

FAITH BY DESIGN

BY DESIGN

design thinking
for your faith



FAITH



Faith By Design: Design Thinking For Your Faith

Written by Dr. Timothy Gillespie, D.Min.

Lead Pastor, Crosswalk Church

Cover Design By Emily Poulin

www.EmilyPoulin.com

Typesetting by Manny Peralta

www.MannyPeralta.com

COPYRIGHT © 2020 BY CROSSWALK All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "CROSSWALK," at the address below.

CROSSWALK Church

10421 Corporate Dr,
Redlands, CA 92374

Ordering Information:

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, a Division of Tyndale House Ministries, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

WEEK 1

JAMES 1:1-12 (NLT)

Greetings from James

1 This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the “twelve tribes”—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings!

Faith and Endurance

2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. **3** For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. **4** So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

5 If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. **6** But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. **7** Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. **8** Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

9 Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. **10** And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. **11** The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James has not always been a popular book. Rather, it has often been derided as a “letter of straw” (Martin Luther). It has been relegated to a second tier in the NT, and modern theologians sometimes feel it has been a judaistic holdover that does not really express the essence of Christian faith. Yet, in quite the opposite way, it has always been quite popular with the everyday Christians. Some have said it is “probably one of the two or three most popular NT books in the church.”

Why is this book so popular? While it is practical, it is concise and it uses metaphors and illustrations to make it easy, I would like to posit another reason. This book is written for design thinkers. What is design thinking? Design Thinking is a methodology used by designers to solve complex problems and find desirable solutions for clients... Design Thinking draws upon logic, imagination, intuition, and systemic reasoning, to explore possibilities of what could be—and to create desired outcomes that benefit the end user (the customer).

Think about an architect. How do they accomplish the task of creating a well-designed house? Simply, they create the drawing of how they want it to look and then they spend a great deal of time doing the hard work of engineering, working with numbers and systems, in order to create the underlying infrastructure that would create a functional and livable home from their initial design. Design thinking “starts with the ending” and creates the roadmap to get there. It includes innovation, systems,

and adherence to the plan, while being flexible enough to iterate new approaches to a problem.

But this doesn't sound much like what we do when it comes to our faith. It seems great for software design or creating an experience for someone at a restaurant, but does it make sense as a way to think about our faith? Our faith is something more organic than something that can simply be designed. Or is it? Should we consider some of these principles when we think about our faith, and particularly is there a book in scripture that lends itself to this kind of thinking? James seems to be a great place to start.

The author of James seems to be interested in how you are experiencing your faith, your obedience, and how your faith allows you to handle the ins and outs of life in a way that glorifies God and creates a better life for you. His view of what a Christian life should be just might be the goal for us to take a look at and begin to design our own lives of faith. He sees opportunity in pain and problems, has a plan for dealing with temptation, understands how faith can lead to change, believes our mouths cause us a lot of trouble, and wants us to be a praying people.

It is with this in mind that we will take a look at how we can begin to look through the book of James in order to begin to design our faith.

1 — Have you ever been frustrated by your experience of faith?

2 — Have you ever tried to create consistency in your faith with a hoped-for outcome?

3 — What would your well-designed life of faith look like?



CROSSWALK

1 This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the “twelve tribes”—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings! 2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.

Interestingly, this letter is one of those letters, like 1 and 2 Peter, 3 John, and even Jude, that is sent out, but not to a particular church. In fact, James simply says that it is for the 12 tribes living in the Diaspora (or dispersion, when the Jewish nation lost their homeland). If you notice, it is sent to the Jewish believers scattered abroad. This letter had a particular audience, and therefore it has a bent toward the chosen audience. There are definitely “Jewishisms” in this book, but he makes it clear who he is writing for. Now, does this mean there is nothing for us in this writing as we are not from the Jewish tradition?

Of course not! We can gain a great deal of insight, but we need to always remember the primary audience to which James was writing in order to correctly understand the cultural and religious context to which he was speaking.

And who was James? This could be a long discussion, especially with the neglect this book saw in the early history of the church. However, for our purposes, we are going to settle on the fact it was a relatively famous early church father by the name of James. Many propose that it was the brother of Jesus, and there is a great case for this. The question of authorship we will leave for another time, but it is an interesting conversation that can be

traced through Christian history, even to the time of the reformers.

There is a positive tone to the second verse of this book. James jumps right in to tell us that in any bit of trouble, there can be great joy to be found. This is of particular importance for us in 2020, a year we will look back at as unprecedented in its troubles for the world. Pandemics, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanoes, and the general desperation of a human population seeking to find its footing amongst these experiences. (I am writing this from my garage, converted in this pandemic to my office, as we are still under a shelter-in-place order due to Covid-19).

The first admonition in the book is to find opportunity for great joy in crisis. One could even say this book is relatively clear in the assumption that stress and hardship in our lives are predictable. This may be new to many of us who have been living relatively blessed and trouble-free lives. However, let us be careful equating our lives as blessed if they are struggle free. If we do this to its logical end, then those who are wealthy and have no real problems are somehow seen as more blessed by God. Biblical examples show us that a trouble-free life does not equate itself with blessing. Rather, see the book of Philippians to see how Paul considered himself

blessed in the midst of trouble.

This book begins knowing there is a way that Christians should consider their lives, and hardship and troubles are not to be seen as anything more than an opportunity for great joy. I understand how this sounds. Sort of “Pie in the sky” type of thinking. However, what have you found to be the joy that came to you and your family in this year’s troubles? My family

was able to be together again, which is a great joy—but there were many more. Our church grew, our network of churches grew, we learned new skills, and we came together as a people with a greater desire to worship and connect.

Was this trouble worth it? That is a question for the history books, I suppose. But there is joy in trouble, of that we can be sure.

1 — What Joy did you find in your troubles so far this year?

2 — How can you look at blessing differently than simply having things go well?

3 — If you could tell people about 2020 in 20 years, what would you say changed in your life for the better and for the worse?



2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.

Let us spend another day talking about this idea of Joy in the midst of troubles. One of the striking things about this text is the assumption of trouble. I don't know if this is how we look at life, or at least how we have traditionally looked at it. I think, perhaps, we have approached life as if troubles were an anomaly rather than the rule. This was probably not the case for the early Christians to whom this letter was written. They had internal struggles (like we do in the church—see Acts 15), they were having external troubles (persecutions, being fed to lions, that sort of thing), and they were probably having internal faith struggles as well (it is simply hard to believe at times). So the assumption the author takes into this sentence is simple; struggles and troubles will come, you have to learn to make the best of them. (This is design thinking; anticipate the situations, then you can iterate around them).

His use of the word “troubles” is a translation from the Greek. I won't worry you with the Greek word and its cognates, but it is a word that has two distinct meanings in the NT. They can mean either an outward trial or a process of “testing,” and they can denote the inner enticement to sin, what we would call “temptations.” This same word is used in 1

Peter 4:12—“dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” It is the same word used in the “Lord's Prayer” and some scholars think we should not translate the phrase “Lead us not into temptation” as “do not bring us to the time of trial” (NRSV), which would really mess with the way I have been saying that prayer over the years, and would even change what it means in some respects. This is why language is so important; words mean things and set us on a trajectory of understanding that is helpful or harmful if we are not careful.

So why did we title this day as “stress is problematic”? Simply because of the assumption that trials and troubles are to be assumed in our lives. There was never a promise in scripture of an easy life for the believer. Actually, I am not sure there has ever been a promise of an easy life for anyone in scripture, and believers are no different. However, we have been promised a purpose (Matthew 6:10), promised the Holy Spirit (John 16) and promised a savior (Genesis 3:15). That should be enough for us to look at any trial we have and realize that we will be okay if we can remember the above three things.

3 For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. 4 So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

This sounds like a training manual for running a marathon or working out. (I may have just gotten up from my writing to work out a little...)

Why is it that we, as believers, can look at and react to our troubles in such a way? Because we know that God uses our trials and troubles to perfect our faith, grow us as stronger Christians, and to build an endurance in us that is not only unexpected, but unusual.

I have a friend who is an ultra-marathoner. It is just ridiculous. His training regimen begins at like 3 am and goes until 7-8 in the morning. He runs marathons as his warm-ups. His capacity for pain is unusual and incredible. He lives in a climate that allows for him to run all year round, and he is uniquely in shape. Of course, he didn't begin as an ultra-marathoner; rather, he began by going on a small run and worked his way up. He told me his goal was never to run an ultra-marathon, but rather to simply keep going. Every time the trail got hard, he kept going; when his legs were tired, he kept going; when he was hungry, he kept going. His ability to keep going made him into the runner he is today. One more step each day was what he was going for, and he got there. He does races with names like "Survival Run," "Mountain Masochist," "Graveyard 100," and titles like that.

Sounds fun!

Wait; Sounds fun?

While we all probably define fun in different ways, what we can understand is that the growth of his endurance has played a great part in his ability to run. In that same way, we grow through our testing, through our trials. The scripture says that at the end of this, we will be needing nothing. How can that possibly be true? Who would have designed our lives to be like this? Why is it that we must suffer through troubles in order to be perfected?

Let's be clear, the troubles are not promised either; however, they are expected. One of the reasons is that we are not really in this world anymore. We react to things differently, we act differently in the face of so many things. At least, this is what is to be expected. If we are to be strong in our faith, if we are to be perfected in our thinking and acting, if we are to grow strong endurance in the face of suffering, then we need training. No one gets their goals without pushing themselves. And spiritual goals are the same way. Remember, our lives are not bifurcated, meaning that our lives are not separate. Our struggles are not separated from our spiritual lives in any way. What affects us practically affects us spiritually as well. We are whole beings, created as flesh and spirit.

1 — How do your struggles make you stronger?

2 —Where do you find your strength to endure?

3 — Can you endure a bit more each time?



3 For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. 4 So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. 5 If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. 6 But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. 7 Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

When has your faith been the most acute? When has it been the most refined and robust? What does it take to make faith bigger and bolder than it usually is? How can we be sure we are growing in faith? And in what ways does God use trials and troubles to make our faith develop into all that it can be?

That's a lot of questions for one day, but in verse 4 we see that when our endurance has a chance to grow, we become as those needing nothing. And wouldn't it be nice to need nothing! I will admit it, I got just a bit caught up in the great toilet paper run of 2020. Well, by that I mean I had a great deal of anxiety around the idea that we needed a certain amount of TP. I went to my wife and was encouraging a quick run to the store in order to get what I thought we needed as a good amount of TP to fill our lives and our cupboards, and to really, simply alleviate my anxiety. My wife kept telling me that we had all we needed, and I finally took her word for it.

Over the course of the next 6 weeks, I would go to a drawer, a cupboard, a shelf, and I would realize there were a few rolls of the blessed material here and there. Then, about 5 weeks in, I opened a cupboard I seldom look in and, lo and behold, I saw about 30 rolls of the stuff. I couldn't believe it! I went to my wife and she explained that before this whole "shelter-in-place" order had begun, we had taken a shipment of our online bamboo-based TP, which is like 60 rolls. We get a few of these a year, and we store the rest. Apparently, we rarely get through a shipment before the next one comes. We had all we needed, and there was comfort in knowing this. While she hadn't explicitly told me where it all was, she had simply admonished me to trust her. I should have believed her much sooner and with much more commitment. She was right, but wanted me to find it all on my own. (Just for the record, I don't think she was teaching me a lesson so much as she couldn't be bothered with my anxiety!)

I tell you this story to illustrate that just because you don't know a thing, it doesn't mean that God doesn't know it. We have to ask God for wisdom and then trust in the knowledge and truth he will reveal to us. Sometimes he reveals it all at once, and sometimes he reveals it slowly to us, through our trials and troubles. It is not up to us how God will disperse his wisdom, but it is up to us how we will receive it.

What we can be sure of is this: our faith is refined in the waiting, in the hoping, and sometimes, in the silence during the trials. We shouldn't be concerned that we are growing our endurance. We should look at it as an opportunity to lean more deeply into a faith that believes God will give us everything we need—all the wisdom, grace, protection, and love we could ever imagine.

1 — When have you felt tested and troubled? What did it do to your faith?

2 — How can we know when we are leaning into the wisdom of God?

3 — How can we know God's timing? Can we at all?



9 Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. 10 And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. 11 The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

This seems like God doesn't like people who are wealthy. But this is in no way true. The problem which sometimes happens with wealth is people begin to believe in their own competency as a salvation schema in their lives. God wants them to realize he has given them all they possess, and this should humble us. Both circumstances, rich and poor, should view themselves as God views them. Each is exhorted or encouraged to take pride or boast, but to boast in Christ.

I was listening to a podcast with Malcolm Gladwell as the guest, and he said something that has resonated a great deal with me. He said he used to chase fame, recognition, and money. But after a while, when he realized his work had provided a roof over his head and food on the table, he realized the pursuit of all the rest—fame, recognition, and money—were just vanity and ego. When he was able to let the pursuit of those things go, or at least place them in the correct position in his life, he was finally able to simply focus on the work. Good work, said Gladwell, was

reward enough on its own. (He also said he was surprised that from the good work, the other things eventually flowed.)

In a similar way, the author is pushing both situations to recognize what is from God and what they have done themselves, and to differentiate between the two on their own. In this way, they can both "boast" as to their "high position" but realizing this position comes from God and not from their own achievements or their own lack, but because of the position they find themselves in because of the grace and protection of God. What we have and what we lack does not make our identity. That comes solely from Christ alone.

Just to be clear, the language is not pitting the rich and the poor against one another, or saying one is better than the other. Rather, one who is rich who is a Christian should take as much pride in his low position as the poor brother (or sister) can take pride in their high position in Christ. The author is pointing both of these people to their identity in Christ to be the thing giving them significance, and giving

them hope. Maintaining such a perspective can be hard both for those with little and those with a lot.

Interestingly, James may see wealth as a bigger trial and trouble than poverty poses to the believer. Again, the myth of competency can be an alluring identity. Pride in achievement must always be tempered by the understanding that nothing we do, nothing we accomplish and nothing we gain is close to what Christ has done for us.

By including verse 12 in this pericope (section), we allow James to return to the

opening topic of the paragraph—trials. He is reminding the believing Christian that our accomplishments pale in the face of the Crown of Life that is promised to those who love Christ. This, not so much a reward as a gift from God for leaning into faith in Jesus, is a much greater accomplishment than what we have worked so hard to gain through our efforts or our trials. In this way, James gives each of us, wealthy and poor, accomplished and failed, a reminder of where our identity and accomplishments are ultimately held.

1 — When people ask you what you “do,” how do you answer them? (In some ways, this is where you have placed your identity, and sometimes, your value).

.....

.....

.....

.....

2 — What can you do to readjust what you are proud of in your life? Of what do you boast?

.....

.....

.....

3 — How can you remind all of those around you of your identity in Christ?

.....

.....

.....

.....

James is building a case for our struggles and their efficacy in the face of our faith. As well, he is building our identity in Christ as the most valuable and important thing in our lives. He is doing this because his ultimate goal is to build our faith by helping us understand how we are refined, how God designs us into the believers he would have us be, and how we can continue to grow closer and lean more clearly into him.

As we look at these texts, we have to recognize that trials and troubles are not something to eschew or avoid, but rather, we are to understand that from every trial, from every trouble, we can be made into stronger believers, with the ability to endure more and more for our God. The point is not so much that we should look forward to suffering, but rather, that suffering can be used to great advantage in our lives of faith. The design of our faith comes from God, and as we tap into it, we begin to understand that everything can be used to grow us, refine us, and teach us lessons that will

build our faith and our lives of faith.

For James, the idea of “our lives” and our “faith lives” are not bifurcated; rather, they are seen as a whole. We are not people with lives of faith, we are faithful people, living lives and lives of faith that are interconnected and even one. This means that every trial and trouble is a faith issue, and every faith issue is a life issue. I will say it again: “Every trial and trouble is a faith issue, and every faith issue is a life issue.”

And the author wants us to remember that trials and troubles can take many forms. He even mentions the idea of wealth being a trouble we might have to live through. Of course, we would all love to have those particular issues in our lives, it seems. However, to have too much is just as much a problem as to have too little. While it may not seem as such, wealth has not proven to be a source of happiness. This has been proven too many times over the years and centuries of human existence.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1— Are you prepared to put your identity completely in Christ?
- 2— Are you willing to see the opportunity in the trials and troubles you will inevitably have to endure?
- 3— If you put your identity in Christ, what would that mean to you every day, every hour, every minute?
- 4— Is there someone you greatly admire in faith that you would like to echo in your life?
- 5— Can you reach out to them and ask for mentorship?
- 6— What is the design you would like your faith to take?
- 7— How can you be explicit in identifying what that ultimate design looks like in your life so you can begin to engineer your path to it?
- 8— Who are examples from scripture you would like to emulate?
- 9— Why is faith so hard sometimes?
- 10— What sort of trials and troubles are you currently experiencing and how is it growing you closer to Christ?



Notes

WEEK 2

JAMES 1:13-17 (NLT)

13 And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. **14** Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. **15** These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. **16** So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. **17** Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.

What is temptation? This is a pretty common question to ask ourselves both for our lives of faith and for how we look to design our faith in a direction that is beneficial. So let's ask the basic question first: What is temptation?

According to the narrative we have accepted as our identifying narrative, it began in the Garden of Eden; there was a conversation between a snake and a woman. The snake promises the woman something she had already been given (to be like God—See Genesis 1:26-28), and she took the bait, as did her husband. When the distrust was later discovered, while grace was extended and then rejected by the couple, God had to let the effects of this distrust play out, and the edenic existence of the first couple was lost to us until Jesus would come and make things right again.

But Jesus was not immune to temptation; rather, he had to suffer through a much greater temptation than we will ever have to experience. If you remember the story (Matthew 4) Jesus was led into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights, which is the Bible saying "forever. . ." He was gone for a great long while, and scripture tells us he was "hungry," which may have been the most obvious statement

in Scripture. At just the worst time, the enemy appears to Jesus and tempts him thusly: "Turn these stones to bread!"

I want to take a moment and recognize something here, and it is pretty obvious, so I apologize. The enemy only uses that which is tempting to us to tempt us! I know this is an obvious statement. But in this way, the temptations Jesus had to endure are much greater than the temptations we have to endure. They were much greater because he had access to all the power that would have made these temptations a reality. For instance, the temptation to make bread from stones is no great temptation for me. Why? Because I CAN'T DO THAT! If I can't do it, it's not a temptation.

Another example; Reeses Peanut Butter Cups are not a temptation for me. I simply don't like them. You can wave them under my nose as long as you want, but they will never really bother me. I can't be tempted by those things. However, put Oreos in front of me, and I'm in trouble. Oreos just might be my "stones to bread" temptation. I will sit and eat a whole sleeve if I am not watching myself.

Again, temptation is always going to come as something that is tempting to you. And what that is for you, I can't say. But you can...

1 — What is tempting to you?

2 — How can the enemy use that to his advantage in your life of faith?

3 — How can you begin to design a process from which to expunge that particular temptation?



CROSSWALK

13 And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, “God is tempting me.” God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. 14 Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away.

Do Not Say “God is Tempting Me...” This is important. God is never the one who is tempting you. To think this is to misunderstand God in his entirety. God has no interest in enticing you to anything that would separate you from him. That would not only be anathema to him, but would put you in a situation where God is the accuser and the distracter. Not only is there nothing to gain from this for God, but it would be a great misdirect of his character. God does not find any joy in tripping you up. God is not in the “stay out of heaven business”; rather, he is in the “how can we get you into heaven” business. That seems to be the misnomer that so many people think is the way of God.

In fact, it is the devil who is interested in tripping you up. When Jesus was being tempted, Satan used the exact things that were available to him in order to tempt him. He seemed to have an intimate knowledge of the savior, in order to use his power and strength against him. In the same way, our evil desires, according to James, are what puts us in compromising situations. Our own desires can be used against us, and they are twisted into something that is not of God. We either become bound to them, or

we are so afraid of them that we worry all the time about falling into temptation, and that is another kind of bondage in itself. When we are slaves to our temptations and to our sins we cannot experience the freedom in Christ he has promised us.

James does not use the idea of Satan, which is a particularly Jewish thought process. He calls to his aid the Jewish teaching on the evil impulse in man, and that allows James to keep the responsibility squarely on the individual. While this may not be what you believe, before we see Satan behind every temptation, perhaps we should take a quick stock of that with which we find ourselves struggling. I wonder if there is a great deal of effort that Satan would need to put into most of us as we are so preoccupied with our own issues that we cannot be a force for good for the kingdom of God. So many of us are so self-oriented and behavior-focused, we cannot get out of our own heads for very long. This makes us almost useless for the Kingdom.

There is a great deal more to say, and we will deal with more of it tomorrow.

But today, answer these questions to begin to clarify where you are.

1 — What is it that you find yourself tempted by on an ongoing basis?

2 — How can you begin to design your life so you may be able to move away from this issue?

3 — Pray today for clarity and for courage. Clarity to see where God can work in your life and courage to make moves to design your life differently.



CROSSWALK

15 These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

James is warning us against allowing these desires to rule in our lives. Now, I know what this begins to do in our hearts. It seems that we are being admonished to be STRONGER when it comes to our behavior and our actions. And of course, there is some of this. However, if you are like me, these kinds of admonitions become frustrating, as we are trying to be as strong as we can, and asking us to be stronger seems like putting salt on an already open wound.

It would seem that James is using a metaphor here of desire giving birth to sinful actions, and those actions then becoming full-blown death. Some commentators have said this is an allusion to Eve, but that is arguable at best. What seems to be in play here is the idea that Temptation is not sinful, nor are desires, but giving into them leads us to a place that can end in death. This seems like the sermon Jesus gave on the mount in Matthew 5, where he takes things like "you shall not murder," and moves the line back to "you should not be angry." What is the efficacy of this? It is taking us closer to the source.

Here is a silly illustration I used when teaching High School Bible courses. I used

to ask a student to stand at the back of the class, and then have them run as fast as they can toward the wall at the front of the classroom. The only caveat was that they should not slow down before they hit the wall; rather, they should stop immediately before the wall, with no slowing. Of course, this was relatively impossible. However, there was always a student who would try it, and I believe it only caused one student a bloody nose. (This, by the way, was when I realized I probably shouldn't be teaching Bible on the Secondary level.)

The point I am trying to make is that both Jesus and James were making the same argument. Perhaps we should try to nip sin in the bud, when it is still temptation, rather than trying to get it to be something we stop as we are careening headlong into a mistake. Rather than having to redirect behavior, which is difficult, let's get to the source and redirect our energy into dealing with temptation and desire rather than behavior and consequence. While it seems like a simple switch, of course it is not. So we have to begin to design our life in a way that can recognize when temptation is coming around, and we have to know what our desires really are.

1 — When was the last time you were tempted and you knew it was happening? What was the temptation?

2 — Why is it that James and Jesus are so concerned at getting to the source of the problem, rather than the behavior?

3 — How can you move your attention closer to the source, and how can you begin to shift some of your thinking upstream toward the temptation, rather than the behavior?



16 So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.

Simply, when you begin to believe that the author of temptation is God, then you have been misled. But of course, if God is sovereign, then how is he not responsible for these temptations in your life? How can a God who is all loving, all powerful, all knowing, and everywhere, not be in charge of what is happening in your life?

These questions are called Theodicy, and it is how we look at God in the face of suffering, and of course, temptation is suffering. We are not going to get into this today, as there is simply too much to unpack with those questions. For a great overview I suggest you go and listen to the Today's Presence podcast with Sam Leonor and myself (Season 1, Episodes 11 & 12) as we unpack these concepts, the arguments which are out there, and where we ultimately land. It will take about an hour and ten minutes to listen to them, but it might be worth your time.

Suffice it to say, that as the Scripture continues into verse 17, it is goodness that is attributed to God. Anything that is good in your life is what is coming from Christ. The metaphor of light is used here, and what is clear is that God is the source of all good things. It means that God is wanting to give us good, right and true things so that we might thrive in our world.

This also means he is the author of

the good we have to fight temptation, and gives us the impetus to create and design systems and processes that will move us away from thinking about only behavior, and begin to address the temptation at its source. These gifts are good because they never culminate in evil or in a desire to sin. Rather, they are perfect as they seek to help people do His will in the world, in amazing ways.

I was having a conversation with a young man who was/is an atheist, and he was very bothered that anyone would say he was "blessed" by the life he found himself living. He mentioned it was he who had made good and healthy choices, that he was the one who worked hard to get to where he was financially, and that his character was something he had cultivated, even though he came from a very broken and abusive home. I asked him where he thought he got the motivation to be who he was, and he did not have a good answer. I know I didn't convince him to believe that the impetus came from the Holy Spirit; however, he is still a regular attendee at church with his family, so God is not done with him yet.

As I reflect on our conversation, I recognize the hard work and effort he has put into creating the life and becoming the person he so desired; but I also believe there is a God at work in his life that was

revealing to him all he could be. He is an incredibly gifted young man, and eventually, I believe he will see the foundation the Holy Spirit laid for him that catapulted his thinking beyond the circumstances he

found himself in to begin with. That is how it is with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes he is willing to give us great things before we will give him credit for them.

1 — What do you have in your life and in your character that is good?

2 — Where did those things come from? Who is the author of the good things in your life?

3 — What can you do to encourage someone else to recognize the goodness in them today, and also how can you point them to who that goodness came from?



18 He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.

Who is James speaking about when he says “us”? Is it just those who believe? Or is it all of mankind? I think the text is speaking to the way that God gives “birth” to believers. However, that is not an exclusive statement, as all have the opportunity to become new believers and experience this “birth.” While some choose not to believe, the opportunity comes to all. However, this is where the collaboration with God, in the great Co-Mission, is truly phenomenal. We are the tool God uses in order that the world should know who he is. We are often that great revealing, that great apocalypse the world sees of God.

What is your most prized possession? If you have kids, it is probably those amazing creatures you are blessed with. It might be your spouse, or it might be something you worked hard in order to be able to own. God sees us as his most prized possession, and this should be something we understand. It gives us identity, and it gives us purpose. As well, since we know that only good things come from God, we can count ourselves among those good things. If you have ever felt unworthy of God’s grace, if you have ever felt that you were not good enough to be loved by others, take comfort in the fact

God sees you as one of his most valuable possessions. He loves you and would not give you up.

But how are we born? According to the text it is by giving us his “true word.” This is not just seen as him giving us scripture, while that is included. But his true word is Jesus Christ, to which the scriptures give testimony. John 5:39 tells us “You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!” So the scriptures are only as good as they testify to who Jesus is, was, and will continue to be. And the good news is that all of the scriptures testify to that one true word, Jesus.

Remember, if you are going to scripture in order to simply find yourself, you are missing the point. Scripture points us to the revelation of Jesus in every word and space between the words. The Holy Spirit can use your study to reveal the greatness and goodness of Jesus to you on a daily basis, but you have to be willing to put aside your bias and your insecurities to see Jesus in every word. I like to call this “chasing Jesus” through Scripture.

1 — What are you looking for when you go to scripture? Is it a greater revelation of Jesus?

2 — How can you use that which you find about Jesus to help you in your everyday life?

3 — What is the most profound truth you have found about Jesus? Write it down!



Let's go back and spend a moment talking about temptation. We seem to think temptation is a bad thing. However, it is possible that by being tempted we are becoming aware that we are becoming a threat to Satan. I don't think he bothers with anyone who is too wrapped up in their fear and in their misunderstanding of who they are in Jesus. What I mean by this is when we are busy worrying about ourselves and how we are doing, we can rarely become a force for good in the kingdom of God.

We begin to become a threat to the work of the enemy in the world when we begin to focus on Christ, his goodness, and how he interacts with the world. When this happens, there is an awakening to your effectiveness in the world for the kingdom, and that bothers those who would have you be silent. It is no coincidence that when you begin to sort out that this is all about Jesus, your life is sometimes thrown into tumult. As you are awakened to the greatest gift God has ever given us, his son Jesus, there are spiritual powers that are awakened to thwart your growth and understanding. While we have the greatest protector there is, we also become a target.

Now, I know there are some of you who no longer believe we are in a cosmic conflict. There are many Christians who find it hard to believe in the great controversy themes. The meta narrative of a great war between good and evil in the world is the stuff of movies and great books, but it can't be the way we see our spiritual lives. It is too "us against

them," too much of us falling into the old tropes of "a devil around every corner."

I understand this mentality very well. But I also have to believe in scripture, so I am at a decision point. Scripture speaks of Jesus praying to God to not "take us out of this world" but to protect us from the "evil one." (John 17:15). Perhaps this is an antiquated idea, but I find some truth and some veracity in the prayer. When things are growing at Crosswalk, when things are lining up in my walk with Jesus, it is usually when things become tough in another section of my life. We can chalk it up to coincidence, but I have been doing this for a while. There seems to be a direct reaction when strides are made for the kingdom of God.

You don't have to believe me, for sure. However, I challenge you to become that weapon in the arsenal Jesus has against the evil one, and see if I am wrong. I would love to be wrong, honestly, I would. I would love it if there was only good in the world, and any inconvenience was simply coincidence. And, if I end up in heaven, and my conversation with God proves me wrong, I am happy to concede I don't know everything. However, as I look to scripture, I see a battle and a war that was waged. I also see victory over the enemy. So while I might be inconvenienced and even troubled by the work of the enemy in my life, I also have a triumphant Savior who supersedes any attacks on my life. My hope and strength is in Jesus, without a doubt.

1 — Have you ever experienced trouble in your life just when it felt you were becoming closer to Jesus?

2 — Did that upheaval derail your spiritual walk, or did it make it stronger?

3 — How can we be sure Jesus has our backs in this struggle with evil? What texts give you strength?



This week we have looked at a small portion of scripture, but an important one. We have learned that every good thing comes from God. We have learned that God never authors temptation in our lives, but that is often a response of the enemy to our making strides for the kingdom of God. We have also learned there is no power that is greater than the power of Jesus in our lives.

However, none of this takes away the potency of the temptation many of us feel. It burns inside us, distracts us, and creates a kind of subtle anxiety in our hearts. It is disconcerting, even when we are not falling into that temptation. To constantly have to deal with this is hard on our hearts. And we all have to find ways to live beyond these constant thorns in our sides.

The good news in these texts is Jesus is never the author of our temptations, which can ultimately lead to sin and then to death. Rather, all the good things in your life, those things we often don't give enough time to, those all come from God. What grace has been given to you this week, even in this crazy year we have been living? (2020 will go down in the history books as the strangest and toughest year in a long time!) How has God blessed you and kept you as you and your family are getting through this time? Is there

something tangible you can think of that God is doing, right now, that will remind you of his goodness and grace?

We have talked about designing our lives with the intent of getting ahead of the temptations in our lives. I understand that this is not the simplest of concepts. But by thinking backwards from when we have been successful in changing the way we live to accommodate a more clear and concise victory over these things, we can probably reproduce those decisions in our lives. Remember, we don't do this alone, but we do this with the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, deep reflection on how we need to set up our spiritual practices in order to create a healthier response to temptation is important.

Here is a "for instance": If you are struggling with lust, and yet you find yourself without any accountability when it comes to what you view either on your phone, television, or computer, perhaps it is time to design a system of accountability (Support Group, Software, Accountability relationships without judgment but with great help) in your life so you will not have to deal with the temptation by simply "being stronger."

- 1 — How can you tell when a temptation is coming your way?
- 2 — What processes and structures have you put into place in order to deal with them before they become a reality in your life?
- 3 — Where do you go for accountability in your decisions?
- 4 — Who is your support group you can go to in difficult times?
- 5 — What do you do to maintain accountable relationships with safe people in your life?
- 6 — What is the hardest thing you deal with right now?
- 7 — What do you think your life would look like if you could be a little more intentional about dealing with temptation?
- 8 — What has God given you that you can be thankful for?
- 9 — How can you create a new appreciation for the good and perfect things God has placed in your life?
- 10— How can you share your blessings with others?



WEEK 3

JAMES 1:18-27 (NLT)

18 He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.

Listening and Doing

19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. **20** Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. **21** So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. **22** But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. **23** For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. **24** You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. **25** But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. **26** If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. **27** Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. 20 Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. 21 So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

We could spend a week on the first verse of these texts alone! How many of us are good at any of these things? I know I am pretty bad at them. Let's break them down as quickly as we can.

1 — Quick to listen. How many of us listen mostly to respond? We often find ourselves formulating responses to parts of sentences without listening to the whole thing. I know I am guilty of this at times.

2 — Slow to speak. Every once in a while, someone suggests I should exercise the "Ministry of Listening" a little more than I do. As someone who speaks for a living, it does me well to be reminded of the opportunity to listen rather than to speak.

3 — Slow to get angry. This is a good one. How many of us have the patience we need in order to continue to continue our relationships?

22 But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. 23 For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. 24 You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.

Sometimes, the frame is as important as the picture. And in these texts, there is a frame that we have seen before. James uses it, much like Jesus did in the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). There is a simple call in these texts to "Go and do." James says it this way : "You must do what it says." Some translations say we must be "Doers" of the word. This, of course, means just knowing the word of God is only a part of what you must do in order to be living a full and meaningful Christian life.

Why is the "doing" so important? It is simple. The idea that we "know" something is useless in the face of "doing" something. When I was working at Loma Linda Academy as their Chaplain (2001-2007), I had a colleague who was in the peak of his physical health. He was much older than I was, but he was also much more fit, and was clearly focused on his health and how he could shape his body. We had a conversation one day where I was commenting on how he stayed so fit and trim. He told me something interesting.

"Anyone can look like this..." he said.

I was astonished. I made some joke about how I couldn't ever look like that, I didn't have the right body shape, and I never could really gain mass except in my belly; he then started to become incredulous.

"That's not true, anyone can look like this..."he said, more emphatically this time.

I took the bait. "How?" I asked.

He said, "All the information is out there. You just have to take that information and do it!"

"AAAAH", I said, there's the rub. "I don't want to do it. It seems hard."

"That's another issue..." He replied.

You see, the truth is, I was not interested in "doing" the hard work; rather, I was only interested in getting some of the knowledge in hope of getting more fit. But knowledge doesn't quite get us there. Rather than simply understanding something, it is imperative that we do the thing we are beginning to understand. Perhaps this is why so many people with great theological understanding are not helping the kingdom grow. They have heard the word of God, and they have even understood the words; however, those words never made the journey from their head to their heart to their hands.

1 — What do you “know,” but you don’t “do”?

2 — How can you begin to integrate that knowledge into your practice?

3 — Is there an expert you know that you can consult to help you design this integrative aspect of your life? (It could be health, theology, compassion, finances, etc.)



25 But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

It might be easy to feel as if James is some sort of "perfectionist," believing that keeping the law is what saves you. However, this couldn't be further from the truth. While James is using some pretty common hellenistic idioms (words and phrases that were around in the vernacular of the time, some of which were influenced by Roman thought, Stoic philosophy, and of course, Jewish tradition), he is thoroughly Christian in his approach. Coming from a Jewish background, he would think the law is perfect, but would understand that it was perfected in Jesus. Also, he understood there was a redefinition of the law through Jesus in his exposition on the mount in Matthew 5. While some of the language certainly sounds a bit like stoic philosophy, it is rooted deeply in the newly defined Christian understanding of the law.

James wants us to take the law seriously as an ethical and practical approach to life. In some respects, finding the boundaries of the law allows for a freedom in which to live. The idea that freedom is living a life without boundaries has been found to be false time and time again. Every time we see someone who has decided to live life with no boundaries, it seems to become a bit of a mess.

I have a friend who has chosen to live his life outside the constraints of society. Most would call him homeless, but as he

chose this life, I have a hard time using that term. When we talk about him entering back into society in a meaningful way, he always reminds me that he is truly "free." He doesn't pay taxes, own anything, have a schedule that has to be kept, and doesn't answer to anyone. He believes that a life unfettered with boundaries is truly the best life one can live.

I, of course, take issue with this. This gentleman has spent time in prison, is often hungry, has no connection with family, and has had significant issues with alcohol and drug use. The boundaries that Scripture sets for us, especially when it comes to ethical and moral living, are important for us and do serve a function. However, that function is not to save, nor has it ever been to save, but rather, to help us live with one another more profoundly and with greater propriety.

The blessing of God mentioned here can be seen as practical outcomes to living a moral and ethical life. As well, God is glorified in your life when you live in a way that not only pleases God, but blesses others. When you are seen as someone who has a deep sense of morality, is honorable and has integrity, the name of Christ is lifted up through your actions. There is not a one-to-one blessing formula here, as if God has to bless your actions, but there are some pretty practical outcomes from living a life that is honorable both to God and to man.

1 — What is the function of law, according to Paul? (See Romans 3:19-20)

2 — What can the law help you with today?

3 — What is the best thing the law has taught you?



CROSSWALK

26 If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. 27 Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

This is a great summary of what has gone before. True religion tames our basest desires and creates a deep compassion for those who are in need. And lastly, it rebukes the world that would drag us down. While the modern word that we use for religion is probably not the best word here, perhaps a better translation would be, "if you think you are following God. . ." We have often made religion the point, rather than the relationship. However, we might be able to do some work here.

There is a phrase that I have heard a ton over the last few years. Maybe you have heard it too: "I'm spiritual but not religious." This phrase is pretty common for those who still want to recognize the power of God, but are not happy with the religion they have grown up with, or are sometimes struggling with what seems to be the exclusivity of their faith of origin.

You've heard this before, but the word "religion" comes from the root "religare," which means to "bind too." So the question becomes, to what are you bound? I don't mind saying I am religious, as I am bound to Jesus Christ, and this binding is a blessing and privilege. Paul would go even further when he states that he is the "bondservant" of Jesus. To bind yourself to

something is not a bad situation, as long as you trust that to which you are bound.

And that becomes the problem. When we bind ourselves to the religious structure, we might be bound to a sinking ship. However, when we bind ourselves to Jesus, we can only be lifted up. Then, those institutions to which we identify become simply vehicles. I know so many people who left Jesus because of the vehicle they were bound to. I think being a part of a religious structure is important, but it is not the point. The point will always be Jesus, and eventually you will understand you need a community, and religion structures often provide that.

James seems to be saying there are some things that are deeply embedded into what he would call "true religion." If this is true, our religion must have those three ingredients he mentions. Personal piety, a true and rich compassion for the least of these, and a desire to live differently and have a different worldview than those who don't know Christ. James also seems to think these are things we can incorporate into our lives in powerful and possible ways. With some organization, with some intention, and with some trial and error, these can be the values we live in our religious lives.

How often have you found yourself wishing you were “better” at this spiritual stuff? How many times have you gone to bed wishing you didn’t have so many sins to confess, or pleading with God to not let you fall into temptation again? We are often our own worst enemy, often feeling like we are not making the grade or missing the mark. Perhaps James is trying to set us on a course that doesn’t seem so

trepidatious, one that might feel like we are getting a little control of our lives and our spiritual understanding. I think this might have been why he is giving us a clear path forward, helping us understand the work that needs to be done in our lives to attempt to design some structures in our lives that can help us feel the grace of God more powerfully in our lives.

1 — Have you ever experienced True Religion as James defines it?

2 — How does your faith community connect you with these three things mentioned?

3 — What kinds of structures do you need in your life in order to make space for these three things?



It seems that we should spend a little more time on these ideas that James has introduced for us to understand “True Religion.” We have already made the case that our only “binding” should be to Jesus, but the religious structures in our lives should help us enact compassion, strength, and grace into the world. If they don’t allow or encourage this, then it is probably time to find another place to honor God.

I also think we should think about the fact there were no doctrinal expectations, beyond that of an understanding of the gospel. We are not told that “true religion” believes this doctrine in a certain way or not. It seems that the measure of true religion always comes back to love and obey God while taking care of other people. So why do we make it so difficult?

Perhaps it is because of our love of being right, or our desire to be involved in an exclusive club. We all like the way we feel when we are able to get into a restaurant as a VIP, or when we can be whisked through the TSA line at the airport because we are a CLEAR member (flexing, not going to lie, but I guess it doesn’t matter much anymore!). We all have this desire to be a part of the “in” group, and sometimes, the way we define “truth” allows for that. It allows us to create an “us against them” mentality, rather than allowing the truth of the gospel to be the thing that binds us together.

So this begets the problem. We want to be in the “in” group, or the “true religion” group, but we have set very different definitions of this group than God has. God’s “measure,” if you will, is how people love one another, and how they love God in the midst of loving one another. With these being the measure of love, and true religion being an expression of these principles, which also has a profound effect on our own lives and ability to give us courage in the face of temptation, we see that God is playing a very different game than we find ourselves playing most of the time. We are already in the “in” crowd, we are the VIP’s, so now, we should busy ourselves not with chasing the continual affirmation of our “in-ness” but rather, doing the work that God would have us do.

1 — Have you ever had VIP anything? What did you like about it and how did it make you feel?

2 — Do you believe you have true religion as James defines it?

3 — How can you share this true religion with others?



22 Abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

It seems we have gone through a lot of ground this week, but I want to get back to a concept that is important for us as Christians to understand. At the beginning of the pericope (the section) we see that anger is an issue. I wanted to come back to this because in today's deeply divided world we seem to see anger becoming the common response to so much. I don't know if this is something the internet and social media has exacerbated, or if the simple anxiety of living in today's world is creating this issue. Maybe people have been angry forever and I am just finally paying attention.

In Christians, anger often takes the form of being deeply offended by so many things. Christians have, at times, made it their purpose and sole goal to remind the world how much it is doing wrong, and then have been deeply offended that the world did not agree with them. The vitriol I see being vomited by Christians on the internet is concerning to me. The deep sense of offense that is then responded to with anger seems at odds with the way that Jesus communicated. Were there times when Jesus was angry? Of course, but he did not stoop as low as many do today, thinking that if they can just get their point across, all the anger will be worth it.

I won't belabor this point, but I want to

ask you a question: Is there any anger that you can see that is appropriate for Christians to have? And if you say "righteous anger" I want to remind you that there is only one who is righteous, and his name isn't the same as yours. The righteous anger that Jesus showed came from a much greater perspective, a better understanding of what is truly happening. His anger never comes from misunderstanding, but rather, it comes from a true understanding of the hearts of man. We don't have that same perspective, vantage point, or insight.

As we design the faith life we are interested in living, we have to figure out what to do with this emotion. Anger is a festering blister that hurts us a great deal more than it hurts the object of our anger. It is a poison that will always hurt the container more than anything else it comes in contact with. What can we do to mitigate our feelings of anger?

The beauty of this is that James has already pointed to some really practical things we can do to understand how to deal with our anger. We have to listen more, slow down a bit more, and get rid of the negative things in our lives. This doesn't mean we don't have the opportunity to be critical at times, but don't let it fester. If you can help someone with critique and can do it with a god-given benevolence, by all means, do

that, but only if you have a relationship that can grow through the interchange.

While I could go on and on, suffice it to say that God's anger is not ours, so let's be

angry only about that which God is angry; injustice, usury, lack of compassion, and a lack of care for others.

1 — Have you ever had an anger issue? How did you get over it?

2 — What is the best way to slow your anger? What has worked for you?

3 — When you read scripture, what do you see that angers God?



James has given us some great practical advice about anger, about following God, and about what true religion actually looks like. So my first question to you is this; does your religion look like what James has proposed? Have you been living your life of faith in this direction or have you been living it with a different target in mind. Many of us believe there is this “perfect” Christian out there, no one knows him/her, but they are out there, and we are sure we are not that person. We sometimes partake in what seems like an exercise in futility, never being able to hit the mark, and understanding that these mistakes are really sin.

While the word for sin literally does mean to miss the mark, I am wondering if we have had the wrong target to shoot for. While I have absolutely no issue with us trying to direct our behavior and our actions toward Christ, these things come as a response for what Jesus did for us. He did “hit the mark” for us, so that we can live without being bound to our sin. However, what bullseye did Jesus actually hit?

You see, while we can focus on the behavior of Jesus, it would behoove us to focus on the love of Jesus, as this was the mark the the hit bullseye after bullseye in his life. His love was expansive, beautiful,

winsome, full of life and verve, and simply beyond what the world had seen before. His target was not obedience, which did come with the love he espoused, but it his target was actually the people to which he could express that love. By healing, teaching, sharing, and preaching, he was able to make everyone he came into contact with understand the depths of God’s love for them. This means that when our target is the same as Jesus’ target, we will be the best expressions of love.

All this to say that true religion is the best expression of love that could ever be. When that is the target we are reaching for, we can begin to see the incredible expanse of love that God provides for us who give it away. Obedience becomes a symptom of a greater love. Your behavior conforms because your first thoughts are of Jesus and how you can payback that love he has given to us. The only way to pay it back is to give it away, and to give it away more each day. The love of Jesus is a never-ending resource of grace, healing, and relationship. We are deeply blessed by the love we have received and the love we have to give.

Give more away, there is more waiting. This is a target you can hit every day.

- 1— What is true religion to you? Explain it so we can see it!
- 2— What “targets” have you been trying to hit since you met Jesus?
- 3— Do you ever feel like the way you have been handling your faith is an “exercise in futility?”
- 4— How can Jesus give you more love?
- 5— How can you give more love?
- 6— Have you ever been afraid that you might run out of the love of God?
- 7— When were you stingy about the love you have to give away?
- 8— Have you ever felt that God’s love might stop flowing to you?
- 9— Is there one thing you want everyone to know about the Love of God?



CROSSWALK

WEEK 4

JAMES 2:1-13 (NLT)

A Warning against Prejudice

1 My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others? **2** For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. **3** If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor"—well, **4** doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives? **5** Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? **6** But you dishonor the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? **7** Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name[c] you bear? **8** Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself." **9** But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law. **10** For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. **11** For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law. **12** So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. **13** There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

1 My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?

We are moving into the next phase of this book, and it seeks to explain some of the principles that were expressed in the first chapter. To make it practical, James is going to talk about prejudice against any certain group of people. Discrimination in the community is simply wrong. Regardless if it is a bias against race, class, gender, or any people group, it has no place in the kingdom of God. James is serious about this because he has exhorted us to be “doers” and not simply “knowers” when it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Taking care of the most vulnerable has been a hallmark of faith in God since the Old Testament, take a look at the minor prophets and you will see this without a doubt.

It is important that we understand that James will never lead us somewhere he is not willing to go himself. Christian compassion, particularly in the early years of the faith, separated people of faith from those who espoused no christian God. Interestingly, it was in the pandemics and plagues where the idea of Christian compassion became the most clear and expressed in those ancient communities. There are a great number of stories of how the Christians were willing to take care of the sick, feed the homeless, and make sure suffering was alleviated, often to their own detriment. They were willing to get sick in order to take care of the sick. This

has always been a Christian virtue.

James will spend some time on this thought. He is explaining the practicalities of what “true religion” really can be. The NLT translates this as a question, while some translate this text as an imperative, or a demand. I like the way the question is put back on us. We love the label of Christian, but are we ready to take up the implications. Ask yourself a question, are there those you struggle with? Is this because of a bias you brought into your Christian walk, or was it cultivated after you accepted Christ? And how can that be? How is it that we could cultivate a bias once we are Christians?

The fact that James, the author, is spending so much time on this particular issue makes us think that perhaps there was an issue in the church he was writing for. This is possible, but he leaves us a little in the dark about how true to life this might be. Regardless of the historicity of the problem, we can see it still playing out in today's world. There is bias in the church and it is as deadly as it is in the rest of the world. As I write this we are in the aftermath of the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery here in the United States. This was a senseless shooting that was nothing more than white supremacy being covered up with the baseless explanation that they were “protecting” their neighborhood. Remember, the Klu Klux Klan has always

called itself a Christian organization. Bad exegesis and theology has been the root or at least the cover for so much hatred and bias, and this was no exception. It sickens me to think that we can use scripture to allow for hatred, violence or oppression, but yet we do.

Here, James is clear. There is no place for bias in the kingdom of God. True religion doesn't do that, can't do that, and God is not honored through it. Have I made it clear enough? James did, go read it again if you need a reminder. I will always love the book of James for this.

1 — How can you work to get rid of your bias?

2 — Reach out to someone you might not normally reach out to today, and begin to tear down those walls.

3 — Do you need to apologize to someone for the way you have acted in the past. This would be a good time.



2 For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. 3 If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, “You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor”—well, 4 doesn’t this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?

Today’s text gives us a solid practical example of what we are dealing with. James’ use of the wealthy and the poor is particularly poignant at any given point, as we are often blinded by our desire to keep our ministries running, and we sometimes fall into the practice of taking care of the greatest givers in ways we don’t for the least in our congregations and lives. So for James to bring this to the forefront is super applicable to our understanding of bias and how it has no place in the church.

There are some interesting discussions about whether or not James was making this case about their worship services, or about another type of meeting in the synagogue. He uses the term “your synagogue” to the church, therefore we can assume we are talking about the Christians, not the Jews who might still be using the synagogue at the time. However, there is perhaps not enough evidence to suggest it is some sort of judicial meeting, as some commentators have suggested, and therefore we are left with a bit of uncertainty as to the nature of the meetings. However, it does not change the focus of the text, as it remains an emphasis

on not letting your bias get the best of you.

Do you have any wealthy friends? Do you treat them differently, even if it is unconscious? We sometimes do this unknowingly, but it is something that is noticed within a congregation. We have to guard ourselves from creating a second or third class of citizens in our congregations. Many of these people have been treated poorly in other places, and to have them treated poorly in the church says very little about how the kingdom of God is different from the rest of the world.

So what are we to do?

We are to create communities of belonging that recognize the esteem that all people deserve, regardless of socioeconomic standing, race, culture, religion, or anything else. Whether they come in looking like they are coming from a wedding, or from the beach; tattoos or bare skin, smelling great or smelling bad, we are to treat them all as brothers and sisters. While this sounds good on paper, it is somewhat more difficult in real life. It means that we have to, at times, become deeply uncomfortable to welcome those

that are so different than us, we might feel threatened. To be uncomfortable is often to be in the will of God, even if just for a moment.

**1 — Have you ever discriminated against someone because of how they looked?
When and where did this happen?**

2 — Where you ever wrong about the person you discriminated against?

3 — How can we be sure not to do this in our lives?

4— Are there some limits we should have on our hospitality?



5 Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? 6 But you dishonor the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? 7 Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?

Let's break this text down. It begins with an imperative, or command, "listen!" It is a pretty forceful declaration, but it is softened by the familiar "brothers and sisters." (It would have been understood as "fellow believers, so we include both men and women.) He then asks the question; "hasn't God. . ." because he wants to continue the argument as to why his readers shouldn't simply flatter the rich and ignore or despise the poor. The author is really wanting to drive his point home.

Have you ever been in a conversation where, even though you agree, the other person seems to want to continue to try and convince you? It's as if you have said yes, but they want to make sure they drive their point home? This is what the author is doing. He has made his case, but he wants to reiterate the point to those reading. This could be because of what was happening in this church, or that he felt this so strongly he wanted to emphasize this teaching again.

He then reminds them that it is the poor who will inherit the kingdom, as Jesus said in Matthew 25. As well, those who are poor in this world were chosen by God to be "rich in faith." What does it mean to be rich in faith? A couple of things to think about here.

1) To be rich in faith is to recognize that God has a very different view of what makes someone wealthy or poor. Is it possible to have nothing, but own everything. A hearty yes is the answer to that question; Jesus had nothing, but as the heir to this world, he owned everything, but in a very different way than we think of it. Ownership is all about stewardship. Ownership is not simply possession, but responsibility. God seems to view ownership and value as something very different than humans have traditionally understood things.

2) God seems to find value in different things than we humans do. While we appreciate riches, money, and wealth, Jesus sees wealth as an abundance of faith. To be rich in faith transcends. And of course, we understand the phrase: "You can't take it with you..." to be the limitation of our financial wealth. Money means nothing to God, but faith means everything.

So, the purpose of this text is to remind everyone that God has a different metric system by which he works. We have a tendency to spend too much time on searching for what makes us rich, and Jesus has just shown us that wealth is not riches, rather, faith makes one rich.

1 — How rich are you today?

2 — Do you find yourself chasing money too often?

3 — How can you change what you find valuable in your life?



8 Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 9 But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.

Have you heard the term “the royal law” before? I am always struck by the term. But I guess the law is “royal” in the sense that it comes from God. The truth is, the entirety of the law is summed up in the two phrases of “love the Lord your God with all of who you are,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the complete and perfect law of God. We can spend time breaking down the law to its many components, but this summary was good enough for Jesus, so it should be good enough for us as well.

James is making sure we understand the elevation of keeping this law of love and that the transgression of this law is really what sin is. As I write this, we live in the aftermath of George Floyd being murdered on the street, yelling that he could not breathe. This was an unconscionable act of violence and racism. At some point, the royal law was forgotten. It was discarded. As Christians, can we really say we are following Jesus if we hold one group above another group? While the illustration James chooses to use is rich and poor, it could have been Hellenistic/Jewish, or believer/unbeliever. There is no end of binaries that we can place against one another.

While we all have prejudices that we need to recognize and work against, the call of James is that to lift up one group

above another is the breaking of the law that was handed to us by Jesus in Matthew 22. Now, this is particularly acute for some of us when we see such a tragedy online. However, for many of us, it is simply an everyday occurrence. Some of us experience bias in such a different way than other’s of us. I want to admit that I don’t always understand what others are going through, but I want to. If you don’t feel that you have ever experienced real bias/racism/disregard, then you need ears to hear as well. I never want to be insensitive to my brother/sister who has a different perspective.

It is easy for us to live in our bubbles, never reaching out to the voices that differ from ours. As Christians, I think we have to seek other voices to understand what our brothers and sisters of all kinds are going through. And there can certainly be no place bias in the kingdom of God. To hold on to our previous grudges, our past hatreds, or our fear of the “other” is in no way Christian, it does not honor God, and it continues to sully the good name of Jesus in all circles. Now is the time to step out from under a culture that vilifies someone who doesn’t look like us, or act like us, or is in our circles. The gospel only spreads when it spreads to people outside of our circles. So if you are uncomfortable, you are probably heading in the right direction.

10 For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. 11 For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law.

All of these things go together. I have this strong belief that God is really interested in the trajectories of our lives and behaviors, as opposed to being hyper-focused on our particular choices each day. Are you growing, are you seeking the kingdom, are you facing your bias, your fears, and your desires to do things that hurt the name of God?

We had a moment in our church a few years ago, some of you may remember. There had been some incidents in the U.S. that week, and I brought a friend of mine in to talk about what it's like to be an African American male in America. My friend was a Baptist pastor and community organizer. He had a strong and profound answer, using words that my ears were unused to hearing in these circumstances. He wasn't cursing, he was telling us the truth as he experienced it.

It was a hard day. Not everyone agreed. In fact, a conversation ensued with one of our church members that was confrontational, and for moments it felt as if conflict would ensue. However, both of these men hold Jesus as their highest authority, and therefore things did not fall into any sort of anger, although there was tension. Rather, these men decided to have a conversation, in front of a very

diverse audience, to talk about what was happening in both of their communities. There was pain acknowledged from both sides, and there was a moment of prayer and community at the end.

I think we were all shaken to our core. I was proud of this conversation, and proud of these men. Not everyone was happy about the conversation, or the way it occurred. Some people were angry with me for letting something like this happen in church, and some wrote very angry letters to me to let me know they would never come back to fellowship as long as I was pastor at Crosswalk. Of course those letters hurt, but I don't think the church should ever back down from hard conversations.

The point James wants us to understand is simply this; you don't have to do the worst, to be breaking the law of God. Our lives are whole, not divided. When we exercise bias against one group or another, the whole of the law of God is broken. So we have to be continually building an infrastructure against bias in our lives. How do we do that?

As you check your bias, make sure you check your ignorance. Does some of what you think about a certain group of people come from not understanding that group? What would you need to do to

understand them more? Have you listened to their voices, read their books, listened to their music, eaten their food? What can you do to bring them into closer proximity to the circles in which you run?

1 — Are you concerned about the Law of God?

2 — What are some action steps you can take today to become more inclusive in your worldview?

3 — What people or groups do you need to start getting to know better?



12 So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. 13 There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

These “cause and effect” texts always worry me. The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35) has always been hard for me. The reason being that I am not always forgiving, and I am not always merciful, and I am not always compassionate. Truly, I want to be these things, but I often fall flat when I am trying to be and do those things mentioned above. There is a reality that I live each day, one that many of us live, continually falling short of what I want to be. But the other reality that I live, is that the God of the Universe has made a way for me. (Romans 3:23-24)

However, there seems to be a direct connection from my willingness to love in ways that involve justice and mercy, and the way that I am judged as well. I think that when we receive the Grace of God, we become deeply interested in the love that we can give to others. Without that recognition of how much I have been saved, it is hard to even want to continue in mercy and grace to others. However, once I understand how good and complete the grace of God is, I find myself striving for a deeper expression of love in the world.

A deeper expression of love means that I go beyond the niceness of being pleasant and move toward the deeper

expressions; mercy, compassion, justice, advocacy. Those are the things that truly show the love and grace of God into the world. Without these characteristics being expressed in my faith journey, I can be a great and sweet lover of Jesus, but I have missed those things that set me free. My freedom from oppression comes from Jesus, the compassion showed to me is the same compassion that I must show. And by the way, the road to that compassion was paved with blood and crosses, why would me showing compassion to a brother and sister be any less of a sacrifice?

I think we get too comfortable. We get used to sitting in churches and singing and having a great time. However, I wish I had the same number of people showing up on Thursday nights for our homeless feeding as I do coming to worship at church on Sabbath. This is not an indictment, it is a dream. I understand how important worship is, but I also understand how important it is to serve. In the moments where we can't meet corporately, the way we worship is by giving of ourselves to the least of these, in order to continue the work of the kingdom. Will we worship soon, of course, but the moments to serve are fleeting, and the need intense.

1 — How do you serve mercy and compassion to your fellow human being?

2 — How can you get involved in the various ministries of compassion and mercy at your church?

3 — Do you spend more time in worship or compassion?



CROSSWALK

This is a week where we have taken a look at what happens when we hold bias against one another and what God thinks about it. There are some tough words in these passages. And perhaps there should be. The illustration of the rich man versus the poor is salient at this point, and can be

expanded to deal with the issues we have of bias in our present reality. As this guide is being written, it has been a hard week in the US for our black communities, and it is a hard week for those of us who want to advocate and empathize with the plight of our brothers and sisters.

Bias runs deep. Some of us have it, and can't even really pinpoint where it came from. Family systems, social groups, and even language embed our worldview into our hearts and from there our mouths speak, and sometimes our fists clench, and tragically, this week, a knee bent to extinguish the life of another human being. (#georgefloyd)

As Christians, I think it is paramount that we address these social ills, as well as addressing the bias we carry in our own hearts. We all have it, but what we do with it is what makes the difference. When we come to the seat of grace, and we realize that the gift that has been given to us is not exclusively for me and those that look

like me, it should galvanize us to become advocates, protectors, and table-mates of everyone that God has made in his image. We cannot back down from love; we should be intentional in our words, direct with our actions, and deeply gracious in our conversations. But deep love requires risk. Advocacy requires risk. And standing in front of those being oppressed will require risk.

I don't doubt that the majority of people have great intentions, and can't imagine doing something that would hurt another person or group. However, sometimes, our small inconsiderations, things that we have simply not experienced from another point of view, add to the perceived or actual bias. This is why a church should have people from all over, from different worldviews, and from different ethnicities and cultures in order to create a much deeper understanding of who we are, how we act, and how it is perceived. The beauty of the Christian life is that it is a life of learning. We grow, we adapt, we learn more about God and ourselves and that helps make the world a better place for everyone.

- 1 — What can you do, today, to alleviate any bias you have in your heart?
- 2 — How many times have you been the object of bias?
- 3 — How did that experience make you feel?
- 4 — How can you teach others who might not have that same experience how it felt and how to stay away from it?
- 5 — What do you think God feels about racism?
- 6 — What can you do in your community to make sure bias is being addressed?
- 7 — What does a world without bias look like?
- 8 — What does a church without bias look like.
- 9 — How does addressing bias in your heart lead to greater spiritual maturity?



WEEK 05

Day 29-35

Written by Pastor Paddy McCoy,

Lead Pastor, Crosswalk Portland.

Faith by Design | James 2:14-26

The Ethical Effect — Faith without fruit is false (2:14-17) Faith without fruit is futile (2:18-19)

Faith without fruit is fatal (2:20-26)

The closing years of the twentieth century saw major changes sweep across our world. In the former Soviet Union, Jews who had been discriminated against for scores of years were freed in growing numbers to immigrate to Israel. The Berlin Wall crumbled. Eastern Europe taught us that no one could be suppressed and discriminated against indefinitely. In South Africa change continues to be in the wind. We in America must remember that we are only one generation removed from racial segregation ourselves. Yet in the Middle East discrimination is at an all-time high, and in the United States there is still so much discrimination between black and white and Jew and Gentile. Application Point: Where are Christians to be when it comes to accepting all people in Christ?

WEEK 06

Day 36-42

Faith by Design | James 1:1-12

Words as well as Works — Controlled speech is directive (3:1-5) Contentious speech is destructive (3:5-8) Conflicting speech is deceptive (3:9-12)

There is a new phenomenon capturing American culture today. Radio and television talk shows dominate the media. We are a nation of talkers. What comes out of our mouths is so vitally important that James devoted twelve entire verses in the middle of his letter to the subject. Having just dealt with the relationship of faith and works, James now deals with the relationship of faith and words. Our words reveal what is actually hidden in our hearts. Thus, the apostle admonishes us to “take note of this; everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19).

Application Point: Words are powerful. Self-esteem and self-confidence are often learned or lost in a parent's words when we are children. Our Lord himself considered careless speech to be a very serious matter (Matthew 12:36-37). Thus, James makes three statements about the tongue in James 3:1-12, and he gives two illustrations for each statement.

WEEK 07

Day 43-49

Faith by Design | James 3:13-18

*Wisdom — Wisdom of the World (3:13-16)
Wisdom of the Word (3:17-18)*

Knowledge is exploding in our day. Textbooks and encyclopedias are behind the times almost as soon as they come off the printing press. We can travel farther and higher and faster than anyone before us. The computer age continues to advance at such a pace that technology becomes outdated with each passing month. However, in the midst of this explosion of knowledge, wisdom is practically non-existent. Many people's lives are in shambles. Position, power, and prosperity have not brought peace and purpose. In our modern world, where so many homes are disintegrating, so many hopes are smashed, and so many dreams are dashed, we need wisdom above all else.

Application Point: The world's wisdom is rooted in the secular, the sensual, and the satanic. In the words of James 3:15, "Such wisdom does not come down from Heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil." Never have people needed wisdom more than today, and so few of us know where to find it. In this paragraph of James' epistle, he examines both kinds of wisdom—the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the Word—and he teaches us how to apply the wisdom of the Word to our everyday lives. white and Jew and Gentile. Application Point: Where are Christians to be when it comes to accepting all people in Christ?

WEEK 08

Day 50-56

Faith by Design | James 1:1-12

*War and Peace — War has its symptoms (4:1-3)
War has its sources (4:7-12)*

"What causes fights and quarrels among you" (James 4:1)? Our current world situation makes James's opening question as relevant in our day as in any previous generation. War has been a part of every era of human history. No civilization has been immune to it. In the early days of the twenty-first century, many of the conflicts around the world have their roots firmly embedded in centuries of ethnic hatred and hostility that are finally reaching the boiling point. The Bible tells us that in the last days there will be an escalation of wars, eventually culminating in a final climactic battle, Armageddon.

Application Point: War is real. Some of us are at war with ourselves, as our flesh wars with the Spirit. Others of us are at war in our homes. Some of us are even at war with God. What causes these fights and quarrels? We who are living on the brink of an apocalyptic war should heed the words of James. He reveals that war has its symptoms, its sources, and its solutions. James 3:1-12, and he gives two illustrations for each statement.

WEEK 5

Written by Pastor Paddy McCoy, Lead Pastor, Crosswalk Portland.

JAMES 2:14-26 (NLT)

Faith without Good Deeds Is Dead

14 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? **15** Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, **16** and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

17 So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

18 Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."

19 You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God.[a] Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. **20** How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?

21 Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? **22** You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. **23** And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." [b] He was even called the friend of God. **24** So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

25 Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. **26** Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.



Faith without fruit is false — 14-17

Faith without fruit is futile - 18-19

Faith without fruit is fatal - 20-26

Like many passages in the book of James, James 2:14-26 has been widely discussed and wrestled with for generations. On the surface, it seems to emphasize the importance of actions, or as it is often translated, “works.” In fact, it could come across as if James is arguing that it’s your “works” that save you. However, the problem is a misunderstanding of the core issue.

As we come to this passage, we have to first of all recognize that James was writing to Jews who had grown up with a strong focus on the law and doctrine. Of course these Jews were also Christians, which means that they had accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, as the fulfillment of the law, and as the ingredient for their salvation.

But these same Jews were still learning the difference between being steeped in the law and Jewish tradition, and what it means to follow Jesus. They were still wrestling with the idea of Jesus being on the throne of their hearts, instead of the Torah, or the temple, or Abraham, or Moses. James, throughout his letter, is trying to help them see what a life following Jesus looks like and how it differs from their past lives.

With his strong emphasis on the teachings of Jesus, specifically the Sermon on the Mount, and inspired by his time meditating on the book of Proverbs, he writes. And in this passage, he tries to explain to the Jews that if they put their trust in Jesus, fully and completely, and if they truly believe that He was and is God, then their lives will show it. They will live AS IF God really does love them as Jesus loved, that God really is present as Jesus was present, that God really will work in and through us as He did Jesus. These truths, rooted deep in our hearts, will change how we live our lives.

And in a country where too many people claim to follow Jesus and yet seem to act nothing like Him, we need the truths in this passage. We need to be reminded that claiming to believe in Jesus or follow Him isn’t going to change the world; trying to be Jesus to the world just might. It’s like the apostle Paul said in his first letter that was written to the churches in Galatia, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith (trust) in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2: 20)

Our works don’t save us, but living our life in such a way that shows our belief that Jesus does? That just may save the world.



1 — Can you pinpoint anything in your life that is different or has changed with Jesus as your Savior, your center, versus the life you lived before knowing Him more?

2 — In what ways do you see professed Christians not living out the life and teachings of Jesus?

3 — In what ways do you see professed Christians trying to model their lives after the life and teachings of Jesus?



14 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? 15 Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, 16 and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? 17 So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

I don't know about you, but I've always had a hard time defining faith. In the past, I've defined it as a set of beliefs, but that didn't seem complete, or exciting.

Of course, I've used the famous passage in Hebrews 11: 1, "Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see." And that works for sure, but an even more simplistic definition I now have for faith comes from the Greek word for faith, "pistis." Of the different ways to translate this word, I like the word "trust" the most. So in other words, faith for me is about who I trust.

This helps me a lot when I read this passage, because it seems like James is speaking to a problem amongst some of these Jewish believers in Jesus, and the problem seems to be people saying that they believe in Jesus for their life and their salvation, but their lives are no different because of it. They continue to chant the Shema which they have twice a day for their whole lives, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." (Deuteronomy 6: 4). They go to synagogue each week, and they do what they're supposed to do according to their rituals and traditions, and yet, they now believe in Jesus. But what is different

about their lives now that Jesus is their Lord? What's changed and what difference does their "faith" make in their daily lives?

These are some of the issues that James seems to be addressing in this passage. In today's focus, he even uses an example of a brother or sister who has no food or clothing for the day. It's not that the brother or sister doesn't have any food in their cupboard or clothes in their closet; it's that they are literally hungry and naked now.

Surely a follower of Jesus who believes and trusts in Him would not just pass by the person in need, would they? I mean, Jesus not only told us to love one another, He showed us how and commanded us to do the same (John 13: 34-35). So if we believe in Jesus, if we follow His teachings, if we TRUST in Him, then wouldn't we see ourselves in this moment as Jesus' answer to this man's or this woman's need?

James is saying that if our faith in Jesus doesn't produce this kind of response, this kind of fruit in our lives, then it's a false faith. It's more for looks than for action, and James' argument throughout this entire letter is that following after Jesus changes you. It changes what you believe, it changes what you do, and it changes who you are, for the better.



1 — How would you define faith?

2 — Why do you think it can be so easy for us to go to church, sing the songs, hear the sermons, but change little to nothing about our lives?

3 — How do you think we go about the work of trusting in Jesus more than in ourselves or our institutions or our political parties or really anything else?

18 Now someone may argue, “Some people have faith; others have good deeds.” But I say, “How can you show me your faith if you don’t have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.” 19 You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. 20 How foolish! Can’t you see that faith without good deeds is useless?

Hands down, I think this passage is the most striking of the week. James isn’t messing around. The gloves are off and the goats are running wild (ok, I’m not sure what that last saying means).

James is saying, “Look, you say you believe in God, right? Great, even the demons believe in God. So what? What difference does it make in your life? How are you better than a demon?”

It is clear in this book that James had first-hand experience with Jesus. There are many echoes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) in his letter, as well as other teachings of Jesus. And having spent so much time with Jesus, James would have seen how the demons responded when they encountered Jesus. They fell at His feet and declared who He was, the Son of the Most High God. (see Mark 3: 11 and 5: 7 for examples). And it’s an interesting aside to note that as powerful as the demons seemed to the people, they all had to obey whatever Jesus said because He was in charge, not them.

James says that if you claim faith, or trust, in God but nothing else in your life is different because of it, then you’re just like those demons and your faith is futile, useless.

So what makes us different from the demons? It’s how we respond. It’s what we do with the knowledge that Jesus is the Word that became flesh and made His dwelling among us. That Jesus is God’s clearest revelation of who He is and how much He loves us. It’s all about who we trust in-God, or ourselves? God, or our talents? God, or money? God and His goodness, or the devil and his lies? Where is our faith/trust and what fruit is it producing in our lives?



1 — Why do you think James uses demons to compare a life fully trusting in God vs a life where we say we believe but we clearly don't trust?

2 — If we talk about our “works” as fruit, then what kind of fruit can knowing Jesus produce in our lives (see Galatians 5: 22 for help)?

3 — Do you find your faith useful in your life, does it seem to make a difference, or does it too often feel useless, like something you put on and take off when you go to church? If it feels useless, can you think of anything you could do to change that feeling?



21 Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. 23 And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God.

Now James goes to the Jewish vault of heroes to bring out the "big guns" of the faith. For the Jew, he gives two examples of people who exemplified the kind of life he is talking about. However, it's important to note for us that these heroes weren't perfect.

As critical as Abraham is to the Jewish faith and our history, and as much as the phrase, "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith" is repeated, Abraham had his own challenges. If you remember, God had told Abraham, who had no children, that He was going to bless him with more offspring than there are stars in the sky. However, from Abraham's perspective God was slow in fulfilling his promise, so at one point he and his wife Sarah take matters into their own hands. Out of that comes marital strife, hurt and pain. It wasn't a good situation. All because they got tired of waiting and trusted in themselves more than God.

Thankfully, that wasn't the end of Abraham's story. Because of God's mercy, Abraham eventually did have a son with his wife, Sarah. But then Abraham was tested in his faith to see if he really trusted in God and God's promise. Abraham was faithful, believing that God was good and would provide and he acted upon that belief.

Look, at the end of the day, I believe that God wants the same thing for us. He wants us to believe that He really is loving and good, and then He wants us to live our life in such a way that affirms and is consistent with that belief. And He doesn't want that for us because He's demanding, He wants that for us because He knows it's the best way for us to live life; fully trusting in Him and His love and care for us.



1 — Do you believe that God is truly good and loving and wants the best for your life? If not, what keeps you from believing? If so, what's one thing you can do today to live into this truth?

2 —Who are your heroes of the faith, the people you admire and look up to and would want to be like when it comes to living the life of faith?

3 — What is it that these heroes do that you admire and would want to emulate?



24 So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone. 25 Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. 26 Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.

I am so fascinated by the use of Rahab in this passage and in the Scriptures.

We first meet Rahab in the book of Joshua, chapter 2, and all we're told about her is that she was a prostitute. We also know that she was considered a heathen by the Jews, someone who wasn't an Israelite and not raised as a believer in the one true God. And yet, this same woman becomes a hero in the story because of her profession of God and her protection of two Israelite spies, and then she becomes an example throughout Jewish history as the mother of all those who convert to faith in God. Rahab is even mentioned in the lineage of Jesus!

So what was it that made this woman, who admittedly had a rough past, change her ways and live a better life? She encountered the God of Israel. In Joshua 2:11, she professes to the Israelite spies, "the Lord your God, is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below." Rahab was putting all of her eggs in one basket, God's. She was convinced that He was good and mighty and powerful, and that He could do what He said He would

do. Then, she lived into that belief, that trust, that faith.

James ends this passage by saying that faith without that kind of action, that fruit, is not only false, it's not only futile, but it's actually fatal. The word for dead in the Greek is literally that, lifeless, without breath, nothing.

If God can make an Old Testament prostitute an example of faith for generations to come, maybe He can do the same with you and me.



1 — How would you describe your faith? Which of the following definitions are you closer to: 1-my faith is living an active, an integral part of my life that I depend on regularly, 2-My faith is something I used as a descriptor, a title of sorts, but it's not something I live by.

2 —If you're closer to definition 2 than 1, do you think you'd want to make a change? If so, what would be your ideal way of interacting with your faith?

3 — What are some steps you could take today to move the needle so that your life reflects your faith in word/deed/action/fruit?



She came into my office and plopped down on the couch after a chapel service one day. You could tell that something heavy was on her heart. I knew her, not well, but what I knew of her was that she was sincere, kind, and as I often say, a good egg.

"Pastor Paddy," she said, "I've been told my whole life that baptism is important and that if I believe in Jesus, then I have to be baptized. But I've been confused, too, because I believe that Jesus has the power to save someone even without baptism." You could tell she wasn't just thinking out loud, but she had been praying and struggling with these thoughts for some time.

"Look at the thief on the cross," she went on. "He wasn't baptized and Jesus said that he would be in paradise. I'm not against baptism, I just don't understand why I have to do it. Can you help?"

Immediately, I did what I always do in these types of situations, especially with these types of questions; I prayed in my head, "Lord, please help me know what to say."

I asked her a few more questions about her past and her spiritual journey. She clearly had a love for Jesus and believed in Him and His teachings.

As we talked, I felt led to talk with her about marriage. I told her that when a couple falls in love, they do that in their own hearts first. They spend time together, they get to know each other, and over time they fall in love and over time they choose to commit to each other. Most of

that happens inside first. However, there comes a point in time when those two are ready to commit their lives to each other, and they want the whole world to know how they feel about each other, and so they publicly declare their love and devotion to each other in front of family and friends.

I told her that baptism is similar. At first, we go through a falling in love with Jesus. We spend time with Him, learn more about Him and His teachings. But then, there comes a time when we are ready to say that we want to spend our whole lives with Him and we want the whole world to know it. So what do we do? We get baptized as a way of declaring to our friends and family that we love Jesus and choose to follow Him.

When we got done talking, I prayed and told her to let me know when she would like to get back together and keep talking. I figured that we'd have a long road ahead of us, navigating what baptism is and isn't.

To my utter surprise, she called me later that night and said, "Pastor Paddy, I want to do it! I want to get married to my best friend." It was her way of saying she wanted to get baptized.

And I have to tell you, of all the baptisms I've done, this one was one of my favorites. The girl's mom had made food for the wedding—I mean baptism—reception afterwards. The girl entered, marching to the wedding music that her friends were playing. She was wearing



white (don't worry, she changed before we went into the water), and she spoke her vows to God. I spoke God's vows to her by reading different passages in Scripture. Afterwards, we went down into the water as she married her best friend.

Faith naturally produces fruit in our lives and that fruit changes us. It can even change the people around us. If it doesn't produce this change or this fruit, then it's

not faith according to James. It may be false, or futile, or even fatal, but it's not faith.

And it all begins with investing fully into that relationship with the only one who is worthy of your trust. The more you spend time with Him, devote your life to His, the more fruit you will grow and the more change will come.

1 — If you have been baptized, can you remember why you made that decision and what you remember from that day that was special to you? If you haven't, what may be holding you back?

2 — What are some ways that you have found that really help you connect with God? List some of your favorite types of activities that you enjoy using in your walk with God.

3 — Knowing that you learn to trust God the more you spend time with Him, just like any relationship, what are some areas in your spiritual life that you'd like to improve upon and/or need help with?



We live in a day when in many cities the church is losing its place of respect and influence. While many church members are quick to say they are people of faith, the world shouts back with the haunting question of James 2:16, "What good is it?" Because the church has lost its voice in so many communities, our whole nation is involved in an ethical effect.

And yet we know that when we invest in our relationship with God, when we look to Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith, when we learn to trust in Him, the fruit of faith will be produced in our lives and our words and our actions can start to match up.

So if the book of James is a window into what the life with Jesus looks like, then how are we doing?

I was 32 years old when I was asked this question for the very first time. An elderly woman who I didn't recognize walked up to me in the waiting area of a doctor's office, entered into my personal space, and said, "Hey, how are you and Jesus doing?" My first response was, "And your name is?" I was shocked, but after the shock wore off and I reflected on this moment, I realized, I was 32 years old and no one had ever asked me that question. I was a pastor, and at this point in my life I had interviewed for several jobs related to living out my faith and my calling, and yet no one asked me how Jesus and I were doing.

Of course, I hadn't asked others that question either. Maybe I was afraid of the answer. Maybe I wasn't confident enough in my own walk to ask someone else about theirs.

Either way, nowadays I make it a point to ask those I have the privilege of sitting with in a meaningful conversation, "Hey, how are you and Jesus doing?" I do this because I believe it's the most important question I could ask. Because, you see, when we can support each other in our spiritual walk, when we can help each other trust in Jesus more, then I believe our lives will produce fruit that show the world that He is the Lord of our lives. When that happens, I believe the kingdom of God begins to shine even brighter here on earth as in heaven.



Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1— How are you and Jesus doing?
- 2— What things do you find in your life that you seem to put more trust in than Jesus?
- 3— What are some steps you could take this week to remove your dependency on those things and seek to make Jesus more central in your life?
- 4— Who are some of the people you look up to, your heroes of the faith, that you have the ability to connect with and how might connecting with them regularly help strengthen your faith?
- 5— What are some ways we can discern whether or not a person is living by their faith versus just using their faith as a check box for an hour or two on a Sabbath?
- 6— I often find that my own busyness in life keeps me from seeing the needs of those around me and, thus, I miss the opportunity to live my faith out because I'm too distracted. What might be some ways to slow down and be more aware of those needs and how God may have equipped me to meet those needs?
- 7— Why do you think so many Christians profess faith, show up to church, but their lives don't reflect the life of Jesus in any way?
- 8— How do you and I avoid the same problem?
- 9— Do you believe that there is nothing you can do that "works" to make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do that "works" to make God love you less? How might the answer to this affect how you live out your faith?

Application Point: The conflict between faith and works is age old. The whole argument originated in the issue addressed in James 2:14-26. The ethical effect, that is faith without fruit, is the burden of James 2:14-26. James reveals to us that a faith without fruit is false, futile, and fatal.



WEEK 6

JAMES 3:1-12 (NLT)

Controlling the Tongue

1 Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. **2** Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.

3 We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. **4** And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. **5** In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches.

But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. **6** And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

7 People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, **8** but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. **9** Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. **10** And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! **11** Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? **12** Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.



1 Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. 3 We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth.

This starts out kind of strange. He uses a term of endearment (dear), and then immediately tells them what they “shouldn’t” be. It seems he is hesitant to let people teach in the church because there will be harsher judgment on them. Perhaps he is worried about deceit and manipulation that has been happening in some of the churches by those Paul called “super-apostles.” (2nd Corinthians 11:5) These were false teachers, teaching something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He gives a little ground in the second verse. He reminds us that all of us make mistakes, but that controlling our tongues is not so easy; if it were, we could control the rest of ourselves. I think this was pretty kind of him to say. Honestly, I speak for a living, I teach scripture and try to apply it to my life and yours. I get the words wrong ALL THE TIME, I make mistakes, I say illustrations that shouldn’t be said. I am sure I offend others—although I don’t mean too. Teaching and preaching is difficult on a good day, and disastrous on a bad day, and anti-gospel on the worst days.

Anyone who teaches or speaks for a living understands this. Many of you come to church for a “good word” and hopefully

receive one most of the time. However, as church-goers, we need to make sure we are not just consumers of the words spoken, but doers as well. When a word convicts, there should be an uncomfortable feeling in our guts. When a word stings, we know it was just for us. When a word is offensive, we have to first check our hearts to see if God is trying to tell us something.

Early in my ministry, I had to preach on a Friday night for a collegiate group and then on the next day, Sabbath, at my church. Friday night went really well, which was a relief. So well, in fact, that I figured I would just forget what I had worked on for church and do this same talk again... What a mistake!

I didn’t seem to realize that a group of young adults and a group of very not young adults would receive my words with very different ears. As much as the Friday night group loved it, the Sabbath morning group did not. It was quiet through the jokes, uncomfortable through the illustrations, and by the end, the tension in the room was not because of a “hard word” given, but because of many misplaced words. I had missed the mark that morning, and it was my fault. I won’t tell you what happened next, but I will say this. Some church



members are gracious to young pastors—believing they can learn, and some are not.

But what I learned that weekend was the power of a word. Words can slay or words can build. They can make things better or worse. Words have the power to inspire or the power to tear down. Words are not light things, but heavy and burdensome at times. We must take them seriously.

That last text, verse 3, says that you can lead a large horse around by a small

bit. This is simply saying that the right word at the right time is important. The next time you speak, the next time you post, the next time you communicate, think about what you want the outcome to be. Where do you want to lead people with your words? Are they worth saying, will they bring people together, can you show love through them?

Words matter. A lot.

1 — Write down an exchange you had with someone that did not go well. Could you have used different words?

2 — How can you “tame your tongue”? What would it take to begin to use language that heals?

3 — How can you de-escalate an argument, whether at home or at church, when you don't agree with someone, or when someone doesn't agree with you?



4 And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. 5 In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. 6 And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

James continues using metaphor to talk about the importance of words and the tongue. He is making a case for how powerful words really are. They can help people change direction, they can help people grow from one viewpoint to another. But for as small as it is, it has tremendous power.

I had a flashlight that someone gave me. It was pretty small, but the light was intense. It was one of those military flashlights that could seriously hurt someone's eyes if they looked into it at any given moment. I used to sit in the backyard and point it at trees and bushes and every once in a while it would scare a wild animal away. Even though it was small, it had a great deal of power.

So do your words. The idea of a forest fire sparking is something that those of us in Southern California are deeply aware of. A small spark can destroy everything. Or, it can set the world on fire. Think of the greatest speeches you have ever heard. The Gettysburg address was only 272 words long. It clocked in at just under 2 minutes, but its words endure to this day. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream speech" delivered on August 28, 1963, while much longer, has

captured, held, and shaped the thoughts of many over the years.

The text says that "the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches." Some translations use the word "boast" for what the tongue can do, i.e. boast of great things. However, the NLT translation says that "great speeches" can come from the tongue. To use the word "boast" might be heard as negative, and this is perhaps not the intent of the author. Rather, great speeches means that it can be both inspirational and aspirational in its intent.

Aspirational. What do you aspire to be, to contribute, to be remembered for? When was the last time you thought about what you aspired toward? It is very possible to live in such a manner that you forget your aspirations. Sometimes, excellent is the enemy of the good, and so we don't get things done, we wallow in our present context, unable to move forward, scared we won't do so well, and fearful we will fail completely. But living with aspiration is one of the most important things we can do.

To me, Jesus is the most aspirational character that we can see. To meditate on and study his life is the thing that inspires me most in life. We often take those sto-



ries that we have learned over the years and have put them in a back pocket of our thoughts, and we only deal with Jesus in the most philosophical way. However, as we study anew the stories of Jesus, his

life and ministry, we are inspired anew to live our lives differently. The words on our tongues become the overflow of our hearts, and our hearts are filled with Jesus. This is a good recipe for us to live by.

1 — To what do you aspire?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2 — What inspires you?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 — How can your tongue be an asset to you in the conversations you have about your faith?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

7 People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, 8 but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. 9 Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God.

James is using this illustration of taming the animals as a pretty common understanding of what humans do. The idea that we domesticate animals, that we can train and tame animals would have been very relevant in the lives of the ancients. When livelihoods depend on the connection with the animals that allow you to have industry, food, and even commerce, how you can work with your animals is very important.

The tongue, however, is not such a docile creature. In fact, James calls it evil and full of deadly poison, and it can both praise God and rain down curses on those whom God created. And that seems to be the dilemma most of us face. We have these tongues that are our best asset, but also our worst enemies, and most of us spend our lives trying to both tame them and use them in a way that lifts up others and forwards the work of Christ in the world.

I grew up in a home where sarcasm was our economy. The one with the quickest tongue would often be the one who won the day. We weren't so much mean as we were constantly sparring to make sure we had a voice in the conversation. This was just our family culture, and I thought it was pretty common in other families as well. It took me quite a while to understand that my economy of words was seen as not only

aggressive, but mean by many of my early colleagues. I would like to say that I have tamed my tongue, but I often fall into old patterns of speech that can be destructive. I have lots of work to do, and I pray often that my words will not be the undoing of the gospel in someone's life.

The last phrase in verse 9 always gives me pause: "It curses those who have been made in the image of God." I guess we have to ask the question, who is made in the image of God? Is it just the people who look like me, that I know, that I agree with? If we are all made in the image of God, then we need to be on the lookout for when we are beginning to communicate in a way that does not honor the image of God in other's lives. I think this is particularly true when we are online. While the last few months have been particularly difficult and divided, and the upcoming months will probably hold the same, we need to be considerably thoughtful about the way we communicate our opinions and our associations. While the world is so divided, the church doesn't have to be. We can disagree, while still staying in fellowship. But, HOW we speak and interact becomes paramount to being able to continue fellowshiping together.

In all interactions, it is important that we work not to be slaves to our tongues. They are difficult to tame.



1 — Can you remember a time when your tongue became poison to someone?

2 — What kind of things can you do that will help you be slow to speak, especially in anger.

3 — Have you ever written a letter and put it in a drawer before you sent it? Did that help you cool off before you said something you couldn't take back?



10 And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!

Now this is confusing. James switches from “tongue” to “mouth.” It is possible that his words may be reminiscent of Jesus’s teaching about the defilement of speech. (Matthew 15:11, 17-18). As well, he uses the term “my brethren,” translated as brothers and sisters, not as an introduction to a new topic, but for emphasis. He is trying to make an impassioned plea to his readers. It was meant to be inclusive, therefore the translation of “brothers and sisters,” as we all have this problem with our mouths.

I quote this scripture a great deal, but Luke 6:45 “...from the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” This means what is in our hearts is what comes out of our mouths, and we need to have God continually searching our hearts in order for our mouths to speak those things which will bring grace and compassion to others. Now, you may not be interested in grace and compassion coming from your mouth, but if that is the case, I wonder why not? What are we to be, as Christians, to the world? How do the words we speak bring unity and growth to the world around us? Are the words we speak ordained of God, or are they acknowledging that we have anger, fear, and hatred inside of us?

You see, our mouths are weapons, they are tools, they are springs of life or screams of death. I know that is pretty serious, but that is how serious words are. I spend most of my life speaking to people, whether it is from a pulpit, a classroom, or one-on-one. When not speaking, I am writing, and I have to think clearly about what I am going to say. I know when I am doing well with God, with others, and with myself, as well, I know when things are shaky. My heart tells my mouth the truth about me, even when my brain doesn’t quite get it.

How do you know the state of your heart? Listen to your words.

That’s a pretty simple formula, but it “speaks” volumes into what you are feeling inside your heart. If your words are harsh and angry, it is time to search for what is really going on inside. Words don’t start in the mouth and on the tongue, they start in the heart. If your words are unifying and compassionate, then your heart is probably in a good place to begin with.

Doing heart checks are important. We sometimes allow ourselves to forget what is happening in our hearts, and then we are confused as to what is coming out of our mouths. When we get confused, it’s time to reset, find some time to reflect, and do a heart check.



1 — When was the last time you did a heart check?

2 — What has been breaking your heart lately?

3 – How can you align your heart closer to the heart of God?

11 Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water?

Okay, I recognize that this is getting a little weird. But the question is a good one. Can water coming out of a spring be both fresh and salty? Interestingly, it can, and often would in the waters around Palestine, particularly in the Jordan rift valley. While certainly not the only place this happens in the world, it surely would be difficult to have this phenomena happen in such an arid area.

When we went to Israel with the Crosswalk Destinations crew in 2019, we were able to be in the area where this would have happened. The Jordan rift valley is an ancient place, with an even more ancient feel. While beautiful in a desert way, it is also rugged and barren. Can you imagine being a traveler in that desert, seeing a spring, a source of life-giving water, only to find that it is brackish? Not only would that be disappointing, it would be life-threatening in certain circumstances.

Perhaps this is what it is like when you are hoping for a gracious word of encouragement from a Christian brother or sister, and rather than sweet and life-giving water of love, you are given the brackish water of criticism and anger. I think this happens all too often in our lives. We go away thirsty, empty, and with a bitter taste in our mouths. Unfortunately, there are always those who look to tear a brother or sister down, and they don't always have a reason, except for the condition of their heart.

The truth is, a spring is only as good as its source.

Where the water comes from is really important. So what is the source of your love and what is the source of your anger? From where do they come? And how can you slow down enough to know which source to tap?

When I was growing up in the 80's our main source of water throughout the summer was the garden hose. This was well before we had "bottled" water. We would have thought it foolish to get water from a bottle. Hoses were just fine. The taste of warm rubber making the bouquet just perfect on a 100 degree summer day! It was gross, but we didn't care, we were young and dehydrated.

While James is about to make the point that the water is only as good as its source, it is interesting to see that when a spring has more than one source, the output is inconsistent. So this is the question today:

What is the source you pull from?



1 — Do you ever feel like you have a divided heart?

2 — What do you read/listen to that gives you hope?

3 — Are you allowing good things into your heart, or do you allow things that shouldn't get inside to destroy the good that is in you?



12 Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.

Now, James decides to give us the natural flora and fauna of the region to make his point. The biggest point is that one kind of tree has to make fruit that is within its nature to bear. This is a bit different than the previous illustration that he uses, but the point is well made. The truth is that having both positive and negative speech is not what God wants from us.

As humans, we are super complicated. We all know that. But the gospel is pushing us toward a greater experience of grace and we are to give that away as a gift. When our speech is ugly, angry, and ungraceful, we are not representing the gospel well. And the truth is, if we believe in the gospel, then we believe the gospel is something that is supposed to be integrated into every part of our being. That means whatever we are pulling from in our lives needs to have a portion of the gospel attached to it.

I find this particularly hard in disagreement. I know I have said this so many times you are probably getting tired of hearing it, but we have to learn to communicate in ways that don't distract from the gospel. This does not mean that we need to agree with everyone around us, but we have to find a way to communicate with respect, with grace, and with compassion.

While counseling is not my forte, I find myself in the situation often. I find that those couples who can communicate through a crisis are much better off. Too often, people find themselves fighting about how they are

fighting with one another, and that creates an added tension that keeps them away from solving the real problems they need to deal with. Once our communication is gospel oriented, we can begin to deal with other problems as well.

James wants us to understand that good and bad speech in one Christian person is difficult, should be inadmissible, and is self-contradictory.

So how do we work on creating a single-source for our speech? In some ways, it is pretty simple and has been answered before; (1:17) Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our father..." This is where we must begin. What if we began every day with this thought in mind? What if we realized that God has a great many good things for us, and good speech is one of those things. While the tongue is difficult to tame, the one who made the tongue can help us. If God can be the source of our communication, then God can also help us tame the wild stallion that is our tongue.



1 — What is your first thought in the day?

2 — Can you direct it to God?

3 — What promise can you hold onto, today, that will change the source of your speech with others?



The texts this week speak of how difficult it is to tame our tongues, and how they can taint the whole of the body and destroy our relationships and mislead people about the gospel. I have said it before, but words matter a great deal. How we use them, how we deliver them, and how they are heard. It is of paramount importance that Christians work with the Holy Spirit to help make sure that the source of their words are from God and not from the world. While we may disagree, we have to learn how to do it from a place of grace, rather than a place of hurt.

While this seems simple, we know it to be increasingly difficult. Today's world is so divided, and the sides seem to see each other as enemies. This is a false dichotomy. The issues that we are dealing with in today's world cannot be solved by one side versus another. Rather, they need to be dealt with by unifying the conversation. That does not mean agree, but it means they work for understanding. I know it seems impossible, but it can't be. We have to rise above the rhetoric of sides. We start this by listening, hearing, believing, and trying to understand what others are saying.

Here is another thing I would like to posit. Christ says that we are to love our enemies. If that is gospel, and we call ourselves Christians, then there is an even greater call for us to love those with whom we disagree. If you have divided your world into those that agree with you and those that don't, your first gospel call is to love those that don't agree with you. Strangely, by identifying the enemy, you have identified those you are to try and love the most. The gospel is funny that way. Just when you figured out who you are supposed to ignore, the gospel tells you to love them the most. This is infuriating, but if we are to call ourselves Christians, we have to take the words of Jesus seriously.

I don't expect this to be easy. It is not as if it is easy for me. But that's the beauty of belief in Jesus; he doesn't ask us to do easy things, but he is there to help us with the hard stuff. If we were only asked to do easy things, then why did Scripture speak so often of the suffering that those who believe will experience? I suppose our faith lives are not always meant to be easy, simple, or without complication.



Here are a few questions for you to ponder this week:

- 1 — What have you experienced as you have tried to tame your tongue?
- 2 — When have you been the most successful at it?
- 3 — How can you get back to reproducing that experience? What do you need to change in your life?
- 4 — Have you ever felt like what comes out of your mouth is beyond your control?
- 5 — What are the best conversations you have? How can you have more of those?
- 6 — When you talk to God, do you ever lose your temper? How do you think God handles that?
- 7 — What is the hardest thing for you to be graceful about in your conversations and online interactions? Should you steer clear of those kinds of interactions?
- 8 — Pray to God that He helps tame your tongue so it does not spew poison.

WEEK 7

JAMES 3:13-18 (NLT)

True Wisdom Comes from God

13 If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. **14** But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying. **15** For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. **16** For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

17 But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. **18** And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.



What is “wisdom” in the Bible? The word usually refers less to factual knowledge and more to skill. It is more “know how” than “know that.” Particularly, biblical wisdom deals with knowing how to live. As such, it is similar to the Greek literary form of paraenesis, or ethical instruction.

We have spoken of Paraenesis before. It is those ethical learnings, those moral teachings that take several forms. In the Old Testament it is found in the legal material of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. In the New Testament, James takes a special place as wisdom literature. While it shows up in the form of the letter, with a greeting and speaking intimately to its readers, using “brothers and sisters” often, it is really a book of instruction. This wisdom, for our purposes, is helping us to understand how to design our faith lives to be what we hope they might be, according to how God is guiding us.

By now, you should have at least a napkin scribble of where you want your faith and life to progress toward. As we work backwards from that vision, we have to look at the place wisdom will play in our lives. Our faith should move us toward a much broader view and vision of what wisdom can do for us. It is not just “street smarts” or “book smarts”; rather, it is a practical and useful wisdom that knows how to connect what is taught in scripture to how we live our lives and express our faith to the world. Also, biblical wisdom will always lead us toward a greater “shalom” or peace in our

lives with God, with others, with the earth, and with ourselves.

Wisdom leads to faith maturity. A mature faith is one that is not easily shaken, is open to discussion, has a great sense of morality and ethics, and is inclusive. It is not defensive, but expansive in its ability to have a conversation with someone who does not agree, and a mature faith is deeply interested in the moral growth of others. Through all of this, a mature faith understands that God cannot be contained in words, yet seeks to find the best words possible in order to relay who God is and what He can do for those around us. A mature faith understands that belief is like a diamond that is not a burden to carry.

Remember, at the beginning of the chapter James had mentioned that not everyone should teach. This is the connection with now being taught about wisdom. Those who are not wise should not be teaching in the church, as they will cause division and destruction before they cause unity and growth. The good news is that wisdom comes from God, and He can imbue that desire to learn and be wise into each of us.



1 — Have you prayed for wisdom lately? Today might be a great day to do it.

2 — How can you know if you are wise? Perhaps as wisdom grows, you will find yourself making fewer of the same mistakes.

3 — What are you reading today to increase your wisdom?



13 If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom.

Now, this is not just for teachers, but for everyone. While James started the chapter speaking to those who should teach, he has moved to more general wisdom for everyone. Here, the author uses two different words that the NLT translates as “wise” and “understand.” Another way to render these words would be “wise and sensible,” but there is a stronger emphasis on the mastery of God’s ways.

Then, James goes on to show us two different ways in which to prove to unbelievers that we are living up to what are considered “God’s ways”; humility, and doing good. What is interesting is that the word used for “life” does not mean a personal or private life, but rather, it is the same word used in 1 Peter to connote a more public life, particularly as it relates to those who don’t believe in God. Therefore, our lives become our witness. David Dark, in his book “Life’s Too Short to Pretend You’re Not Religious” says: output. My witness is the sum of everything I do and leave undone. The words are there, but the actions speak louder. James is making much the same argument here. What we do and what we don’t do is incredibly important when it comes to what other people think of not just Christians, but of God, as well.

The truth is, we must give evidence to the fact that we are followers of Jesus. The term “Christian” is not a label or a ban-

ner we get to put on ourselves; rather, it is a verdict the world will put on us as a legacy of our labor. Is it really enough to say “I believe” and then never show the world how that affects every fibre in your being? To believe is to demonstrate and express who God is, and James thinks that wisdom, goodness, and humility are part and parcel of what we are trying to show people.

Some use the term “meekness” rather than “humility.” I really like this word. For some reason, in today’s world the idea of meekness is equated with weakness, but this is not the case. Meekness is the opposite of arrogance. And Jesus spoke about meekness at one point: Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” This is a pretty profound promise. While it doesn’t seem as if the meek will inherit anything, this is a promise from the lips of Jesus himself, so perhaps we should take it seriously.

To be meek, in this context, is to understand—with humility—how much we need to depend on God. There is an arrogance to thinking that we have got this all worked out for ourselves. Meekness is not weakness when it is connected to God; rather, it is the power of God in our lives.



1 — Has anyone called you meek or humble? Is that an attribute you aspire to?

2 —Why do you think that meekness is vilified in today's world, even by Christians?

3 — How can we become more humble in our approach to faith and life?



14 But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying.

James is continuing his thought using a pair of conjunctions; “but” and “if.” These conjunctions pair together the idea of meekness and humility to the bitterly jealous and selfish ambition of verse 14. These words that are used are pretty damaging. Using the term “bitterly” in front of “jealous” amplifies the intensity of the word. Often, jealous was translated with a more neutral word, “zeal”; however, the author here clearly wants us to understand that this word needs to be seen in its negative connotation. As well, “selfish ambition,” which is one word in the Greek, was often used to discuss politicians who are greedy, putting their own ambitions above everything else, usually leading to division, not unity.

But James lets us know that these things come from our hearts. If you have ever heard the phrase “they have a black or narrow heart,” it comes from these words. As James seems to see it, the problem of rivalry, partisanship and jealousy is not external, but it is in your heart. The heart is where so much of our lives are decided. We have to not only guard it, but let God search it, as well.

Now, the second part of the sentence is a little bit more difficult. The reason being is that it does not seem to let us know what the boasting is about! Is it about the wisdom that you have? Is it about how much God has given you? Is it boasting about yourself, and therefore not allow-

ing the truth of what you really feel to be shown? There are a great many different interpretations of this particular part of the text, but perhaps we could translate v.13 and v.14 like this:

Are any of you truly wise? If you are, you must show it by living a right life and by being humble and wise in everything you do. This is true wisdom. 14 But if you have a heart full of jealousy and a desire to be better than other people, you must not boast that you are a wise person [or, have spiritual understanding]. If you do that, you turn what is true into a lie.

This sentence structure is strange, but perhaps the meaning is a bit more clear. “Turning what is true into a lie” is interesting to me. How can something that is true become a lie? It seems to have a little to do with intent. What is the intent from which you speak, and how does that affect the words you are using, and how does your attitude affect those who are hearing?

When our intent is less than gracious, less than stellar, and less than honest, something bad happens, even when we are using the truth. What truth are you in danger of distorting because of your intent? It is worth asking.



1 — How can you know your own intent?

2 — What can you do to change your intent? Is that even possible?

3 — Have you ever felt wise, and what was the outcome of that thought? Was it humility and a good life?

15 For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

These are strong words for us today. Basically, it is saying that God has a particular kind of wisdom, and jealousy and selfishness do not make the list. At the end, there is a crescendo that basically says these things are earthly, then unspiritual, and then demonic. Whenever this idea of demonic is introduced, we should probably take pretty serious stock of what is being said.

You notice it was a downward spiral (perhaps a better word than crescendo). From earthly, these thoughts move us away from even our spirituality until they become something downright evil (demonic). The word "earthly" can simply mean to be the opposite of heavenly. When you are considered earthly, you are not considered to be someone who can rise above the shackles of this earth in order to live a more godly life. Rather, you are earth-bound to behave and react without a manner of heaven in your behavior.

Then, this "wisdom" is unspiritual. This can simply mean that is "devoid of spirit." So I will ask a question here; when was the last time you asked the Holy Spirit for guidance before you did something? I mean, it is easy for us to simply move forward with what we think is right, and with what we want to do. Have you been able to carve out time to ask God for guidance in every given situation? While that may seem like it is not possible, it perhaps is.

When you design your faith-life, there should be some moments of reflection, where you can seek the wisdom of God, and when you can do a heart check. Without these, you may move forward in a way that includes jealousy and selfishness rather than those things of God we have discussed before.

So how do you design some time into your life for the Holy Spirit? The concept is simple, but the execution might be difficult. Here is a quick list and then an explanation:

- 1 — Submission.** This is a daily occurrence. It is when we begin our day with the acknowledgement that God is our king, our lives are His, and our commitment to Jesus is more important than the other things we will experience each day.
- 2 — Request.** This is when we ask God to not only be the Lord of our lives, but to ask the Holy Spirit to be our guide in our decisions as well. We also ask for time to process the way the Holy Spirit would have us process. I believe that God works in time, and even stretches time for us to be able to process in partnership with the Holy Spirit to make good choices.
- 3 — Follow.** Now, this is when we have to do it. Execution is always where things fall apart. But if we are serious about what we are asking of the Holy Spirit, then we have to be willing to



follow the guidance we receive. We might not all receive the guidance in the same way. For some, it may be a clear understanding of which way to go. For others, it might be a sense of

peace. And for others, it might be the word of a trusted advisor, speaking the words of God into our lives. However God works, listen and follow.

1 — When was the last time you submitted your day and decisions to God?

2 — What would that prayer sound like to you?

3 —How can you make sure you have the time to do this each day?



16 For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

James is going to express what the consequences are for such false wisdom. And the consequences are essentially evil. There is really nothing good that comes out of it. When our desires are jealousy and ambition for ourselves, we will wreak havoc on those around us, and certainly within the community of Christ. We all know people like this. People who seem to want to lead in church because of the status it gives them, because of the power and the position they perceive to have because of it.

When I was in college and seminary, you could always tell those who were going into the ministry in order to have “power” over other people. They perceived their pulpits as much grander than they were, and they were sure that their ability to be in control of others was a God-given right. Quite honestly, they were a little bit scary. They were sure that the position granted them the right to bully, cajole, and demand certain things from those with whom they were in community. I never understood this kind of attitude.

To be sure, there is a respect that CAN come with the job of Pastor, but that is only granted through the trust of the community. Those of us who are pastors and leaders know that we only lead as far as the people in our congregations trust us to be words of life and love. Without this trust, we are not leaders, but we are clanging gongs and cymbals in people's lives. Disorder is some-

thing that can be created quite easily with poor leadership and a lack of trust.

Since these things, jealousy and selfish ambition, are not wisdom from God, where do they come from? Usually, they come from insecurity. When we are jealous of what other people have or what they are, it is usually more of a reflection on what we think about ourselves than what we really think about anyone else. Selfish ambition usually extends from our desire to be “more” and to get that “more” in any way possible. Notice that ambition is not the problem, but selfish ambition is. When we are only focused on what we have and what we want to have and to be, we fall into the trap of ambition that is selfish and that is fueled by jealousy.

These two aspects, working together, ultimately begin to create disorder and chaos around us and in the communities we find ourselves. We are not content with what God has given us and with the trajectory He has made for us, so we push the issue. Whenever I have done that in my life, I have found myself lacking, wanting, and in a place that ultimately does not honor God, nor is it a place where I can most effectively use my talents. My competencies are best used where God places me. Is that the same for you when you look back at your life?



1 — Where have you been guilty of moving ahead of God's plan for your life because of selfish ambition? How did that work out?

2 — DIs ambition itself bad? Why or why not?

3 — How can you work on the jealousy you find yourself experiencing at times? Social media is often great at exacerbating these feelings of jealousy. Perhaps a social media fast can quell some of these feelings.



17 But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. 18 And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

James turns on a dime. Using the term “but” shows us that he is going to contrast something, and in this case it is the wisdom that does come from heaven. It is a few things that are worth mentioning:

- 1** —Pure. That means it comes with no selfish ambition or jealousy. It is a wisdom that seeks to increase the joy and contentment of everyone around it.
- 2** —Peace Loving. It does not seek to disrupt or disorder those things in which it comes in contact. Rather, it is growing a sense of peace around it. Do your words do this in other people's lives?
- 3** —Gentle. Rather than being loud, it is the small voice that people want to listen to. If we think we have to be the loudest voice in the room in order to be heard, then we don't believe that our words have the gravity they need to be spoken softly, yet listened to widely.
- 4** —Willing to yield to others. We can allow other people to speak and still find our voice being important. It is easy to think that perhaps we don't have enough volume or time to make our points. But heavenly wisdom knows that we are in this for the long-run, and we will be able to say that which needs to be said at just the right time.
- 5** —It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It should not be surprising that the more mercy we give, the more we see the fruits of that mercy, our words will cultivate good deeds. When we are full of mercy, we will also see the fruits of that kind of wisdom in our lives and the lives of others.
- 6** —It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. That means this wisdom is not self-seeking, nor is it insincere in its ability to speak to others. It wants what is best and greatest for those around it, and it is not jealous of anyone; therefore, it does not need to get close to anyone for favors, regardless of station.
- 7** —Peacemakers. Since wisdom from above does not seek station, there is no reason to fight and scratch for position. Therefore, they can become peacemakers and cultivate righteousness in those they serve because there is no need or desire for personal gain. This is truly what it means to be a peacemaker.

James ends this verse with an emphasis on peace. Apparently, he had some concerns about the conflict that was happening within the churches at the time. A better translation of this text is perhaps “The harvest of righteousness is sown in peace.” This



is very true. Without the desire for peace, we won't have it within the church. Have you ever wondered what will make you break fellowship with other people? Is it politics, is it personal preference over worship style,

is it the fact that people are not doing what you want them to do in church? The truth is, we all have hills that we will die on. Should we be careful that those hills are gospel, and not preference?

1 — Have you ever broken fellowship with someone over a disagreement?

2 — How can you produce peace so that you might harvest righteousness in your life and your family's life?

3 — Are the above mentioned qualities things that you aspire toward? If not, why not?



This text talks about the wisdom that comes from God and how important it is for the way that we live our lives together. If we are designing our faith, wisdom is an incredibly important piece of the puzzle. Solomon prayed for wisdom above all else (1 Kings 3:1-14). He understood that of all the gifts that God gives, wisdom is the gold standard. So much flows from God's wisdom, as it is imbued into those who believe. There is no gift that can match its usefulness and maturity.

The beauty of these texts is we see what is of God, and what is not of God. You can tell this by the fruits that you see coming from the way wisdom plays out in your life. While there is never a direct one-to-one approach to our lives of faith, over time, we can see trends and themes that show us if how we are experiencing faith and putting into action has fruit, or if it is rotten at the root.

Faith maturity is something we should all aspire to. Without wisdom, maturity is much harder to attain or perhaps impossible. Faith maturity has some aspects that are worth mentioning.

- 1 —A mature faith trusts God's saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. These things are non-negotiable for the mature Christian.
- 2 —A mature faith experiences a sense of personal well-being, security, and peace. These are things that come from God, and not simply from knowing the right things. We have a sense of peace

knowing that God is consistent in our lives, and that He is for us, and not against us.

- 3 —A mature faith integrates faith and life, seeing work, family, social relationships, and political choices as part of one's religious life. There is no bifurcation from what we believe about God and what God calls us to be in other aspects of our life.
- 4 —A mature faith seeks spiritual growth through study, reflection, prayer, and discussions with others. A faith like this enjoys the interplay of conversation and thoughtful disagreement. While not looking to simply be an apologist for one's faith, a mature Christian can understand other points of view and value them as expressions of God's unfolding grace.
- 5 —A mature faith seeks to be part of a community of believers in which people give witness to their faith and support and nourish one another. Community is very important for those with a mature faith. Christianity is not meant to be experienced alone, and so life together is important.
- 6 —A mature faith holds life-affirming values, including a commitment to racial and gender equality, affirmation of cultural and religious diversity, and a personal sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.



these expressions of faith and life together. We should always be praying for wisdom, perhaps even before courage and strength. The wisdom that comes from God is an imperative for the life of a Christian. The good news is that God has a great deal of it and wants to give out as much wisdom as possible.

it and wants to give out as much wisdom as possible.

- 1 — Where does your wisdom come from, and how do you ask God for more?
- 2 — When do you know that your wisdom is failing you, and you need some heaven-sent wisdom?
- 3 — What is the greatest gift God can give you?
- 4 — Have you ever made decisions only to have them end in chaos and disorder around you? What could you have done differently?
- 5 — When did you last submit to God and ask the Holy Spirit for more wisdom in your life?
- 6 — What is the greatest piece of wisdom you have ever been given? Where did it come from?
- 7 — How do you search the scriptures for wisdom?
- 8 — Was it news to you that James was wisdom literature and not just a letter?
- 9 — What can you do to help others search for God's wisdom?

WEEK 8

JAMES 4:1-12 (NLT)

Drawing Close to God

1 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? **2** You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. **3** And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

4 You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. **5** Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. **6** And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say,

“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”

7 So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8** Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. **9** Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. **10** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

Warning against Judging Others

11 Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you. **12** God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?



4 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? 2 You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. 3 And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

In this chapter, James is going to take on the infighting that is happening with the Christians of the day. He wants them to understand where their fighting comes from and he is forceful and deeply effective in his expression of displeasure at what is happening.

Before we jump into this, I want to ask you a question: Have you ever been involved in a church that was constantly fighting? Where did that fighting come from? Often, it is over opinions that cannot be reconciled. Occasionally, it is over theological differences, and often it comes from a crisis of character for those involved. It is too often that churches split because of issues that cannot seem to be resolved by those involved. James wants us to know that this division comes from somewhere.

He begins by asking the question, "What is causing the quarrels and fights among you?" And then, he answers the questions in a pretty profound, but also a pretty rough way for those who are listening. He wants them to know that they come from the evil desires at war within your heart. There is jealousy involved, there is violence, and there is a pretty serious willing-

ness to take whatever you can get. He uses words like "fight," and "wage war," and "kill" and "scheme." These words should not be taken lightly. When we begin to think of ourselves before others, we are willing to allow them to be seen as less than human, and therefore, we disregard their lives and their achievements in light of what we want.

I know this sounds harsh, but so does the author. There have been many attempts over the years to soften this language or to explain it away. However, to read it as it stands makes the most impact. While it might have been an idiom, using the word "kill," much like we would say "I'd kill for some chocolate right now." However, he reiterates that the people are willing to wage war to get what they want. For James, this seems to be unbecoming of Christians. And even when they do ask God for something, they don't do it in the correct spirit. Their intentions and motives are all wrong.

The last line: "You want only what will give you pleasure," is particularly poignant. Christians at the time were apparently confused as to their motivations. While they would sometimes ask for things, and good things, from God, their motives were all



wrong. They wanted comfort, they wanted status quo, and they wanted to make sure things were good for them, but it seems at the cost of someone else. This was a particularly serious issue in the church, and it remains an issue today. The idea that Christianity exists to maintain the status quo is perhaps one of the worst ideals that

has seeped into modern Christianity. Christ was always pushing back on the comfort, on the ease, and on the inability of the religious establishment of the day to call out what is wrong. Are we guilty of the same complacency? And if we are, what are we to do about it?

1 — Have you ever asked God for something, but it was from the wrong motivation?

2 — What was the outcome of that ask of God?

3 — How can we, as Christians, follow in Christ's footsteps and be those who are working toward a more equitable world?

4 You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. 5 Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. 6 And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble!"

Unfaithful Creatures! This is another way of saying what they were acting like. He uses the feminine, so you could say "adulteresses" if you wanted to. It is those who are unfaithful to their marriage vows. While not a literal situation here, the point is that these believers were beginning to, like the Israelites of old, find idols that they found much more interesting than God. In this case, it is a friendship with the WORLD.

Perhaps we should unpack that for a moment. The "friendship" idea could be translated as "love" for the world. To be friendly with the world means that you are aligning yourself with things of this world, and not the things of God. To be too committed to the ideals and ideologies of this world means that you have a relationship with God that is antagonistic, (enemy of God). Again, James sounds harsh here, but there is a theme that needs to be picked up. If we are too committed to things of this world, how can we be committed to the things of God?

He repeats the phrasing again in the second half of verse 4, so it must be something he wants us to understand. In that vein, I have another question for you: What do you lose when you lean on the things of

God? When compassion, mercy, justice, and healing are the highest principles for God's mission in the world, do you lose something when those become your highest principles as well? If you do, what is it that you are holding onto in this world? I don't ask this question lightly. If we are designing our lives of faith, and we want our lives to include the same things that are in the life of Christ and what he finds to be valuable, we may have to re-orient our lives in a particular way. The way we re-orient our lives might send us in a very different trajectory than we are currently on. How would that make you feel? Would you be willing to do it if God called you in a different direction?

In verse 5 he asks a question about Scripture and whether or not it has any meaning. That can be personalized to ask if it has meaning in your life! Are you someone who is open to learning new things, open to the Holy Spirit in your life changing directions? Even our ability to follow him comes from the spirit he has put inside of us. Again, what is your relationship with Scripture? Are they nice words that hold no sway in your life? Or are they authoritative above all other things in your life?



If these texts seem challenging to you, they were supposed to be. James was challenging the first century Christians to truly be people who believe in what has been revealed to them through the scriptures. Are we any less willing to heed this warning? Is our faith a faith based on the Bible, or is it a faith based on ideas and ideologies of this world that don't come from scripture? Do we know the difference? Are we willing to seek truth from scripture? These are big questions for a random weekday morning, but they are important for us to ask.

You see, if we build our foundation for our faith-lives on anything other than the revealed word of God, we are in danger of building something that is not based on Scripture, and will only approximate a biblical faith. I am deeply concerned that there are too many of us who call ourselves Christians, yet are not interested in being biblical; and if that is the case, we have some heart work to do.

1 — Where do you want your faith foundation to come from? Be specific, even finding texts that will help build that foundation.

2 — What can you do in order to make sure your faith is fully grounded in the Bible, as opposed to other ideologies?

3 — When was the last time you decided to re-evaluate from where you were getting your worldview?



6 And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. 7 So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

I am jumping back to verse 6 as we didn't really do it justice in yesterday's writing. Verse 6 is quoting from Proverbs 3:34. (You could say that wisdom literature in the New Testament loves to quote from wisdom literature in the Old Testament). The message is that pride is not something to work toward, yet grace is given to the humble. I don't think this text is talking so much about pride as we would perhaps define it, but much more closely related is the idea of arrogance, with humility being its opposite.

The arrogant are those who disregard God's claims and promises and rather show contempt for Him and despise others who might disagree with them. Arrogance is a pretty bad sin in scripture, as it hardens hearts and doesn't allow for people to be able hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in their lives. We have all probably been guilty of this at one point or another, but that doesn't mean we can't change and have God humble our hearts and minds. Unfortunately, humility is sometimes seen as something we don't want, rather than an attribute that God wants for His people. We do live in a world where the most arrogant and bombastic seem to rule the day. That is unfortunate, as scripture seeks to show us a better way. As Christians, we always have to look

for a better way.

Verses 7 and 8 give us the way forward. Humility, resistance, and coming close to God. When we ask what it means to humble ourselves before God, we answer like this; we allow God to be God in our lives, and not try to take that place ourselves. It is important that we don't think we have more information than God does, more strength than God does, and more wisdom than God does. When we do that, we are leaning into our own understanding, and that is not such a great way to do things. So we have to give ourselves to God, submit to His will and of course, He will help us resist the devil. As well, we need to wash our hands and purify our hearts.

Wash our hands? In this Covid-19 world, we understand the literal meaning of this, but the truth is, this means that we should repent. The previous phrase mentions that we should “draw close to God, and He will draw close to us.” This is great! It means that we have a God who is not worried about being intimate with His creations. He wants us to be close to him and He wants to be close to us.

But He does want us to repent, to wash our hands. Repentance connotes a change in direction and a recognition that



things should and need to change. Repentance is hard, but it is also freeing. When we decide we will not hold onto that which we bore around, we find our lives are a bit lighter than they were before. We find that we can and will change our ideas, our

world views, and our desires. Repentance is a way forward, not backward, and it allows for us to be able to move in a different direction without the baggage we had been carrying around. It is a new start, a new day, and a new beginning.

1 — When was the last time you repented, and not just of a behavior, but of a way of thinking?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2 — Why do you think it is so hard to repent?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 — What has God been working on in your heart that you need to confess and repent of?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

9 Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

We used to sing this campfire song as a round. The words were, "Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord (x2), and he will lift you up, higher and higher, and he will lift you up."

Do you remember that one? We'd get three or four groups singing this song in a round and it felt like the words were spiraling up to the heavens. However, I never really knew where it came from, or what the context was for this little ditty we would sing. Having seen verse 10, I finally realized where it came from. It came from a deep sense of repentance and from literally having tears about where we were before. The fact that verse 9 says that we should cry, have sorrow and deep grief, sadness, not laughter, and gloom instead of joy is pretty profound. Scripture doesn't say this kind of thing all the time.

These verses are almost calling for an "attack" on your own heart and hypocritical attitudes. "Attack" sounds strong, but change is not easy, and after repentance and submission there is a pretty significant mourning period for what we were. No one likes to go through this. NO ONE. And so, mostly, we just don't do it. To search our hearts, to root out the incorrect and detrimental beliefs that we live by is so painful that it does cause tears and sorrow

and grief. So it is much easier not to do any of this. It is a much easier life to simply go on believing what you already believe, never question or search your own heart, and never change your mind on anything. I think too many of us are comfortable to live here.

I will tell you the truth; in the last two months I have had to recognize where my worldview has been lacking, where I was part of a problem that has persisted for far too long in my own church and country. This realization has been hard, and there has been much grief and despair. And I know this can become a political discussion very quickly. I am not interested in that, as I am sharing my journey. As I have read, researched, learned, and allowed God to search and change my heart, I have experienced the sadness instead of laughter, and the gloom instead of joy. I don't believe I experience a change in values, as I have always valued diversity and not being racist. However, when a shift happens in your understanding of the world, there is some pain involved. Usually, a shift in worldview takes years, if not decades, but things have been changing quickly, and I don't just preach certain Bible verses, I believe them. Therefore, the heart work that I have had to do is hard, and I have had to repent and grieve. But honestly, it has



made me a better person, more compassionate and willing to listen, more available to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life and the lives of others. It has kept my heart

pliable. Having God search your heart is heartbreaking, but it is also healing. It is worth the risk and worth the journey.

1 — What has God been leading you to learn about yourself? Is it a hard truth?

2 — What do you do when you grieve? How do you handle it?

3 — How can you be sure that God is speaking to your heart? What does that sound/feel/work like?



11 Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you.

The theme of judging one another is a pretty popular theme in scripture. Actually, let me say that correctly; the theme of NOT judging one another is a pretty popular theme in Scripture. It often tells us not to judge others and that God is the only righteous judge, because God knows our hearts and is the only one who can make a real decision based on all the facts. James has switched from calling them adulterers and has started calling them brothers and sisters again. However, he is also making sure they are not continuing to sow strife in their communities by their willingness to judge others in the community.

It is a truth that when things are bad in our lives, we often try to distract ourselves from our own insecurities and mistakes by focusing on the shortcomings, or perceived shortcomings, of others. While this is a pretty human response, we should be working toward a better way of living and thinking about our lives. James wants them to stop judging as a matter of community. It is hard to live with people that you are judging or that are judging you. His point is that if we stop this, we will probably have less about which to be frustrated with one another.

Do you remember being a kid with your brothers or sisters or cousins, and when one of you would get caught for doing something, you would immediately blame someone else for what they were doing as well, so perhaps you could move some of the punishment away from yourself? We have all done this, and even in the story of the first parents, Adam and Eve, they do the same thing. To redirect judgment is pretty common, but we are called to live uncommon lives. And that means that we have to deal in the reality of the lives that we are living. The good news is that we were never expected to be perfect; rather, we are expected to be striving toward a holiness that comes from God and is granted by God as well.

The desires we have to deal with in our own hearts need to be where we begin any conversations. But I do want you to remember, when we are called not to judge others, we need to be graceful with ourselves as well. We don't really even know our own hearts as well as God does, and so we should allow God to be the one who judges us, gives us guidance through the Holy Spirit, and does the work of mending our broken hearts.



1 — Have you been judging others so as not to feel judged yourself? What can you do to stop that from happening?

2 — Do you think God judges harshly or with wisdom and grace?

3 — What can you do about changing the way you are judging others? What kind of exercises might be a good practice?



12 God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?

This last text of the week places the ball firmly in the court of God when it comes to judgment. He alone has the power to judge righteously and rightly. He alone has the power to know enough to be the judge. When we judge on so much we don't know, we will inevitably get things wrong, so we need to leave judgment up to God.

Have you ever been wrongly accused of something, or have you ever been judged for something that was not correct? The worst of these experiences show up in our legal system, and that can literally lead to someone losing their life for something they did not do. A good exposition on this is a movie I just watched called "Just Mercy." While this movie deals with many themes worth watching, the idea that someone is judged on faulty evidence is always frightening to me.

This is the case when we judge others, or when others judge us. It is so simple to think we know someone, what their motivations are, and what we think they are thinking. However, people are much more nuanced than this. People are very complex creatures, and we do not have the capacity to understand ourselves, let alone others. When God tells us not to judge, it is because we will ultimately get it wrong, and that can have horrible repercussions in our lives as well as those we are judging.

This is the problem with today's world. We have made a binary out of every conversation and opinion. You are either left or right, for this or against that. We have no nuance in today's dialogue. It is a shame, because we are always looking for what we have to disagree upon rather than starting the conversation from where we do agree. When we do this, which is a form of judgment, we stop the conversation and fall into the trap that the world loves: us against them.

But the truth is that it is "God for all of us." And if this is true, then we can be okay with God being the judge, as He knows the best way to not only judge us, but to save us as well. When we live beyond the binary, we are not sucked into the politics of the day. Honestly, I pray for us all that we can do this in our lives. If we can't, I have fear that the church will split, that people will buy into the fear-mongering that is being sold to every side of every argument, and we will make no progress in our understanding of people who do not think like us.

My prayer is that we learn to transcend.



1 — How can you find what you have in common with those you would normally come to judge?

2 — Is it possible to allow God to judge those you disagree with, as He will judge you?

3 — Who do you need to reach out and speak to, so that you can put these ideas into motion?



This week was not the easiest when it comes to the instruction given to us by James. He dealt with drawing closer to God, with repentance, with not being quarrelsome and with being humble. These are all themes that we could spend months on as Christians, and mostly, they are themes that we seek to incorporate into our lives as we grow and seek to know Christ more profoundly.

While it might be easy to be a Christian, it is difficult to be a Biblical Christian. If we say that the Bible is our measuring rod and authority, then we have to take it pretty seriously. What this means is that we are going to need to take these words at their face value and do some real soul-searching and begin to conform our behavior and thoughts to this kind of thinking. It will never be easy, but good things never are.

What is the hardest thing you have ever had to face? Was it something internal or external? Sometimes, the heart is the hardest thing to face. Without knowing that we have a God who can walk us through even the changing of our own heart, we would be easily lost. However, we do have that savior, we do have that guide through the Holy Spirit, and we do have a father who loves us dearly. Our job is to humble ourselves and let God be God. He is the one who can carry us through the hard times of change that we are often faced with in our lives.

To be open to change is a powerful way to live in this world. The beautiful thing about the gospel is that it will constantly push us to move ahead, to progress as human beings toward God. Our ultimate goal is that we are the best expressions of Jesus in the world, and the only way to get there is to follow God's guidance in order to continue to move toward His grace and compassion and mercy.

As designers, you know that some of the hardest steps are foundational. I was working at a church that was trying to build a new young adult chapel. We tore out the old chapel before we had a clear plan moving forward. When we began to survey the soil, we learned that we were going to have to sink pillars down almost 100 feet because of the dilution of the soil and the water in the soil. Liquefaction is what it was called. I had never heard about it before. But the only way to build over this kind of soil was to sink those pillars down so far as to go past the liquefaction and into more solid soil. The truth is that we sometimes need to plant our pillars of faith super deep in order for us to be very strong in our ability to stay with our values of following Jesus. It was incredibly expensive to do this. But at the end of the day, it made the building stronger.

Our journey of faith will be expensive, but it will be worth it.



- 1 — How has God been changing your heart?
- 2— Are you growing more toward Jesus each day?
- 3 — Is there something for which you need to repent?

WEEK 09

Day 57-63

Faith by Design | James 4:13-17

Roots and Recession: Arrogance of the Age

Foolish Presumptions (4:13)

Foolish Perspectives (4:14)

Forgotten Perspectives (4:14)

Forsaken Priorities (4:15-17)

Recession! Those words send chills up the businessman's back. In this paragraph of his letter, James is less interested in economic recession than in the spiritual recession plaguing many homes and hearts. Application Point: The roots of spiritual recession are the same as the roots of economic recession. According to James 4:13-17, the roots of recession are three-fold: foolish presumptions, forgotten perspectives, and forsaken priorities. When it comes to accepting all people in Christ?

WEEK 10

Day 64-70

Faith by Design | James 5:1-6

What does your money say?

How we get it (5:1,4,6)

How we guard it (5:1-3)

How we give it (5:5)

"Now listen, you rich people" (James 5:1). With these five words, James begins the next paragraph of his letter. There are basically two reactions to this paragraph. Those who are without money somehow feel they are more spiritual than those who have money. Well, they are not. On the other hand, those who have money somehow feel as if they have to be defensive. Well, they do not. These verses apply to everyone, for being "rich" is relative. Compared to the rest of the world, almost everyone reading this theological journal is very rich. No matter how much we have, someone else has more. No matter how little we have, someone else has less. The words in James 5:1-6 are for each of us.

Application Point: Our money talks. In fact, it says volumes about what we really think is important. How we deal with our money is a reflection of our spiritual health. Thus, James deals with how we get it, how we guard it, and how we give it.

WEEK 11

Day 71-77

Faith by Design | James 5:7-12

Apocalypse Now

Look Up. ... Be Calm (5:7)

Look In...Be Clean (5:8-9)

Look Back...Be Challenged. (5:10-11)

Look Forward...Be Consistent. (5:12)

“Be patient ...until the Lord’s coming” (James 5:7). Instead of being patient, there are many today who are presumptuous. There are always those who try to forecast or pinpoint the Lord’s parousia. Every major world event brings a new wave of preachers crying that the sky is falling. This is one reason preachers lose so much credibility in the eyes of the world. James 5:7-12 deals with what we are to do until the Lord’s coming. Application Point: Christian Patience.

WEEK 13

Day 85-91

Faith by Design | James 5:19-20

The Restoration

The possibility of our falling. (5:19)

The responsibility of our calling. (5:19-20)

God is in the restoration business too. The remarkable thing about him is that he uses us to help bring restoration to people who have been placed in the barn, beaten up by life’s circumstances,

WEEK 12

Day 78-84

Faith by Design | James 5:13-18

The Church in a Hurting World

The Situation (5:13-15)

The Solution (5:16)

The Secret (5:16-18)

It is amazing in the way that James’ letter is as relevant today as it was to a first-century world. He addresses all the major issues the church is facing now. In the previous paragraph he calls on the church to be in touch with a hurting world. We live in a world where people are hurting. We must go into the world with a message of hope. As the church touches a hurting world, James addresses the issue of its situation, its solution, and its secret. Application Point: Hope is always relevant

knocked around, and finally put over to the side.

Application Point: James closes his letter with the recurring theme of the second chance. He reminds us of the possibility of our falling and the responsibility of our calling.

WEEK 9

JAMES 4:13-17 (NLT)

Warning about Self-Confidence

13 Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” **14** How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone. **15** What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.” **16** Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil.

17 Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

13 Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.”

This week, we will be talking about “recessions.” No one likes the idea of a recession, and most of us have lived through one or two over the years. They are never fun, people lose much, and recessions are something that should concern you. However, James is not so much speaking of an economic recession; rather, he is addressing a recession that takes place in our spiritual lives and in our hearts. James moves to a conversational tone that he hasn’t taken before. He begins with “look here,” which makes it seem like he is jumping into a conversation with a friend with whom he can be pretty serious.

What James is talking about here is the arrogance of planning how things are going to go. There is this sense of “we will go, we will stay, we will do business, we will make a profit.” These things are what astute business people do to plan for the future. Why would this be any sort of problem for the author of this book? Why can’t we plan to do what is best for our life, family, and even business? It almost seems that James has some sort of bone to pick with someone planning to make money. Can this be true?

Probably not. The language that is being used is “going to a certain town. .

.” which is the language of the hypothetical. He is setting up a construct in order to make a broader point. It’s like saying “yada yada yada” in some respects. (The older of us here will get the Seinfeld reference.) So he is not speaking of anyone in particular, but to the hypothetical construct about how people sometimes plan without giving due to the Great Planner, who can help us make changes when things don’t necessarily go our way.

It would be easy to misinterpret these texts as James somehow being against a system of capitalism, or the ability to make profit. However, that is not necessarily the case, although some commentators have said this. Rather, James is pushing back on the “Myth of Competency.” What do I mean by the Myth of Competency? I mean the idea that we have created our own competency, and that God did not have a part in it. As believers, at the very base of our understanding is that God created us, in His image, and that image has imbued us with a few gifts and traits that help us become the people that we have become. As well, through the nurturing process of our skills and our competencies, God has been deeply involved, both

guiding the process and by enhancing our gifts. Without God, these things may well lay dormant in our hearts and minds and not help us move to our full potential.

James wants us to remember to think about the God who got us where we are in order to be even more prepared for what may lay ahead, as we can't really know what is coming next in our lives.

1— Have you ever succumbed to the Myth of Competency in a way that made you arrogant or prideful?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2— When have you made plans without consulting God? How did that go?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 — What could you give God credit for in your life today? (Perhaps this is a good spiritual exercise in order to help keep you humble.)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

14 How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone.

A few days ago, my sons and I went down to the beach to do some surfing. The waves were small, as they often are in the summer, but we just wanted to get wet, learn a little more, and have some fun. It is always good to get away from the heat of the Inland Empire and get down to the beach. As we drove over the 241 into Orange County, we were struck with the marine layer that often sits over the coastal cities in Southern California. My youngest asked, "Hey, what's that? Is it fog?" I told him it is the marine layer, and we had a nice discussion about it. He, as I, was struck by the fact that when we left the house it was almost 80 degrees (this was before 6 a.m.) and the weather was significantly different by the time we got to the beach.

In the same way, we cannot know what tomorrow will bring, but we can know who is in charge of tomorrow, just like he is in charge of today. However, this conversation comes at us like an accusation in some respects. The author is seriously asking this question: "How can you possibly know what tomorrow will be like tomorrow?" And these words are particularly poignant in the times we are

living in. Covid surges, civil unrest, partisan politics and general anxiety, how can we know what tomorrow holds for us? It seems there is a new report, a new regulation, or a new plan each and every day for how our lives are going to be from here on out. It is disconcerting, and sometimes even frightening.

However, we are to be a people who are not so worried about tomorrow, because we are spending our time focusing on our God and the mission He gives to us. When we begin to focus on Him, rather than on what the future holds, we begin to find that peace that passes understanding.

There is a sense that our lives are so temporal that they literally take a second seat to the work of God in the world. Our lives are the fog that fades, but the life of Christ is the everlasting Gospel that gives peace and hope to the world, especially in times of crisis and concern. How are we connecting with that grace, with that love and with those who might need a portion of that love today? You can be the light that the world needs right now, simply by being what God has called you to be: Open to His direction.

1— How do you see God working in the world right now?

2— Have you ever become hopeless? How did you get past it?

3 – What can you do to help someone see how God is still good and working in the world today?

15 What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.”

This phrase connects to verse 13 rather than verse 14. And what we have here is what has become known as the “Jacobean Condition.” It is not enough for us to just realize that we are transitory and temporal. We have to connect with the idea that we are actually completely dependent on God for all that we have and all that we are. Our contingency on God should inform our way of thinking. Rather than planning everything out, we need to prepare for whatever way God is going to be sending us.

This idea of preparing, rather than specifically planning allows for the movement of the Holy Spirit and the ability for us to remain agile and flexible, knowing that God sometimes allows us to navigate through twists and turns in our lives and the lives of people around us. I have often thought that life was a bit like a car ride. I can drive pretty well and get you there safe. God, however, when He is in the driver’s seat, may take you on a much more wild ride and yet you will get there just as safely as you would have if I were driving the car. God, in his infinite knowledge and love, will take a very different road, but one that will get you where He wants you to be, regardless of how treacherous the road

you are on really is.

By giving the power over to God, rather than holding it for ourselves, we allow God, who ultimately knows much more than we do, to be the one who takes charge of our lives. Our jobs, then, become deeply focused on listening for and hearing the direction that God gives us. When we become more and more used to hearing the voice and direction of God, then things begin to make more sense.

Now, I know this is hard. I struggle with knowing the voice of God in my life at times. I sometimes think that the plans I have made are the ones that God ordains. I am foolish enough to believe that I know how to do this work that God has given me. I plan, strategize, work hard to make sure things get done, and then something inevitably happens that slows the timelines, that changes the directions, or even drops the whole thing completely. This is incredibly frustrating.

However, every time this has happened, we have ended up in a much better spot than we were in when we began, and better than we could have planned for! I can tell you story after story of not getting what I wanted, only to be given that which I didn’t even know that I needed. Whenever this happens,

I have received more than I could have dreamed of. God is like that; He works in abundance.

So let us remind ourselves that our attitude needs to be “Thy will be done”

rather than “Make my plan work out.” With this in mind, we can move forward knowing that God is with us, and not against us.

1— Have you ever had your plans thwarted by God?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2— What was the end result?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 — If you had a money-back guarantee on your life, would you ask for your money back?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

16 Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil.

Arrogance. That is what James is speaking about in this text. He believes that it is arrogance that leads people to create plans that don't include God. In our arrogance, we often think that our answers are the best answers anyone can come up with. Arrogance has a tendency to lead us to boast about what we have achieved. Actually, it leads us to think that only our ideas, our worldview, or our understanding makes sense, and that others' are somehow less than ours. Unfortunately, the arrogance that leads to boasting is what directs us to evil.

All this seems pretty serious to say about someone who is just wanting to create a life for themselves and has a plan to execute so that the people around them might benefit from their labor. But again, let us not confuse this hypothetical construct with the point that is trying to be made. James is admonishing those who believe to make sure they are submitting their wills to God, and therefore, have the humility to change their plans according to His will in their lives. It is a call to make sure in their process of life they are leaning first and foremost into the will of God. There is a humility that it takes to believe that someone else might have a better plan. Even when we are

talking about God, it does take humility to start there rather than to begin with our own ideas and plans.

James has been working hard to help us understand that there are bigger issues at play than simply what we do, but how we think about what we do makes a big difference as well. While preparing for the future, it takes a great deal of humility to submit our preparations to God.

Have you ever thought you were heading in the right direction, then you prayed that God's will be done in your life, and then the situation changed? Every time this happens to me, I wonder if praying the Jacobean condition is a good idea. "Your will be done" is a dangerous prayer to pray. However, if you have prepared to move in whatever direction God is calling you to move, it might be less traumatic than it would otherwise be. You don't have to scrap your plans when you are prepared for what God has for you.

In your life, are you proud of your accomplishments or are you waiting to see what God is creating for you in the next iteration of your life? The harder of the two is to consult with God and wait for clear guidance on next steps. This is an exercise in humility, patience, and self-deprecation. But it is worth the wait!

1— Have you found yourself boasting about what you are about to do? Did those things work out well?

2— If boasting is evil, have you acted in evil ways by being too arrogant?

3 – How can humility become the first move you make each and every day?

17 Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

This is considered a sin of omission. Do you know what that is? It is when we know what we should do, but we decide not to do it. I remember when I was little not telling my parents about a vase I had broken when they were away. When they discovered the mistake, I was told that this was a sin of omission, and I should have simply told them what happened. Honestly, I thought calling what I did a “sin” was a little bit strong, but later I realized that this had become a bit of an idiom, as well as a biblical truth.

And in this text, the tone has changed from more personal to more formal. There are indications that this may have been a popular idiom of the time. The reason for James to use this kind of idiom may have to do with what is coming next (Ch. 5), or it could have to do with what came before. However, it feels as if it might be a little disconnected to the previous verses.

A better translation might be, “When we don’t do what is right (good), we have sinned.”

This is tough, because there have always been things that we have not done, that we probably should have done. In particular, I have felt this twinge of guilt when I pass someone on the freeway

with a blown-out tire. I have stopped on a few occasions to help, but more often I have passed them by. I have this bit of guilt, remembering the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, “the least of these...” I wonder if I have committed sins by driving past.

Perhaps that is a silly illustration of a sin of omission. I suppose that we have all felt this way at times. Sins of omission are sometimes accidental, but they are at times deliberate, as well. We have to gauge our hearts, our intentions, and our actions when it comes to these kinds of sins. The fact that James is throwing it in at the end of his thought is an interesting point. Perhaps he wanted to make a more general statement to those who were listening. This statement could be expanded to most of what he was speaking of previously. When we know what is right and we choose not to do it, we are in the same sort of danger we find ourselves in as when we move headlong into behavior and attitude that is not of God.

1— Have you ever found yourself guilty of knowingly not doing what was right?

2— Have you ever simply ignored the prompting of the Spirit when you knew it to be right?

3 — How can you direct your heart in a direction that doesn't allow for sins of omission?

17 Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

Now we have seen the whole pericope, it moves from concern over planning without taking into account what God wants, to the arrogance of boasting about our own plans, to the final step of omitting the good we should be doing with our lives. These are pretty serious concerns, and they are wrapped in the idea that one can make plans without God, but there is an arrogance to it.

In one of my earlier iterations of ministry, I was looking to strategize a new name and plan for the ministry to which I had been called. It was a ministry that had stalled out, and was looking for some infusion of excitement and a new way forward. I remember sitting in a staff meeting, the kind that are interminably long, and sketching on a piece of paper what this ministry might look like. There is nothing I love more than dreaming and brainstorming about a new ministry, so this was time well-spent. I came up with what I thought was a brilliant plan, as I often think my plans are! But I couldn't seem to get any traction from the people around me. The name was too obtuse, there was no ability to scale, the way I was trying to make a logo didn't make any sense, and no one thought it was as brilliant as I hoped it would be.

I stayed with my idea for much too long. I just kept trying to workshop it and find a way for other people to "get it."

A few weeks later, I was meeting with my leadership team, and they asked me if I had submitted the name and idea to God? I had to be honest that I had not done anything like that. I was too proud of the fact that I came up with it to give God any of the credit or any ability to vet my idea. It was a moment of humility for me, as I needed to be reminded that God is in control of all this, not me. So at that very moment we gave the whole process to God. While we weren't hit with any great ideas at that moment, over the next few weeks, with lots of prayer and collaboration, we came up with something that not only made sense, but had the ability to work into a system of ministry that is still used to this day.

The point is, I should have trusted God's process, not my own. Every time I fail to submit my plans to God, the result is less than stellar. And conversely, when I do give them to God, He has a way of blessing things to a much greater degree than I could have imagined. I don't know why I forget to give things to God first!

1— In your life, what have you submitted to God today?

2—Why do you think it is wise to submit your plans and preparation to God?

3 – If God changes your direction, will you obey?

The texts this week took us all over the place; however, there is a common thread. That common thread is that God is in charge and wants to be with us. We often forget to think about our faith lives as partnerships with God, rather than as us trying to make God happy with our results. If that were the case, we would have a seriously disappointed God!

But the truth is that we need to be willing to really practice what we preach when it comes to what we submit to God, and how we are planning on obeying the will of God in our lives. To say we are Christians means that we are taking on the mantle of God being the first and foremost priority in our lives, and that should mean something. That should mean that we take our cares, plans, preparations, and desires to Him first and foremost. While we should consider competency important, we don't consider it the measure of our actions; rather, it is the result of our partnership with God. His direction and will in our lives, working in concert with some great abilities that he has granted us, means that we can more directly see His work in our lives, and ultimately, the outcomes will be greater than we could have imagined.

Can you remember a time when you were willing to submit your plans

and preparations to God before they became realities? What was the outcome? While, of course, there is not a one-to-one outcome expected from these kinds of practices, the willingness to submit becomes the important point. It is sort of the same way that giving to God works. When we make the decision to give to God first, there is a peace in our hearts that works its way into other decisions that we make. I am not sure there is a miracle to the idea of tithe, but I do think that when we return the first fruits of our labor to God, there is a deep peace that allows our desires and wants to be quelled for a while. When this happens, we make better decisions. This is true, too, of giving your plans to God before they happen. Perhaps it just makes us more available to be flexible knowing that God's plan, while it may be a bit bumpier, is ultimately just as safe.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1** — What plans are you making right now? Delineate them.
- 2** — Have you submitted them to God?
- 3** — Have you heard any response?
- 4** — What form of response do you think that might take?
- 5** — How can you be sure it is the voice of God affirming or changing your plans?
- 6** — What if you don't hear anything or have any impressions of where God wants you to go with your preparations? Should you move ahead?
- 7** — Where do you ultimately want to be in relation to where God is in your life?
- 8** — What can you do to tangibly give God your preparations?
- 9** — Are there people around you that can help with this? People you trust?
- 10** — What are the hoped-for outcomes from your preparations? How do you think God might help you exceed them?

Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes.

WEEK 10

JAMES 5:1-6 (NLT)

Warning to the Rich

1 Look here, you rich people: Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you. **2** Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags. **3** Your gold and silver are corroded. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This corroded treasure you have hoarded will testify against you on the day of judgment. **4** For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the Lord of Heaven's Armies.

5 You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire. You have fattened yourselves for the day of slaughter. **6** You have condemned and killed innocent people,[a] who do not resist you.

1 Look here, you rich people: Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you.

Uh-Oh! Not a great way to start the week, especially if you are “rich people!” Don’t shoot the messenger; I didn’t write this. But he starts out with a phrase we have heard before, from James 4:13—“Look here!” That sounds like a rebuke. If I hear someone say “look here,” it means that we are probably not having the greatest of conversations. And James arrests the readers’ attention by using this phrase. There is a focus on the wealthy that perhaps he hasn’t had before, or perhaps he did but did not call them out with the same laser-like focus.

Now, there is some disagreement as to whom exactly James is speaking. Of course, it is the wealthy, but is it the wealthy Christians or the wealthy non-believers? While there is no consensus as to whether these are influential believers or non-believers, the rebuke is the same. In fact, when he uses the term “weep,” it is actually an onomatopoeia. That means, the word for weep (or wail) actually sounds like a weep or a wail. For example, the word “swish” is an onomatopoeia. It sounds like what it is describing! Can you come up with one of these that you use often in speech?

His warning sounds very Old Testament. Very often, the OT prophets would

call out the wealthy for their lack of care for the poor and the marginalized. We see this in Psalm 94 very profoundly. We also see it in almost every single one of the OT prophets. This is a pretty clearly enunciated critique found in scripture. As we know, we look at scripture as a whole to pick out themes and ideas, and taking care of the poor and marginalized is deeply ingrained into the psyche and theology of both the OT and the NT. If you are not sure about this, look into the book of Luke, as it is clear that the idea of advocacy for the poor and oppressed is deeply rooted in the ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ.

God’s concern for the poor is seen in so many of the Mosaic laws that give direction to the people of Israel as they live out a relationship with God. However, in Israel’s later history, these laws were often ignored, as they are today. The poor were often oppressed by the wealthy, the powerful, the officeholders and even the landholders. Because of this, the wealthy rarely get good coverage in the OT and the NT. While this is an indictment, it does not mean that wealth is inherently evil; rather, that wealth that leads to lack of care for the poor is a problem.

1— Do you consider yourself wealthy?

2— What do you do with the wealth that God has given you?

3 — Has this wealth come to you by oppressing others?

4 — What can you do with your wealth?

2 Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags.

This is shaping up to be a pretty tough week, that's for sure. James continues his diatribe against the wealthy by using a rapid-fire approach that we will look at today and tomorrow. He uses a shortened and abbreviated language here to bring home his point. He also uses items that would have been connected with the wealth.

We all like to have nice clothes, and we all like to show what we own. When I moved to Loma Linda, California, I was struck by the wealth that was on display. Now, it was not that most people in the community were trying to show people how wealthy they were. There was just a different level of income than I had been used to seeing in my previous pastorate. And I will tell you, it was a source of anxiety for me. To see young people with cars and items much nicer than I was afforded was quickly becoming a bothersome notion for me. I wasn't sure how to handle it. To be clear, this was an issue for me, not really for anyone else.

I came across a book that was super helpful for me to process some of my feelings. It was called "The Millionaire Next Door" and it was an epiphany for me. It related the difference between wealthy and hyper-consumerism. These

were concepts that I hadn't delineated in my head before. What I began to notice was that while there were many people with a great many things, there were far fewer truly wealthy people in the community. Hyper-consumerism was a bit of a scourge to many families. I found that some people I thought were truly wealthy actually had far fewer dollars in their savings accounts than I did.

While this was not something I mentioned to many people, I began to realize that wealth and having "things" were not the same thing. The accoutrements of having money makes others think you are wealthy, but it does not mean you absolutely are.

The reason I relay this to you is that you may be feeling bad that you don't have what others have, but what we see in the text here is that those trappings of wealth are fleeting, and actually rot away at a pace that is pretty surprising. The things we own often own us, and if we are not careful, we live our lives in pursuit of those things rather than in the pursuit of righteousness. While wealth and righteousness are not mutually exclusive, one can hurt the cause of the other, which is what James is speaking to in these texts.

1— If you had the kind of money you want, what would you do with it?

2— Do you think your pursuit of wealth has ever gotten in the way of your seeking righteousness?

3 — If money has become an idol to you, what can you do to have it play less of a role in your life? (Hint, the answer might not be make less, but give more...)

3 Your gold and silver are corroded. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This corroded treasure you have hoarded will testify against you on the day of judgment.

We are continuing the discussion of wealth and the upcoming judgment. And this text starts with something sort of strange. The author says that your “gold and silver are corroded.” Any idea what is strange here? Could it be that both gold and silver don’t corrode? Now, a few different explanations have been given as to why the author says this. One explanation is that he was from a lower class of people in society, and therefore didn’t understand the properties of gold and silver. Or perhaps it is more of a metaphor for what is happening in their hearts.

Regardless of the author’s understanding of these precious metals, the point is well made. When he continues that the wealth you were counting on will essentially cause you pain, he is letting us know that to put your faith in the wealth of the world is probably a fool’s errand. In fact, beyond a fool’s errand, it might be what is leading to your demise. These are hard words, and of course, they are leading us up to the day of judgment, to which any good OT prophet would call us.

So wealth will not only bring no lasting benefit, it will also stand as a witness against us in the coming day of judgment. How can it testify against us? While James does not make a clear distinction in this text, we can perhaps infer from other texts that to pursue and manage such wealth may have made us ignorant or indifferent to the needs of others. (Ezek.7:19; Matthew 6:19-20) The pursuit of wealth and its trappings, often, can mean our focus on how we help the most marginalized in society is not a true concern of ours.

If you have ever heard the phrase “follow the money,” you probably understand that where people place their money is also often where their focus is. If our focus is on acquisition, then we will make decisions that allow us to acquire that which we desire. If our focus is on power (a possession of sorts), then we will move our lives in a direction that will help us gain the power we desire, as well.

While we can do much with wealth and power, unfortunately it is often the story that when those things have been acquired, there is very little “giving

back” to be seen. Of course, this is not always the case. There are wonderful and powerful exceptions that can be seen, but this can be the case. Perhaps those who have forgotten to give back to the least of these is who James is speaking to in this indictment of a verse we have today.

1— Is the acquisition of wealth and power important to you?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2— What do you believe to be enough?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 – If you became powerful and wealthy, what would you do with it?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4 For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the Lord of Heaven's Armies.

Scripture actually has a great deal to say about the workers in the fields. In fact, there are regulations that are protecting their rights all over the OT. (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14,15) Even in the NT we see a parable of the workers in the vineyard that is set against this kind of backdrop. (Matthew 20:1-16) The reason for these regulations is that the very nature of humanity at times is willing to exploit the less fortunate in order to gain more wealth. Without these regulations, it would have been impossible for the day laborer to take care of his family.

Not much has changed over the years, has it? One difference is that these day laborers were paid at the end of each day, and in this way, there would be no question about whether they were compensated for their work. Without this immediate response from the landowner, it was much easier for the day laborer to be taken advantage of. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 says as much: "Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may

cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin."

The cry of the workers has made it to the ears of God, and in turn, to the ears of his armies. It seems that this was not only a rebuke, but a sort of threat. It is very much in the vein of the Deuteronomic text we have just read. James often sounds like an OT prophet, trying to right the wrongs of the people of Israel.

Have you ever been taken advantage of? What did that feel like? Were you helpless as it happened, or was there some recourse you had to recover what had been taken or held back from you? Often, when this happens, there seems to be little recourse for recovery of lost wages or of that which was taken from you. As much as you have disliked being on the receiving end of injustice, what must it be like for those around you with much less? It is easy for those of us with much to forget the plight of those with little. Subsistence living is difficult on a good day, and when those with little are taken advantage of, it can often mean disastrous results.

1— Is there a place in your life where you might be taking advantage of people?

2— What can you do to eradicate that situation in your life?

3 — Have you been treated unfairly? Is there any recompense that can be sought? How can you approach rectifying this situation?

5 You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire. You have fattened yourselves for the day of slaughter.

Did you know that Yale Medicine has said that the average weight gained during the Covid Quarantine is about 15 lbs? While this statistic varies across the country, we have all been afraid of the “Covid Curves,” as they are being called now. While weight gain has been a bit of a problem, it is not the problem that James is speaking of here. James, much like the prophets of the OT, decided to go after the root of the problem. There is a selfishness that has been years in the making by those who have seen fit to seek after a life of luxury, making sure that their needs were taken care of first. It is poignant that James says they do this, even on the day of slaughter.

What is the day of slaughter? That is something that is a bit of a quandary. There is some thinking that this just means any day in which the poor are taken advantage of. However, there is probably some eschatological thought behind this phrase. Many have connected it to the “day of the Lord” or day of judgment. It would seem this verse does have those “end times” connotations attached to it, to which we could say that there is no stopping these people who have been fattening themselves, even

when it seems like the end is coming.

These texts seem really tough, and truly they are. But James isn’t finished yet. It seems that he is speaking to those who can’t seem to find an anchor point in their faith, and they have been overwhelmed by the pursuit and trappings of the things of this world. This is something that we all probably deal with at some point in our lives. As we get older, and as we progress in our careers and our lives and even in our ability to make more money to match our growing competencies, it is easy to think that we might deserve more than we currently have. While this could be true, it is not always the best thing we can do for ourselves, and especially for our spiritual lives.

When you begin to believe that you deserve the very best that can be afforded, we begin to see our spending habits and our identities change. Let me give you an example that those of us from California probably understand very well: Our cars often give us a bit of an identity. Californians often spend a great deal of time in their cars, and so they have begun to define us a bit. The kind of car you drive often speaks to your status, your wealth, and even what you want people to think of you. However,

is this really true? Probably not, but we function this way.

While money is not condemned, the use of money to simply fulfill our needs and especially the willingness to

do this on the backs of those less fortunate than us is at center stage in the chapter.

1— Why is money such a big deal? Should it be?

2— When do you have enough money to satisfy your desires? Can you ever?

3 — What place does money and luxury hold in your life? Should it change?

6 You have condemned and killed innocent people, who do not resist you.

This is perhaps the most damning statement of all. Is James implying that they were killing innocent people for sport? No, no one seems to think that. Rather, this text could be seen in two different ways; 1) By not paying decent wages, the people were dying. 2) By using the justice system to their advantage. The use of the word “condemned,” a legal term, seems to indicate they were able to use a system that disadvantages the poor in a way that would benefit the wealthy, leading to deaths with the marginalized community.

Now, this may seem a lot like what is still happening in today’s world. It has often been said that the justice system works differently for those with a great deal of wealth than for those with nothing. While I am not here to argue this from a legal standpoint, it is probably worth one’s time to see if our systems benefit those with much rather than those with little. As Christians, are we okay with systems that advantage some people over others? I know this can be a volatile topic in today’s overly-politicized world, but asking the question should probably be a part of our practice.

What were the values of Jesus, and did he work for equality and equity for those who were marginalized? There are

many who think that he didn’t, and in fact, would say that if this was his point, he failed quite profoundly at bringing about justice. However, I think this is a deeply misguided thought and actually a pretty misguided theology to live by. It means that the words Jesus spoke in Luke 4: 14-28 were not serious, and that his mission was something less than what he stated by reading the Isaiah scroll. If this is the case, stories like the one about the Good Samaritan were simply an exercise in story-telling, rather than a directive to the people of God to be compassionate and merciful.

Should we, as individuals who follow Jesus, continue to look for ways in which to help the most marginalized in society? Or should we be okay with the way things are? Should we be working to make the phrase “on earth as in heaven” a reality, or should we understand that in this sinful world it can never happen, and therefore it is a fool’s errand to try? Didn’t Jesus say, “The poor will always be with us”? What do you think he meant by that phrase? (Matthew 26:6-13)

Well, that is only half a sentence, not to mention the fact that it is also a quote from Deuteronomy 15:11, which actually states: There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be

openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.” So the biblical response to poverty and the marginalized is openhandedness.

When one group can use a system to oppress another group, we need to take a hard look at those systems, see what is good about them, and see what needs to be changed. By the way, this is not a

quick fix. Systems take years to develop, and the change that is needed takes a while, too. But being cognizant of what needs to change is part of the process. Never close your eyes to abusive systems, and always work for their change. That is what Jesus did, and what he commanded us to do by simply calling us to love one another as a fulfillment of the law.

1— What systems are you a part of that might treat others poorly?

2—How can you help bring about change?

3 – Do you believe that we should work for an “on earth as it is in heaven” type of society?

Man, that was a tough week. We went from people not paying wages to their workers to ending with the idea that they had used the judicial system to actually kill other people. This is a hard week for those of us who have wealth. However, James is not speaking to everyone who is wealthy, but rather to those who have gained their wealth on the backs of others, by cheating, by using systems of oppression, and by not being honest in their dealings with their subordinates.

Have you ever worked for someone who was less than forthright, or someone who was a downright scoundrel when it came to the truth, to recompense, and to making sure their subordinates were treated fairly? We have all had bad bosses; that is nothing new. But there is something particularly bad when a boss or CEO has little or no care for his workers. It is hard to believe that any business can be successful with that kind of treatment of its employees, but we all know it can happen.

The takeaway from this week is clearly that some have become wealthy by taking advantage of others, and James finds no place for it in God's world. His language is prophetic in the vein of the OT prophets, calling out to those who decidedly did not protect

those most vulnerable among us. It is clear that James not only has no time for this, but his language is an indictment. Whether he is speaking to believers or to those who don't believe, there is a clear understanding laid forth that we are not to treat others unfairly, and we are especially not to profit from it. In fact, if we do, that mammon we might gain from this treatment is rusting already. No good will come from it.

As well, there is a notion that these people had done nothing with their lives but fulfill their desires and had become fat through all this misappropriation. In following their pursuits and desires they were unable to bring about the world that God wants to see. A world that reflects the values of heaven. A world where people will be paid an honest day's wage for an honest day's work, and where they don't have to worry about making ends meet because of the usury of others.

Does this world seem too utopic for the world we actually live in? I suppose it does. But aren't we supposed to aspire to something greater, to a different kind of living, to a different kind of economy, a different kind of world? If Christians are simply supposed to parrot the world that is already around us, then why are we working so hard to understand who God is in this world? God, and Jesus,

bring something wholly different into the world, a different worldview, a different understanding of mercy and compassion, and different desired outcomes for each and every person. Does it sound silly to say this? Perhaps, but isn't that what we believe?

Our call today is to make sure we don't become like those James mentions, fattening ourselves up, even on the day of slaughter.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1** — What does money mean to you?
- 2** — How do you manage that relationship?
- 3** — Have you ever found yourself seeking money over the kingdom of God? How did you change that?
- 4** — How have you interacted with those you find are using other people for gain?
- 5** — Do you stand in the way of abusive relationships to help create equity?
- 6** — Have you ever found yourself looking at your neighbor's things and wishing you had the income to get those things too?
- 7** — Have you ever done something unethical to forward your financial position? How can you make that right today?
- 8** — How can you help someone who hasn't done as well as you have today?
- 9** — What sort of system can you help create that works for justice, equity and compassion in your line of work?
- 10** — Do you believe what Jesus said in Luke 4 when he was rejected at Nazareth? Go back and read it and answer the question.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Notes

WEEK 11

JAMES 5:7-12 (NLT)

Patience and Endurance

7 Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen. **8** You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.

9 Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door!

10 For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. **11** We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about Job, a man of great endurance. You can see how the Lord was kind to him at the end, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy.

12 But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned.

1 Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen.

How many of us are farmers? I have a friend who is a farmer. He lives in Michigan and he is one of the most patient people I know. I suppose he has to be patient, as you can't microwave the process of development and growth of a planted seed. No matter how fast we want it to go, we simply can't thwart the process that God has set in place. As I watch my friend wait for the harvest, I have realized that his waiting is never passive. He is actively awaiting harvest, and that means he is constantly preparing for that day when the plants are ready, the crop is ripe, and it is time to start the work of harvest in earnest.

Here, James is speaking of the coming of the Lord, which was assumed to be quite quick in its coming. He has changed his tone from the previous texts, which were indictments of the rich, to be using the terms "brother and sisters" again. This means he is speaking to his primary audience, his congregation, friends, and family in Christ.

His admonishment is for them to wait patiently, like a farmer waits for his harvest. There is this phrase where he

points to the rains in the fall and in the spring. This acknowledges that God is still working, no matter the state of the crops. God is still in charge, providing, sustaining, and planning. When the harvest comes, the farmer, who has been eagerly waiting, is ready and prepared to bring in the fruit of his labor, and of his partnership with God, who brings the rain.

The admonition given to us by James is that we should be patient, but it doesn't say that we should be idle.

If you have ever been to Disneyland as a child, you know that there is nothing more painful than waiting for the day to come when you jump in the car with your parents and head down the various freeways it takes to get to Anaheim. Those days when we are anxiously awaiting the date to finally go are interminable, and as a child, they rank up there with torture. So what do your parents say? Get busy, go play, do homework, find something else to do in order to be able to make the time go faster.

The same is true for those of us who wait on the Lord's return. We can wait idly by, simply staring up at the sky,

or we can busy ourselves with the Mission Dei, or the mission of God, in order to help make the world a bit more like the heaven we all long for. Doing the work of the kingdom prepares us for

the kingdom more than anything else we could put our minds toward. So the question becomes, what is God asking you to do in the meantime?

1— What do you think God has specifically gifted you for in His work?

2— Have you ever waited a long time for a reward you were anticipating?

3 — How can you know what you should be doing in the interim between His resurrection and His second coming?

8 You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.

We, as Adventists, have heard phrases like this for our whole lives. We must be patient, because the time of the Lord's coming is near. In fact, sometimes it feels like we have heard these sentences so often they have lost their power. How can "soon" mean close to 2,000 years, and still it has not happened yet? Each generation thinks they are the ones who will see Jesus come in their lifetime, and then they are disappointed when they begin to wax and wane and realize that Jesus may not come before they see their own demise.

Okay, I'm sorry for being so dramatic and blunt. But doesn't it ever frustrate you that we have been saying this for years and yet Jesus hasn't come? I remember speaking to my grandmother and her telling me she never thought she would graduate from high school because she always assumed that Jesus would come before the end of her senior year. She's now been gone for over 20 years, and yet we still don't have an inkling of when Jesus will come.

James is speaking to a particular group of Christians here, and you must remember that they were being exploited and they were suffering, as well. We are certainly living in strange times,

but we need to have the same forbearance as these early Christians did in the face of suffering. Wars, rumors of wars, plagues, famines, disasters; Christians have lived through all of these things and have kept the faith and have had patience in waiting for the return of Christ. Why should we be any different? Is our suffering more than theirs? Is our inconvenience more than those who have died for the gospel? Perhaps our suffering, when compared to that of other generations of Christians, is really not so much.

So what do we do?

Perhaps we should hold on to the second part of the text, "Take Courage." A few years ago, I began to end my emails with this phrase: "Have courage, and be courageous." I'm not sure why I began to end my emails this way; it just made sense at the time. I don't always put that tagline at the end, but there are times I still do. James is encouraging those early Christians, and in turn us, to be hanging on for the timing of Christ, as it is still in the offing.

We can learn a few things from this text:

- 1** — That there is work that we have to do that takes courage.
- 2** — Jesus is still coming.

There has never been a question about his ultimate return. While people over the years have questioned timeline and processes, the question of his return has never been up for grabs. While we may feel like the wait is interminable, we can know that it is just an interim period in which we are living. The end will come, and our job is to hope and take courage in the promises of God. Does that make us a foolish people? Only if he never comes. And there are promises upon promises that Jesus

will ultimately return.

The promise I am most reminded of is this one, found in Romans 5: 3 We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. 4 And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. 5 And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

1— Have you ever been frustrated that Jesus hasn't returned yet?

2— What do you think he is waiting for?

3 — If you were the only one left who believed in his second coming, would you still stake your life on it?

9 Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door!

Have you ever been on a long road trip with your family? When you are waiting to get to a destination, you will definitely have to deal with grumbling about one another. It is in our natures to be a bit unhappy when we have to be patient. We just went on a 3,500 mile road trip to the Pacific Northwest. The time in the car was mostly uneventful, but I can tell you, there were moments of deep frustration and grumbling coming from the back seats. Even though our kids are in the early, middle and upper teens, there were moments that harkened back to when they were all still toddlers or preschoolers, and their communication was much the same.

We can, at times, become frustrated by the idea that we aren't able to really exercise our deep desire to be with Jesus in a more perfect way, and so we may take up our time finding reasons to grumble about one another.

What is interesting in this text is that James takes on the idea of grumbling as the idea that we are judging one another. By complaining and grumbling, we are actually creating a state of judgment in our relationships. James reminds us that if we are doing this, then we will be judged as well, and

it seems in Scripture that we never want to be judged for being judgmental. In so many of the different texts that relate to judging, we are told not to, lest we will be judged. (Matthew 7:1-5, Luke 6:37-42; James 4:11-12; Romans 2:1-3; Romans 14:1-13—to name a few)

So what do we do in the interim? How are we to occupy our time when we are waiting for Christ's return? Here are a few ideas:

1 — Get involved in ministries of mercy and compassion. See what you can do to help our world become a better and more loving and caring place.

2 — Study scripture in new ways and with new people. Perhaps your study of scripture needs some work; perhaps it is time to take it a bit more seriously. I find that the more I learn from scripture, the more humble I become, as I learn how much I don't really know.

3 — Tell someone about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are always admonished to go and tell the world about who Jesus is. (Matthew 28:19-20) Remember, this is not the great commission, but rather the great Co-Mission. It is God partnering with us to tell the world about Jesus.

1— Have you ever found yourself grumbling about someone and realized that it was actually you judging them?

2— What can you do to keep yourself busy so as not to focus on the foibles of others?

3 — How does it change your attitude, knowing that the Judge is standing at the door?

10 For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

When was the last time you needed an example of patience in suffering? This phrasing may seem strange, but it is important. Prophets were not people who told the future, as we sometimes think. Prophets primarily are spokesmen for God and interpreters of God's will. They were also seen as someone who speaks God's message to the people. In doing so, many of the prophets experienced suffering and hardship. (See Hosea for a great example of suffering for God's word).

Prophets have always fascinated me. Not because they were so connected with God, while that was amazing, but rather, because they seemed to be pretty interesting people. From Elijah to Elisha, to Hosea, even to Jonah, we see a cast of characters that were not exactly normal, but were completely committed to making sure that others knew the word that was coming from God.

So let me ask you this question:

How undignified would you become for God? (2nd Samuel 6:22). Seriously, how many strange and unexpected things would you do if God asked you to do those things? What would you suffer? What would you endure?

What sort of hardship and uncomfortable situation would you be willing to suffer through in order to bring a word from God to someone? Is God even asking you to do anything like this?

I know that the point of this text is to learn patience from the prophets, but I believe we can also learn many other things from the prophets. We can learn not to worry too much about what other people think of us. We can learn to really hear the word of God and recognize His voice in our lives. We can learn to spend our time in the presence of God first, and then go find those who would listen to the word that God gives us. There is a great deal we can learn from the prophets.

When we think of the prophets as primarily fortune tellers, we actually have a tendency to miss the most important part of the things they did, that is, live a life that was fully committed to God in every way possible. From the way they dressed, to what they ate, to the way they depended on God in times of trouble and strife, all of these things teach us what it means to be a follower of God. While most of us probably don't feel that we were created to be that kind of mouthpiece for God, we can all be committed to spending our

time in the interim between resurrection and the second coming to give our all to

His cause, to share His words, and to be committed to compassion and mercy for all.

1— Have you ever thought of yourself as a prophet?

2— What role have prophets played in your life?

3 — Is there such a thing as a modern-day prophet? Who would that be in your life?

11 We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about Job, a man of great endurance. You can see how the Lord was kind to him at the end, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy.

James begins this text in a very traditional way by honoring those who have endured the suffering of which he speaks. He then uses the example of Job as someone the ancient Christians should look to in order to see an example of great patience. If you remember the story of Job, then you remember that Job lost pretty much everything, but in the end, it was restored to him. While there are many different ideas about the book of Job and its historicity, we can certainly learn a powerful lesson of what it means to have patience in the midst of suffering.

What has always taken me aback about Job is that even though he finally breaks down and complains to God (and is met with a pretty serious rebuke from God), Job hangs in there and still believes that God is good. Job is a good man, and goes through some terrible times, but is able to keep his faith and his hope that God is still good in the midst of all the turmoil he sees in his life. In the end, things are restored to him in abundance, but the sting of the struggle is still there in his life.

James seems to be making the case that no matter how hard things

get, there is still the belief that God is really good and really full of compassion and mercy for his children. With this in mind, there seems to be the implication that we can trust in the promises and in the character of God, no matter what.

So what are you going through that seems worse than anything you have gone through before? Can you keep your faith in God?

We are living in the strangest of times. With the turmoil over racial injustice, the Coronavirus, and even the social distancing and regulations, it seems as if we are living a surreal life that we could not have imagined. What does this do to our faith? Does it make us lean into faith as Job did, or do we falter as his friends did in the narrative we are given? In the darkest of times, is this when your faith grows or shrinks? Are things hopeless for you, or do you believe that God may just be doing something new through this time?

These are tough questions, but tough times lead to tough questions. Faith is rarely built in comfort, but it is often grown and developed in the patience of waiting through difficulty.

1— How is what is happening in the world affecting your faith?

2— Does Job give you a sense of patience and strength? Perhaps it is time to read it again.

3 — How can we give great honor to those who are suffering and yet enduring in their faith everyday?

12 But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned.

So this is a strange way to end the week. Why would James make a point about oaths at the end of a diatribe on patience and faith? Some scholars have found it hard to connect this last text in this section to the previous texts we have studied. However, the beginning phrase “but most of all,” means that even in considering everything that was said before, this is an important saying. However, it is okay to think of this as the beginning of a new thought as well. James is beginning to bring his letter to a close, and he has a few things he wants to say, that we will study next week.

But the reason he wants us not to make oaths, or even contracts, as some commentators say, is that we are to be people of integrity. We are to be the ones for whom our words are trusted, and our truth is unassailable. We are not always those people, but we should be.

This has an implication for our witness. If you are someone who likes to fudge the numbers, or doesn't have too much problem with hyperbole, the people around you begin to take your word less seriously. In fact, they begin to become a bit wary of your stories. If you

always have to one-up someone, and you are pretty loose with the truth, your witness for Christ will be taken with a big ole grain of salt.

Can you just continue to under-sell, rather than oversell? Is it possible for you to not be the biggest storyteller there is? Can you be less of the life of the party, and rather, be someone who is deeply pleasant and truthful to talk to?

Jesus has given us so much, we don't have to “gild the Lilly” as they say. All we have to do is tell the truth about God in our lives. Let our yes be yes and our no be no.

1 — Have you ever increased the story to be better for your audience?

2 — Can people trust your words?

3 — Can you put in place something that will remind you to “talk less, and say more?”

Today, we need to focus on patience and endurance. It is easy to have faith when things are normal, but it is much harder when things are difficult and when trials and tribulations abound around us. So let me ask you this, what gives you a sense of peace and patience in the midst of a storm? What are the things that can calm your heart and give you a steadfastness that will defy any winds and rain that may be thrown out at you? Today, Hurricane Hanna has made landfall this week in Texas, and they understand what it means to be in the time of a storm. With Coronavirus surges and now a hurricane, things are difficult in that part of the US. Hurricanes, earthquakes (for us in CA) and more can't shake the faith of the people of God. At least it shouldn't!

In this text, James seems to be speaking of the simplistic way that Christians are supposed to live. Simply, by having our yeses be "yes" and our

noes be "no." There is something beautiful in living a simple life. Sometimes it seems we complicate our lives and our transactions, when the word of a Christian should be his or her bond. We can be people of the truth, proclaiming the truth of Christ, while at the same being people who proclaim a simple truth in our own lives, that we will be people of integrity, not afraid to live behind our words. Sometimes, it makes sense to keep things simple.

Our lives are to be full of patience, fortitude, grace, compassion and mercy. We are to be prophets in the way we give a word of God to the world, and in how we recognize the voice of God in our lives. All of this we do in the interim between the resurrection of Jesus and his return to the earth. While it is not on our timeline, it is still something that we look forward to everyday. And one day, we will not be disappointed because our hope will be concluded in his coming.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1** — How are you working to become more patient?
- 2** — Are there any practices you have put into place in your life?
- 3** — Is your yes a “yes” and your no a “no”? How can you make that happen in your life today?
- 4** — Who do you look up to in the faith? James gave us examples in the prophets and in Job, who are your examples?
- 5** — Can you find any good in the suffering you have had to do?
- 6** — Who is the greatest person of faith you admire in today’s world?
- 7** — How can you give other people an example of patience and faith?
- 8** — Are you willing to become even more undignified for Jesus? What might that look like?
- 9** — Who is your favorite prophet and why?
- 10** — Read the story of Job again today. What have you learned?

WEEK 12

JAMES 5:13-18 (NLT)

The Power of Prayer

13 Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. **14** Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. **15** Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. **17** Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! **18** Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.

13 Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises.

James finishes this chapter with a call to prayer. It is a major theme that will play out this week. Prayer is necessary for the Christian for a great many reasons.

1 — Prayer is important because it is a form of obedience. We are called to pray; God designed prayer for us. It is truly built into our very ability to exist. We were created in His image, and we are to behave in ways that were modeled by Christ, who was in constant prayer. Here are some examples. “Before day-break the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray” (Mark 1:35). “My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you” (John 17:1). “They all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary, the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus” (Acts 1:14). “All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). “Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word” (Acts 6:4).

2 — Prayer is an act of service. We often pray for others, not just ourselves. Intercessory prayer does not change God’s mind, but it reminds us as to what we

are to focus on and how we can help. Philippians 2:3-4 is such a great example of this. “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interest of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

3 — Prayer is a solution. It is an avenue to resolution, the path to finding an answer to a problem, and is deeply important to the design process we have been talking about. “Ask me and I will tell you remarkable secrets you do not know about things to come” (Jeremiah 33:3). “Then, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land. My eyes will be open and my ears attentive to every prayer made in this place” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

4 — Prayer is communicating with God. Since the beginning of time God has been talking to us. We’re just not always in a place or state where we can hear Him. Adam and Eve enjoyed chats with Father, as have prophets, and of course,

Jesus spent much time with Him. Some examples: “Then God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Genesis 1:28). “Then the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’” (Genesis 3:9). “‘Who told you that you were naked?’ the Lord God asked. ‘Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?’” (Genesis 3:11). “Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them” (Exodus 25:8). “I am the one who brought them

out of the land of Egypt so that I could live among them” (Exodus 29:46).

There are many reasons to pray, both from our pain and our joy. Never stop communicating with God. And for sure, when our joy overflows, it sounds a great deal like praise and worship!

The thing that I miss the most about not gathering is our worship time together. To hear the people of God singing praises is a special joy in my life. I miss that greatly.

1— When do you feel is the best time to pray?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2— In crisis, do you find yourself praying more or less?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 —How can you praise God in song today?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8 You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.

After mentioning the first two reasons to pray--suffering and happiness--he mentions a third circumstance needing prayer, namely sickness. Sickness is seen as a different kind of suffering or hardship, one that has an attachment to the prayers prayed by the elders. A few things are happening here.

1 — The elders are a group of people in the church who can be called upon to come and deliver prayer and healing. They are delineated and clearly defined. They have “status” in the church, not for political gain, but as wisdom and prayer for the larger church community.

2 — Their function in this instance is to anoint and to pray “over” the sick.

Often, what we see as elders in the church is more an administrative function, but the ability to pray over those in the church is very important for this group as well. When I was first in ministry, our elders would meet in between the study time and church every single week. They would pray over the pastors who were preaching, and they would handle short administrative issues that the pastoral staff would bring to them. However, their primary function, each week, was to pray over the pastors for wisdom and to pray over church members who were

dealing with tough situations and who were hurting or in need of healing. It was a beautiful time each week, and I came to really appreciate those short, usually ten-minute meetings.

While that has not been incorporated in our current situation, as we usually don't have time between services, and the three services offered at Redlands preclude everyone being in the same place at the same time, our Leadership team prays earnestly, and our prayer team is available for prayer at any time (email; prayer@crosswalkvillage.com). We take prayer seriously, and while we don't always know exactly how it works, we know that God has asked us to communicate with Him, to pray for others, and to anoint the sick when appropriate.

My first anointing was quite an experience. An older colleague in an organization I was working in had taken ill, and he was well into his 90's. As the illness progressed, he asked that I and another pastoral colleague come and anoint him. I had never done this before, so I felt I was along for the ride. My colleague, being much older and experienced than I was, took the lead. When it came time to anoint our dear friend and mentor, my colleague took out a bottle of oil, and not a small one. I had always heard we were

to put a small bit in our hand and put in on the forehead of the one being anointed. Well, he poured quite a bit of oil into his hand, it was running over, and then put it all over the head of our friend. I was a bit in shock, but we fulfilled our purpose, and our friend died a few days later, however, with much more peace than he had before we came and anointed him.

I tell you this to remind you that it is not always the process that is import-

ant; it is the meaning imbued into the tradition. While I found it a bit strange, the amount of oil used, I remember the prayer my colleague prayed, and it was amazing. When you are asked to pray over someone for healing or for peace (which is a beautiful form of healing), do it however it works best for you and for them. It is the connection with God that we seek!

1— Have you ever anointed someone? Have you been anointed?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2— What can you do to pray for someone today?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 — Have you ever needed prayer for healing?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

15 Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

This is quite a promise. There are a few things we need to discuss. When it comes to healing prayer in scripture, and in this text in particular, it seems that we have been promised healing without real qualifications. However, sometimes when we talk about a prayer of faith, we have a tendency to either think it won't work, which undermines the faith, or we have a tendency to blame the person for not having enough faith, which often exacerbates a difficult situation. Does this mean that if healing doesn't happen, we don't have faith, or those that pray the prayers for us don't have enough faith? Both of these ideas can be unbiblical.

The first rule of thumb in prayer is simply this: "Thy will be done." It is a prayer that Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, and a prayer that is deeply appropriate for us to pray, every time we pray. That does not mean that if healing doesn't happen, that God did not want it to happen. It means that we submit, as contingent creatures, to the will and the timing and the power of God. It is easy to find ourselves in a situation that becomes manipulative to our faith if we don't understand this.

Prayer for healing will always be a situation fraught with misunderstanding, disappointments, and frustrations. While some find this kind of theology simple, it truly is not. But by keeping in mind the previous concept, that it is God's will and His timing and power that we submit to, we can keep our wits about us.

One way that this text has been interpreted is that it is a prayer for salvation, rather than physical healing, which doesn't seem to be the case here. While resurrection is expected at the end of time, this text seems to be specific to the healing of the person physically as well as spiritually, which we see in the final phrase about forgiveness.

So what do you do when you pray for healing and yet it does not come to you? Does it mean that you lack faith or that those praying for you lack faith? By no means! It means that there are other things at play in the world, and we don't always get to know those things. To submit to God's will is to have faith in the midst of the suffering, not just when things go the way we want them to!

However, does this mean that God WANTS us to be sick and to suffer, especially seen if we are not healed? Again,

by no means is this the case! Rather, we have to be willing to allow God to be God and make the kind of moves He needs to make to work toward His ends. When we submit to this, outcomes become

God's department, and our department becomes the continuous prayers, seeking His will and wisdom and peace. It is not always the most comfortable, but it is the most obedient.

1— Have you ever prayed for healing, or had someone pray over you? What was the result?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2— Were you frustrated with the outcome?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 — What did it do to your faith in God?

.....

.....

.....

.....

4 — How can you be at peace with the answers that God gives to your prayers? What part does trust play in your faith life?

.....

.....

.....

.....

16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

This is an interesting text for today. There is this idea of confession and that confession should happen in community. However, is this text saying that we should get in front of each other in church and commit our sins to a public hearing? I would say no, that is probably not what we are talking about. The Ecclesia, or the gather, the church, is to be a place of confession, but is public confession what we are talking about?

I think that one of the greatest aspects of church is that it is where you can find some pretty amazing friendships. Friendships among believers can be incredibly deep, honest, accountable and relatable. But within each congregation there are friendships that are deeper with certain people than with everyone. Perhaps in a small church this is less the case; however, in a large church, there are congregations within congregations, deep friendships among wider friendships.

I think this text is best understood in our context that we should have people to which we can confess without the fear of judgment and without the fear of gossip. This is why we are always encouraging people to come together in

smaller groups in order to build those accountable relationships that allow for some confession in safe and secure places. If you have some of these relationships in your life already, then those people are part of your Ecclesia, or your community/congregation.

Now, the last part of the text seems to assume that if you are righteous, there will be great power and wonderful results. This is a great promise. Remember, the righteousness that we have comes from God, and it originates in God, as well. We are subject to His grace and His mercy all the time. So our prayers, given in earnest, without selfishness or wish for personal gain, become the amazing conduits for the power, the peace, and the grace of God. Remember, we are not praying so that we can manipulate God or the situations we find ourselves in. We pray for peace, for wisdom, for strength, for courage, and for a sense of God's presence in our lives. Those are powerful things.

When we think of prayer as a "power" that we yield, we are missing the point. Prayer is not a tool to manipulate God or any sort of power; rather it is a conduit for a better and more profound relationship with God.

1— How do you view prayer in your life?

2— Does prayer help you in your everyday life?

3 — How often do you pray? What does it mean to pray without ceasing?

17 Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years!

Again, James goes to the use of examples to show the power of prayer. He uses Elijah, and the first phrase is interesting. It says that Elijah was “as human as we are.” What in the world does that mean? It means that he had the same limitations as us, or that he had the same feelings that we have, or similar suffering as we do. The same word is used in Acts 14:15, when Paul and Barnabas told the crowds, “Don’t think of us as Gods.” In other words, we are just like you, but we have the gospel.

So if Elijah, one of the greatest prophets, is just like us, what does that mean for the way we interact with God not only in prayer, but in everything? It means that we have access to the same kind of power, the same kind of grace and the same kind of wisdom that Elijah, and even Jesus had. That same power that was present in Elijah’s life is present in our lives today.

Why was he so connected to that power? Perhaps it was because he decided to focus on that power; he decided to focus on the relationship that he had with God above all else. Perhaps it was because he was willing to listen to God’s voice in ways that we don’t always decide to listen. There are a myriad of

things that Elijah did that we don’t. So how do we become more like Elijah?

1 — Listen. There is a famous line from Aaron Burr in the musical “Hamilton.” Burr tells Hamilton and his friends to “Talk less, smile more. . .” He says this in the context of not wanting people to know where he stands all the time. Hamilton has some obvious issues with this. But in our context, listening to God is sometimes the greatest way that we can pray. Getting to know the voice of the Father is incredibly important in our faith lives. We have left it to later on in the conversation because James did this, as well. However, listening cannot be underestimated in your faith journey.

2 — Go. When God calls, GO! Be ready, in season and out of season, to say the words that God gives you. Remember, when the drought happened because of the God hearing the prayers of Elijah, he did not have the greatest life. He was fed by birds during that time! Are we willing to follow through on the calling that God has put on our lives? Remember, you won’t hear His call unless you listen first.

3 — Prepare. Prepare for whatever God will call you to. Exercising preparation means that you are prepared to take the direction of God seriously, and go where He calls you to go.

1— Do you feel like those heroes in scripture were “like you”?

2— What does it mean to “pray earnestly”?

3 – How can you learn to listen like Elijah?

18 Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.

This shouldn't be taken as if Elijah didn't pray for the last 3.5 years. Truly, he must have if God was the one sustaining him through this time. However, it was a focused prayer that was tied to the first prayer. Our prayers are to be continuous and are to be deeply committed to finding the will of God in our lives. Elijah would have most certainly prayed prayers that kept him in contact with God all throughout the three and a half years.

How often do you pray? Maybe this sounds like a silly question, but it speaks to how you think of prayer. Is it something you visit, a conversation you come to and go out from? Or is prayer a constant conversation with God, one that you rarely "go out of" but are constantly "staying in"?

I have a tendency to look at prayer as the one conversation that never ends, never loses focus, never forgets prior conversations, and is a constant companion in my life. I am not a "prayer warrior," as some are called. I am more of a "prayer continuer. . ." (which might not be a word, sorry). I find myself constantly in the midst of prayer without any interruption other than the regular interruptions of life, but still, prayer is there constantly.

Even when I find myself sinning, prayer is my constant companion. Does this seem strange? It is in those moments when I find my prayer life most acute and important. Does prayer keep me from sin? Often! But does it solve every problem? No. However, it brings into focus the constant companionship I have with God. I am blessed to have the privilege of having a God who is my "ride or die," as the kids say! Without my constant connection to God, I feel a bit like a lost child, trying to find his parents.

Without the deep connection that prayer allows us, we are disconnected from God. Have you ever been in a place where your cell phone doesn't work? It is disconcerting to think that if something happened to you, you would be all alone. This is how I feel when I am not in constant conversation with God. I feel like I am in the middle of nowhere looking for a bar or two on my phone. When we come back into a service area, there is a sense of relief. Well, with prayer, you are never out of service.

1 — How can you have a constant conversation with God? Will that seem too invasive?

2 — What is the thing you hate praying about? Do you think God is bothered by it?

3 — What keeps you from praying?

12 But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned.

As we are coming close to the end of this series, we have to take a look at how we design our lives of faith. While James left the idea of prayer until the very end, mostly, it is something that we cannot ignore. We need to make sure that we have a robust prayer life, and I have suggested that this means we pray without ceasing, meaning we are in a constant conversation with God. Without this connection, we often feel as if we are lost in the midst of a storm. The good news is that we are never disconnected from God.

James again used examples from the prophets, namely Elijah, so that we could see that not only were prophets much like us, but the connection with God helped them to do amazing things. We can also do amazing things when our connection with God is strong and constant. It also helps us to understand the sound of God's voice in our lives. Without the conversation, how are we to know when God speaks into our lives?

We have dealt with healing, anointing, and with the function of the elders of the church. Each one of these issues

is worthy of a week's worth of study, but we don't have time right now. The truth is that James has ended his letter by emphasizing something that just might take them through their hardships and focus them on God, rather than themselves. This is something that prayer does profoundly. It allows us to listen to the voice of God rather than those internal voices that are constantly struggling for attention in our heads and our hearts, those voices that often are not always positive, and often are pushing us toward negative feelings about ourselves and others.

How does prayer factor into the design of our faith lives? It is ubiquitous. What I mean by that is it is pervasive, and it layers itself above, beneath, and in between anything else. Our first and last instinct should be the connection that prayer gives us with God. As we design our faith lives, prayer does not just have a place; rather, it begins with prayer, ends with prayer and is saturated by prayer through the whole of the experience. Without it, we will never get to where we want to go, and progression toward the goal will be difficult, as well.

Here are some questions for this week: :

- 1** — How is your designed faith progressing?
- 2** — Have you written end-goals prayerfully?
- 3** — What choices do you need to make in order to make these things happen?
- 4** — How can you walk back any mistakes you have made in the prototyping process?
- 5** — Have you used empathy that comes from God to help you understand where you want to be in your faith life?
- 6** — How does the design of your faith life affect others?
- 7** — Where is prayer involved? How can you make it more significant in your life?
- 8** — How often do you feel connected to God?
- 9** — How do you listen when you pray? Are you impatient?
- 10** — Do you believe those early prophets were much like you? Why or why not?

Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes.

WEEK 13

JAMES 5:13-18 (NLT)

Restore Wandering Believers

19 My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, **20** you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

Why are we talking about the fall today? For a few reasons; 1) We are almost to the end of the 5th chapter of James, and therefore at the end of the series. 2) There is an assumption that someone can fall or wander away from the truth of the gospel. So for these reasons, we are going to take a look at the fall story found in Genesis 3, at least in a general way, so that we can take a look at how people can fall away from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the narrative found in Genesis 3, we see Adam and Eve taking the apple after having a conversation with the snake. The snake uses the falsehood that God doesn't want Adam and Eve to be more like him. This is patently false, when we take a look at Genesis 1:26-28 where God has a conversation with himself (the trinity) and says "let us make man in our likeness. . ." God has always wanted us to be "like" him, that is why he made us in his image.

However, since the beginning of time we have been susceptible to lies that come from Satan that try to get us off track of the gospel. Lies about who we are, lies about who God is, and lies about how God cares about us. Sometimes it is difficult to sort through all of these lies to find out what is true. There is so much in this world that is grappling

for our attention, and much of it has lies built in as to what God is really about. If you look at most television shows that depict God, they are often skewed in a direction that most Christians wouldn't recognize. How do we find out who God is in the midst of such confusion?

One thing we can do is surround ourselves by those who are seeking God. This is what James will suggest, but from the communities perspective. He will tell those of us in the community to go and find someone who has wandered away from the truth and bring them back. This is the commitment that we make to one another while we are in community together. It is, of course, not so easy when communities become large, and people don't necessarily know one another. This is why we must create micro-communities via small groups to stay close to those God has placed in our paths. We can't expect a church with 2000 in attendance to function in the same way a small group functions.

So, as we look at these final verses, I want you to think about who is in your immediate community and how you are holding one another together in the truth of Jesus Christ.

1— Who is your small group? (even if it is not formal, who do you hang out with that you assume you are spiritually accountable to?)

2— How can you cultivate a culture of accountability amongst your immediate peers?

3 —Would you allow yourself to be accountable to someone? If so, what are the requirements of that in the relationship?

19 My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, 20 you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

These 2 verses are the way that James has decided to end this missive he has been using to guide the early church. And there is a great deal of compassion and mercy toward those who may have moved away from the faith. This is important to note that he did not see them as people who were lost forever, rather, he saw them as people who needed to be loved back into the community in order that they might experience the grace and love of Jesus once again.

Have you ever left the faith? Do you know of someone who has left the faith at any point? Were you sought after once you left? Often, there are stories of people who leave and are never spoken to again by those who have stayed. I had a very interesting conversation with a friend of mine who decided to de-convert from his faith upbringing. He mentioned to me that I was the only one who still spoke to him about faith. (I am not telling you this to get kudos, I simply kept my relationship the same with him, and faith would always come up). He asked my why I thought his former church family didn't reach out to him. My first question

was: "do you want them to?" To which he replied; "not to reconvert me. . ." I think that is the problem. We break relationships when it feels like they will not come back to faith anymore.

Perhaps what we should be doing is staying in relationship with those who have left, hoping and praying and believing that God will open their hearts, and we will be available with the right words when we are called to give them. I have not tried to reconvert my friend, but we are still on great terms and if the time ever comes to fruition that he wants to engage this conversation, I am hopeful he will come to me.

At the end of this verse there is a strong affirmation that this work is really important, as the person who brings back the one who has wandered off will help save that person from death. There is nothing better than when someone you are working and sharing with begins to understand the power and depth of the gospel. If you are ever in that position, you will understand. The eyes of someone when they finally understand the grace of God in their lives are brighter than the brightest star.

15 Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

Having dealt with the previous text, we want to spend a little time on the 5 phases of design for your faith life that we spoke of a few weeks ago in the on James 3:13-18.

The first phase of the design process begins with empathy. Empathy is a powerful connection that humans have toward one another, and it allows us to help see the issues that others are dealing with. Human Centered Design and Faith Design both have to begin here. Even if you are designing for your own life of faith, to have empathy is the ability to allow us to see what is really happening and to have not only an emotional response, but a response of compassion as well. This allows us to begin to clarify our thinking between how we approach the problem and what the problem really is. The importance of empathy cannot be overstated.

One way we can empathize is to first spend some time in prayer over your faith life. Ask God to help you understand the issue you are dealing with and to help show you what things could look like as you work your way through these issues. Sometimes, using something like an empathy map is helpful. If you google an empathy map, you can

get an idea of what it is, but basically it is a grid that helps us see what we think, feel, say, and do when it comes to our life of faith. See link in the footnote for a great explanation of empathy maps.

To be really good at empathy, we have to begin to set our assumptions aside and immerse ourselves in the context of the problem we are attempting to work on. This is sometimes hard when it comes to the internal conversation we are having about our lives of faith. However, as we become a bit more objective about the ideas we are dealing with, we begin to become better at even empathizing with ourselves and our own problems as we seek solutions.

One thing that is important is to know you are not going about this journey alone. You have friends and family that would be very interested in working through this process with you, and it is possible that your conversations with God may be very clarifying as well. As well, speaking with a pastor or trusted mentor can help provide perspective that might lend itself to benefiting the conversation.

1— Have you processed and audited your faith life? Where do you think there are issues that can be addressed?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2— Who do you have that you can discuss these issues and hopes with?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 – What do you see as your greatest asset in redesigning your faith life?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

This is sometimes the hardest part of the process, because finding a clear and succinct language from which to work is difficult. However, after having made lists, done empathy mapping, and working toward a better understanding of some of the issues you wish to tackle, you now take a human-centered approach to defining the problem. Since you and your faith life is not a business, it may be difficult to find a language that can capture the metrics you wish to see in order to know if you are making a difference in your approach to your life of faith.

Because you can't simply say something like: "I want to increase my grace by 5%," you will have to come up with words that make a bit more sense to what you are trying to accomplish. Phrases like, I want my faith life to take a more central role in my decision making process. (This could be accomplished by the following 3 spiritual exercises—1. Prayer. 2. Study. 3. Prioritize.) This is just an example, however, you can see there are tangible exercises that are attached to the stated goal. In each of these exercises, you can assign a frequency, a time frame, and a consistency to help you keep track of how

you are doing. While faith and spirituality are not simple to connect metrics to, you certainly can connect metrics and aspirations to your practices that will help you become more aware of where you are trying to go.

Maybe some of you are not so great at creating language that will help define the work you need to do. This is when you need to consult someone who is better at it than you are. Find a partner, a friend, a spouse, a pastor, or a mentor who can walk with you through the process.

Attaching metrics to spirituality is always a tricky thing, so I suggest you don't do that. But what you can create metrics around is the practices, exercises, and disciplines that help us create opportunities for spiritual growth in our lives. As we define the problem with clarity, we can begin to seek solutions that make more sense.

Too often, when we think of our spiritual lives, we don't break them down to parts, but we feel bad about the whole experience not living up to what we hoped it would be. Its time to change that language and narrative and create intentional steps to making our lives of faith more robust, challeng-

ing, important and seeking to move the dial on an often much too neglected part of our lives. Remember, your spiri-

tual life and your actual life are so interwoven, it is sometimes difficult to speak of one without relating to the other.

1— What have you defined as problem areas you would like to tackle with this process? Be specific.

2— How can you create some metrics around these problem areas?

3 – Who can you enlist to help you process all of this?

To me, this phase is one of the most fun phases we can employ in this whole process. The reason why it is fun to ideate is that ideation takes the shape of brainstorming. This is when you find a white board and begin to dream. You have a goal in mind, but now, you get to play around with ideas that may get you to this goal. It is a time to explore solutions without judgment, a chance to get to know your thought processes and what might or might not work, and a chance to collaborate with people you trust to help build a roadmap that you can then begin to implement.

When you ideate, don't get fixated on one idea. This is a time to go wide with your ideas, not so deep. It is easy to get in the weeds of "how" something will work. But right now, you are still in the "what" phase. At this stage in the game, there are no bad ideas! Just get them out as quickly as you can, make a list, use sticky notes, create a mind map, or have someone write down every seemingly crazy idea.

A few of the things that help in this process are having some creative tools around. For instance, I have often done ideation meetings with lego's, play-doh, and kinetic sand on the table. While these things don't necessarily make new ideas show up, they keep

your hands busy and keep engaging the more creative side of your brain. When you keep every area of your mind and body engaged, you think differently. Also, you never know when a crazy idea of yours might spark a really great idea for someone else.

Once you have a myriad of ideas, begin to sort and eliminate those ideas that are simply not feasible, not affordable, and perhaps not beneficial. But make sure you don't do this until later. Sometimes, a second, third, or fourth ideation session is needed in order to create the right list and then edit that list in a way that makes sense for your process. Remember, while there are no bad ideas, some will rise to the top. After you have identified these ideas, you will better be able to formulate a plan and preparation for bringing them into action.

Ideation is really fun, really creative, and can be the best part of this process. However, we don't ideate alone. We always ask God into the process, as he knows you better than everyone else, he is also the most creative being in the universe, so to have him on your side is not a bad thing!

1— Did you pray before you began the prototyping process?

2— How many times have you failed before you succeeded? Are you okay with failure if it is leading to something?

3 —How far are you willing to go until you get it right? How can you find encouragement when something doesn't work? What have you done that has worked, and can you define your failure to success process?

We are now into the stage where we are asked to begin to build what we have ideated. Since not every idea will be feasible, we begin with the ones that are the most simple and we build our schedules, our locations, our attitudes and our behaviors accordingly. We start simple for two reasons: 1) We'd love to have some early success stories. 2) We can get them out of the way and begin to focus on some more difficult issues that will take more time to process and prototype.

While I understand that this may be a difficult thing to conceptualize, we are basically taking what we have worked on in the ideation process, and begin to shape our lives around the solutions we think might work. This part is hard, because we don't always know what will work. Let me give you an example.

Some of you will want to tackle the idea of a more robust study life when it comes to faith. You know this is an issue, you have defined the problem and ideated some solutions. One solution is that you want to get up earlier to study Scripture. (By the way, this is a super common issue and solution). However, you know yourself, and so you worry that getting up early is difficult for you.

You have ideated solutions to this problem as well. The first one is to buy

a new alarm clock. (Okay, let's face it, you are just changing the alarm on your phone. . .) You set the alarm for 4AM to study; but when that alarm goes off, you take your phone and throw across the room! Well, your first prototype is done! Congratulations. You probably won't recognize this until you wake up at 7:30AM and wonder where your phone is. But you have completed your first prototype, and it was a miserable failure. Now, you can choose another alarm and try again, or you can realize that this might not work, so it is time to find a different timeframe from which to study. Maybe the evening is better.

Regardless of the next prototype, you have begun the process of adjusting your first model to better fit who you are, your schedule, and your ability to make a prototype work. Remember, you can't hate your solution, or it is not a solution. It is easy to be too aspirational in our problem solving, and in that way it might disconnect from your real life, leaving you frustrated that you have again failed in a solution.

The beauty of prototyping is that we are not making value judgements, we are working on processes and models that we assume will fail until we get it right. Remember, most of us eat Heinz 57 ketchup, not Heinz 1. It takes trial and error. It is said that Thomas Edison took

over 20,000 tries to make the light bulb. Why would your prototypes work the first time.

I actually believe that God blesses failure. It is how we learn. And in fact, I'll go so far as to say it is not a failure if you learned something through the process! By the way, the way we learn

through this is to make sure we are keeping copious notes on how things are going. We are trying to bring intentional practices into our prototyping, so take notes, check off what doesn't work, keep what does, and create a model that successful for you!

1 — Did you pray before you began the prototyping process?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2 — How many times have you failed before you succeeded? Are you okay with failure if it is leading to something?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3 — How far are you willing to go until you get it right? How can you find encouragement when something doesn't work? What have you done that has worked, and can you define your failure to success process?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

12 But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned.

Okay, we have prototyped and found some great solutions, and now it is time to test. We test by making these attitudes and behaviors incorporated into our own lives. While the models may be successful, this is time when you will probably have to make small adjustments to your new models. Remember, when you buy a new car, the car works, but you still have to adjust your seat to fit you just right. Don't be alarmed by little changes. This is a long process, and the ultimate goal is not perfection, but a greater effectiveness in your faith life.

You will begin to know if your testing is working when it is confirmed in community. I know this sounds weird, but I truly believe that calling is confirmed in community. As well, when you are becoming the person that God has made you to be, in all its nuances, the people around you will recognize that something is different. This becomes a powerful part of your witness, as they will notice the change, the peace, the wisdom that has come to you through this process and beyond. They may not know what has changed, but they will know that something has changed.

Also, they will want to know how this happened, and this becomes your opportunity to share some great things about the gospel and about working with God through all of this.

The good news about this whole process is that it is non-linear. This means you can go back at anytime and begin to ideate around ideas that you had in the past, begin to rework what is working but could be more effective, and generally just continue to engage in the process.

But I want to finish this series by going back to the first chapter in James and looking at one phrase one more time:

James 1:2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. 3 For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. 4 So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

This is an encouragement to continue in the process. We might suffer, we might be tested, we might have a chance for our endurance to grow.

But James says simply “let it grow!” Throughout this process we have tried to be intentional about what James is telling us. Issues of compassion have been brought up, justice and mercy, love and grace, intention and motivation. Throughout all of this James has encouraged us to keep the faith, and even finishes his letter by telling people to go and get those who have wandered from the faith.

It is my hope for you that you will incorporate design principles into your faith not as a gimmick, but as a means of progress and growth in your spiritual life. God did not create us to be static

creatures, rather, he created us to be growing and moving toward a greater expression of the Gospel in the world today. By taking care to be intentional about your life, you will grow that endurance of which he speaks.

It is a great joy to continue the journey with you.

Grace to you, and Peace.

Pastor Timothy Gillespie.

