

A Series of 11 Sermons on the Epistle of James

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Sermon 1: Introduction to the Book of James 5-12-02

This morning we begin a new sermon series. I have chosen the book of James, and I have done so for several reasons.

First, ever since Martin Luther rejected James as an epistle of straw, this book has given Protestants a sort of uneasy feeling. We're not quite sure what to do with James, especially the apparent contradiction between James and Paul on the issue of justification by faith.

I doubt that many of us would agree with Luther's harsh rejection. After all, it is in the canon, and so we can't question James without opening up doubt about other books in the canon. But at the same time, we do wonder about James. I've decided to preach through this book because I want to show that there is no conflict. It is true that Paul and James have their own unique insights into the gospel, but ultimately I'm convinced, and I want you to be convinced, that they are in harmony. We'll deal with this when we come to chapter 2, but I've also reserved the two final sermons, sermons 10 and 11 to cover it in greater depth.

The *second* reason I want to preach through James is that it offers a very helpful perspective on the Christian life that I think will be beneficial to you. I am referring to James' perspective on trials and their value to us in our Christian walk. The word trials occurs right at the outset in 1:2. The word in Greek is *peirasmos*. Now this word is difficult to translate. Sometimes it means *trials* and sometimes it means *temptations*. The second usage occurs a few verses later in vv. 13-14, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God' ... but each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust." Another possible translation is *testing*. This is probably the best translation for verse 2. Trials, tests, temptations. Perhaps no single word captures the full meaning and so we need all three.

When James speaks of trials, tests, and temptations, then, he isn't just talking about trials in the sense of suffering. Look, for example, at vv. 9-10. Here James includes both the brother of humble circumstances and the rich man among those who are being tested and perhaps even tempted. The brother of humble circumstances is, by virtue of his humble circumstances, put in a position of testing. He may be tempted to grasp after the riches of the rich man, or he may be tempted to blame God for his poor condition. Likewise, the rich brother is, by virtue of his riches, put in a position of testing. He may be tempted to boast, to become self-assured, and to oppress the poor. You see both are being tested, and in the midst of the test, they may be tempted to deviate from God's will. Both brothers are therefore called to take the opportunity afforded by this trial or testing, and to resist the temptation, to persevere in doing God's will, and thus to come through the trial with the positive outcome of being approved before God.

James takes the entire first chapter to develop his theology of testing and temptation. Once he has done so, he then applies it in three main areas:

- (1) The Temptation to Nominal Christianity: Faith's Obedience (2:1-26)
- (2) The Temptation to Doctrinal Strife: Faith's Gentle Wisdom (3:1—4:12)
- (3) The Temptation to Eschatological Indifference: Faith's Patience (4:13—5:20)

So my second reason for picking this book is that I want to explore with you James' theology of temptation and the way in which these trials or tests or temptations are an opportunity for us to have our faith confirmed and completed. The Christian life is not easy. It is full of tests, and we must embrace each test as an opportunity to have our faith in Christ tested and matured.

This morning in my first sermon I want to introduce you to the Book of James by raising an important question. And that is the question of whether or not James is even a Christian document to begin with. At first it might seem to be a basically Jewish writing. There are no references to the core narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ. In addition, the book has such a strong ethical flavor, with such an emphasis on works and obedience, that the gospel almost seems to have been left out. Luther seemed troubled by this seemingly law-centered rather than Christ-centered writing. For these reasons, some scholars have argued that James was originally a Jewish document, and the two references to the Lord Jesus Christ in 1:1 and 2:1 were interpolations added by Christian scribes.

But there are three compelling reasons to view James as a Christian writing through and through:

- (1) The author is Christian
- (2) The audience is Christian
- (3) The content is Christian

(1) The author is Christian

The first thing we are told is that James is the author of this letter. Although there are a handful of other Jameses in the New Testament, the consensus of church tradition is that this James is the brother of the Lord Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church.

Let me give you some background on James.

Matthew 13:55 tells us the names of Jesus' brothers, and James is listed first. Apparently, James and his other brothers did not come to faith in Jesus during his earthly ministry. Mark records one incident where Jesus' family came to take custody of Jesus, saying that he had "lost his senses." When Jesus is told that his mother and his brothers were standing outside, he said, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then looking about at those who were sitting around him, he said, "Behold, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and my sister and mother."

However, the unbelief of James did not continue. For Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 7, that the risen Christ appeared to James. The implication is that this appearance was also a call to leadership alongside the twelve apostles and Paul himself.

In the book of Acts, he is first mentioned as being in a position of church authority in chapter 12. There we are told, after Peter's miraculous deliverance from imprisonment, that he left the Jerusalem church in the hands of James. From that point on in the book of Acts, he is the recognized leader of the Jewish Christians. Tradition has it that he was the first bishop of Jerusalem.

In Galatians, where Paul is most zealous to defend the gospel against the Judaizers who were zealous for the Torah, it is interesting that Paul recognized the authority of James.

Read Gal. 1:18-19; 2:9.

This harmonizes with Luke's account of the council of Jerusalem, where James makes the decisive speech in favor of including the Gentiles in the church without making them get circumcised.

Read Acts 15:13-21

Later, in Acts 21, when Paul visited Jerusalem for the last time to deliver the collection for poor Jewish believers, James received Paul and his entourage gladly. Paul then reported to James and the elders the marvelous work of God in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. Luke reports that when James and the elders heard this, they glorified God (vv. 17-20).

At this point, the biblical record concerning James falls silent. However, we know from Josephus that James was stoned to death in AD 62 by the sanhedrin. Apparently he was envious that all the people were converting to Christianity, so the high priest at the time concocted a charge that James had violated the Torah, although Josephus doesn't tell us what the charge was. Eusebius records these as his last words: "Why are you asking me about the Son of Man? He is seated in heaven at the right hand of great power, and will come again on the clouds of heaven." And so they stoned him to death for his steadfast faith in Jesus Christ.

So it is clear that James was a Christian man, deeply committed to Jesus as Messiah and Lord. It is true that James was a Jewish Christian. Indeed, he was the chief spokesman and representative of Jewish Christianity before the destruction of Jerusalem. Yet we must be careful not to overdo the Jewishness of James. He was a Christian first, and a man of Jewish heritage second.

Look at the salutation again: "James, the bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

When the Judaizers wanted to impose circumcision and observance of the Torah on the Gentiles, James was the most powerful voice who argued for the inclusion of the these uncircumcised, non-Torah observant Gentiles within the people of God. The implication is that he clearly taught salvation apart from keeping the Law.

Consider also the total absence of any references to the Torah or to the works of the Law in the book of James. Although he does refer to the law, he always qualifies it as "the law of perfect freedom," or "the royal law" of love. These are Messianic qualifications. The Mosaic Law is not the center of James' piety and faith. Rather, it is allegiance to Jesus, and especially the teachings of Jesus, that stands at the heart of James' thought. In fact, no other NT book outside of the four gospels contains so many quotations and allusions to the sayings of Jesus. The book is soaked in the atmosphere of the teachings and sayings of Jesus.

James identifies himself as a bondservant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is not a bondservant of the Torah. He is a bondservant of Christ. The central commanding authority over him is the authority of the one whom he calls Lord and Messiah. The word "Lord" or *Kyrios* as a title for Jesus occurs about a dozen times in this book.

(2) The audience is Christian

Returning to the salutation. We've looked at the author, and we've seen that the author is Christian. Let us now consider briefly the audience. "To the twelve tribes of the dispersion." Many commentators get this one wrong. Influenced by their assumption that James was a Torah-observant Jew first and a Christian second, they interpret this phrase literally, as if James were addressing his epistle to the Jews of the diaspora.

But there is no reason to take such a wooden approach. Similar language is used in the salutation of 1 Peter, and most scholars agree that Peter is addressing a largely Gentile Christian audience whom he views as the New Israel. Even if James is addressed primarily to Jewish Christians, the label here is not ethnic but theological. James is addressing the church of Jesus Christ. At this early stage, perhaps most of them are Jewish Christians, but they are Christians. This is clear, because throughout the book James addresses his audience as those who believe in Jesus. He addresses them as "my brethren" or "my beloved brethren" 13 times throughout the letter.

Note also 2:1, which presupposes an audience with a faith-commitment to Jesus Christ.

If the twelve tribes is theological, so is the concept of the diaspora. Although it may in fact be that he is addressing Jewish Christians who happen to live outside of Judea, yet he is addressing them not merely in terms of their geographical location, but in terms of their spiritual location as pilgrims on the way to the heavenly promised land. This is evident when you look at verse 2. As those who are the New Israel of God at the end of the ages, as pilgrims and sojourners scattered throughout the world, they encounter various trials.

And yet they are to rejoice in the midst of these trials, because of the eschatological promise of verse 12 – the hope of receiving the crown of life.

(3) The content is Christian

So we've seen the author and the audience. Let's turn now to the content.

The Christology of James

We've already mentioned that James refers to Jesus as Kyrios about a dozen times. But we should look at a two of these references, because they show that he conceived of Jesus in the most exalted terms.

2:1 - Resurrection & exaltation: "our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (ESV)
5:7-9 - Christ as coming eschatological Judge

James attributes titles and functions to Jesus that properly belong to God alone. In view of his 3 references to God as "Father" (1:17, 27; 3:9) and one reference to the Spirit (4:5), we might even say that we have here an incipient Trinitarianism.

The eschatology of James

To begin with, it is clear that James holds to the traditional Jewish eschatology of a coming day of judgment. It is the day when we faithful believers will receive the crown of life (1:12). It is the time when the kingdom that has been promised to those who love God will be inherited (2:5). It will also be a day when the actions of believers will be judged according to the law of liberty, a day when mercy will triumph over judgment for those who have shown mercy (2:12-13).

What is exciting is that the eschatology of James is not exclusively future. He also has an inaugurated eschatology:

5:3 "in the last days"
5:8 "near" - same term used in gospels, "The kingdom of God is at hand."

Where did James get the idea of inaugurated eschatology? Because he saw the risen Lord, like Paul, and concluded that the eschatological glory had already been set in motion (2:1).

Distinctively Christian terminology

There are many words, phrases, and concepts scattered throughout this book that are unique to the writings of the New Testament, and unparalleled in the Old Testament or the Jewish writings of this time.

1:3 - "faith" - a key Christian term that was rarely used in Judaism - 19x

1:12 - "The crown of life"

1:18 - "Begotten by The word of truth" - a phrase that is used elsewhere in the NT to refer to the kerygma, that is, the gospel message as preached by the apostles. Christians as "firstfruits" of God's creation.

1:21 - "the implanted word which is able to save your souls" - there are 4 other occurrences of the verb "to save" in a soteriological sense in the rest of the book.

2:5 - "heirs of the kingdom"

2:7 - “the name by which you have been called” - referring to the name of Christ, and the fact that believers were called “Christians” - possibly a reference to baptism

2:8 - “the royal law” - the law of love enunciated in Lev. 19:18, as elevated to prominence by Jesus, the King - thus it is “the law of our King”

3:17-18 - the list of virtues reminds one of the Beatitudes and Paul’s fruit of the Spirit

5:7-8 - “the coming of the Lord” (2x) - James uses the technical term *parousia*

5:14 - “the elders of the church” - two technical terms here: the *presbyteroi* of the *ekklesia*.

I’m looking forward to studying this book with you over the next three months. Let us heed the distinctive message of James, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, as he exhorts us to faithfulness in the midst of trials, tests, and temptations. Yes, he does so strongly and pointedly, and it sometimes makes us uncomfortable. But let us not despise the Lord’s correction, which he only gives to those who are sons.

Sermon 2:
James' Theology of the Testing of Faith, Part 1
James 1:1-12
5-19-02

Last week we began a new series of sermons on the book of James. We dealt with the question, "Is James really a Christian document?" I argued that James is not a Jewish book with a few Christian words and phrases tacked on, but a Christian book through and through. I cited three pieces of evidence to back up this claim:

First, the author, James, was a thoroughly Christian man. He identifies himself right at the outset as "the bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Second, the intended recipients of the letter are clearly regarded as fellow believers in Christ and are addressed as "brothers." As the opening verse of chapter 2 clearly states, the recipients of the letter are members of the visible church. They profess faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

And third, the contents of the book are laced with a uniquely Christian vocabulary and concepts. E.g., it contains as high a Christology as any in the NT. He teaches that Jesus is now the exalted Lord of glory who is coming again as the judge of the world. The more I study this book the more I am convinced that James definitely belongs in the canon of the New Testament.

So much for matters of introduction. This morning we are now going to delve into the meat of the book itself, beginning with the first 12 verses. Last week I briefly stated that the thesis of James is stated right here in the first chapter, and then applied in the rest of the book.

Verses 2-4

These opening verses supply the key to the entire book. In these three verses, the whole thesis is contained in a nutshell, and then unpacked and illustrated in the remainder of the chapter. James introduces his thesis by making the paradoxical claim that we ought to rejoice in trials and tribulations. "Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials." The word "consider" means to "regard or look upon something" in a certain light. From the viewpoint of the world this is crazy, but from the perspective of eternity, we make the decision of faith to regard our trials as nothing but pure joy.

But the key is "from the perspective of eternity." James isn't saying that trials themselves ought to make us rejoice. Rather, we ought to rejoice, even in the midst of trial, because of the eschatological perspective that trials are merely temporary tests that come to us in this present age, but which will reap great rewards for us in the age to come. This is why James addresses his audience in v.1 as "the twelve tribes of the dispersion." As I pointed out last week, this identification is not to be interpreted literally. It is James' way of referring to the church, the Messianic community of the last days, as the true Israel of God. James wants us to locate ourselves spiritually on the topographical map of history as seen from God's perspective, in other words, history seen from the perspective of our eschatological hope.

We are like Israel after the exile. We are scattered throughout the nations. We are not living in the land that God promised on oath to Abraham. It is true that we remain in God's eyes, the twelve tribes of Israel. But at the moment we are dispersed or scattered abroad, away from the land of promise. But although we are merely sojourners in this present world, and although we encounter various trials and tests along the way, our citizenship is in heaven. This is why we can consider it all joy when we encounter various trials, because we know that we are on the way to a more glorious inheritance. We are the twelve tribes of Israel. We are the blessed inheritors at the end of the age, as we look forward to and hasten the coming of the day of Christ.

But there is more. It is not only that we ought to rejoice in the midst of trial because we know they are temporary and will give way to the glory of heaven. There is an integral relationship between the time of trial and the coming glory. James makes this explicit. To explain why we should rejoice in trials, he adds a clause that begins with the words “knowing that.” James says, “knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.” In Greek the word “endurance” and “perseverance” are the same. It is the word *hupomone*. The etymology in Greek is “remaining under.” Picture a person carrying a heavy load for a long time, or a soldier who remains steadfast under attack – he stands his ground. *Endurance* is therefore a good translation.

In order to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials, we must see that God sends the trials into our lives for a reason. He wants to work endurance in us. He wants our faith to be proved genuine. That is the meaning of the phrase, “the testing of your faith” in verse 3. The word “testing” here is not the same as the word translated “trials/tests or temptations.” The word “testing” in verse 3 means “to put something to the test in order to determine if it is genuine or not.”

Read 1 Peter 1:6-7

How do trials prove that your faith is genuine? To understand this you have to recall the parable of the sower and the seed in the gospels.

Read Luke 8:11-15

The word “trials” in v. 13 is *peirasmos* and the word “perseverance” in v. 15 is *hupomone* – both of which are found in our text in James 1. James is intentionally echoing the language of the parable of the sower and the seed. As Jesus says, the seed stands for the word of God (v. 11). The word of God, here, does not mean the Bible, but the word concerning Christ crucified and risen, the preached word. In simple terms, the seed is the gospel. Now the gospel does not even germinate in the stony ground. The gospel is taken away by the Devil, so that the hearers beside the road do not even have temporary faith. But soils two, three, and four all have in common the fact that the gospel does germinate, there is some sort of response to the gospel. However, there is nevertheless a big difference between soils two and three, on the one hand, and the good soil that produces a bountiful crop. The difference is precisely in the area of temporary faith *versus* faith that survives the long haul. The rocky soil hearers believe for a while, but in time of temptation, they fall away. And the seed that fell among thorns is choked by the worries and riches and pleasures of this life, so that it also fails to bring forth fruit to maturity. Only the good soil hears the gospel and holds it fast and bears fruit – and notice the key phrase added at the end – “with perseverance.”

Trials provide the opportunity for us to persevere in our faith, in spite of the challenges to that faith. If we have real faith, we will persist in that faith, in spite of trials. Why does real faith persist in spite of trials? Because real faith looks beyond the present age – with its trials, temptations, difficulties, and hardships for the sake of Christ – it looks beyond these obstacles to the eschatological reward.

James says we should regard or look upon our trials as pure joy, since we know that they are tests given to prove the genuineness of our faith. But James adds another reason in verse 4 (read).

The goal of this process isn't merely to demonstrate that your faith is genuine. God has an even higher purpose in allowing his people to endure trials in this age. He wants us to become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Now we have to define these terms. “Perfect” doesn't mean “sinless perfection.” It has to do with a process of growth toward spiritual maturity and well-roundedness. The second word, “complete,” means “whole, entire.” The goal of the Christian life is not merely to survive trials and attaining the assurance that one possesses genuine, saving faith. It is that we would develop a full-orbed Christian character, Christian maturity. Ultimately, of course, this does involve sinless perfection, but that will not be achieved until our bodies are transformed at the resurrection. Only then will we be perfectly conformed to the image of Christ.

In the meantime, trials and enduring in faith in the midst of trials, are the means that God uses to perfect us and make us more like Christ. Only through trials do those aspects of our character that do not conform to Christ get burned away, like dross in the fire. And notice that it doesn't happen automatically. Verse 4 is an imperative: "Let endurance have its perfect result." In other words, the spiritual benefits of trials will not be enjoyed unless you respond to them in the right way.

Verses 5-8

This is why you need wisdom. If you are going to have the right attitude in the midst of trials, then you need wisdom, spiritual insight, so that you can see what God is doing and how he is perfecting you through trial. James doesn't have to define wisdom, because his audience knows the book of Proverbs. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom is the opposite of being a fool. A fool is someone who lacks perception, someone who never learns from his mistakes, who blindly pursues fleeting pleasure, and never gives any thought to real significance of life. Wisdom, by contrast, is the most precious thing a person can have. It is worth more than gold and silver.

Now you may be thinking, "But I'm not a particularly wise or insightful person. How am I going to benefit from trials if I lack wisdom?" James says all you have to do is ask! The English translations here fall short. In Greek it says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of *the giving God*, who gives to all generously and without reproach." God is a giving kind of God. He's not stingy. He loves to answer requests like this, and believe me, he will! And God won't reproach you when you ask for wisdom to learn from your trials. When God gives, he gives good gifts, so that the wisdom you are asking for will have its intended result. It will enable you to understand the trial you are going through, and to understand what you need to learn from it.

But James adds a warning in vv. 6-8 (read). The word "doubting" in Greek is stronger than the English translation implies. It means to "dispute with oneself." Here James use this term to refers to a fundamental spiritual division within a person that causes that person to be unprepared for the gift of wisdom in the midst of trial and the spiritual fruits it is intended to produce. James is not talking about the ordinary struggles of faith that are common to all of God's people. James is talking about the person who claims to have faith but in reality is an unbeliever. He makes this clear by his description of this individual.

First, he is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. This person is clearly more like the second or third soil – he lacks the root of faith.

Second, in v. 8, he says that this person is "a double-minded man." The term "double-minded" is literally "double-souled" in Greek. As far as we know this is the first time this work occurs in Greek literature. In all likelihood James coined the term in light of the OT which describe the wicked as those who have a divided heart. Literally, they have "a heart and a heart." They are the opposite of the elect who love the Lord your God with all their heart and with all their soul.

Third, he is "unstable in all his ways." It is not an occasional doubt but a spiritual instability, a fundamental contradiction between the outward profession of his lips and the true condition of his heart and soul.

Thus the warning in vv. 6-8 is not intended to discourage you from praying, as if even the slightest grain of doubt in prayer means that you will never receive anything from the Lord. The warning is intended to be a caution to you to make sure you are truly asking for God's wisdom with the sincere desire of wanting to grow in the midst of trials toward the goal of perfection and spiritual wholeness.

Verses 9-11

James now gives us a specific example, or illustration, of how we can use God's wisdom to enable to gain an eschatological perspective on our trials. This paragraph is even written in a literary form modeled

upon the wisdom literature of the OT. It is given in the form of a paradox. The brother of humble circumstances ought to glory, because in reality he has been given a high position in the kingdom. And the rich brother, by contrast, is to glory in his humiliation. Why is being rich a humiliation? Because his riches are fleeting and he will pass away in the midst of his pursuits.

In v. 11, James uses a vivid illustration to make the point. First we have to understand the phrase, “the flower of the grass.” Normally we don’t think of grass as having flowers, but in Greek “grass” refers not to the nice green lawns that we mow every week, but to the wildflowers that grow on the hillsides. We have this right here in southern California. These wildflowers look like ordinary weeds most of the year. But when the time is right they will suddenly bloom in all their glory – for a week or so it is beautiful. The hillside will be carpeted with wildflowers. But then what happens? The sun rises one morning, and this time there is a shift in the weather – a dry Santana wind starts to blow, and the stems dry out. And what happens when the stem dries up? The flower falls off.

In the analogy, the rich man is glorious like a vast hillside carpeted with wildflowers. But this glory is only temporary and illusory. As soon as the weather changes and the scorching Santanas start blowing, the stems all dry up, and the flowers fall off just like that. So too the rich man, in the very midst of his pursuits, will fade away. This is why James uses the phrase “the beauty of its appearance.” The rich man’s glory is external. In reality he is a mortal human being like everyone else. In a single day he might lose everything on the stock market, or a devastating lawsuit. And if he manages to avoid such calamities, it is certain that death will catch up with him, and he will fade away in a moment just like the wildflowers which are here today and gone tomorrow. What a humiliation it is to be rich!

James says that the rich man ought to glory in this humiliation, just as the poor brother ought to glory in his high position. The key to understand how this fits in with the argument is that the paradox of the glorious poor man and the humiliated rich man will only make sense to those who have faith, a faith that evaluates things, not according to the standards of this present age, but in light of heaven. Furthermore, both the rich brother and the poor brother must persevere with their eyes firmly fixed on the heavenly reward.

Verse 12

In v. 12, James then returns full circle and concludes the paragraph by reflecting on the blessedness of those who have such persevering faith. Notice the verbal similarities that link this back to vv. 2-4:

- “Trial” (vv. 2 and 12)
- “Perseveres” is the verb form of the word “endurance” in vv. 3-4
- “When he has stood the test” links back to “the testing of your faith” (v. 3)

Only those who endure, who persevere through trials, and who cross the finish line with their faith intact will receive the crown of life. True faith perseveres to the end. Of course we know that faith is a gift of God’s sovereign grace – James himself states that in 1:18. And we know that all who are elect will certainly persevere in faith to the end. On the other hand, we must not become presumptuous and think that we can receive the crown of life apart from perseverance. We cannot rest upon our laurels, or past experiences of faith. We must persevere in faith to the end, against all obstacles, through all trials and tests, and only then will we receive the crown of life. This is the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The Scripture teaches both, and does not attempt to reconcile them systematically, even though they are clearly reconciled in the mind of God.

The principle enunciated in verse 12 was first fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He is the one who persevered under trial – the ultimate trial, the ultimate test. In spite of Satan’s tempting him to deviate from the way leading to the cross, he stood fast. In spite of being abandoned by his own disciples, he did not shrink back from the cross. “Fixing your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

By persevering under trial, he obtained the crown of life. And he won that crown not only for himself, but for us, that we might reign with Christ forever in heaven. He is the author and perfecter of our faith, the forerunner who has blazed the way for us by his perfect obedience. Since he won the crown by his obedience, not one of his chosen sheep can fail to win the crown of life. They will persevere to the end, because Christ has not only purchased the crown for us, he has also purchased the persevering faith through which the crown will be received. It will be enjoyed by us, not as the reward for our faith, but as the reward for Christ's obedience, which purchased both the crown and our faith.

This wonderful passage sets forth a vital lesson that we need to learn, and which we often have a hard time with. Whenever God brings a trial into your life – whatever it might be – any difficult and trying circumstance – you must not respond in unbelief. We respond in unbelief when we start feeling sorry for ourselves. We complain and grumble against God. We ask, “Why is this happening to me?” Instead of viewing trials as a problem, we should view them as opportunities for spiritual growth. God is bringing this thing into my life for a purpose. He wants to make me more like Christ. He sees the areas of my soul that are out of joint and crooked, the things that are out of accord with the perfect character of Jesus Christ. He sees the parts in us that are lacking, the parts that are not yet whole. And so he brings us trials designed to correct those faults, to root out those sins, and to fashion us ever more into the image of the Lord of glory.

Are you enduring difficulty and trial in your life? Let endurance have its perfect work! Let God do his perfect work of finishing the good work that he began in you! Don't get all bent out of shape and start whining and complaining. Don't feel sorry for yourself. Instead, consider it all joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and endurance is going to produce its perfect result. God is making you whole and complete and mature. He's ironing out the wrinkles in your soul and making you more Christlike. And the ultimate goal of it all is that by means of these trials and tests, your faith is being refined and proved genuine, so that through persevering in faith to the end, you may at last win the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him!

Sermon 3:
James' Theology of the Testing of Faith, Part 2
James 1:13-27
5-26-02

Chapter one is divided into two paragraphs. We've looked at the first paragraph in vv. 2-12. This morning we turn to the second paragraph, verse 13 to the end of the chapter. The first paragraph sets forth the basic thesis of the book as a whole. What that thesis is can be seen by reading vv. 2-4 and 12 together. The topic that James is going to be dealing with in this epistle is the importance of persevering through trials, thus passing the test, and winning the eschatological reward, the crown of life.

That's the first paragraph. In the second paragraph follows this up by doing two things. First, in vv. 13-18 he adds an important qualification. Second, in vv. 19-27 he returns to the thesis and works it out in greater detail.

(1) Verses 13-18: An important qualification

Read verses 13-14.

Why does James say, "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone"? I think his argument goes something like this. Temptation involves an impulse or attraction to sin. But God has no inner attraction to sin. Therefore, if he has no attraction to sin, he cannot desire that man would be tempted to sin – unlike Satan, who tempted Adam because he wanted him to sin.

Now it is important to understand that James is not denying that God *tests* us. God brings trials into the lives of his people in order to test them, to see what is in their heart. There are numerous examples of his in the Old Testament. One famous example is the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. The text explicitly states that God tested Abraham when he commanded him to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering. When Abraham raised the knife, the angel of the Lord intervened, and said, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Gen. 22:12). The purpose of the test was to see what was in Abraham's heart, to see whether he would follow the Lord in unconditional obedience.

James does not say that God never tests us. He's saying that in the test, it is not God's intention to tempt us to sin. Every trial carries with it a temptation to deviate from the will of God, but the temptation to deviate from the will of God in the midst of the test, originates from our own sinful hearts, not from God. The word "test" and "tempt" are the same in Greek, but James is clearly distinguishing the two meanings of the word. For this reason I would translate verse 13 as follows: "Let no one say when he is undergoing a test or trial, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone."

Read verse 14.

The word *lust* is better translated, "sinful desire." The word simply describes the innate tendency, inherited from Adam, to have desires that are out of accord with God's will for man. Notice the modifier "... carried away and enticed by *his own* sinful desire." James places the responsibility for temptation and sin squarely on the shoulders of each human being. We cannot blame God, even though God is the sovereign originator and orchestrator of all trials.

Notice that James does not equate these sinful desires with actual sin. He implies this when he says in verse 15 that the sinful desires are that which conceive and give birth to sin. All sinful desires are sinful. And all actual sins proceed from these sinful desires. Yet actual sin and the desire to sin are not morally equivalent. In reliance on God's grace, our sinful desires may be checked by obedience to God's will.

In vv. 13-15, James has stated that God is the sovereign orchestrator of trials, but he is not the author of temptation. The enticement to sin that we face in the midst of trials, does not come from God, but from our own sinful desires. In vv. 16-18, he makes the same point in a positive form: God is not the author of temptation. On the contrary, God gives only good gifts.

Read verses 16-17.

What is meant by the reference to God as “the Father of lights”? This odd phrase seems to have been derived from Genesis 1 where the sun, moon, and stars are called “lights.” To say that God is the “father” of the heavenly luminaries, is simply a Semitic way of saying that God is their originator and sovereign governor.

I cannot help but wonder if James is engaging here in polemic against astrology. Astrology is the belief that our lives and destinies are governed by the stars. In response, James points out that God is the author of the luminaries. Our lives are not governed by a constantly changing and fickle system of astronomical bodies, but by a good heavenly Father who, unlike the astronomical bodies, is constant and unchanging.

This astronomical reference is supported by the remainder of the verse, “... with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow,” literally, “shadow cast by turning.” The heavenly luminaries constantly change in appearance and location in the sky. As a result of their constant turning, they often cast shadows. The sun rises, bringing light, but then it sets and its glory is temporarily extinguished in the shadow of night until the next day. The moon becomes completely overshadowed every month, then it gradually grows into a full moon, only to wane again until it disappears once more. There are also shadows caused by solar and lunar eclipses. Unlike the sun and the moon, with their shadows caused by constant change and turning, God is steadfast and unchanging. And therefore, God never casts any shadows. Everything that comes from his hand is a good and perfect gift, coming down from above. And that includes our trials. Therefore, nothing that befalls us in this life is to be viewed as a dark shadow cast by some fickle god of constantly shifting character. All that God brings our way in his providence is a good and perfect gift from a wise Father who loves us with an unchanging and everlasting love, as he pursues his singular purpose of accomplishing the salvation and perfection of his elect.

The reason I think “every good and perfect gift” includes trials, is because of the verbal link back to 1:4. The word *perfect* is the same word that James used in v. 4: “Let endurance have its *perfect* work, that you may be *perfect* and complete, lacking nothing.” Everything, including trials, comes down from this good and loving heavenly Father, and is given to make you perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

In v. 18 James continues the creation motif. James describes the new birth through the Word of truth as a new creation. Just as the original creation was a sovereign exercise of God’s will, brought forth by his mere word of command, so by the exercise of his will he brought us forth through the word of truth. The phrase “the word of truth” occurs four other times in the New Testament, and in each case it refers to the gospel as the means or instrument of the new birth (e.g., Ephesians 1:13). James is referring then to what in theology we call effectual calling. Effectual calling occurs by means of the preaching of the gospel.

God’s sovereign will, put into effect by the preaching of the gospel, has resulted in the inauguration of a new creation. The new creation is still future, the new heavens and the new earth prophesied by Isaiah and in Revelation 21. But we who believe in Christ through the sovereign action of God in giving us new birth by the word of truth – we are the firstfruits of the new creation. We are the downpayment, the first installment of God’s plan of redemption, which is cosmic in scope. Christians are that part of creation first harvested by God as part of the new creation which will be redeemed in its wholeness at the end.

But in addition to the idea of the downpayment or first installment of the rest of the harvest to come, the firstfruits was also the best part of the harvest, “the cream of the crop.” God’s ultimate concern and

delight is not in the physical creation itself, but in those whom he has redeemed and made to be his very own possession. We are the pinnacle of the new creation, the most valuable and desirable part in God's eyes.

How does v. 18 fit in the flow of thought up to this point? In vv. 2-12, James has set forth his basic theology of the testing of faith. Faith must be tested through trials. In vv. 13-17, James has corrected a potential misunderstanding of his theology of the testing of faith. When we are being tested through trials, God is not tempting us to sin. God's will is unchanging and constant, and He only sends us good gifts. In v. 18, he reminds us that the new birth through the word of truth has caused us to be the firstfruits of the new creation. Even though the word "faith" does not occur in this verse, that's what James is describing. Faith is a work of the new creation, created by the exercise of God's sovereign fiat word, the word of the gospel. Therefore, when God sends trials he is not trying to tempt you to fall away. He has no destructive intent. Why would God want to destroy the firstfruits of his new creation? Rather, God's intent is to provide the opportunity for the faith that he himself has authored to be proved genuine. God sends trials to perfect the work of his own hands.

(2) Verses 19-27: Return to and elaboration of the thesis

Having introduced "the word" in v. 18, James now transitions to the next topic: an exhortation to respond to the word by hearing it, letting it shape our lives, and living it out in our actions.

Thus, in v. 19 to the end of the chapter, James returns to and elaborates the thesis of vv. 2-4 to show the ultimate purpose of the new birth. The new birth through the word is intentional and specific ("by the exercise of his will"). God wants us to become his firstfruits, to be the downpayment of the new creation, indeed its choicest part. Since God has given us new birth through the word of truth, we must therefore humbly receive that implanted word and allow it to have its full effect in our lives, for that is God's intention for us as his firstfruits.

Read verses 19-21.

At first the exhortation to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, does not seem to fit very well into the flow of the argument. However, it makes much more sense if we go on to read verse 21 as part of the exhortation. "In humility receive the word implanted" stands in contrast with hasty and angry speech. What James seems to be saying is this. When you encounter a trial, don't start blaming God in anger, saying that God is tempting you to sin. Don't get angry with others who from a superficial point of view, may appear to be the problem. Instead, be quick to hear what God is saying to you in his word, that is, receive the implanted word which is able to save your soul. Human anger does not achieve the righteousness that God requires. It is only when, in humility, you receive the implanted word, that that righteousness is produced.

But, James warns, in vv. 22-24, when you listen to God rather than speak out in anger at Him or others, be careful not to merely *listen* to the word. Make sure that you also do what the word says. For the one who listens to the word is like a person who takes a quick glance at his face in a mirror, and then as soon as he walks away, immediately forgets what he looks like.

Read verse 25

This verse is clearly an important one and stands as the climactic high point of the first chapter. Note the contrast between the person described in v. 25 and the man who looks at himself in the mirror. A superficial glance at our image in the mirror and then walking away, since knowing what you look like is ultimately irrelevant to the daily activities of life – *versus* looking intently and remaining, not just walking away, but staying before the mirror of the word in order to let it transform you. Literally, the Greek word translated "looking intently" means "to stoop to investigate something carefully."

Notice that in the analogy, the mirror stands for "the perfect law of liberty." But what one sees in the second mirror is different: in the first mirror, you see the natural face you received at birth. When you look

intently into the perfect law of liberty you see your *new* identity, given by the *new* birth. You see the firstfruits of the new creation!

What does James mean by “the perfect law of liberty”? The logic of the passage demands that it is identical with “the word of truth” by which we were brought forth as the firstfruits of the new creation (v. 18). It is also identical with “the implanted word which is able to save your souls” (v. 21). The perfect law of liberty must therefore be the gospel.

Now it is strange to refer to the gospel as a law. But this makes sense if you realize that James is not merely referring to the indicative, but also to the ethical implications of the indicative. The indicative and the imperative can never be separated.

That both are in view is clear from the analogy. James speaks of the perfect law of liberty as that in which we behold our new face in the mirror. In other words, we see in the gospel our new identity as those brought forth by God’s will as the first installment and the choicest products of the new creation. But then we must continue to gaze into this mirror, and we must not be superficial observers who walk away and immediately forget what we look like. Because who we are in Christ, what we see when we behold our image in the mirror of the perfect law of liberty, is the very thing that dictates what we ought to be.

In the two final verses (vv. 26-27), James draws his argument to a close, and provides a bridge to the next chapter. I’ll be very brief here. *Religion* refers to the external rites of worship, to ceremonies, rituals, prayers, sacraments, and so on. James echoes Jesus’ condemnation of hypocrisy. Like Jesus, James reminds us that there are many who think they are religious, but such people are deceiving themselves, for in reality God is unimpressed with their outward display of religious activity. This ties back in with the call not to be mere hearers of the word but effectual doers. Those who hear the gospel without putting it into practice prove that they have an empty profession of faith. Interestingly, James says that their profession is belied by their failure to keep a tight rein on their tongue.

Why do I call vv. 19-27 the return to and elaboration of the thesis in the first paragraph? Because faith has been replaced by the word itself! It is not only that God wants to test and perfect your faith. It is much more than that. God wants to test and perfect his own word! He wants to see it come to full expression. He wants to see that his word has gone forth and accomplished what it was intended to accomplish. That is why we must not be mere hearers of the word, but effectual doers of it.

When God formed man and the various animals of the original creation, everything was just as he wanted it to be. God saw all that he made, and behold it was good. How much more the new creation! He brought us forth by the fiat word of the gospel, and it was so. God wants the precious seed of the word to manifest itself in obedience to his will.

What an amazing perspective James has given us on our trials! Let us not grumble and complain at these good and perfect gifts that come down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow cast by turning. Let us rather consider it pure joy, my brethren, when we encounter various trials, since we know that the testing of our faith produces endurance, and endurance will have its perfect result, so that we will be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

**Sermon 4:
The Temptation to Nominal Christianity: Faith's Obedience, Part 1**

James 2:1-13

6-2-02

In the last two weeks we've examined James' theology of the testing of faith, as set forth in chapter 1. This morning, we come to chapter 2, where James makes his first of three main applications. Faith must be tested, if it is to be proved genuine and result in the winning of the crown of life. One temptation that we face in the Christian life is to have an outward profession of faith in Christ that is not accompanied by obedience. If faith is real, it will manifest itself through concrete obedience to God's will, in particular the law of love.

Chapter two is divided into two paragraphs.

The main point of paragraph one is stated in verse 1: "My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism." James describes Jesus as "the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." An awesome, exalted title for the Lord Jesus. In particular it suggests the heavenly exaltation of Christ, and it draws our attention to the fact that this exalted and glorious Lord is coming at the end of history to judge (cp. James 5:9). This reminder is particularly appropriate in view of the fact that the Christians to whom James is writing are evidently in awe of the outward glory of the rich, and do not see the invisible glory of Christ's humble poor, who are glorious even as Christ is glorious.

To paraphrase, James is saying, "In view of the fact that your faith has for its object this glorious Lord who once was crucified but now reigns at God's right hand and is coming again in the clouds of heaven – don't you see how inconsistent it is to hold your faith in this Lord of glory with an attitude of personal favoritism, of showing preference to the rich and despising the poor? True faith is inconsistent with the sins of favoritism and discrimination. And you can see how inconsistent it is, only when you place those sins under the gaze of Him who is the object of our faith. His glory is the glory of heaven. His light is the radiance of the age to come. In the light of that glory, all fleshly evaluations are seen to be totally irreconcilable with a genuine profession of faith in Jesus Christ."

This introductory statement is then illustrated with a specific example of discrimination in vv. 2-4. James depicts a typical worship service, in which Christians have gathered together for worship on the Lord's day. It is interesting that he uses the word *synagogue* in v. 2. This shouldn't be interpreted literally, as if the Christians were still attending the Jewish synagogue. Instead this verse shows that the Jewish Christians of the early church, and probably also the Gentile Christians, patterned their worship services after the synagogue model.

James pictures the scene vividly. The ushers conduct the splendidly dressed person to a fine seat, while contemptuously ordering a poorly dressed person to sit on the floor, "beneath my footstool."

First prong (vv. 5-7)

Having prohibited favoritism in v. 1, and having illustrated it in vv. 2-4, James now explains why favoritism is wrong. Favoritism is wrong because it contradicts God's own evaluation of things. In God's eyes, the poor of this world are rich, since they have been chosen to be heirs of the kingdom. Conversely, the rich of this world are really those who are poor in God's eyes.

Now this presents a problem theologically. Is James merely replacing one form of favoritism with another? Is James saying that God favors the poor, as opposed to the rich? The answer is found in the Hebrew background of these terms, "rich" and "poor." In the Hebrew Old Testament, the word "poor" refers to those who are poor in a spiritual sense, those who recognize their utter dependence upon the Lord and who therefore are looking to him alone for deliverance.

An excellent example is found in Isaiah 61:1 (read). When you turn to the NT the Hebrew word for “the afflicted” gets translated as “the poor.”

Read Luke 4:18.

This explains the difficult saying of Jesus in Luke 6:20: “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Matthew is simply spelling out what is implicit in the word when he adds the clarifying phrase, “the poor *in spirit*” (Matt. 5:3).

Some have attempted to use these statements in Jesus and James to develop a radical theology known as “liberation theology.” This is the view that God has a preferential option for the poor. But liberation theology seriously misreads the teaching of the NT. For one thing, James acknowledges the possibility that a rich person can be a Christian in 1:9-11. The NT condemnation of wealth is not a condemnation of wealth *per se*, but of the spiritual pride and sins of oppression that are often a temptation to the wealthy (Luke 1:51-53). Nor does the NT anywhere state that the poor are specially favored by God apart from personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 7: “the good name which was called upon you.” This seems to be a reference to baptism, when the name of Christ is solemnly pronounced upon the believer, thus incorporating him into the name of Christ. This is another indication of the Christian origin of the book of James.

Second prong (vv. 8-13)

The second reason that favoritism is wrong is that it violates the royal law. What does James mean when he speaks of “the royal law”? The word “royal” in Greek (*basilikos*) is related to the Greek word for “kingdom” (*basileia*). It is significant that the kingdom is mentioned right in the immediate context (v. 5). Therefore, “the royal law” should be translated, “the law of our king.” This is James’ way of alluding to the well known fact that Jesus had made the law of love central to his ethical teaching, and had in fact singled it out as the primary demand of the kingdom. Douglas Moo puts it this way: It refers to “the sum total of demands that God, through Jesus, imposes on believers: the whole law as interpreted and handed over to the church in the teaching of Jesus ... The law in question here is not the OT law as such, but the OT as reinterpreted and imposed by Christ on his followers” (*Pillar Commentary on James*, pp. 112, 117).

At the same time, this law is not totally unheard of or unique to Jesus. There is continuity with the Mosaic revelation of God’s will: the love command is not only “the law of our king,” but it is “according to Scripture.” But although there is continuity with the old law, Jesus brings something new. In the OT the love demand was limited to love for one’s neighbor, and one’s neighbor was defined as one’s fellow Israelite. Jesus takes this to radical new depths when he teaches that we must also love our enemies. Furthermore, Jesus defines the standard of our love differently. Leviticus 19:18 taught that we must love our neighbor *as ourselves*. Jesus said to love one another *as I have loved you* (John 13:34). The *as* clause is not self-centered but Christ-centered. The new measure of our love is no longer ourselves, but the wondrous love shown to us in the cross of Christ.

Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (1645):

“We are freed from the law, as given by Moses, and are only tied to the obedience of it, as it is given in Christ: and though ... we are subject to those commands and that law which Moses gave, yet not as he gave it, but as Christ renews it, and as it comes out of His hand and from His authority: ‘A new commandment I give you, that ye love one another’ (John 13:34). It is a commandment, for Christ is both a Saviour and a Lord; and it is a new one, not that it did not exist before, but because now renewed, and because we have it immediately from the hands of Christ. I shall not much quarrel with this. Acknowledge the moral law as a rule of obedience and Christian walking, and there will be no falling out, whether you take it as promulgated by Moses, or as handed to you and renewed by Christ ... We look not to Sinai, the hill of bondage, but to Sion, the mountain of grace.”

But notice that James takes the love command as handed to us by Jesus, and shows us a new application of it. James points out here in this context that to follow the love command, the law of our king, we must love without showing favoritism or discrimination to any group. The love of God must be extended to all people, including the poor, the shabbily dressed, those rejected and marginalized by society. We must not be eager to evangelize only the wealthy, the upstanding citizens, or famous actors and athletes. We must enthusiastically welcome all into our church, even those who have nothing to offer us. Of course, Jesus may not have taught this specific application in so many words, but he certainly exemplified it in his life, didn't he? He welcomed the outcasts of society, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, into his fellowship. He ate and drank with sinners, because he delighted to show God's love to all, especially to those whom the religious establishment despised as unclean.

Verses 10-11. The unity of the Law was a common presupposition shared by the Jews of the first century. It was also espoused by Paul in Galatians 5:3: "I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." James cites this well known presupposition of the unity of the Torah, just as Paul cites it, not in order to argue that the whole Torah must be observed by Christians, but to show that the only way you can observe the whole Torah is by keeping the law of our king, the law of love. And if you break that law, but you claim to be observing any other specific commandment, such as the seventh commandment, your vaunted law keeping is worthless in God's eyes. It is so easy for us to view the law as a series of individual, separate commandments, some of which we might be keeping and others not. But that is self-deception, James says. Why? Because the law isn't a set of commands but the will of God. The crucial presupposition behind James' argument here is that the law isn't a set of isolated commandments but the revelation of the will of God. Back of the law stands the will of God. Therefore, the unity of the law is founded upon the unity of God. Each particular commandment is part and parcel of one indivisible whole, and together they reflect the will of the one Lawgiver. To violate a command is to disobey God himself and thus to render a person guilty in his sight.

James applies this principle of the unity of the law as follows: Those who may be avoiding the sins of the flesh, like adultery, but who are discriminating against the poor believers, are in fact committing the equivalent of murder. Although James is applying the logic of Jewish orthodoxy here, he is applying it in a Christocentric, new covenant context. It is not the Torah per se to which James urges complete obedience in order to avoid being guilty of breaking the entire Law, but the royal law, the law of Christ, the perfect law of liberty that he urges complete compliance with if we are to avoid being guilty of selective law keeping.

Why is it "the law of liberty"? James explains in verses 12-13 (read).

One commentator put it this way: "Judgment comes so to speak as the accuser before the tribunal of God, and mercy stands up fearlessly and defiantly resists the claim." When justice and mercy are pitted against one another in a contest, mercy wins every time. Mercy triumphs over justice. "So speak and so act as those who will be judged by the law of liberty." So why is the law of love the law of liberty? Because not worrying so much about keeping the commandments frees you from having to be justified before God, and thus you are free to care for your neighbor instead. If you think you will be judged by the law of justice, you will not be free to love. Your heart will be cramped with the self-centered concern to maintain your own righteousness as the most precious possession that no man can wrest from you. Those who are justified on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, not the filthy rags of their own righteousness, are free to love others, to serve others, since they are those who speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.

It is also liberating in this regard. You are no longer afraid to be judged wrongly in the eyes of men. Since you have a future vindication to look forward to at the tribunal of Christ, you are not afraid to lose in the court of human opinion. Thus freed from the fear of what people think, you are able to serve them with selfless love.

So we've looked at the first paragraph of James 2. I've titled this chapter "the temptation to nominal Christianity: faith's obedience." Nominal Christianity is a recurring problem, even in our own day. People

make verbal claims to believe in Christ, to be Christians. And yet their verbal claims ring hollow, not because they commit this or that sin, for all true Christians are sinners saved by grace. No their claims ring hollow because they live in a manner that totally belies their claims. True faith always manifests itself in some fashion. Faith in Christ is always accompanied by some measure of obedience to the law of love, some evidence of living in the consciousness of the day of judgment when we will be judged by the law of liberty.

Sermon 5:
The Temptation to Nominal Christianity: Faith's Obedience, Part 2
James 2:14-26
6-9-02

Last week we began looking at James 2, in which James deals with the first application of his theology of the testing of faith. Chapter 2 deals with a common temptation in the Christian church – the temptation to nominal Christianity, or what James calls “dead faith.” Nominal Christianity exists whenever a person or a whole community professes faith in Jesus Christ, but does so in a manner that is utterly devoid of the kind of the obedience that is an essential manifestation of true faith. In the first half of the chapter we saw that one common problem with nominal Christians is that they despise poor Christians and show favoritism to the rich, in violation of the royal law of love. Such discrimination is incompatible with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. This morning, we come to the second half of the chapter. Here James sets forth in greater detail the precise relationship between faith and works.

Now everyone knows that this is a difficult passage, and the main difficulty is that James seems to contradict Paul. Paul says we are justified by faith alone. James says that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. To make matters worse, the word “justify” is the same in Greek. The resolution to the difficulty is to recognize that James and Paul may be using the same Greek word, but with different meanings.

The word in Greek is *dikaioō*. In the Septuagint it is used to translate the Hebrew word *tsadaq*. Basically the word is used in a judicial context. In the OT, there would usually be two plaintiffs, the accuser and the accused, both of whom would stand before the judge, who would then decide between them. If you were falsely accused, then the judge's task was to justify you, to render a favorable verdict of acquittal, thus declaring you to be in the right (e.g., Deut. 25:1).

When we come to Psalms and the book of Isaiah, we find that this word sometimes takes on an eschatological flavor, having to do with God's vindication of his suffering people. Although they are in exile, although they are in fact in exile because of their own guilt, God will reverse their fortunes and declare his people to be in the right. “The LORD has made known His salvation; He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations” (Psalm 98:2).

Paul picks up on this later, eschatological meaning. For Paul, the eschatological vindication has already intruded into history, in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:21-22). The righteousness of God has been revealed in the cross. God poured out the fullness of his wrath upon Christ, but then he raised Christ from the dead, publicly vindicating him and granting him the reward of eternal life. This transition from wrath to vindication occurred once for all in Christ as our covenant head. Therefore, we who are united to him are partakers of that vindication. And this is what Paul calls justification.

James, however, still holds to the original meaning, which lacks the eschatological connotation. For James, to be justified means to be proved right, to be vindicated in one's claim to be a believer. This older usage can be found in other parts of the NT, for example, in Matt. 11:19, “Wisdom is proved right by her deeds.” And this occurs in the believer's lifetime, according to James. Notice that the justification of both Abraham and Rahab, the two examples that James cites in this section, occurred after their initial faith, but prior to the day of judgment. James declares that Abraham was proved right when he offered his son Isaac, in obedience to God's command. Rahab likewise was proved right when she received the spies sent by Joshua. This idea is stated in James 1:12: “when he has stood the test.” It is a confirmation in the believer's lifetime, of the genuineness of his or her faith. And it only happens as one perseveres in the midst of trials or tests.

Once we keep Paul's and James' use of the word justify distinct, the conflict between Paul and James is seen to be more apparent than real. In reality, the passage is not really even about justification at all. James isn't talking about Shorter Catechism #33, “Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein he

pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone.” If you read that definition into this passage, you’ll never be able to reconcile it with Paul. This passage is about something more basic and more simple. It’s about the relationship between faith and works. If we can just set the issue of justification aside, and focus in on James’ theology of the relationship between faith and works, then everything will fall into place, and James and Paul will be seen to be in agreement. Although they have their own unique insights into the gospel, they are ultimately in perfect harmony.

Verses 14-19: Faith without works is dead and useless

In verse 14, James introduces the topic of the relationship between faith and works with a rhetorical question: “What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can such faith save him?”

In verses 15-17, he gives an illustration of how pious talk can sometimes be used as a cover for the absence of true piety – “go in peace; be warmed and filled.” What is the use of such pious talk, if it is not accompanied by tangible action to provide for the person’s physical needs? “Even so,” James concludes in v. 17, “faith, if it has no works, is dead in itself.”

In verse 18, James appears to raise a potential objection to what he is saying. The problem is that the objector seems to be taking James’ side. As I read the verse pay attention to the “I” who is speaking, and listen to his point of view.

Read verse 18

Whoever this “I” is, he sounds a lot like James, doesn’t he? For this reason, I am persuaded that verse 18 is an objection that a person who is sympathetic with James’ viewpoint might raise in response to the person who claims to have faith without works. This interpretation is called “the ally hypothesis.”

To those who would adopt the position that faith is the only thing they need, and that works are unnecessary, James’ ally may well respond with the following challenge: how can such people prove that they even have *faith*? An ally who adopts James’ viewpoint of the necessity of works can say: “I will demonstrate the reality of my faith *by* my works.”

This verse is very significant theologically, because up till now it might seem that James is contrasting faith and works, as if they were two competing alternatives. Some have faith. Others have works. James might then be thought of as advocating the latter alternative, that of works. But as Douglas Moo points out, “James is not really contrasting faith and works, as if these were two alternative options in one’s approach to God. He is, rather, contrasting a faith that, because it is inherently defective, produces no works and a faith that, because it is genuine, does result in action” (p. 126).

I like the ally hypothesis for another reason as well. It substantiates my argument that for James the word “justify” means to prove the genuineness of a person’s claim to have faith. Here, in verse 18, James uses a related verb, “show, or demonstrate,” which helps us clarify his usage of the word “justify.”

In verse 19, James cites the Shema, the central creed of orthodox Judaism, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” James goes on to point out that the demons also confess an orthodox monotheistic creed – but they do so without any accompanying obedience to God. So how can you be sure your faith isn’t the faith of demons? James adds, “The demons also believe – *and shudder*.” The demons may have a non-saving faith, but at least their faith causes them to shudder in fear of the God they profess. That’s more than can be said of nominal Christians.

Verses 20-26: The examples of Abraham and Rahab

James has established his basic thesis: faith without works is dead, useless, no better than the faith of demons. He has also made the key point in v. 18 that faith must demonstrate itself through actions. Now, in vv. 20-26, James gives two examples from the OT to support his thesis, and to show that the reality of one's claim to faith must be proved right by means of works.

James interprets the life of Abraham in a way that supports his overall point, by pointing to two key moments in Abraham's life of faith. These two moments serve as the bookends of Abraham's spiritual journey with the Lord. James takes the endpoint first (verse 21): "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar?" Certainly we must agree that Abraham was proven to be a genuine believer by means of this most amazing act of faith, when he obeyed God and offered his son Isaac upon the altar. It is utterly impossible to argue that Abraham was a nominal believer, simply going through the motions of religion and piety. He clearly demonstrated his unconditional commitment to the Lord when he stepped out in faith, gathered the firewood, placed it on his son's back, made the long trip to Mount Moriah, and then bound his son to the altar and raised the knife to slay his beloved son. As a result, God said, "Now I know that you fear me, since you have not withheld your only son from me."

That's the endpoint in Abraham's life. Then, in verses 22-23, James moves backward from this to a point very early in Abraham's journey of faith, a point recorded in Genesis 15, when we are told that Abraham was having doubts about the promises God had made. He even suggested to God that perhaps Eliezer of Damascus, his household servant, might be adopted as his heir. But the Lord said, "No, one who comes from your own body will be your heir. Lift up your eyes, and count the stars if you are able to. So shall your seed be." And then the text says something amazing: "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness." On the basis of the mere word of God, on the basis of the promise alone, Abraham put his trust in God. Meredith Kline argues that Abraham at this point said, "Amen" to the promise in spite of his own inability to have a son, and in spite of the unbelievable magnitude of the promise of a seed as numerous as the stars of the heavens. No wonder Abraham's Amen was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Immediately afterward, God swore on oath that he would give the land to Abraham's seed. The oath was a self-maledictory oath in which God threatened himself with a curse, should he prove unfaithful to his promise. This may be what James is referring to when he adds, "and he was called the friend of God." The word "friend" is a technical covenantal term. Literally the word friend is from the verb to love. It probably covers both directions: Abraham loves God, and God loves Abraham.

And so we see these two bookends. At the beginning is Abraham's Amen and God's self-maledictory oath. At the end is Abraham's Amen in action, as he offers his son on the altar. And notice that the link that connects the two events together is Isaac. Abraham believed that God would provide him with an heir to inherit the land that God had promised. But then, when God provides the heir, and then commands him to take that very heir, the very promised seed that Abraham had believed God would provide – Abraham in faith continues to believe the promise. How else could Abraham have offered his son Isaac? Only because he believed that God would still come through and be faithful to his word. The author of Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed that, if necessary, God would even raise Isaac from the dead.

Now notice how James connects these two bookends theologically, in verse 22: "You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected." The two events may have been separated in time, but the offering of Isaac in Genesis 22 was merely the outworking of the faith that was already present in principle in Genesis 15. It is not that Genesis 22 is describing Abraham's works, and Genesis 15 Abraham's faith. Both are about Abraham's faith. Genesis 22 is merely the bringing of that faith to completion and maturity, for the act of offering Isaac in unconditional obedience to God was nothing less than an act of faith. It was faith in action.

James in fact views Genesis 15 as a prophecy that was fulfilled in Genesis 22. He says in verse 23: "And the Scripture was *fulfilled* which says, 'And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as

righteousness.” The offering of Isaac was the fulfillment not only of Abraham’s faith, but it was the fulfillment of God’s declaration that Abraham was righteous. Abraham was declared righteous by faith alone. But Abraham’s status as a righteous man was proven true, it was fulfilled and vindicated, when Abraham stepped out in faith and unconditionally obeyed his Lord in Genesis 22. Abraham was thus demonstrated to be a true servant of the Lord whose profession of faith was more than words and religious talk, but genuine trust in a covenant-keeping God.

What James is saying here in regard to Abraham is simply a concrete illustration of his theology of the testing faith that he laid out in chapter one (James 1:2-4, 12, 18-22).

Verse 25: “In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?” The example of Rahab is similar to that of Abraham. Rahab’s act of receiving the spies sent by Joshua to prepare for the battle of Jericho did not spring out of nothing.

Read Joshua 2:9-11

Rahab had heard about the mighty deeds of Yahweh. She had heard how God had brought Israel out of Egypt with many mighty miracles, by the awesome power of his outstretched arm. And so she had heard the gospel of the mighty acts of God in delivering his people by means of judgment. And so she believed that God was with Israel.

And what’s amazing is that this Canaanite woman takes sides against her own people and identifies with the armies of the living God. In act of stupendous faith she agrees that Yahweh’s judgment upon her people is just. She sees that Joshua and his army are not merely another near eastern tribe looking for more land for themselves. By faith she recognizes that God’s oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them the land of Canaan, is a divinely sanctioned oath, and that the Israelites have a proper claim to this land.

Motivated by this amazing faith, she acts upon it by showing hospitality to the spies, and when the king of Jericho sent out the police to capture the spies, she hides them and helps them escape by a window in the wall. She even takes the initiative. She makes the spies take an oath to spare her and her family. Rahab thus demonstrated that these stories about Israel coming out of Egypt weren’t merely tabloid rumors, but things that she had come to genuinely believe and had become committed to. Her actions, then, were the actions of faith. She proves herself to be a genuine believer in Yahweh.

And what is more, she was a harlot! Because of her sinful profession she would have been an outcast in her society, a shame to her own family. And yet this one who was regarded as unrighteous in the eyes of men, was considered to be righteous in the eyes of God, because of her faith, which manifested itself in the fact that she identified with the agents of the holy war. The fact that James chooses a prostitute as his closing example of justification by works demonstrates clearly that the works that James is calling for are not to be restricted to obedience to the moral law. James specifically identifies her as “Rahab the prostitute,” “the well-known prostitute.” A prostitute is not normally thought of as someone who has kept the moral law. The works that James says justify us, the works that demonstrate that we are in fact servants of the Lord, are thus not defined in terms of law-keeping, but in terms of faith. To receive the spies was an act of faith.

To summarize, let’s read verse 24, which I skipped. I would suggest the following paraphrase: “A person’s religious claims are proved true, not merely by one’s profession of faith, but by the works that flow from faith, by acts of faith.”

This is the difference between dead faith and living faith (verse 26). Dead faith is a mere profession, a mere claim to faith. Living faith is genuine faith, faith that expresses itself in obedience to God in the midst of trial. Let us have living faith. Let us count it all joy when we encounter various trials, for when we have stood the test by acting in a way that expresses the reality of our faith, then our faith will be proved genuine, and we will be blessed of the Lord.

Sermon 6:
The Temptation to Doctrinal Strife: Faith's Gentle Wisdom, Part 1
James 3:1-18
6-23-02

In chapter 1, James introduced us to his theology of the testing of faith. Faith must be tested by means of trials. Every trial involves a temptation to deviate from the will of God, to take the easy way out. But if we persevere under trial, then we will have stood the test, and our faith will be proven to be genuine, saving faith. Beginning with chapter 2, and continuing through the remainder of his treatise, James takes his theology of the testing of faith and applies it to three areas.

Chapter 2 is the first application. Here, James deals with a very common temptation in the Christian church, the temptation to nominal Christianity. There are many who profess to have faith in Jesus Christ, and yet that profession is invalid because it is not accompanied by obedience. The primary area of obedience that James is concerned with is obedience to the royal law, the law of love, originally buried among other laws in Leviticus 19, and now elevated to a level of supreme importance by Jesus. The law of love demands that we treat all believers as heirs of the kingdom, rather than showing favoritism only to a particular segment of the church, whether to the rich or to any other group that we deem (from a worldly perspective) to be of greater importance. Nominal Christianity is worldly because it makes distinctions among fellow believers, each of whom are rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to those who love him.

Although such nominal Christians may claim to have faith, James shows that such faith is empty, useless, and dead, unless it is demonstrated by works. James argues his point by appealing to the examples of Abraham and Rahab, both of whom were justified by means of their actions. Although James appears at first to be contradicting Paul, a closer analysis of James shows that he is using the word “justified” in an older sense, meaning “to be proved right.” A person’s claim to have faith must be proved right, and this can only occur by means of actions, which demonstrate the genuineness of one’s faith. When tempted to deviate from the will of God, both Abraham and Rahab proved that their faith was genuine, saving faith by their actions – actions that were concrete manifestations of their faith. In the same way, James exhorts us to show that our faith is true faith by loving our fellow brothers in the church without discriminating among them on the basis of worldly criteria. The temptation to worldly or nominal Christianity is therefore an opportunity to persevere in faith, bringing our faith to expression through acts of faith as defined by the royal law of love, the law of the kingdom.

Beginning with 3:1 and continuing to 4:12, James now turns his attention to a second major application of his theology of the testing of faith. In this section, he addresses the problem of strife among the community of believers, particularly with reference to those who are teachers in the church – those who, because of their position of leadership in the church, bear a greater responsibility to foster peace and unity in the community of believers.

The fact that the entire section is addressed primarily to teachers is shown by the fact that the section begins with verse 1: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” The word “teacher” in Greek is *didaskalos*. In the NT this word has become a technical term for those who are ordained to the office of minister of the Word, or what we today call the pastoral office (cp. Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

Right at the outset of this new section, then, James identifies his area of concern as the teaching office of the church. Having signaled to us that this is his theme, he explains why it is that teachers will receive a stricter judgment. It is because of the amazing difficulty of being a teacher, which involves using the tongue, that is, using public speech in order to lead and build up the church. The person who can control the tongue is able to control the entire body. The teachers of the church are in a leadership position and by means of the tongue are able to steer the entire community of believers for good or for ill.

(1) A discourse on the tongue (verses 2-12)

Although I see the entire section, 3:1—4:12, as directed primarily to the teachers of the church, there is also much in James' discourse on the tongue of practical benefit for you, the ordinary members of the congregation. So let's take a look at vv. 2-12, where we see several important lessons about the tongue.

The **FIRST** lesson is that in spite of its apparent insignificance, the tongue is disproportionately powerful in its effects, because it is capable of controlling the whole direction of a person's life.

Read verses 2-5a.

It is easy to underestimate the power of the tongue. Words roll off our tongues with such ease, that we fail to realize how significant they are, what a profound impact they have upon ourselves, our hearers, and the entire community in which they are spoken.

Although the tongue is a small member, it is mighty in its effects. The bit that is put into the horse's mouth is small, but with it a rider can turn his mount to the right or to the left. The rudder of a ship is small, but with it the helmsman can control the direction of the entire ship.

Notice that in these analogies, there are three points of comparison. There is the bit or rudder, the small instrument that guides and controls. There is the horse or the ship, the large moving body that is being guided. And then there is the person who is riding the horse who controls the bit, or the pilot of the ship who operates the rudder.

These three elements in the two illustrations have a corresponding element in the community of believers. The bit and the rudder correspond to the tongue, to speech that appears insignificant in itself, but which has significant effects. The horse and the ship correspond to the community of believers, a large entity that needs direction and guidance. The rider of the horse and the ship pilot correspond to the teachers of the church who use communal speech as an instrument for leadership in the community of believers.

So the first lesson is: Do not underestimate the power of speech. It may appear insignificant, but it has tremendous potential, especially when used by the teachers and leaders of the church.

The **SECOND** lesson is this: as a result of the fall, the awesome power of speech has been usurped by sin and by demonic activity, with devastating effects.

Read verses 5b-6.

In vv. 2-5a, James has explained how the tongue is comparatively small and yet able to produce significant affects in the church. He has not said whether these affects are positive or negative. Now, in vv. 5b-6, he speaks of the negative power of speech, viewed from the perspective of the fall. The tongue is a world of iniquity, a raging fire that cannot be controlled. It is full of deadly poison. It sets everything on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

All of these statements are intentionally one-sided and hyperbolic. James isn't saying that the tongue can never be controlled or that it is always set on fire by hell. For he will go on to explain that while no man can tame the tongue, grace is able to do so. At this point, James is merely describing the capacity of the tongue for evil, when viewed exclusively from the perspective of sin. Apart from grace, the tongue is so overcome by sin that it has become an instrument of sin, a tool by which the powers of hell do their work.

The phrase, "set on fire by hell" is further explained in v. 15, where James speaks of the wisdom from below as "demonic." When James says that the tongue is set on fire by hell, then, he means that it is doing its destructive work in service to the demonic powers. Ultimately, the profound damage that sinful speech causes and has caused throughout history is the damage that Satan himself wishes to produce. Satan is

a master arsonist. Human tongues, often even the tongues of church leaders, are the dry brush that the master arsonist sets on fire in order to create raging forest fires of sin.

The **THIRD** lesson is that even when the Spirit's transforming grace is operative in the hearts of those who believe in Christ, speech is difficult to discipline and so a Christian is simultaneously capable of doing good and evil with his tongue. In verse 8, James states that "the tongue is a restless evil." Literally "an *unstable* evil." James used the same word restless or unstable in 1:8 with reference to "the double-minded man who is *unstable* in all his ways." So also the tongue is double-minded and unstable in all its way.

James highlights the double-mindedness of the tongue with a vivid illustration in vv. 9-10. One moment we are blessing God, and the next we are cursing our fellow man who is made in God's image. What a contradiction! How can we bless and praise God, and then turn right around and pronounce a dreadful curse on a creature who bears the image of God?

James provides us here with a wonderful motive to help us when we are tempted to say evil things about a fellow human being. Whenever you feel like saying something truly hateful against someone, stop and remember that that person is made in God's image. The image of God has indeed been defaced and broken by sin, but it is not utterly annihilated. The best analogy is a mirror that someone tried to smash with their fist. You can still see yourself in the mirror, but the image that you see is all fractured, splintered, and distorted. Likewise the image of God in man after the fall. Do not despise the image of God even in its fallen and distorted form. Even though your fellow man may have done something evil against you, do not burst out in anger or hateful speech against him, because if you do, you are cursing a human being who bears the very image of God.

James offers us an additional motive not to speak against our fellow man in vv. 11-12. He paints the absurd image of a spring that produces both fresh water and salt water. James is pointing out the absurdity of the fact that we who are God's people, who have new hearts renewed by grace, would speak both words of blessing and words of cursing. Christians whose hearts have been transformed by the Spirit ought to bring forth out of their renewed hearts, words that are refreshing and sweet, in accordance with their heavenly character as the firstfruits of the new creation.

(2) Application to teachers (verses 13-18)

Having developed the ways in which speech has been harnessed in the service of evil, James now shows that it can also be harnessed by grace in the service of good. In v. 13 James returns to the theme of v. 1 and directly addresses the teachers of the church with a probing rhetorical question:

Read verses 13-18.

To paraphrase, James is saying, "Who among you *considers* himself to be a teacher, a man gifted with wisdom and blessed with theological insight? If you fancy yourself to be such a man, then you must show it, not by multiplying words, as if to display your learning and supposed wisdom, but by good behavior, by words spoken in the gentleness of the true wisdom that comes down from above."

A teacher in the church who claims to be a wise man, but whose teaching produces only bitter jealousy and strife in the church, is a man whose "wisdom" is from below. It is an earthly, unspiritual, and demonic wisdom. But the man whose teaching produces peace and good fruit, that man's wisdom is from above. This warning doesn't apply only to teachers, preachers, and those called to ordained office in the church. All of us need to be warned against stirring up strife in the church by means of ungodly speech that does not build up the body but tears it down and creates disunity.

I think it is significant that the list of virtues in v. 16 echoes both the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, and the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. James of course adds his own particular emphasis. But what do these lists of virtues have in common? They are not qualities found in the ten commandments. The ten

commandments are negative prohibitions, but these are positive virtues. Furthermore, these positive virtues cannot be legislated. They can only be described. And the ultimate description is not a text of Scripture but the incarnation of these virtues in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who perfectly fit the description here: “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.” You cannot be these things in your own strength. But rest assured that these qualities are yours in union with your Lord, the Lord of glory. He is the one in whom the sweet aroma of these heavenly qualities is found. And you are in him, united to him by his Spirit. Therefore, you too may appropriate them by faith, and live them out in your lives, imperfectly to be sure, but certainly nonetheless.

Exhortation

First, although the tongue is a relatively small member set among the members of our body, we must ever be reminded, as Proverbs tells us, that “death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Apart from grace, the tongue is one of the prime avenues for the accomplishment of Satan’s purposes. On the other hand, through the transforming power of God’s grace, the tongue is one of the prime means by which the Spirit gathers a harvest of righteousness and peace.

Sinful speech is not something to take lightly, as in the children’s ditty, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” No, James says, words are powerful and they can severely wound others. On several occasions, the book of Proverbs reflects on the dual capacity of speech to bless or to curse, to wound or to heal:

Proverbs 12:18: “There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Proverbs 15:4: “A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit.”

Proverbs 16:24: “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”

How we need to be more aware of the tremendous effects that our speech can have on others, to wound or to heal, to bless or to curse! If speech in general is powerful, how much more when it comes to spiritual and theological speech. Because of the ultimate importance of spiritual and theological matters, speech in these areas tends to be more volatile, more explosive, and often occurs at both of the extreme ends of the spectrum, the demonic end and the divine end. The problem is that it is often difficult to tell the difference. Our zeal for the truth can sometimes lead us to intemperate language that is in fact demonic in its spirit.

This is why James says that we must evaluate the wisdom of speech on the basis of its fruits. When you see the negative results set forth in v. 16 (e.g., bitter jealousy, strife, selfish ambition, and disorder) you know that the speech involved is animated by a wisdom that is not from above. By contrast, speech that leads to the Christ-like qualities set forth in v. 17 is inspired by the wisdom that is from above. Evaluate your speech and ask yourself which qualities, the Christ-like or the demonic, it most often emulates. Ask yourself which results it most often produces. Does your speech produce strife and disorder? Or does your speech produce the fruits of peace, love, and gentleness?

In yourself, you cannot change your bad and destructive habits of speech. In yourself, you cannot control your loose tongue, or cause it to be used more for edification than for tearing down. James says so. He says that every species of animal has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue. Literally in Greek, “no one of men can tame the tongue.” Augustine comments: “He does not say that no one can tame the tongue, but that no one of men; so that when it is tamed we confess that this is brought about by the pity, the help, the grace of God” (*On Nature and Grace* 15). Only God, by his grace operating through the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, can tame your tongue.

But tame it he will. This is the promise of the text. For the wisdom that we need is a wisdom that comes down from above. That language, “from above” harks back to 1:17-18, where James first made reference to the doctrine of regeneration by the word of truth. The new birth is one of the gifts that comes down from above, from the Father of the heavenly lights. It is the heavenly gift of new life that is nothing less than a downpayment of the new creation. This theology of the new birth James now brings into the argument here in chapter 3 concerning the tongue. The wisdom that comes down from above is the wisdom of the heavenly life that is created by grace. In the power of that grace, we are enabled to have the kind of speech that edifies, that builds up, that produces peace in the community of believers.

**Sermon 7:
The Temptation to Doctrinal Strife: Faith's Gentle Wisdom, Part 2**

James 4:1-12
6-30-02

The entire section from 3:1—4:12 is an exhortation against doctrinal strife in the church, addressed specifically to the ordained teachers of the church. Let's trace the flow of the argument. Right at the outset James states that he is speaking to those who are teachers as well as those who aspire to become teachers in the church. "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren." The word "teachers" is a technical term for the ordained office of teacher or pastor. Why does James discourage those who would aspire to the office of teacher in the church? Because those who teach will incur a stricter judgment.

In vv. 2-12, James explains why teachers will be judged more strictly. The office of teacher involves the use of the tongue. Now the tongue is a small member, and may seem to be relatively innocuous and easy to tame. But in reality, the tongue is like the bit by which a horse is directed, or like a small rudder by which large ships are guided wherever the pilot wants to go. Therefore, being a teacher is a huge responsibility. By the use of the tongue, a teacher can guide an entire congregation of Christians this way or that. And very often, the teacher uses the tongue to produce great harm among the body of believers.

Having dealt with the great power of the tongue, in vv. 13-18, James calls upon the teachers of the church to exercise that power in the service, not of the demonic wisdom that comes from below, but in the service of the wisdom from above. "Who among you is wise and understanding?" Who among you claims to be a wise and insightful teacher? Then let him show it, not by impressive displays of intellectual ability, but by the fruit that results from his wise use of the tongue. Teachers, whose task is to use the tongue for the instruction and guidance of the body, must demonstrate that they are genuine teachers sent from God by using the tongue in a proper manner, to build up rather than to destroy the flock.

On the other hand, by the sinful use of their public speaking role, some teachers are in fact lying against the very truth that they claim to be upholding. Sinful abuse of the tongue's power was apparently a major source of disharmony and disunity within the churches to whom James is writing. This can be seen by noting two crucial terms that occur as a pair in 3:14 and 16, "jealousy and selfish ambition." In Greek they are *zēlos* and *eritheia*.

The first word, *zēlos*, can be translated "jealousy" or "zeal" depending on the context. Although most translations go with "jealousy" in this context, I believe a better case can be made for "zeal." Zeal can be thought of in both a positive and a negative sense. The positive sense is found, for example, in John 2:17, where Jesus, quoting the OT, says, "Zeal for your house has consumed me." But the word can also be used in a negative sense. A good example of the negative type of zeal is in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 where Paul describes the party spirit and factionalism that was rampant in the Corinthian church.

Read 1 Cor. 3:1-4

Zeal for the Lord and his truth can often turn into blind fanaticism and a party spirit. This is what James is protesting against – and this is why he adds the qualifier, "*bitter* zeal." We've all met zealots who are harshly critical of those who are not Reformed, to the point of becoming bitter, rigid, and arrogant in their denunciations of others.

The second word is *eritheia*, which the NAS translates "selfish ambition." Aristotle uses the word to mean "a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means." Paul uses it in Philippians 1:15-17 in a similar manner (read). It seems to convey the idea of ecclesiastical politics, of jockeying for position, and self-seeking pursuit of prestige and power. This meaning fits well in the present context, where James warns, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren." Self-seeking ambition is therefore a good translation, but the ambition in view is directly related to the desire for prominence in the church.

My suggestion is to translate these two words as “zealotry and church politics.” I mention this in order to show that the chapter 3 is not addressed primarily to the individual Christian’s use of the tongue, but to the church as a community. With this in mind, notice that the word “peace” or “peaceable” occurs three times in the last two verses of chapter 3 (vv. 17-18). The goal is peace in a communal sense of harmony and unity within the body. This leads naturally to the opening question of our text this morning, where James raises the question of the source of such quarrels that are disturbing the peace of the church.

Chapter 4:1-12 subdivides into three smaller units:

Verses 1-3: The source of doctrinal strife

Verses 4-10: The worldliness of such strife, along with a call to repentance

Verses 11 and 12: A concluding argument against doctrinal strife

(1) The source of church strife (vv. 1-3)

James begins this new paragraph by asking the question, “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?” If, as I have argued, this new section is continuing the argument from the previous chapter, then James is referring here to *doctrinal* quarrels and conflicts caused by teachers who have not used their teaching authority in accordance with the wisdom from above.

There is a tendency among some interpreters to take this paragraph as literally dealing with the question, “What is the source of war?” as if James were suddenly addressing geopolitical conflict. It is true that the word “quarrels” in v. 1 is usually translated “wars,” but a figurative usage is also possible. In addition, the reference to “murder” in v. 2 need not be taken literally. James has already prepared us for a more expansive understanding of murder in chapter 2, when he identified the sin of favoritism as a form of murder (2:11). James was obviously influenced by the teaching of his Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus taught that the sin of anger is also a form of murder (Matt. 5:21-26).

The ultimate proof that James is not discussing literal wars and literal murder is found in verse 4: “You adulteresses!” It would hardly make any sense to address those who fight wars and commit murder as “adulteresses.” This is a characteristically biblical way of identifying the covenant people of God when they are being spiritually unfaithful to their Lord. Therefore, when James asks, “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?” he is asking what is the source of quarrels and conflicts among believers in the church.

What, then, according to James, is the source of church conflict? He states the answer right away: “Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?” What does James mean by “pleasures”? He uses the same word again in verse 3, “You ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” The word is *hēdonē* in Greek, from which we get the English word “hedonism.” But just as the reference to “war” is not literal, so here we need not limit the word *hēdonē* to “bodily pleasure.” The pleasures that James is referring to are any and all sinful desires. Recall what James said back in chapter 1: “Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own sinful desire.” What sorts of sinful desires does James have in mind? In light of the preceding context (chapter 3), the most likely answer is the selfish ambition of those who lust after positions of prominence, prestige, and power in the church. James is condemning those who want to be teachers, with all the authority and respect that such an office brings to the one who holds it – they want to be teachers, not in order to promote the well being of the Christian community with the edifying wisdom that comes down from above and whose fruit is sown in peace by those who make peace – but in order to promote their own power, to expand their own following, and to edge out the rival factions with whom they are competing.

How do such sinful desires lead to quarrels? James explains in verse 2 (read). Sinful desires for power and prestige lead to quarrels because church leaders desperately want these things, but when they don’t receive them, they commit murder. That is, they use their tongues to spiritually and psychologically murder those whom they perceive to be rivals. They are “envious” – literally, the verb form of “zeal,” the same word that we talked about in 3:14, 16. In other words, they are engaging in bitter rivalry and zealotry.

Here is my interpretive paraphrase of verse 2: “You have sinful desires for power and prestige and yet your desires are never fully met. So you commit spiritual murder against your fellow Christians. You engage in bitter rivalry, zealously pursuing the advancement of your party or faction, and yet you are not able to attain your desired dominance. The result is that you end up fighting and quarreling with your fellow Christians.”

What James says next is rather surprising: “You do not have because you do not ask. [Verse 3] And even when you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your sinful desires.”

James is in effect acknowledging that zeal for the truth and aspirations for leadership position in the church can be good, as long as your motives are right. If we would only pray to the Lord of the church, he will provide us with expanded opportunities and greater resources to preach the gospel to the lost, to serve those who are in need, and to build up the body of Christ. The Head of the church loves to answer such prayers. The problem is that we often ask God for these resources, not in order to help others, to feed the sheep, to bind up the wounds of the hurting and to care for the spiritually needy, but in order to bolster our ecclesiastical power or to protect man-made ecclesiastical institutions. How often in the history of the church, an ecclesiastical institution becomes an end in itself – whether it be a seminary, or a denomination, or a well-endowed congregation. These things are not evil in themselves. In fact, they are necessary tools for the fulfillment of the great commission. They become evil when we elevate them to the same level as the kingdom of God.

(2) The worldliness of such strife, with a call to repentance (vv. 3-10)

James has exposed the source of church conflict as sinful desires on the part of church leaders to turn the church into a means for satisfying their own selfish ambitions. Now, he exposes these selfish ambitions and quarrels in the church as nothing less than worldliness. James calls us to repent of such worldly attitudes. He begins by addressing us with an emotionally charged term, “You adulteresses.” This echoes the language of the OT, where the prophets came with the covenant lawsuit against Israel, and charged Israel with spiritual adultery.

“Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?” The leaders of the church have adopted worldly priorities and worldly ways of thinking. They are therefore friends with the world. Logically this means that they are enemies of God. The leaders of the church who are compromised by their bitter rivalry, party spirit, factionalism, and worldly priorities need to hear this sharp rebuke, because they presume that they, of all people, are right with God. James is pointing out that they are hypocrites, and that their spiritual state is one of great need, not the favored status that they presume.

Read verse 5

James is continuing the theme of spiritual unfaithfulness. God will not let his wayward bride go after other lovers. He is a jealous God who jealously desires that his people return to him and renew their exclusive devotion to him. He has made the Spirit to dwell in us. He therefore jealously desires us, and will not let us go, even if we stray from him.

What Scripture passage does James have in mind here? There is no single verse that corresponds exactly with this quotation. However, the general thought is found throughout the Scripture, especially in the prophetic writings, such as Jeremiah and Hosea. The jealousy of God ultimately overpowers the harlotry of Israel, until he finally restores her to himself by establishing a new covenant with his people. The jealousy of God is a holy jealousy, a holy wrath, that could only be satisfied in the person of Jesus Christ who bore that wrath in our place. As a result of his holy, redeeming love for the church, Christ is jealous for us. He has betrothed us to himself as a pure virgin, and will brook no rivals.

The paradox is that in view of the holy jealousy of our Lord, repentance is not only possible but necessary. The jealousy of the Lord for his church demands that we cast out all worldly ways of thinking that have infected our ministries and our churches.

Read vv. 6-10

On the basis of this jealous love of Christ for his bride, James exhorts us to repent, to humble ourselves in God's sight. Verse 6: "But He gives a greater grace." In other words, the jealousy of God will not burn in holy wrath against us unmitigated by his grace. He will be gracious to us, if we would only humble ourselves in his sight, acknowledge our need and utter dependence upon him.

Those church leaders who engage in factionalism and rivalry, those who in effect turn the church into another arena for worldly politics, are in need of humility above all else. They must stop thinking that they are God's gift to the world, and realize that they are the ones who need God's grace first and foremost. Only then will they be able to minister to others properly, not as ecclesiastical aristocrats but as humble servants.

(3) A concluding argument against doctrinal strife (vv. 11-12)

We come now to the last two verses of the section. James returns specifically to the sins of the tongue which are at the heart of his indictment against those aspiring to be prominent teachers and leaders in the church. The sin of speaking against or slandering one's brother is directly related to the sins of party strife, quarreling, ambition, and pride that he has been dealing with in this whole section.

The word "slander" in Greek literally means to speak against someone. It is the same word found in the list of sins in 2 Corinthians 12:20, along with *zēlos* and *eritheia*. This confirms that vv. 11-12 belong with the whole section on the tongue. It generally involves the idea of making harsh and judgmental speech that attacks others in a critical, censorious, and self-righteous manner.

James goes on to give an argument why we must not slander our brothers in Christ: "He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it." There are only two positions relative to the law: to be a doer of the law, or a judge who administers the law. The moment you begin to judge your brother, you place yourself in the latter position of the judge, and then you have forgotten that your place is merely to be a doer of the law. Furthermore, James says in verse 12, you should not presume to be a judge who administers the law, "For there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?" Whenever we judge our brother, we are taking upon ourselves a God-like prerogative to determine the ultimate spiritual destiny of another human being. But as mere creatures, and what is more, as sinful creatures who deserve eternal judgment, how can we presume to make the ultimate determination of a person's spiritual destiny?

What does James mean by "the law" in this passage? In the two earlier texts referring to the law (1:25 and 2:8), James added a qualifier to make clear what law he had in mind: "the perfect law of liberty," or "the royal law." These added phrases pointed not to the Mosaic Law per se, but to the law of love taken from Leviticus 19 and elevated to a new level of primacy by Jesus as the law of his kingdom. Thus, in these previous texts, the law was the OT law insofar as it has been taken up into the law of Christ and thereby made binding upon the followers of Christ.

It is likely that this is the meaning that James has in mind here in 4:11-12. Although the qualifying phrases are not present, they are probably to be inferred from chapters 1-2. This interpretation is supported by comparison with two other passages.

The first cross-reference is 5:8-9 (read). Here, James identifies the Judge with the Lord Jesus Christ. Turning back to 4:12 we see that the Judge and the Lawgiver are one and the same. Therefore, if the Judge is

Christ, and if the Judge is the Lawgiver, then the Lawgiver is Christ. Christ is the Lawgiver of the church because he is the one who took Lev. 19:18 and made it the primary command for his disciples to keep.

The second cross-reference is the phrase, “doer of the Law,” which is also used in 1:25. Which law is it that we are to be doers of? This is unclear in 4:12. But in 1:25, the only other occurrence of this phrase, to be a doer of the law does not mean to be a doer of the law of Moses, but of the law of Christ, the perfect law of liberty.

How often we are tempted in the midst of doctrinal strife, or any kind of church related conflict, to question the reality of the other person’s faith! We are so quick to say in our hearts that that person cannot really be saved or regenerated, because otherwise they wouldn’t act that way, or hold such “heretical” views. The ultimate argument against such strife and judgmentalism is to stop being judges who apply the law of Christ to others, and instead to start being doers of the law of Christ ourselves.

Conclusion

We have completed our study of the second application of James’ theology of the testing of faith. How does this section fit in with the overarching theme of the book, the theology of the testing of faith? In chapter 2, James addressed nominal Christianity, those who claim to have faith, but do not demonstrate it with actions. In chapter 3, James addresses the same issue as applied to the leaders of the church. If our faith is genuine, it will manifest itself not with mere words, but in faith’s gentle wisdom, “the wisdom from above, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

Sermon 8:
The Temptation to Eschatological Indifference: Faith's Patience, Part 1
James 4:13–5:12
7-7-02

This morning we come to the third and final application of the theology of the testing of faith – the temptation to eschatological indifference. By “eschatological indifference” I mean living as if this life is all there is, denying (by our actions) the reality of a future judgment. Genuine faith, by contrast, manifests itself by patiently waiting for the coming of the Lord.

Our text this morning divides into three paragraphs:

- (1) 4:13-17: Rebuke to rich believers who are boasting in themselves
- (2) 5:1-6: Rebuke to rich unbelievers who are headed for judgment
- (3) 5:7-12: Encouragement to suffering believers to be patient until the coming of the Lord

The first two paragraphs begin with the same introductory phrase, “Come now, you who say ...” (4:13) and “Come now, you rich” (5:1). These two paragraphs are rebukes to those who arrogantly think that they are self-sufficient and in control of their lives. The difference is that the first paragraph is clearly addressed to believers, while the second is addressed to unbelievers. The fact that the first paragraph is addressed to believers is evident by looking at the last verse at the end of this paragraph, verse 17: “Therefore, to the one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

When we come to 5:1-6, however, it is clear that this paragraph is addressed to unbelievers. The overall tone of 5:1-6 is that of the prophetic pronouncement of doom upon the pagan nations. Unlike 4:13-17, there is no hint of exhortation here, no hint of James calling the audience to adopt a different attitude or behavior. The rich here are simply doomed to destruction.

In the first two paragraphs, James has castigated both believers and unbelievers for their arrogant attitudes in connection with the abuse of wealth. Then in 5:7-12, he turns to the suffering people of God, the poor of the earth, who need to be encouraged to adopt an attitude of humility and patience that stands in stark contrast with the earthly minded perspective of the rich.

The entire section beginning at 4:13 and continuing to the end of the book, is a solemn warning against eschatological indifference. The busy merchants in 4:13-17 are tempted to eschatological indifference. They need to remember that they are but a vapor. The wicked rich in 5:1-6 obviously suffer from an acute, even damnable, case of eschatological indifference. As James so poignantly states in verse 3, they have hoarded their wealth in the last days!

Then in 5:7-12 the poor believers who are suffering at the hands of the wicked rich are also tempted to eschatological indifference, whether by wanting to take revenge upon the rich who are oppressing them, or by grumbling against their brothers. Instead, they need to be patient until the coming of the Lord.

(1) 4:13-17: Rebuke to rich believers who are boasting in themselves

In the first paragraph, James warns the wealthy merchants not to boast in themselves or to become arrogant as they plan for the future. The temptation for those who occupy this particular socio-economic status is that it can easily lead to a sense of self-sufficiency and boasting in one's own abilities, but this temptation is common to all of us, whether we are wealthy or not.

Read verses 13-15.

James reminds us of two things.

First, he reminds us of who we are. As creatures, we have no idea what our life will be like tomorrow, and that we are nothing but a vapor. The future is in God's hands, not ours. We have no idea what will happen between now and tomorrow. A major event could completely turn our lives upside down, in either a good way or a bad way. Remember that on September 10, none of us had any idea of what would happen the following day. How quickly our lives changed – in an instant!

Proverbs 27:1: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”

James reminds us that we are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. A vapor is transient and insubstantial. It is transient because it only lasts a short time. And it is insubstantial in itself, lacking solid and lasting substance. Therefore, let us not take ourselves too seriously. Let us not think that we are more important than we really are.

Psalms 39:4: “Lord, make me to know my end and what is the extent of my days; let me know how transient I am ... Surely every man at his best is a mere breath.”

Second, James reminds us that the Lord is sovereign over our lives.

Read verse 15. “If the Lord wills.” This can become a glib formula lacking any real significance. James is more concerned that we adopt the humble that the words express, than that we literally append the words to every sentence in which we express our plans for the future. The attitude we ought to have is one of humble resignation before the sovereignty of God.

There are two words of significance here. The first word I want to draw your attention to is “the Lord.” The Lord focuses on the notion that the risen Christ is the master, and we are his servants. The word in Greek is *Kyrios*, and it seems to be James' favorite title for Christ.

The second word is “wills.” The Master is the one who wills, by his sovereign determination, what will be best for us, what will bring most glory to him. Our lives are not in our own hands. We do not have ultimate control over our lives to will what we want. It is the exalted *Kyrios* who disposes all things for us. We are slaves, and a slave has no right to demand how his master ought to use his slave.

Remember that all your plans for the future, all your dreams and hopes, are in the sovereign hands of God. Therefore, do not become too disappointed if your plans are not fulfilled. Do not become embittered against God if your life takes a big detour in a totally different direction from what you had originally envisioned. You are merely the Lord's servant, and you serve at his beck and call. If his providence calls you to service in another arena or in another manner than you had planned, do not complain but say to your Master, “Reporting for duty, sir! Just tell me where you want your servant to go, and I'm there!” What a joy to lay down my life to serve my King! To die to my dreams and plans, that Christ might be glorified, that Christ would be pleased and say in that great day, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Calvin's motto was: “Lord, I give you my heart, promptly and sincerely, as a living sacrifice.”

(2) 5:1-6: Rebuke to rich unbelievers who are in danger of judgment

James has warned the covenant community against the temptation to eschatological indifference, and he has reminded us all that we are the Lord's servants and that all our plans are at the Lord's disposal. Now, he aims his guns at those outside the covenant community – the wicked rich.

Read 5:1-6

On what basis does James come out so strong in his condemnation of the wicked rich? There are two basic reasons stated in various ways in the text: First, they have hoarded their wealth for self-indulgent motives (vv. 2-3, 5). Secondly, they have defrauded and oppressed the innocent (vv. 4, 6). The interlocking

nature of these two indictments suggests that they are closely related. The self-centered attitude of the rich, seeking their own pleasure and indulgence, is expressed by oppressing others. Why? Because their wealth rests on the exploitation of the poor. They got rich precisely by not paying the wages of their hired laborers (v. 4), and by condemning the innocent to death (v. 6).

In verses 2 and 3, James describes the wealth of the wicked as having “rotted,” as “moth-eaten,” and “rusted.” This is not of course the perspective that they themselves have. In their eyes, the riches and garments and gold and silver that they possess are still new and shiny and full of satisfaction. But from the eschatological point of view, they are already rotten. It is only a matter of time before their inherent rottenness is revealed. It is only a matter of time, before their riches will burn up in the fires of divine judgment. James is trying to get us to see the filthy rich with prophetic eyes, to see through the outer veneer that dazzles our fleshly vision – to see reality as God sees it. Eschatology is like a black light. It brings out things you would not normally see in ordinary light. James wants us to analyze the wealth of the wicked under the black light of eternity.

But there is more. Not only does the eschatological black light bring out the true nature of their wealth, and show it to be already rotten and rusted and worthless, but the eschatological perspective also casts into bold relief just how wicked such earthly-mindedness is. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). Their hearts are set on earthly treasure, and ultimately, on themselves, rather than on God. They are worshipping and serving themselves, rather than the Creator.

End of verse 3: “It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!” Also verse 5b: “You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.” James paints the ironic picture of a man counting his gold coins while the Titanic is sinking. Not only is the man going to lose his money, he’s going to lose his life. That money is of no value to him now. It cannot save him from certain death. And the longer he dawdles over his money, the more likely it is that he will perish in the very midst of his pursuit of worthless treasure.

We look at this picture with a certain degree of pity, for we see how foolish the wicked rich are to be storing up treasure in the last days. But our pity soon turns to righteous anger, because we realize that they are so in love with themselves, that they would prefer death with a bag of gold in hand, than repentance and serving the living God. The eschatological black light therefore exposes the true nature of their idolatry, an idolatry that has so gripped their hearts that they cannot save their soul even if they wanted to – so enslaved are they to their self-indulgence and luxury. They would rather die in the midst of their pitiful rebellion against Almighty God, than turn and be saved from the wrath to come.

Verse 4. In Palestine at this time, it was common for peasant families to be forced off their land due to foreclosures on their property. The young sons of the family would be forced to sell themselves as slaves for a day, as hired hands. Each day’s wage would buy just enough food for the next day. In this situation, if a laborer was not paid at the end of the day, he and his family would be forced to go hungry. These poor day laborers were often treated badly by their employers, just as they are today. If the laborers quit, they would lose their back wages as well.

James paints a vivid image here. He says that the money that should have been used to pay their wages is simply sitting in the bank. And as the back pay sits there it is crying out to the Lord of Sabaoth, just as Abel’s blood cried out to God for justice against his brother Cain.

The Lord of Sabaoth is an Old Testament title for God that means “the Lord of hosts.” The original reference to the hosts or armies of Israel that God led into the battle has probably faded away. But the emotive connotation of this exalted title still brings to mind the notion of the sovereign, Almighty Lord of heaven and earth, who comes in judgment to administer justice for the oppressed and to mete out vengeance upon the wicked. The Lord of Sabaoth is in heaven, listening to the cry of the oppressed, and he will bring about justice for his elect who cry to him day and night (Luke 18:7-8).

(3) 5:7-12: Encouragement to suffering believers to be patient until the coming of the Lord

Do you see how the argument has been escalating and gaining momentum? James began in 4:13-17 by warning the wealthy merchants who are Christians against the temptation of trusting in their own ability to plan for the future. Such boasting presupposes an eschatological indifference, a failure to realize that our lives are but a vapor, and that we have no control over the future. Then, 5:1-6, he turned up the eschatological heat a couple of notches. The wicked rich are taking the same sin of eschatological indifference to greater heights of wickedness. They not only boast in themselves, but their hearts have become idolatrously wedded to their money, and they have taken advantage of the weak, even to the point of withholding their wages and having innocent people who stood in their way put to death.

Now that James has gotten us pumped up with excitement as we think about the doom of the wicked rich, in vv. 7-12, he returns now to exhorting us who are Christians to be consistent. Having stoked the fires of our eschatological consciousness, we are now encouraged, as those who are suffering at the hands of the wicked rich, to be patient until the coming of the Lord. We must not take matters into our own hands. We must wait for the Lord to come and set things right.

The word “patience” occurs 4x in this paragraph; “endurance,” 2x. So patience and endurance are the theme. James began his epistle with this very theme, and now he is returning to it at the end.

Read verses 7-8

The farmer can prepare the field and sow the seed. But ultimately, he must wait upon God for the rain to come, the early and the later rains that are so essential to a good harvest. On what basis are we to be patient and endure, like the farmer? On what basis are we to strengthen our hearts? The motivation for patience is the certainty of the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 8b: “For the coming of the Lord is *near*.” Our hearts are often weak. We lack courage and strength to continue plodding on in the tasks of the farmer. But if we would only remember that the coming of the Lord is near, then we can strengthen our hearts to labor with renewed energy and zeal in the Lord’s harvest fields.

What does the nearness of the Lord’s coming actually mean? It is not a chronological nearness, but a spiritual nearness, due to the overlapping two-age construct of NT eschatology. It is the absolute certainty, the knowledge that the present age is already on the way out, and that the age to come has already been set in motion – that is what spurs us on in our service. We have something the farmer never had: we have 100% certainty. The refreshing rains are coming, and the seed we have planted will produce a sure and certain harvest at the end of the age.

In verse 9, James applies the certainty of the second coming in another area. Whenever we face difficult circumstances and trials, what do we do? We often grumble against those who are closest to us, particularly against our brothers and sisters in Christ. James warns against this kind of verbal behavior by reminding us that the footsteps of our Lord Jesus can already be heard coming down the hallway to knock on the door. When he comes in, will we as a congregation be ashamed of the bickering and backbiting that Christ may find in our midst?

Verses 10-11. The example of the prophets. When James refers to the prophets, we are to think of those righteous men who suffered at the hands of the wicked Israelites precisely because they proclaimed that the Israelites were going to be judged severely. Elijah was persecuted by Ahab and his wife Jezebel because through Elijah’s ministry God brought the covenant curse of drought upon the northern kingdom for worshipping Baal. Jeremiah was imprisoned because he said that the Lord would wipe out Jerusalem – not exactly the message that king and the rulers wanted to hear.

The implication is that the Christian church is to view itself as having a prophetic stance toward the unbelieving world. The church warns of coming judgment. Because we do so, we suffer at the hands of

unbelievers. But like the prophets who went before us, we must be patient until the coming of the Lord. Then our message will be proved right, and we will be vindicated.

Interestingly, James adds the figure of Job. Job is not the most likely candidate, given the fact that he complained bitterly against the Lord for what he perceived to be the injustice of his sufferings. Why should we imitate Job? Because even though his faith was severely tested, and he succumbed at times to deep depression and doubt, nevertheless he never completely gave up his trust in the Lord. In the end, when the Lord confronted Job in the whirlwind, Job repented of the bitter things he had said, and humbled himself before God. As a result, the Lord showed himself to be, as James says, “full of compassion and mercy.” The Lord did not punish Job, but restored him to his previous position of wealth and honor, and Job’s latter end was greater than his beginning. Thus we too may often be on the verge of giving up, and calling it quits. But we may take comfort from the example of Job, whose ultimate restoration is interpreted by James in eschatological terms as a picture of what the Lord will bring about for his people at the very end, when he returns and redeems our bodies from this fallen world, and grants us eternal glory in heaven with himself. The Lord knows that we are weak, earthen vessels, and that we often crack under pressure. But he is full of compassion and mercy, and at his return he will graciously reward us more than we can possibly ask or think – not on the basis of our faithfulness, but Christ’s.

Let us not succumb to the temptation of eschatological indifference. Let us adopt a humble attitude as the Lord’s servants who stand at his beck and call, ready and eager to serve him in whatever way God in his providence should call us. Let us be patient until the coming of the Lord.

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

Sermon 9:
The Temptation to Eschatological Indifference: Faith's Patience, Part 2
James 5:13-20
7-14-02

This is a controversial passage. It is appealed to by Pentecostals to support their aberrant theology of healing. They say, Look, the text is explicit. Verse 15 says that the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick. This passage is also a proof text for the Roman Catholic sacrament of last rites.

What are we to make of this passage? The interpretation I am going to offer this morning is somewhat unique and not widely held by biblical scholars. But I'm not alone in my interpretation. It is also held by Jack Collins, a biblical scholar who teaches at Covenant Theological Seminary.¹

To begin with, we must understand that the specific setting in view here is not just any sickness, but a very seriousness illness in which death is feared to be close at hand. The evidence for this is that the person is so sick, he cannot go to the elders, but must call for the elders to visit him at his bedside. Furthermore, James uses another word in verse 15 that is translated "the one who is sick" but it is a bit stronger than that. This second word means "to be hopelessly sick, to waste away," and in some contexts it even means "to die."

In other words, we could paraphrase verse 14: "Is anyone among you on his deathbed?" If anyone is ill to the point of facing the very real prospect of death, then he or she is to call for the elders of the church and they will pray for the person and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. We'll talk about the anointing with oil later. For now, the picture is fairly straightforward. The elders have prayed for the seriously ill person, and they have also anointed him or her with oil in the name of the Lord.

Now, verses 15 and 16 is where things get tricky. "The prayer offered in faith" clearly refers back to verse 14, to the fact that the elders have prayed for the seriously ill person. But what does James mean when he states, without qualification, that this prayer will restore the one who is sick? In Greek, the word translated "restore" is literally the verb "to save." There are many examples in the gospels where the verb "to save" can be used in a physical sense to refer to restoration to health. And so it is certainly possible to translate here: "The prayer of faith will *restore to health* the one who is sick." But that is not the way James commonly uses the word. In each of the four other instances where James uses this word, it refers to salvation in the eschatological sense of deliverance from eternal death (see James 1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20).

James seems to use the word "to save" exclusively with reference to spiritual salvation. We even have an example right in the immediate context where it clearly has that meaning. So it's a bit odd that James would switch meanings and use it to refer to physical healing. My initial translation, then, is: "The prayer of faith will save from eternal death the one who is sick to the point of physical death."

This is confirmed when we take a look at the next clause in the middle of verse 15: "... and the Lord will raise him up." The Lord's raising the sick person up is usually interpreted to mean that the Lord will raise the person up from his sickbed and grant him restoration to full health. But is that the only possible meaning of those words? I think that you will agree with me that this could very well be referring to the resurrection of the body. James uses the same verb for resurrection that is found throughout the NT.

Putting both sentences together we have: "The prayer offered in faith will save from eternal death the one who is sick to the point of physical death, and the Lord will raise him up."

Now you ask, "Why would a sick person be worried about whether he will be saved and resurrected at the last day? If he or she is already a believer, why would he need this reassurance?" James explains the answer in the last sentence of verse 15: "And if he has committed any sins, it will be forgiven him." In other

¹ C. John Collins, "James 5:14-16a: What is the Anointing For?" *Presbyterian* 23/2 (1997): 79-91.

words, the person who is gravely ill, to the point that he suspects that he is about to pass out of this life into the next, is naturally going to be concerned to make sure that he is right with God.

Then, in verse 16, James concludes: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.” Now one interpretation is the view – common among those who believe in healing – that the reason people suffer with various illnesses is because of unconfessed sin in their lives. Physical illness is merely the outward manifestation of inner illness of the soul. Therefore, James would be saying you ought to confess your sins in order to secure release from physical ailments.

But there are a number of problems with this view. First, the concern in this passage, as we have seen, is not just any illness, but illness that is so serious that the person is facing the very real prospect of death.

Second, there is no biblical warrant for the idea that sickness is always rooted in unconfessed sin. Remember the story of the man born blind in John 9? The disciples asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” And Jesus replied, “It was neither, but it was that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Third, the word “healed” is best interpreted here as a spiritual restoration and reconciliation. Whether not it is accompanied by physical healing is up to God. In some cases, it may very well be, but if spiritual healing is effected by confession, divine forgiveness, and assurance, then that is all that we can properly expect from God.

An example where the terminology of “healing” is used metaphorically to mean healing from the guilt and power of sin is 1 Peter 2:24, where Peter, speaking about Christ, says: “He himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” This is an allusion to Isaiah 53:5: “He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon him, and by his scourging we are healed.” (Another example of “healing” in a spiritual sense: Heb. 12:11-13).

The Holy Spirit’s healing work is to apply Christ’s death to the wounds caused by sin. Christ has taken upon himself our infirmities and our sins, and bore them in his own body on the tree. It is an objective reality. But we also need the subjective assurance of this. Our sins may be forgiven, but our consciences may not be fully healed. The Spirit takes the work of Christ and applies it as a salve to our conscience to assure us that we are indeed forgiven and accepted by the Father.

So, then, if the healing mentioned at the end of verse 16 is the healing of forgiveness, then we see that the purpose of calling the elders and confessing your sins to them, is for spiritual healing. The phrase “to one another” does not refer to some kind of mutual confession among the members of the congregation, but refers back to verse 14, to calling the elders and having them pray for you, so that you may be saved, raised at the last day, and forgiven.

This seems to be supported by the second half of verse 16: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” James then singles out Elijah as one particularly righteous man whose prayer accomplished much. Elijah’s prayers accomplished the dual covenant sanctions of the old covenant. When he prayed, the covenant curse of drought came upon Israel. When he prayed the second time three and a half years later, the covenant curse was lifted and the blessing of the rains came and refreshed the people of God.

The last two verses are a continuation of the topic of deathbed confession. The restoration of the erring brother is occurring by means of the church’s ministry of reconciliation. Not only should the extremely sick person who is on his deathbed request this ministry, but the elders should be on the lookout for straying sheep, and especially at the moment of death, they should seek to bring the wanderer back to God. In this way, the church will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

What James is teaching in our text is this. Serious sickness is an opportunity to search our hearts and confess our sin. When we are facing the very real prospect of death, our minds are lifted to that heavenly judgment day when we will stand before the Lord Jesus Christ to give account of our thoughts, words, and actions, whether good or bad. As we contemplate that day, we can only conclude one thing, and that is that we are wretched sinners in his sight. Alone on our sickbed such thoughts cannot help but bewilder and confuse, perhaps even cause us to tremble in fear.

In the Old Testament period, prior to the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, serious sickness was a spiritual crisis of major proportions.

Read Isaiah 38 (vv. 1-3, 10-14, 18-21)

Why was the prospect of death such a cause of panic for Hezekiah? In the Old Testament, the land that God gave to his people as their inheritance was a type of the heavenly inheritance. At the center of the land stood the temple, the place where God dwelled with his covenant people. The glory-cloud that took up residence in the temple symbolized God's holy presence. The entire land was holy, because it was set apart by God's presence in the temple at the cultic epicenter. By means of these typological and sacramental arrangements, God's old covenant people were taught to view temporal blessings like long life in the land as a type of eternal life and communion with God. Conversely, sickness and death were the curses of the Mosaic covenant that came upon those who transgressed the covenant, and were therefore regarded as God's judgment. To be cut off from the land and the temple and the covenant people, was to be cut off from God's own presence. It was to be regarded as unclean, unholy, and unfit for fellowship with God.

Therefore, when pious Jews became ill to the point of death, this was a most serious situation. Sickness was not abhorred merely because of physical suffering, but because of what it symbolized on the spiritual and covenantal plane. Sickness meant that you were about to be cut off from the land of the living, and hence from God himself. In such a situation, then, the pious Jew would cry out to the Lord for deliverance. This form of prayer was called the lament. Often laments included cries of distress as the sick person lamented the fact that his fellow Jews were taunting him, and interpreting his sickness as a form of divine abandonment on account of his sin. Sometimes the lament included other elements, such as a confession of sin, or a vow that if he recovers he will offer a special sacrifice at the temple.

If the Lord delivered him from his sickness and granted him a full recovery, he would then go into the temple to pay his vow by offering a sacrifice. As the sacrifice was being offered the person would use a psalm of thanksgiving, to thank the Lord for the deliverance and rejoicing in God's lovingkindness and favor. The fact that it all took place in the temple is exceedingly important. The physical restoration was thus interpreted in terms of a spiritual restoration to fellowship with God.

This whole process of sickness, lament, restoration, and thanksgiving occurred on both the individual and the corporate levels. On the corporate level we have a lament like Psalm 102 or Daniel 9 which are corporate confessions of all Israel, groaning in exile, while the temple itself lies in ruins. God then responds to the cries of his covenant people and promises to restore them to the land and to rebuild the temple.

When we come to the New Testament, the corporate experience of all Israel converges on the person of Jesus himself. He is baptized in the river Jordan with the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is thus identified as the lamb of God upon whom the totality of the sin of God's people has been placed, and he must undergo the covenant curse on behalf of all the elect. When we finally come to the climactic moment, when Jesus is hanging upon the cross, what does he do? He takes upon his lips the opening words of Psalm 22, a psalm of lament: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But the Lord did not abandon his soul to the grave, and did not let his suffering Servant see corruption. He raised him from the dead and granted him full restoration, setting him at his own right hand in glory and honor.

As a result of the death and resurrection of Christ, therefore, the old covenant process of sickness, lament, and restoration has been fulfilled. The physical land of promise has now been transcended and fulfilled in heaven itself. The temple where God dwells in the glory-cloud in the midst of his people has been transferred to heaven, and Christ is the chief cornerstone of that temple, and we are the living stones being built up in him.

When believers in the new covenant age get sick, no longer need we view sickness and death as the sign of God's disfavor. Instead, we view sickness and death as the precursors to glory. Paul says that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed. He says that we boast in tribulations, because tribulations produce character and character produces hope, hope that will never be put to shame. James adopts the same perspective, and calls us to rejoice in trials, since the trial of our faith is producing patience, and patience will have its perfect work. James says, "Be patient, my brothers, until the coming of the Lord."

So there is no need to respond to serious sickness the way the Old Testament saints did. Instead, we ought to call for the pastors of the church to come and minister to us and, specifically, to anoint us with oil in the name of the Lord as a sign of the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts as the downpayment of the future resurrection of our bodies. In the Old Testament the anointing oil was used as a sign of the Holy Spirit. When we come to the New Testament, all believers have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit's anointing is a pledge or downpayment of the resurrection of our bodies (cp. 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:1-5; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). When the elders anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord, and pray over him, and as the sick person confesses his sins to the pastors of the church and receives forgiveness – by means of this deathbed ministry, the individual saint is sent on his way prepared to cross the river of death and await the resurrection of the body with certainty.

Unlike the saints of the old covenant, the prospect of death need not make us quail in fear. Because of the resurrection of Christ, we need not take it as a sign that death will cut us off forever from God's presence and favor. Rather, death is merely the last trial that we must endure in our earthly pilgrimage. Having called us to faithfulness and patience in the other trials that James has described, James concludes by encouraging us to face the final trial with the church's help, and in the confidence that the Lord has prepared a crown of life for all those who faithfully serve him to the end.

**Sermon 10:
James and Paul, Part 1**
7-28-02

Two weeks ago, I finished preaching through the book of James. This morning and the following Sunday, I want to show that there is no conflict between James and Paul. This is a serious problem. The two texts we have read, James 2:24 and Romans 3:28, seem to be in direct conflict with one another. It was for this reason that Martin Luther doubted the canonicity of James and called it an epistle of straw. He did not think it was possible to reconcile Paul and James, and therefore, James had to go. He also objected to the fact that it makes so few references to Christ, and seems to leave out the cross.

However, Luther's harsh judgment on this epistle has not been followed by the majority of Protestant theologians. Reformed theologians in particular have always accepted James as part of the canon. It is an important epistle, and the fact that the Holy Spirit guided the early church to include it in the canon must be taken with the utmost seriousness. The Holy Spirit wants this book in the canon, and he wants the church to pay attention to it and to let it inform our theology and our practice as the new covenant people of God.

The apostolic authority of James

My goal, then, is to show you that James and Paul are in perfect harmony. But first of all, I want to begin by showing that there *cannot* be any contradiction between James and Paul, because both were authorized by Jesus Christ himself as apostles commissioned to lay the once-for-all theological foundation of the church for all subsequent generations.

Of course we know that Paul was an apostle. But what about James? He draws attention to his authority right at the outset of his epistle when he identifies himself as "James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." The word bondservant is *doulos*, the same word that Paul uses: "Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ" (Titus 1:1). To be a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ means more than to be a Christian. It is a title of office.

Why does James call himself a bondservant of the Lord Jesus? Because the teaching of Jesus stands at the heart of James's thought. It is a common mistake to view James as an essentially Jewish writing. But James does not write as a Jewish rabbi but as an apostle of Christ. Nowhere in this epistle does he appeal to the Mosaic Law as directly binding. He quotes from the Law two or three times, but in the context he always makes it clear that it is not the Law itself which is binding, but the Law as it has been taken up into the teaching of Jesus, the Law which is now for Christians the law of Christ, the perfect law of liberty. James's allegiance is not to the Mosaic Law, but to Jesus himself. No other NT book outside of the four gospels contains so many quotations of the sayings of Jesus. The book is permeated by the spirit of Jesus. As many as 36 parallels to the teaching of Jesus can be detected. You get the impression that his memory of the person of Jesus and his ministry was still fresh in his mind, and that it had left such a deep impression upon James that he is, as it were, the living conduit of the Master himself. In the person and ministry of James, the Lord's brother, the church is in contact with the person and ministry of Jesus himself. He speaks with the same authority, the same withering rebuke of Pharisaic formalism and pride. He calls upon the disciples of the Lord to follow their Master with absolute devotion. And is not this the very definition of an apostle? Jesus himself said to the original twelve disciples, "Whoever listens to you, listens to me; and whoever rejects you, rejects me" (Luke 10:12).

Another important point that many people don't realize is that Paul *himself* recognized the apostolic authority of James. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul lists off the witnesses of the resurrection. In addition to appearing to the twelve, and to Paul himself, the risen Christ also appeared to James. The implication is that this appearance was also a call to leadership alongside the original apostles and Paul himself. Also, in Galatians 1, Paul says that during his first visit to Jerusalem, he became acquainted with Peter, but he did not see any of the other apostles – and then he adds, "except for James." Paul recognized that James possessed an apostolic office, as a representative of Jesus Christ, just as he himself did.

My point, then, is simply this: if both James and Paul are authorized apostles of Jesus Christ, clothed with the authority of Christ to lay the theological foundation of the church, then there cannot be any contradiction between them.

With this in mind, I want to show that, in fact, they are in perfect harmony and agreement. I'm going to do so in two sermons. This morning I will demonstrate that James is in agreement with Paul in teaching that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Next week, Lord willing, I will demonstrate that Paul is in agreement with James in teaching that dead faith is not saving faith, but genuine faith must be tested and must express itself through action.

So this morning, I want to show that James agrees with Paul in teaching that we are not saved by works, but by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone.

Before I explain James's view of salvation by faith alone, I want to go back and remind you of what I said in my sermon on James 2:14-26. We need to clear away the apparent denial of salvation by faith alone first. Once we've done that, then we'll look at what James has to say positively.

It is true that the statement in verse 24 – “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” – it is true that this one sentence, taken out of context seems to be in direct contradiction with Paul, who states just as clearly in Romans 3:28, “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

As we saw when we looked at this passage several weeks ago, the resolution to the difficulty is to recognize that James and Paul are using the same word with different meanings. In the Old Testament, the word “to justify” is used in a judicial context. There would usually be two plaintiffs, the accuser and the accused, both of whom would stand before the judge, who would then decide between them. If you were falsely accused, then the judge's task was to justify you, to render a favorable verdict of acquittal, thus declaring you to be in the right. The judge was not supposed to justify the guilty. He was only supposed to justify the innocent, that is, declare them to be in the right.

When we come to Psalms and the book of Isaiah, we find that this word sometimes takes on an eschatological flavor, having to do with God's vindication of his suffering people. Although they are in exile, although they are in fact in exile because of their own guilt, God will reverse their fortunes and declare his people to be in the right. Paul picks up on this later, eschatological meaning. For Paul, the eschatological vindication has already intruded into history, in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

James, however, still holds to the original meaning, which lacks the eschatological connotation. For James, to be justified means to be proved right, to be vindicated in one's claim to be a believer. This older usage can be found in other parts of the NT, for example, in Matt. 11:19, “Wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

So there is no conflict. James is saying that a person's profession of faith in Jesus Christ is proved right, is vindicated, not by mere words or claims, but only through works which flow from faith and which are the visible manifestation of faith. A faith that is not expressed through actions is a dead faith. It isn't true faith at all. True faith, on the other hand, always expresses itself through obedience. My translation of verse 24 is as follows: “A person is proved right by works, and not merely by faith.”

Much more could be said, but that is enough to help alleviate the apparent conflict. But we must now move on to a positive development of James's soteriology. This is something that we will have to piece together using the various references scattered here and there throughout the epistle. Soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation, is not really James's concern. He hasn't written a treatise on it. However, it is something that we can piece together like detectives as we pick up the various clues that he has left us.

The epistle of James is a highly focused book, aimed at making a very specific point. As a bondservant of Jesus Christ, James has written this epistle to Christians, to followers of Christ as Lord and Savior, for the purpose of instructing them on the nature of true faith. The emphasis on “faith” in James is evident when you consider that the word for faith, both as a noun and as a verb (*pistis/pisteuo*) occur 19x in this epistle. James is asking one question in this epistle: What does it mean to confess Christ, to profess to believe in Him? What is the nature of faith in Christ?

In the course of his discussion of the nature of faith, James makes four important statements about faith that correspond to Paul’s teaching.

- (1) Faith is a sovereign gift of God
- (2) Faith is created by the gospel
- (3) The object of faith is Christ himself
- (4) Faith alone saves

(1) Faith is a sovereign gift of God (1:17-18)

Faith is a result of new birth from above, through instrumentality of the gospel (Read 1:17-18). “In the exercise of His will.” In verse 17, James has commented on the creation narrative, and he refers to God as “the father of lights,” referring to the creation of the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day. In Genesis 1, we see God enthroned in heaven dictating his sovereign fiats of creation. “Let there be light, and it was so.” There are no forces standing in God’s way to oppose him. He merely speaks, and it is done. So here James says that the new birth by which we are brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ is a sovereign act of new creation. By the free and sovereign will of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, we have been brought forth as the first fruits among His creatures.

In chapter 2, James makes the same point when he says that “God chose the poor of this world to be rich in faith” (2:5). In other words, election is the cause of faith, not the other way around. We come to faith because God chose us to have faith, and granted us that faith in the exercise of his sovereign will. Faith is one of the good and perfect gifts that comes down from above, from the father of the heavenly luminaries, with whom there is no variation or shadow cast by turning.

If faith is the sovereign work of God, a new creation, and something that is entirely the result of the exercise of his electing will, then certainly salvation for James is not based on works. Salvation is entirely a matter of grace. It is because he exercised his will, that we are saved, not because we exercised our will and made strenuous efforts to reform ourselves morally. James agrees with Paul, then, in teaching that salvation is not by human effort but by God’s sovereign will.

(2) Faith is created by the gospel (1:18, 21)

This new birth occurs by means of “the word of truth.” This phrase occurs in the salutation of Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians, where Paul says that the believers at Colosse have been blessed with faith, love, and hope. They have faith in Christ Jesus, love for all the saints, and their hope is laid up for them in heaven. And then he adds that this heavenly hope was something that they “heard in the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world” (Col. 1:5-6). Thus “the word of truth” must have been a stock Christian phrase in the early church to refer to the gospel, the apostolic proclamation of Jesus Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the free offer of forgiveness for all who turn from sin and put their trust in this risen and exalted Savior. In verse 21, James refers to this word of truth as “the implanted word which is able to save your souls.”

Believers are the firstfruits of the new creation, a result of God’s sheer fiat activity just as the light sprang forth out of the darkness in response to his command. James views the preaching of the gospel as parallel to the divine fiats by which God spoke the creation into existence.

(3) The object of faith is Christ himself (2:1)

Faith is directed toward the object, the risen Christ of glory (2:1). And it is directed toward Christ as:

The coming Judge (5:8-9)

Who is able to save one's soul from eternal death (4:12; 5:20)

The Judge whose mercy will triumph over judgment (2:13)

The Judge who will grant forgiveness and resurrection life (5:14-16)

... who will bestow upon us the crown of life (1:12)

and an inheritance in his kingdom (2:5)

One reason Martin Luther doubted that James even belonged in the canon is that in his opinion it did not preach Christ. And so he said that James was an epistle of straw. But Luther was dead wrong in his assessment. James is Christ-centered from beginning to end. Everything in this book is Christ-centered. It is written by a bondservant of Christ to those who confess that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, who is now the exalted Lord, who is coming soon to judge all mankind at the end of history and to deliver his chosen people from eternal death.

(4) Faith alone saves

Because the object of faith is Christ alone, it necessarily follows that for James, it is faith alone by which we are saved. To look unto Christ in an attitude of trust and dependence, to look to the risen Lord who covers our sins, raises us unto eternal life, and gives us the promised inheritance – to look to this Savior in such faith, means to look away from oneself to Another. It means to leave behind all pretensions at self-justification, all reliance upon one's own righteousness. The aloneness of the object of faith necessarily implies the aloneness of the instrument by which we rest upon that alone object. We rest upon Christ, and Christ alone.

For James, faith is essentially an attitude of humility and trust. Faith cannot coexist with an attitude of pride and self-sufficiency. Only the humble, the meek, the poor in spirit, who know their need, can trust in the Lord Jesus Christ unto the salvation of their souls. Here, James draws upon an Old Testament motif called "the piety of the poor." In the Old Testament, the poor does not refer merely to a socio-economic class, but to those who are poor in a spiritual sense, those who recognize their utter dependence upon the Lord and who therefore are looking to him alone for deliverance. All of these ideas are contained in the Hebrew word *anavim*. Sometimes the word is translated in the LXX as "the humble," as in Psalm 34:2: "My soul will make its boast in the LORD; *the humble* will hear it and rejoice." Sometimes the very same word is translated "the poor," as in Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to *the poor*" (as quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18).

James sees the poor as those who are favored by God, not in the sense that all poor people will be saved, but in the sense that the poverty of spirit that is often associated with economic poverty has become a paradigm of spiritual poverty and trust. James is simply echoing the teaching of his Lord in Luke 6:20: "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Matthew then spells out what is implicit in the word "poor" when he adds by way of clarification, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3).

With this context in mind, turn with me to James 4:6 (read). In the context of the contrast with the self-sufficiency of the rich upon whom he thunders his curses in chapter 5, this statement here in 4:6 is highly significant. The rich are proud, self-confident, wicked men, who use their wealth and their power to trample upon the rights of the defenseless. By contrast, true religion is to visit orphans and widows in their distress, thus identifying with God's *anavim*, the humble and afflicted ones who look to God alone for deliverance from oppression. This is James's way of saying that we are justified by faith alone, apart from any merit of our own. We are the afflicted ones who have nothing of our own to offer. Utterly helpless and dependent upon the Lord, we trust in his promise to deliver all who look to him in humble trust.

Conclusion

As this brief survey has shown, the soteriology of James is in perfect harmony with that of Paul. He teaches that we are saved by humble faith that looks in utter dependence to Jesus Christ alone, a faith that renounces all self-reliance and pride. This faith is a sovereign gift of God that comes through the preaching of the gospel, the implanted word that is able to save your souls. This faith is a heavenly birth from above, that is effected by the sovereign will of God, since he is the one who has brought us forth by the word of truth as the first fruits of his new creation. And this faith has for its object the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, he who is able to save and to destroy, he who is coming again to judge the world, and who grants forgiveness to his humble servants who look to him in faith, covering a multitude of their sins, and who will raise them up at the last day by his grace.

Next week, Lord willing, we will see that not only does James agree with Paul, but Paul agrees with James in teaching that dead faith is not saving faith, that genuine faith must be tested and must express itself through action.

**Sermon 11:
James and Paul, Part 2**
8-4-02

Last week I demonstrated that James is in agreement with Paul in teaching that we are not saved by the works of the law, but by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This morning, I will demonstrate that Paul is in agreement with James in teaching that dead faith is not saving faith, and that genuine faith must be tested and must express itself through works.

As I demonstrated last week, both James and Paul were bondservants or apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were both given a foundational role in the infant church as authorized representatives of Christ. As Paul says, the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone. The reason this is so important to recognize is this: if the risen Christ appointed both of these men as architects who laid the theological foundation of the New Testament church, then both must be in perfect agreement. The church recognized this fact. And that is why the epistle of James and the writings of Paul were included in the New Testament canon as equally authoritative.

We see evidence of their unity in the New Testament itself. At the council of Jerusalem, Paul and James each recognized the authority of the other. Although Paul maintained his independence from the original disciples and insisted that he received his gospel not from man but by direct revelation from Christ himself, nevertheless Paul submitted his teaching to James and Peter and John in order to receive their stamp of approval. And they in turn gave Paul the right hand of fellowship and commended him to the rest of the church as an apostle to the Gentiles.

James and Paul are in perfect agreement. They both laid down authoritative doctrinal and ethical instruction that is binding on the New Testament church. However, having said this, we must also recognize that the writings of Paul are given a privileged place in the canon of the New Testament.

First of all, Paul's writings are the most voluminous. The NT canon is divided into three sections: the historical books (the four gospels and Acts), the epistles, and Revelation. Just looking at the epistles, Paul's writings occupy 70% of the epistles section (that is, everything from Romans through Jude). The non-Pauline epistles – Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude – form the remaining 30%. Furthermore, Paul's epistles are placed up front in the epistles section.

Second, Paul was given a unique theological gift that the other apostles recognized. Read 2 Pet. 3:15-16. Peter recognized that Paul had been given a special gift "according to the wisdom given him."

Paul's epistles are more theological than the epistles of Peter and John and James. Paul's rigorous theological mind continually shines through even when he is addressing specific problems. The risen Christ called this Jewish rabbi into the service of the gospel precisely because of these gifts.

Christ granted Paul a unique ministry in the gospel. Paul calls this "the stewardship of God's grace" which was given to him (Eph. 3:2). He says that he labored more abundantly than all the other apostles (1 Cor. 15:10). And even goes so far as to call himself "a wise master builder" (1 Cor. 3:10). More than any other New Testament writer, Paul sets forth with clarity the gospel of free grace, apart from the Law. Paul was a special gift of the risen Christ to the church, with a unique depth of insight into the mystery of the gospel.

It should be obvious, then, that although James and Paul cannot be in conflict, it would be wrong to take the teaching of Paul concerning justification by faith alone and to attempt to make it fit into the teaching of James in chapter 2. As we saw last week, James 2 isn't even talking about justification in the Pauline sense. But there are some who think that James is using the same word "justify" in the same sense that Paul is using it. Having started out with this questionable assumption, they then argue that when Paul says we are justified by faith he means that we are justified by works, by obedient faith, by faith which works through

love. In this way, then, Paul is reinterpreted to fit in with James. The result is that Paul and James do not conflict, but Paul no longer teaches justification by faith alone, since faith on this definition includes works. Faith is obedient faith. It is faith which works through love. This is the position of the Roman Catholic Church.

But I trust you see the error of this approach. It is not the teaching of Paul that must be interpreted to fit with James, but the other way around. Because of the unique theological gift that the risen Christ gave to this wise master builder, and which the other apostles recognized, James must be interpreted to fit with Paul.

The two-age eschatology of James

That is what I attempted to do last week. I demonstrated that James teaches a doctrine of salvation that is just as free and just as gracious and Christ-centered as Paul's. James teaches the same *sola fide* gospel when he proclaims that we have been brought forth by the sovereign will of God as the firstfruits of the new creation (James 1:18), that election is the cause of faith (2:5), and that mercy triumphs over judgment for those who know their need (2:13), and who humble themselves before the Lord, looking to him in utter dependence for forgiveness, grace, and eternal life (4:6). We are not saved by any merit of our own, according to James, but by faith alone, a humble faith that looks to Christ alone.

But what about James' teaching that dead faith is not saving faith, that genuine faith must demonstrate itself through works? Does not this important teaching blunt the sharp edge of the *sola fide* gospel? The answer is No. Let me explain why not.

The key to the book of James is the opening paragraph, where James sets forth his theology of the testing of faith. Turn with me to James 1:1. Notice that James sets his discussion of faith, and the need for faith to be tested and proved genuine through trials, he sets this discussion in the context of verse 1, "James ... to the twelve tribes scattered abroad." Do not take this statement literally! James isn't writing to the Jews who are scattered abroad. He's not writing to the literal Jewish diaspora, that is, the Jewish communities outside of Palestine in Asia Minor, or Greece, or Rome. He can't be, because that would contradict what he says in 2:1, where he addresses his audience as Christian brothers and sisters who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It may be true that many or even most of his readers are Jewish Christians, but they are Christians, they are believers in Christ.

Why is this important? Because it proves that the reference to "the twelve tribes scattered abroad" is a spiritual application of old covenant terminology to the new covenant church. James regards you, the new covenant church, as a spiritual diaspora. We are the twelve tribes scattered abroad. We are strangers and pilgrims in this present age. Now this is key, because it shows that the whole epistle is addressed to those who are destined to inherit the kingdom, but who have not yet inherited the kingdom in its fullness. James makes the same point later in 2:5, where he describes Christians as "heirs of the kingdom" (the already) "which he has *promised* to those who love him" (the not-yet).

In other words, James shares the same two-age conception of eschatology as the rest of the New Testament writers, including Paul. James, like Paul, teaches that on the one hand, believers already possess eternal life in Christ. We are heirs of the kingdom. It is a present reality. Yet, on the other hand, we're not yet glorified. We are strangers and pilgrims, we're the diaspora away from the promised land. We are caught between these two ages. The age to come has already entered history in the Christ-event, in the resurrection of Christ. But the age to come is not yet fully realized. There is still a future aspect of it for which we long. That is why James exhorts us so strongly in chapter 5 to wait patiently until the coming of the Lord. That is why James says, even though we are distressed with many trials and tribulations in this present age, we are to count it all joy when we encounter various trials, because we know that the testing of our faith is producing an eschatological result, namely, that if we stand the test Christ will grant us the crown of life he has prepared for those who love him.

This eschatological perspective, this tension between the already and the not-yet, is the context for everything that James says in the rest of the epistle, and it informs his discussion of the necessity for faith to be demonstrated by works.

Read James 2:20-23

Notice that James does not mix faith and works together. Rather he says that Abraham's faith, the very faith by which he was declared righteous, was perfected by his works. The faith that he manifested in Genesis 22 when he offered up his son, was merely the outworking of the same faith that he had when he was justified in Genesis 15. Therefore, James' discussion of the necessity for faith to be demonstrated by works does not blunt the sharp edge of *sola fide*. The not-yet does not cancel out the already. The already is an assured fact, apprehended by faith, and judicially reckoned by the once-for-all act of God in justification. The not-yet merely provides the temporal arena for that once-for-all reckoning of justification to be manifested and worked out in our lives.

Romans 5:1-5

Once we realize that James wraps his whole discussion of faith and works in the blanket of two-age eschatology, we immediately remember that this is precisely what Paul did.

Turn with me to Romans 5:1-5, where the same themes are found (read). This passage contains many parallels with James 1:1-4. (I've also included 1 Peter 1 in the following chart.)

Romans 5:3-5	James 1:2-4, 12	1 Peter 1:6-7
<p>3 And not only this, but we also <i>exult</i> in our</p> <p><i>tribulations</i>, knowing that <i>tribulation produces perseverance</i>;</p> <p>4 and <i>perseverance produces the state of being tested and approved</i>; and being tested and approved, produces hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.</p>	<p>2 <i>Consider it all joy</i>, my brethren, when you encounter</p> <p><i>various trials</i>,</p> <p>3 knowing that <i>the testing of your faith produces perseverance</i>.</p> <p>4 And let <i>perseverance have its perfect result</i>, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.</p> <p>12 Blessed is a man who perseveres under <i>testing</i>; for once he has been <i>approved</i>, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.</p>	<p>6 In this you <i>greatly rejoice</i>, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by <i>various trials</i>,</p> <p>7 so that <i>the proof of your faith</i>, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to <i>result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ</i></p>

First, both open with a paradox. Paul says, “We exult in our tribulations.” To exult means to be joyfully confident. “We are joyfully confident in the midst of tribulations.” James says exactly the same thing: “Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials.” Trials are usually a cause of discouragement, not joy! This is particularly true if you were an Old Testament believer. In the Old Testament age, prior to the resurrection of Christ, trials and tribulations were normally regarded as a sign of God’s disfavor, as something to be ashamed of. But James and Paul both know that things have changed. The resurrection of Christ in the midst of history changes everything. For in Christ, we have been vindicated already. We are already enjoying resurrection life. No enemy can assail us or triumph over us. Eternal life, resurrection life, incorruptible life that cannot be forfeited, has already been set in motion through the resurrection of Jesus. In the meantime, though, we are strangers and pilgrims, we are the diaspora, while we wait expectantly for that resurrection life which has already been set in motion to be fully realized at the resurrection of our bodies.

Second, both James and Paul offer the same reason why we ought to rejoice and boast in tribulations. Why? Because tribulation produces perseverance. Or as James says, because the testing of your faith produces perseverance. In the present time between the two comings of Christ, we count it all joy when we encounter various trials, because we know that our trials are not a sign of God’s disfavor, but such the opposite. They are merely an opportunity for our faith to be tested and confirmed and proved genuine as we patiently endure these tribulations in view of the glory that is to be revealed, and which is already ours as a guaranteed possession in Christ.

Third, both James and Paul speak of the end result of this process. When we endure tribulation, we enjoy the status as those who have been tested and approved. This refers either to a sense of assurance that we enjoy in this life after we’ve been through many trials in the Christian life, or to the approval that we will receive from Christ himself at the day of judgment. It probably refers to both, because the present assurance that we have through trials is merely a foretaste of that wonderful vindication and approval that Christ will give us at the end. In any case, tribulations are not an end in themselves. They produce a result, and the result is that we enjoy the confirmed status of being the Lord’s tested and approved ones.

Peter makes this confirmed status clearly eschatological: “... so that the proof of your faith ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ ... obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:7, 9). The result is ultimately eschatological.

So now you see then how this whole theology of perseverance in good works as the necessary result of faith harmonizes with *sola fide*. Notice the context in which Paul places this discussion. It comes right on the heels of Romans 4. In Romans 4:18-25, he talks about Abraham, just as James did.

Read Romans 4:18-25

Both Paul and James appeal to Genesis 15:6 as the key event in Abraham’s journey of faith. It was then that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as an irrevocable righteousness. It is a past event, a once-for-all declaration.

Paul goes on to add that this justification was secured on the basis of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Verse 25: “Christ was handed over for our transgressions and raised again for our justification.” And this happened to Christ, not as an individual, but in his public role or office as our covenant head. Paul will talk about that later in Romans 5:12ff, where he talks about Christ as the second Adam, the covenant head who represents the elect. What Christ did, he did as our covenant head, as our legal representative before God. The justification of Christ at his resurrection – his vindication, his being declared and approved, his being granted that divine approbation, “This is my beloved, Law-keeping Son, this is my obedient righteous servant” – *that* justification which occurred at the resurrection constitutes the justification of the elect who are represented by him.

And so we return to the question: We do we harmonize these two things? On the one hand we have this theology of the necessity of perseverance in good works. On the other hand we have this doctrine of

justification by faith alone. The way we harmonize them together is the way Paul does here in Romans 5. What I would argue is basically this. Think of the theology of the New Testament this way, if you want to integrate Paul and James together in canonical context. Think of it like this. You're reading through Romans. You're following the logic of Paul's argument. You've followed his argument in Romans 3-4 about justification by faith alone. Then you come to chapter 5, "Therefore, having been justified by faith alone we have peace with God, and here are the results." And then he says, "Not only this but we also rejoice in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance proven character, and proven character, hope." Right there, you have a little asterisk. And the asterisk says, "If you want to know more about what that all involves, if you want to see it fleshed out in detail with specific applications, go read the book of James." The whole book of James, then, picks up at this point, and presupposes everything that Paul has said about the once-for-all verdict of justification by faith alone.

And you see it all rests on the fact that Christ is the one who was justified in our place. *Your* justification is really *Christ's* justification. If Christ was justified and raised because of *his* perfect obedience to God, because *he* merited the reward of eternal life, then how can your good works, how can your perseverance in faith, how can doing all those things that James calls us to do, play any role in that justification? Faith is merely the empty hand that rests upon and receives the once-for-all justification of Christ.

This is answer to the Roman Catholic view of justification. Catholic theology has no place for the meritorious accomplishment of Christ, no place for the performance on the part of Christ of the covenantal probation as the second Adam. He did not fulfill it and bring us to that "beyond probation" status. Justification is not a done-deal that occurred at the resurrection of Christ but a process of transformation by which I become inherently righteous as I work out my faith expressing itself in obedience. That is why Catholic theology teaches that we are justified by works, by our own efforts at sanctification and perseverance.

The Reformers said, "No! Paul teaches *sola fide*." The Reformers understood the totally external nature of justification on the basis of *Christ's* righteousness, on the basis of *his* justification. And in view of that they pointed people to Christ, calling to look away from ourselves and our own sanctification *to Christ* and to the finality and perfection of his meritorious work. By the way, this idea of "looking away" is taught in Hebrews 12:1-2: "... run with endurance the race that is set before us, *by looking away unto Jesus*, the author and finisher of our faith." The NAS has "fixing our eyes on Jesus," but in the Greek there is this added idea of looking away unto Jesus – looking *away* from yourself *unto* Jesus. The reference to Jesus as "the author ... of our faith" means that he is the forerunner, the one who has gone before us. He has achieved eternal life for us by his meritorious accomplishment, and who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty on high, because of his obedience. He has already secured it for us. Therefore, looking away from yourself, fix your eyes on him, who has already done it, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross and despised its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Good works, sanctification, perseverance in faith, perseverance in obedience – all of these things are necessary, but they play absolutely no role in this once-for-all judicial declaration. Only when we have been fully assured of our judicial standing in Christ by faith alone can we even begin to discuss how that faith demonstrates itself to be genuine faith by persevering in the midst of trials.

This is the mystery of the gospel! This is the secret that is so hard for the mind to grasp – not only the natural mind of the unbeliever, but even our own regenerate hearts have a hard time understanding this truth. It is all packed into that word "therefore" in Romans 5:1. "*Therefore, having been justified by faith ... we rejoice in tribulations, because tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance produces an approved character.*" Good works and perseverance in the midst of tribulation are the *result* of justification, not the basis of it. The result. We obey, we persevere, we manifest our faith through good works, *because* we have been justified, not in order to be justified. Sanctification flows from justification.

Perseverance in the midst of trial is not something that we are doing in our own power, but is the result of God's grace. It is not as if we are justified by faith, as if justification is what Christ does by his merit – but then we are sanctified by works, as if that is the part *we* contribute to salvation. Salvation is not a cooperative effort between God and man. The gospel is not, “God helps those who help themselves.” The gospel is Ephesians 2:10: “We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *unto* good works which God prepared beforehand that we might walk in them.” And as Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13, to the extent that the believer is actively working out his salvation, it is really God himself who is working in us to will and to do of his good pleasure.

This is all very clear in Paul, but the glorious thing is that it's also clear in James. Remember in James 1:21, where James talks about the gospel as “the implanted word”? James is alluding to the parable of the sower and the seed. The seed is the word of the gospel, it's planted in our hearts. And when it sprouts and brings forth fruit, that's the word in the form of faith in our hearts. When James talks about faith he doesn't talk about faith, but the word, the word implanted. The word of the gospel is not something external to you, as if the good works that result from believing the gospel are something that you do. The good works that result from the gospel are the fruit of the seed that has been planted in your heart in the form of living and active faith. Faith is the word in its implanted form. When James looks at you the believer, he does not see a person who has heard the gospel intellectually and then has decided to believe it and to go out and try to act upon it and do good works. Instead, James sees the word itself in action. He sees the implanted word, having already taken root in your heart, and now bringing forth fruit.

That is what he says at the beginning of his epistle. Then, at the end, in chapter 5, he picks up on the parable of the sower and the seed, and he says, “Be patient until the coming of the Lord” (verse 7a). And then he uses the illustration of the farmer: “The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains” (verse 7b). Your perseverance to the end, and the bringing forth a harvest of good works and good fruits of righteousness and obedience to the Lord, is not up to you. It's not something that you yourself are doing. It is rather God himself who is causing his own word to be fruitful in your life. Therefore be patient for the precious produce of the soil. Be patient until the coming of the Lord.

And so we've seen that James and Paul are in perfect harmony and agreement with one another. James places the emphasis of his epistle on the necessity of faith producing good works and demonstrating itself to be genuine faith. But all throughout his epistle, we weave in the theology of salvation by faith alone, just as Paul. And Paul, on the other hand, by the unique gift given to him as a master builder, to lay the foundation of the gospel for the New Testament church, has more clearly brought out for us the judicial nature of that salvation, founded upon the transaction that occurred at Calvary and the resurrection of Christ. But he too goes on to show that the faith by which we receive Christ's once-for-all work must manifest itself through perseverance in the midst of trial. And the great assurance is that all of this is given to you because of what Christ has done. Because of his completed work, you may therefore persevere in faith and patiently wait like the farmer, until the harvest is brought forth – a harvest that you didn't create, a harvest that wasn't up to you. You didn't go out every day and make it happen. It is God himself who is producing it in you by his grace.