Works (2:14–26)**

James in these verses is not contradicting Paul. Paul, in Rom. 4:1–5 and Gal. 3, is explaining how the sinner is justified, given a right standing before God; James, on the

other hand, is writing about how the saved person proves that salvation before others. People have no right to believe that we are saved if they do not see a change in our lives. A sinner is saved by faith, without works (Eph. 2:8–9), but true saving faith leads to works (Eph. 2:10). Being a Christian is not a matter of what we say with the lips; it involves what we do with the life. (Note that the statement in v. 14, “Can faith save him?” ought to read, “Can that kind of faith save him?” referring to the first sentence in the verse.)

We do not show our faith in Christ only by great deeds of achievement, such as those listed in Heb. 11, but by the things we say and do, day by day. Read 1 John 3:16–18 along with vv. 14–16. Faith that does not lead to works is dead faith (vv. 17, 26), not living faith. There is a challenge in v. 18: “Show me your faith without your works!” This is impossible to do! The only way faith can be expressed in the Christian’s life is by practical loving obedience to the Word of God. Even the devil has dead faith! (v. 19) Read Matt. 8:29 and Acts 16:17 to see how the demons acknowledge Christ. Still, this kind of faith will not save them.

James reaches back into the OT for two examples of faith that lead to works. The first is Abraham (Gen. 22:1–19). Abraham was anxious to have a son, and God promised one to him. Abraham believed God’s promise, and this faith gave to him the righteousness he needed for salvation (Gen. 15:1–6; Rom. 4:1–5). God had promised Abraham that through Isaac, he would have children more numerous than the sand of the sea and the stars of the heavens. Then God asked Abraham to sacrifice that son Isaac on the altar! Abraham had faith in God, and therefore was not afraid to obey Him. Hebrews 11:17–19 indicates that Abraham believed that God could even raise Isaac from the dead! In short, Abraham proved his faith by his works. His obedience to the Word was evidence of his faith in the Word. His faith was made perfect (brought to maturity) in his act of obedience. See 2 Chron. 20:7 and Isa. 41:8 for “the friend of God.”

James’ second illustration is Rahab (Josh. 2; 6:17–27). This woman was a sinner, yet her name is listed in the family of Christ! (Matt. 1:5) Hebrews 11:31 indicates that she was a woman of faith. She lived in the condemned city of Jericho, and she heard that God had judged the enemies of Israel. She believed the report she heard about God (Josh. 2:10–11), for “faith comes by hearing” (Rom. 10:17, NKJV). Note that she also had assurance (Josh. 2:9, 21). Keep in mind that Rahab was a believer in the God of Israel before the two spies came to her house. It was her reception and protection of the two spies that proved her faith in God. She risked her own life to identify herself with Israel. Because of her faith, proved by her works, she and her family (who also believed) were delivered from the judgment that came to all the people in Jericho.

Verse 24 summarizes the entire matter: faith that does not lead to works is not saving faith. Sad to say, there are multitudes of professing Christians and church members who have this “dead faith.” They profess faith with their lips (v. 14), but their lives deny what they profess. This is the same truth Paul explained when writing to Titus. “They profess that they know God, but in works they deny Him” (Titus 1:16). Real Christians are “a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14). This is why Paul warns, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith; prove yourselves” (2 Cor. 13:5, NKJV). This does not mean that a true Christian never sins (1 John 1:5–10). But it does mean that a true Christian does not make sinning the habit of his or her life. A true Christian bears fruit for God’s glory and walks so as to please God.

The whole matter of faith and works is summed up in Eph. 2:8–10 (NKJV): (1) the work God does for us (salvation)—“For by grace you have been saved ... not of works”; (2) the work God does in us (sanctification)—“For we are His workmanship”; (3) the work God does through us (service)—“created ... for good works.”

## James 3

We can identify mature Christians by their attitude toward suffering (chap. 1) and by their obedience to the Word of God (chap. 2). Now James tells us that a Christian’s speech is another test of maturity. We read and hear many words every day and forget what a wonderful thing a word is! When God gave us the faculty of speech, He gave us a tool to build with; but it can also become a weapon of destruction.

### I. The Exhortation (3:1–2)

Apparently there was a rivalry in the assemblies over who would teach, for James warns them, “Let not many of you become teachers!” The reason? Those who teach will be judged more strictly than those who listen. It is a sad thing when immature Christians try to become teachers before they are ready. They think they have attained a great place of honor, when they have really asked for a more severe judgment from God!

James is quick to agree that all of us stumble in many ways, especially in what we say. In fact, the person who is able to control the tongue proves that he or she has control over the whole body. Read 1:26 again, and note also the many references to the tongue in the Book of Proverbs. Peter is a good illustration of this truth. In the Gospels, while an immature disciple, he often lost control of his tongue and had to be either reproved or taught by the Lord. But after Pentecost, his spiritual discipline was evident by his controlled speech.

### II. The Illustrations (3:3–12)

James used three paired illustrations to portray the power of the tongue.

#### A. *Power to direct—the bit and rudder (vv. 3–4).*

The word “helm” in v. 4 is “rudder,” the part of the ship that steers it through the water. We often think that our words are unimportant, but the wrong word can direct the listener into the wrong paths. An idle word, a questionable story, a half-truth, or a deliberate lie could change the course of a life and lead it to destruction. On the other hand, the right word, used by the Spirit, could direct a soul out of sin and into salvation. Just as the horse needs a guide, and the rudder needs a pilot, so our tongues need the Lord to control them.

#### B. *Power to destroy—the fire and animal (vv. 5–8).*

The size of a thing does not determine its value or power. The tongue is a little member in the body, but it can cause great destruction. How the tongue loves to boast! (Of

course, what the tongue says comes from the heart: Matt. 12:34–35.) “How great a forest a little fire kindles!” (v. 5) Each year, many thousands of acres of timber are lost because of careless campers or smokers.

A little flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a flame: it can, through lies and gossip and heated words, set a whole family or church on fire. See Prov. 16:27. And the “soot” from the fire can defile everybody involved. When the Spirit came at Pentecost, there were tongues of fire from heaven to enable the Christians to witness; but it is also possible for the tongue to be “set on fire from hell” (v. 6). James also compares the tongue to a fierce and poisonous beast that cannot be tamed. No *man* can tame the tongue; only God can control it through His Spirit. The tongue is restless, unruly (that is, it cannot be ruled). What poison it can spread! A spiritual tongue is medicine (Prov. 12:18).

*C. Power to delight—the fountain and tree (vv. 9–12).*

It is impossible for a fountain to produce both fresh water and salt; and it is impossible for a tongue to speak both blessing and cursing. How often we “bless God” in our praying and singing, and then “curse men” in our anger and impatience! See Prov. 18:4. Christians must allow the Spirit to give forth the “living waters” of the Word through their tongues. There is something wrong with the heart when the tongue is inconsistent. Likewise, a tree cannot bear two kinds of fruit. See Prov. 13:2 and 18:20–21. The “fruit of the lips” (see Heb. 13:15) ought always to be spiritual.

After considering these six examples, believers must realize that they cannot permit Satan to use their tongues. The wrong word at the wrong time could break a heart or lead a person astray. We need to make Ps. 141:1–4 our constant prayer.

### **III. The Application (3:13–18)**

One of the key themes in the Book of James is wisdom, or practical living directed by the Word of God (see 1:5). It is tragic when Christians lack practical wisdom to direct their affairs, both personally and in the church. Far too many people have the idea that to be “spiritual” means to be impractical—and nothing is farther from the truth! When the Holy Spirit guides us, He uses our minds, and He expects us to get the facts and weigh issues in the light of the Word of God. James indicates that there are two sources of wisdom and that the believer needs to be discerning. The tongue of the believer can be filled with true wisdom from above or the false wisdom from below.

*A. False wisdom from below (vv. 14–16).*

When we have bitterness and envy in our hearts, our tongues will express these things. It matters not how spiritual our teaching might be: if the tongue is not controlled by the Spirit from a loving heart, then we are imparting false wisdom. To their shame, Christians often believe this false wisdom and even glory in it! They know this “wisdom” contradicts the Bible, so they lie even against the truth of God’s Word! False wisdom belongs to the world (earthly), the flesh (sensual), and the devil (devilish)—the three great enemies of the believer (Eph. 2:1–3). You can always tell when a church or a family follows false wisdom: you will find jealousy, division, and confusion. Instead of humbly depending on the Spirit and the Word, they look to the world for ideas and to the flesh for strength, and by so doing play right into the hands of the devil.



### *B. True wisdom from above (vv. 17–18).*

Truly wise believers do not need to advertise the fact that they are wise; you will see it expressed in their daily life (edifying conversation and good behavior) and attitude (meekness). Knowledge puffs up (1 Cor. 8:1), but spiritual wisdom humbles us and keeps us from being arrogant. While the false wisdom has its origin in the world, the flesh, and the devil, the true wisdom “comes down from above” (see 1:17). It comes from God, by the Spirit; it is not invented by the mind of man.

This true wisdom is pure; there is no error in the Word of God. It is peaceable: it leads to peace and harmony, not discord (see 4:1–10). Man’s method for attaining peace is to sacrifice purity for the sake of harmony, but God does not work that way. Where people bow to the pure Word of God, there will always be peace.

The wisdom from above is also gentle; gentleness includes patience and forbearance. When the flesh controls the tongue, it unleashes a flood of words without self-control or a willingness to listen to others. “A fool vents all his feelings,” says Prov. 29:11 (NKJV). The wise person uses gentleness and persuasion with patience; he or she does not threaten or accuse. “Easy to be intreated” (v. 17) suggests a willingness to yield, or to be reasonable. Wise people are full of mercy, not quick to judge or condemn; their lives are full of good fruits. There is no wavering (“partiality,” 1:6 and 2:4); though they are willing to yield, they are not willing to compromise with the truth. Finally, true wisdom will not allow for hypocrisy; the truth is spoken and is backed with a true motive.

## **James 4**

This chapter makes it clear that there were carnal divisions and disputes among these believers. One cause was the selfish desire of many to be teachers (3:1), but the basic cause was disobedience. There was a lack of true separation in the lives of the people. It is tragic when brethren dwell together in discord instead of unity (Ps. 133). “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3)

### **I. The Enemies We Must Face (4:1–7)**

We noted in 3:15 that the Christian battles the world, the flesh, and the devil. You find this same listing in Eph. 2:1–3, where the life of the unsaved sinner is described. The unsaved person lives for the world and the flesh and is controlled by the devil. Those who trust Christ receive the Holy Spirit within and have a new nature. Still, they will battle these enemies.

#### *A. The flesh (vv. 1–3).*

The word “lusts” does not necessarily mean sensual passions. It simply means desires. These desires are at work in the members of the body, and they excite the flesh and create problems. Please keep in mind that the body itself is not sinful; it is the fallen nature that would control the body that is sinful. The flesh is human nature apart from God, just as the world is human society apart from God. This is why Rom. 6 exhorts us

to yield the members of our bodies to the Spirit: see also the emphasis in Rom. 8 and Gal. 5. Note also what James says in 1:5 about our desires.

In v. 2 James describes these believers' sinful actions: they desire, they kill to obtain (see Gal. 5:15), and they do not stop to pray about their desires. And, when they do pray, they pray selfishly that they might enlarge their pleasures, not glorify God. The flesh can even encourage a person to pray! Of course, when a believer is at war with himself, it is not likely that he can have peace with others.

### *B. The world (vv. 4–5).*

Spiritual adultery is being married to Christ (Rom. 7:4) yet loving the world (2 Cor. 11:2–3). In the OT, God called Israel's idolatry "adultery" because the idols had robbed Him of the people's devotion. How can Christians have friendship with the world when they have been called out of the world? (John 15:18–19) We have been crucified to the world, and the world to us (Gal. 6:14). There are four dangerous steps that take the believer into a wrong relationship with the world: (1) friendship with world, James 4:4; (2) being soiled by the world, James 1:27; (3) love with the world, 1 John 2:15–17; (4) conformity to the world, Rom. 12:1–2. The result is that the compromising believer is judged with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). Lot illustrates this folly; see Gen. 13:10–13 and chapter 19. Believers who are friends of the world are at enmity with God. They grieve the Spirit, who jealously yearns for their love.

### *C. The devil (vv. 6–7).*

Christians who live for the world and the flesh become proud, and the devil takes advantage of this situation, for pride is one of his chief tools. God wants to give us more grace—more than anything Satan can give! The Christian must use the Word to resist Satan (Luke 4:1–13), and this the Spirit will enable him to do. But God cannot help the Christian who is proud, who refuses to repent of sin and humble himself. Grace is for the lowly, not the lofty. We must first submit to God; then we can effectively resist the devil.

It is important that Christians examine themselves to see if any of these enemies are defeating them.

## **II. The Exhortations We Must Heed (4:8–17)**

James turns now to three important warnings and calls Christians to repent of their sins. Unless individuals in the church are right with God, there can be no peace.

### *A. Warning against pride (vv. 8–10).*

Wars and fighting originate in pride; the wise Christian sows seed of peace (3:13–18). Pride puts us at a distance from God; pride defiles our hearts and our works. It is the sin of double-mindedness again, and this is basically lack of surrender. "Purify your hearts" (v. 8) carries the idea of having a chaste and faithful heart, not loving the world or grieving the Spirit. These believers were living in pleasure, surrounded with laughter and worldly joy. They needed to be sober and serious, putting sin out of their lives. James promises that if they humble themselves, God will lift them up. See Matt. 23:12, Luke 14:11, 1 Peter 5:6, and Prov. 29:23.

*B. Warning against criticism (vv. 11–12).*

When people are worldly minded and proud, they are often quick to criticize others. The conflicts among these Christians had their origin in their judging and speaking evil of one another. Here is the tongue again! (1:19–20, 26, and 3:5–6) How many churches have been divided and disgraced by hateful, critical tongues! The Bible teaches us that we must have Christian discernment (1 Thes. 5:21–22; 1 John 4:1–6), but this does not mean that we can judge the hearts and motives of others. In Matt. 7:1–5, Jesus teaches that believers have the right to help others conquer their sins, but they must first judge their own sinfulness. If I have a plank in my eye, what right do I have to criticize the man who has a speck of dust in his eye? And I cannot see clearly enough to help him until I first take care of my own needs. When we judge other Christians without love and mercy, we are making ourselves lawgivers; and God is the only Lawgiver. If all of us would devote ourselves to obeying the Word and not investigating to see how well others obey it, our churches would have harmony and peace. James suggests in v. 12 that the only one with the right to judge is the one with the power to punish—namely, God.

*C. Warning against arrogant self-confidence (vv. 13–17).*

Pride, criticism, and self-confidence go together. Humble people pray for God to help disobedient Christians, and they try to love them back to fellowship with Christ. The humble know how to say “If the Lord wills” as they make their plans day by day. But these believers were boasting of their plans and anticipated success. They would go to the big city, set up business, and come back wealthy! He warns them that this carnal boasting and self-confidence is dangerous. To begin with, we know nothing about tomorrow; only God knows. The person who boasts about tomorrow is claiming to be God! Furthermore, life itself is uncertain—a cloud that quickly comes and goes (Job 7:7; Ps. 102:3). We do not even know when life will end, so how can we be so confident? We ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live ...” Every believer needs to keep before his or her eyes an awareness of the brevity of life. “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). Boasting about an unknown future is sin. Yet so many people make their plans without praying or seeking the mind of God. They live like the worldly sinner who thinks he has security for the future, but discovers he has lost everything (Luke 12:15–21).

Verse 17 sums up the chapter and points out that we can sin by neglect as well as by deliberate action. It is not simply what we do, but also what we do not do, that is sinful. This is why the Puritans used to talk about “sins of commission” and “sins of omission.” Life is so brief that we cannot afford to waste it. We must make our lives count for Christ before He returns.

## **James 5**

There are several miscellaneous matters in this last chapter, but the key thought seems to be that of the second coming of Christ (vv. 7–9). When Christians honestly look for the return of Christ, the evidences of this hope show up in their lives.

## I. They Are Patient When Wronged (5:1–11)

In those days a great gulf existed between the rich and poor; the “middle class” as we know it today was not a major presence in society. It appears that the Gospel appealed to the poor masses, while the rich rejected Christ (with some exceptions) and oppressed the Christian poor.

### A. *The sins of the rich (vv. 1–6).*

James lists several sins and shows that the rich were only preparing themselves for coming judgment. First, he names hoarding (vv. 1–3). He proclaims that the rich had amassed their wealth only to have it fade away. Their gold, silver, and garments (see Matt. 6:19–20) would only rust and be eaten away. Their very riches, by fading away, bore witness against their present selfishness and would testify against them again at the judgment. They had heaped up treasures but forgot that the “last day” was upon them and that judgment was coming. James may have been referring to the impending fall of Jerusalem. The second sin he names is stealing wages (v. 4); these rich people had held back the honest wages of the poor (see Lev. 19:13). They used fraud to steal these wages, and their sins would find them out! We often hear the phrase “Money talks!” In this case, the stolen wages cried out to God for justice, and the needy workers cried out to God too. “Lord of Sabaoth” (v. 4) means “Lord of the armies” and is the “battle name” of God. See Isa. 1:9 and Rom. 9:29. God would come with His armies and judge these thieves! The third sin named is extravagant living (v. 5). Certainly God wants us to enjoy the blessings of life (see 1 Tim. 6:17), but He does not want such a life to be wasteful and luxurious while robbing others in need. These men were living in needless luxury and were spending wantonly, using money that was not rightfully theirs. James compares them to senseless cattle who feed themselves without restraint, little realizing that they are only being fattened up for the slaughter! See Amos 4:1–3. The final sin is injustice (v. 6). The rich took advantage of their power to abuse and kill the poor. These Christians did not resist; they left their case in the hands of the Righteous Judge (Rom. 12:17–21).

### B. *The patience of the poor (vv. 7–11).*

James encourages these suffering Christians to get their eyes on the promise of Christ’s coming. The word “patient” (v. 8) does not mean that they were to sit idly by, doing nothing. Rather, the word carries the idea of endurance, bearing the burdens and fighting the battles until the Lord comes. He uses several illustrations to hammer home this lesson of patience. (1) The farmer (vv. 7–8). The farmer plants the seed and prepares the soil but does not reap a crop immediately. God sends the rains to water the soil, and then comes the harvest. (The early rain came in October and November and the latter rain in April and May.) Even so, the Christian must be patient, knowing that “in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9). (2) The judge (v. 9). Apparently their trials had made some of the Christians critical, and complainers emerged in the church. James reminds them that they are not to judge; Christ, the Judge, is at the door! He hears what is said, and He will come quickly and make things right. Murmuring and complaining is a serious sin among God’s people. If we would all remember that Christ is coming, we would not complain and criticize so much. (3) The prophets (vv. 10–11). James refers these Christians to the OT believers, who suffered

under the hands of sinners yet left their trials with God and won the victory. Job is the classic example. God had a wonderful purpose and result in mind when He permitted Job to be tried, even though Job did not understand what God was doing. Regardless of what trials may come to our lives, we know that God is full of love and mercy and that all things work together for good.

## **II. They Are Pure in Speech (5:12)**

James is not forbidding legal oaths, for even Jesus took an oath at His trial (Matt. 26:63–64). He is telling us to have such honest speech that we need not “back up” our promises with oaths. The rich men did not keep their promises; but the Christian must always keep his word, even if it hurts him or her personally.

## **III. They Are Prayerful in Trials (5:13–18)**

The Bible nowhere promises that Christians will have an easy life, but the Bible does tell us what to do when trials come. Some Christians will be afflicted, that is, go through a trial specifically planned by God. What should they do? Pray! James does not promise that God will remove the affliction, but he does suggest that God will give the grace necessary to endure it. See 2 Cor. 12. Other Christians will have sickness, and the suggestion in v. 15 is that this sickness is the result of sin (see 1 Cor. 11:30). What should they do? Call the leaders of the church and ask for prayer. This is not a church ritual to prepare a person for death, because James says that it results in the healing of the person’s body. The word “anoint” (v. 14) is the common word for “massage”; it is used in Mark 16:1, where the women wanted to prepare the body of Christ for burial. Oil was a common medicine in that day; physicians often anointed the sick with oil (Luke 10:34). The picture here is of saints not only praying for one another but also using the means God has supplied for their health. In v. 16 James summarizes the lesson: Christians are to confess their sins (when they have sinned against each other) and pray for each other.

James believed in prayer. In fact, tradition tells us that he spent so much time in prayer that his knees became hard and calloused. God works effectually through prayer, but that prayer must come from a clean, dedicated heart. James uses Elijah as the example of the power of prayer; see 1 Kings 17ff. “Like passions” (v. 17) means “with a nature like other men”; see Acts 14:15. It was not Elijah’s natural gifts that made him a great man of prayer; it was his dedication and faith.

## **IV. They Are Persistent in Soul-Winning (5:19–20)**

We can be so wrapped up in our own trials that we forget the needs of the lost and of believers who have strayed. The basic meaning of these verses is that saints should seek to bring wandering brethren back to the Lord. “Convert” simply means “to turn back again” (Luke 22:32). How easy it is for a saint to be seduced (to err) from the truth. Disobedient Christians are in danger of serious discipline, and even death (1 Cor. 11:30). In love, we should seek them out and help restore them (Gal. 6:1). When we do,

we are rescuing them from death (the discipline of God) and, in love, we see their sins covered (see 1 Peter 4:8).

But we may apply these verses to the lost as well. As we see the return of Christ approaching, how much we need to dedicate ourselves to witnessing! The Christian who really believes in the return of Christ cannot help but want to win others.