

FAITH
WORKS

THE BOOK OF JAMES



5-WEEK RESOURCE

DEDICATION

To the people of Living Word Community Church.
Your faith and good works for over 40 years
are a testimony to God's amazing grace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

- DAY 1 The Challenge of Trials and Temptations James 1:1-12
- DAY 2 Facing Sin, Trusting God James 1:13-18
- DAY 3 The Heart that Listens James 1:19-21
- DAY 4 Doing the Word of God James 1:22-25
- DAY 5 What Is Pure Religion? James 1:26-27
- DAY 6 Do Not Show Favoritism James 2:1-7
- DAY 7 The Royal Law of Love James 2:8-13
- DAY 8 Faith and Works: What God has Joined Together
James 2:14-26
- DAY 9 A Living and Useful Faith James 2:14-26
- DAY 10 People of Faith and Faithfulness James 2:14-26
- DAY 11 The Way of Humility James 3:1-2
- DAY 12 The Power of the Tongue James 3:3-8
- DAY 13 The Paradox of the Tongue James 3:9-12
- DAY 14 Two Kinds of Wisdom James 3:13-18
- DAY 15 Paul on the Impact of Our Words
Ephesians 4:29-31; 5:4-7
- DAY 16 Christians in Conflict James 4:1-3
- DAY 17 Friendship with the World James 4:4-6
- DAY 18 Submitting to God James 4:7-10
- DAY 19 Do Not Judge Your Neighbor James 4:11-12
- DAY 20 "If the Lord Wills" James 4:13-17
- DAY 21 A Warning to the Rich James 5:1-6
- DAY 22 Patience in Suffering James 5:7-11
- DAY 23 Let Your Yes Be Yes James 5:12
- DAY 24 The Power of Faithful Prayer James 5:13-18
- DAY 25 Loving Those Who Wander James 5:19-20

INTRODUCTION

In the New Testament, we may be familiar with the four gospels. We are also acquainted with Apostle Paul's letters. But after Paul's letters, there are more New Testament books that are much less known to many Christians. They are tucked away after Paul's letters and before Revelation. The letter of James is one of them.

Tradition and conservative scholarship generally agree that this James is the brother of Jesus. James the Apostle had been martyred for his faith earlier. There are no other Jameses who have sufficient spiritual maturity and status in the early church to write such a letter. So, the author describes himself as, "James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).

James is writing during the time after the persecution of the church that is described in Acts 8:1: "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." This was not one of the even more severe Roman persecutions that was still to come. This persecution was by the Jewish authorities, and it scattered the Jewish church.

As the years went by, the church was scattered and dispersed even more, which is why James addresses his letter, "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1). The Christian Jews began to move into the nations of the Roman Empire and start house churches. James was their pastor and continued to teach them the way of Jesus.

All scripture is inspired, useful, and with purpose (2 Timothy 3:16). For example, the Apostle Paul's theology focuses on salvation by grace through faith alone. It is central to Paul's letters.

James has a different focus. James is concerned about discipleship and how Christians are living faithfully in these dispersed churches. James is primarily interested in practical Christian living. And even more so, he is interested in how Christians do life together. In this way, James is much like the Apostle Paul, who spends the latter parts of many of his letters giving practical exhortation about how to live.

It is not that theology is missing from James, it is just that it is not predominant. As you make your way through this devotional, we will highlight theological passages. In every case, the theology leads to spirituality in the community of Jesus' followers.

James asks a key question: What does faithfulness to the gospel look like in action? For James, this is about Christian behavior, undergirded by belief. Apparently, these scattered churches had significant relational problems that did not honor Jesus nor serve the church.

In Galatians 5:6, the Apostle Paul captures the entire letter of James. He says, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

That's how James wants the churches to live—faith resulting in more love toward each other. As you will find out, James can get passionate about failures to love and equally persuasive about what love in action looks like.

Our *Faith Works* series on James includes Sunday messages, a mid-week second message/study from James, a devotional guide, and small group resources.

As you open your heart to the message of Jesus through the letter of James, you will express your faith in love. Your faith will grow stronger and you will bear fruit. May the Spirit of Christ bless you with enlightened hearts every time you hear the Word and put it into practice.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pastor Brian K. Rice". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of "Pastor" and "Rice" being capitalized and prominent.

Pastor Brian K. Rice

The Challenge of Trials and Temptations

Reflect: James dives right into deep topics with tests and trials, revealing that both require prayer and patience and are intended to develop perseverance (determination, grit, tenacity). The character of Christ is formed in us as we keep following God in challenging times—a valuable lesson for life today.

In the first 12 verses, James' language mirrors that of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

JAMES	JESUS
James 1:2 – Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds ...	Matthew 5:11-12 – Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you ...
James 1:4 – Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete ...	Matthew 5:48 – Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
James 1:5 – If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God ...	Matthew 7:7 – Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find ...

Then, James urges us to believe without hesitation, see the façade of riches as well as fragility of life, and trust that blessings will come with endurance.

Pray: Lord, there are many things I do not understand in life. I need you to help me keep growing and ask for your wisdom to guide me.

Practice: Pay attention to when you feel disoriented by your circumstances. Talk to God about any concerns. Affirm your love for him and rest in his love for you.

Facing Sin, Trusting God

Reflect: James now adds temptation to the list of challenging times. His back-and-forth movement alludes to the pattern of original sin in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve saw, lusted, desired, then took what was forbidden by God (Genesis 3:6). The first three—see, lust, desire—are about temptation. The last one “take” (acting on our sinful desires) is sin. James reveals a similar pattern: tempted, enticed, desired, gives birth to sin—noting sin “at full growth” leads to death. Spiritual death.

Repeated sin destroys us spiritually, and James notes we must not blame God for this trajectory. God is wholly holy and will not tempt us. He does allow free will for us to choose if we will or will not follow him.

Sin gives birth to death. God’s truth gives birth to life. The truth is that all of us must face our sin, own our actions, and choose God’s Word, will, and ways. New life always begins with Jesus.

Pray: Lord, there are times I prefer to give into my sinful nature instead of choosing you. Please forgive me. I do not want to give birth to death. I want your abundant life (John 10:10). Help me.

Practice: Pay attention to the pull and pattern that alienates you from God. When and where are you tempted? Enticed? Desiring? Taking? How can you break this cycle? Reach out to our Counseling Center or pastoral care team for support. Choose life.

The Heart that Listens

Reflect: James strikes a familiar tone that conveys a genuine concern for our spiritual well-being, as well as healthy relationships. After pointing out issues that will disrupt our personal walk with Christ, he turns his attention to what will disturb our fellowship with each other with a verse worthy of immediate application: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.”

Think about it: Who is excluded from “everyone”? How often do we flip this to being *slow* to listen, *quick* to speak, and *quick* to become angry? This does not produce God’s righteousness in us. There may be times for annoyance, but anger damages relationships. Paul exhorts, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26).

James and Paul see anger and sin linked closely together. James encourages us to weed out anger, moral filth, and evil so God’s Word can grow inside us. This image of preparing our hearts to receive God’s Word reminds us of Jesus’ Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23).

Pray: Lord, point out when I get angry quickly, speak too much, or listen too little. I want to care for those around me the way you do and show your love.

Practice: Practice active and attentive listening. “The great talker is rarely a great listener, and never is the ear more firmly closed than when anger takes over” (from *The Bible Speaks Today* commentary).

Doing the Word of God

Reflect: James again draws a connection to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, this time cautioning us on how we deceive ourselves if all we do is listen and not obey.

JAMES	JESUS
James 1:22 – Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.	Matthew 7:24 – Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The issue is not whether I see myself in the mirror and remember what I look like, the question is: Will I see myself in God’s Word and do something with what I have seen (read, learned)? Note the contrast:

DECEIVED <i>The Person with the Mirror</i>	BLESSED <i>The Person with God’s Word</i>
Observes (23-24)	Looks intently (25)
Goes away (24)	Continues (25)
Forgets (24)	Does not forget (25)
	Does something with what they “see” (25)

This devotional guide is designed to help us read, reflect, pray, and practice. If all we do is read and learn, we are like the person looking in the mirror who soon forgets. But if we continue to pray (talk with God) and practice (live out his Word in our daily life), we are blessed. That is how true life transformation happens.

Pray: Lord, I do not want to be deceived by my way of seeing life. I want to be blessed by seeing life your way. Help me to love your Word, do your will, live your way.

Practice: Re-read the first four devotions and capture any “aha” moments so you do not forget how to do life God’s way.

What Is Pure Religion?

Reflect: After defining the difference between being deceived and being blessed, James quickly defines three areas that determine whether we are on the right track or not:

1. Control of the tongue
2. Care for the needy
3. Holiness

It seems like an odd list at first, but looking back to verses 17-18 we see a glimpse of God's nature as being truthful, caring, and holy. James appears to be echoing this consideration for us, and in the next few chapters will develop each of these so we can learn more. For now, it is a quick check with whether we are in a genuine relationship with God or being fake.

Perhaps it will help to think of it this way: If people only hear me talk, would they think I am a Christian or be surprised with my language? If people just see me in action, would they know I am a Christian or be confused at my lack of care for others? Am I a good example to the world or do I neglect a life of holiness?

Pray: Lord, help me consider what James suggests to know if I am headed in the right direction with you. Please reveal what needs to change so our relationship can continue to grow.

Practice: Consider the acronym TCH as a check-in on tongue, care, holiness. Invite a close friend or family member to check in with how TCH is going. Share and care together.

Do Not Show Favoritism

Reflect: James continues to talk about practical faith with a direct and clear statement. After starting with a caring tone for the family of God, he directs attention to Jesus, then lands the point by telling us we must not show favoritism. This is not a caution or a warning—it is a command.

The English translation for *meeting* is the Greek word for *synagogue*. It is a meeting to worship God in unity with others. But something has gone wrong in the meetings. There is no love and unity. There is favoritism toward the rich and bias against the poor. There is a perennial problem of the heart (see Leviticus 19:15).

James reiterates our mutual relationship then returns to the Sermon on the Mount. Pay attention to this first statement Jesus makes in his earliest sermon.

JAMES	JESUS
James 2:5 – Listen, my dear brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?	Matthew 5:1-3 – ... he went up on a mountainside and sat down. ... He said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” ...

After Peter’s epiphany in Acts 10, he professed, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (v. 34).

Pray: Lord, help me realize this, too. Please reveal anywhere I favor one person (or group) over another, and help me change my attitudes and actions toward them.

Practice: Pay attention to how you interact with people. Who are you drawn to? Who do you avoid? Why?

The Royal Law of Love

Reflect: These verses assert Kingdom values that must be grasped if we are to grow in connecting our faith to daily life.

WRONG LIVING = SIN AND JUDGMENT	RIGHT LIVING = FREEDOM
Showing favoritism	Loving your neighbors as yourself
Committing adultery	Speaking with care
Committing murder	Acting with kindness
Not being merciful (kind-hearted, benevolent)	Showing mercy (compassion, understanding)

Of course, murder and adultery are wrong. We all agree with that. What is striking is how James lists favoritism and a lack of mercy here as well. All four violate God’s character and desire concerning the value of people.

Jesus commands: “... Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). This is the royal way of love.

That two-letter word **IF** carries so much weight. James uses it at the beginning of verse 8 and Jesus uses it here. **IF** we are to love Jesus, then we must love others with a Kingdom love.

Pray: Lord, teach me how to speak with care, act with kindness, and show mercy to my neighbors. Show me how to do this consistently as an overflow of your heart for people.

Practice: Spend each day wisely. “If we are to be new people in Christ, then we must show our newness to the world. If we are to follow Christ, it must be in the way we spend each day” (William Law, 18th century Anglican priest).

Faith and Works: What God has Joined Together

Reflect: The three devotionals for the rest of the week are closely connected. You will look at the same passage all three days.

Faith and works, like a marriage, are joined together by God. What God has joined together, let no one separate. Yet we are always dividing what God links together. When it comes to faith and works, we must have a both-and approach. It is never faith OR works, it is faith AND works. A wrong understanding of how they are connected will lead to problems.

The Bible is inspired by God. The whole Bible. It is true, normative, and speaks with divine authority. When you find seeming contradictions, realize they are only apparent. With a little more work, you will find resolution and the deeper truth of the both-and.

We are saved by GRACE through FAITH in the saving, redeeming, forgiving, transforming power of Christ's death and resurrection (Ephesians 2:8-9). That is the consistent teaching of the New Testament. Every book in the New Testament affirms the absolute necessity of new life. As hearts are changed, words, behaviors, and relationships are changed. True belief leads to Christ-like lives. James' focus is on Christ-like living.

Pray: God, give me a deeper faith that believes, works, trusts, and transforms as I follow Jesus my Savior AND my Lord.

Practice: Every morning say, "Jesus, I believe. Today, show me how I can faithfully live for you as your follower."

A Living and Useful Faith

Reflect: James talks about dead faith (vv. 17, 26), useless faith (v. 20), faith that shudders (v. 19), foolish faith (v. 20), complete faith (v. 22), and faith that works (vv. 24, 26). Think of it as **faith works**. In other words, real faith is useful, functional, alive, active, fruitful, and gets results.

James is dealing with what is called dead orthodoxy—right belief and nothing else. A full understanding of the word *faith* (Greek = *pistos*) clears up the confusion. *Pistos* is often translated as *belief*. Faith includes belief, but is so much more. *Pistos* is a “thick” word that has many components to it. Together, these components are real or authentic faith.

Faith/belief knows and understands truth— your mind.

Faith/belief desires and loves the truth— your emotions.

Faith/belief accepts and chooses the truth— your will.

Faith/belief aligns with the truth— your behavior.

Faith is your full trust, surrender, and allegiance to Jesus.

The issue is not faith vs. works. The issue is full faith vs. fake faith. James shows us that full (real, authentic) faith works. Fake faith is useless, foolish, empty, and dead. Fake faith is not Christian faith. Faith in Christ is always a full faith.

Pray: Jesus, I believe. Help me fully believe. Jesus, I have some faith, but I want to have full faith. Increase my faith.

Practice: Every time you learn a new truth ask, “Do I understand, desire, accept, align with, and trust this truth?”

People of Faith and Faithfulness

Reflect: James uses two powerful examples of faith here—one obvious, and the other, maybe surprising.

When it comes to both faith AND faithfulness, there is no better example than Abraham. He is the role model of faith that believes and is saved by God's grace (see Genesis 15:6; Hebrews 11:8-12). James relates the story of Abraham ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac, who was the only way for the promises of God to be fulfilled (see Genesis 22:12; Hebrews 11:17-19). If you look at the full faith description in yesterday's devotion, that is what you see in Abraham. You could say it is a **faithful faith**.

The second story is unexpected. Rahab is a woman of faithfulness (see Joshua 2; 6:25). Hebrews 11:31 says she is a woman of faith. Now, James says she is a woman of faithfulness who went from unbelieving and disobedient to believing and obedient. Her life is a full faith, a faithful faith.

That is what Jesus, James, Paul, John, and the entire Bible teaches. Christianity is a full faith that makes a difference. It is a faith that works. Faith works. And faith works because that is how Jesus designed it.

Pray: Jesus, may my life also be a role model of faithful faith. Lead me in the ways of Jesus and strengthen my faith in him.

Practice: What is the faithful faith response God is calling you to live out today in your relationships? Think of one context and take your next step of faith.

The Way of Humility

Reflect: James moves into an in-depth study on the topic introduced on Day 5: TCH (tongue, care, holiness). For the past week we have focused on authentic, loving faith; this week we will study the tongue.

James begins with an exhortation to those who are involved in teaching. It is a serious responsibility to teach God's Word in a way that helps people encounter the real Jesus and grow as genuine followers. And there is no lack of false teachers. Jesus dealt with them all the time. They were the Pharisees and teachers of the law. In Matthew 23:1-33 Jesus gives one of his most powerful rebukes to these teachers. Fundamentally, they are hypocrites. Be sure to read verse 33 for the dire condition of their hearts.

Those who are called to teach must strive to live exemplary lives. It is the old "walk the talk" so you can "talk the walk." You need an integrity of teaching and living. You need to be transformed by the very truth you teach.

We all have opportunities to teach and train others. Every opportunity is a "holy opportunity." So, be wise and careful, thoughtful and prayerful. Above all, teach with integrity, as your words influence others.

Pray: Lord, help me recognize how my life is imparting words to others and help me discern whether they are good words or bad words. I want to grow in this area.

Practice: As you are consistent in putting into practice what you learn, you will be ready to share/teach/impart to others what you are learning. Every day, ask yourself: "Am I walking the talk today? Am I living the truth?"

The Power of the Tongue

Reflect: James uses three easy-to-grasp word pictures when he addresses the tongue's overwhelming ability to hurt or help. A bit is small in comparison to the size of a horse. A rudder seems incidental in relationship to a ship's dimensions. Both display incredible control over activity and direction. A spark can be good (lighting a fire for warmth) or bad (becoming a wildfire that destroys everything in its path).

Proverbs 18:21 states, "The tongue has the power of life and death." This is very serious. If we do not control the tongue, the fire it sets not only destroys us, but turns us away from God and into agents of destruction working in conjunction with the enemy (James 3:6; John 8:44).

James acknowledges we cannot change ourselves, but we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. Consider the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit "lit a fire" and tongues began declaring the marvelous works of God (Acts 2:2-4, 11).

Pray: Lord, help me recognize opportunities to encourage and bless others. I want my words to be life-giving.

Practice: Each day be alert to *what* you say and *how* you say it. Quickly ask for forgiveness if words harm others.

The Paradox of the Tongue

Reflect: One of James' hot buttons is people failing to consistently respond to God. Our faith journey is meant to display alignment between faith and works, beliefs and actions, talk and walk. Here he points out a major inconsistency: How can we praise God then curse people with the same mouth? We turn to the creation story to see why this is so serious.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness’ ... male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). Sin damaged the image of God in us, but did not destroy the image. The source of human dignity and worth is the image of God. It is a serious matter to attack one another.

What James finds shocking (and we should, too) is the double standard of saying good things about God and bad things about people. The person you curse is made in the image of God. If you curse them, you curse God, which is profane and irreverent behavior.

James uses word pictures to illustrate how ridiculous it is to think such opposite words come from the same source. Something is wrong and it is likely that the “wellspring of life” is poisoned (Proverbs 4:28; Matthew 15:16-20).

Pray: Lord, the person I do not like (even dislike immensely?) has worth in your eyes. Help me see them the way you do and appreciate them. Create in me a clean heart, God.

Practice: Who am I with, and what am I doing, when I devalue the worth of another person? Hear James as he firmly states, “This should not be.” Resolve to stop.

Two Kinds of Wisdom

Reflect: James continues his quest to help us grow by defining two types of wisdom, compared here:

UNSPIRITUAL WISDOM	WISDOM FROM HEAVEN
Harbors bitter envy	Pure
Selfish ambition in the heart	Peace-loving
Boastful	Considerate
Denies the truth	Submissive
Envious	Full of mercy and good fruit
Selfish ambition (reiterated)	Impartial and sincere
Disorder	Peacemakers
Every evil practice	Righteous

James wants us to align our daily lives with wise choices and loving actions. It is very helpful to see that what Paul lists love is not is almost an exact replica of what unspiritual wisdom is: envious, selfish, boastful, denying truth, evil.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-8

WHAT LOVE IS NOT	WHAT LOVE IS
Is not envious	Is patient
Is not boastful	Is kind
Is not proud	Rejoices in the truth
Is not rude	Always protects
Is not self-seeking	Always trusts
Is not easily angered	Always hopes
Keeps no record of wrong	Always perseveres
Does not delight in evil	Never fails

Comparing James' list of what unspiritual wisdom is and Paul's list of what love is not reflects the great battle for our souls conveyed by Jesus in John 10:10 (MSG), "A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of." We experience "more and better life" when we are in genuine, abiding relationship with Christ and choosing to live wisely and lovingly.

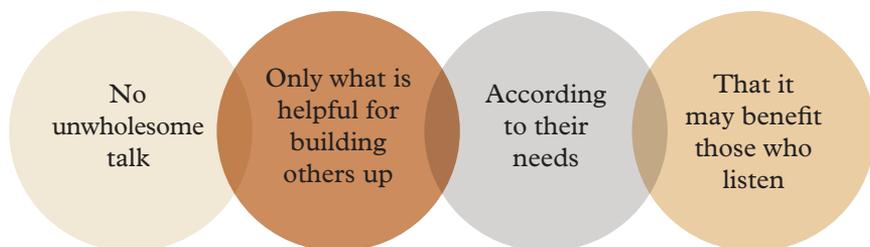
Pray: Lord, I did not realize until now that being unwise and unloving were tied together. Help me grow in wisdom and learn to love you and others more each day.

Practice: Choose to display wisdom from heaven and what love is. Need help? Ask God. He provides wisdom generously (James 1:5).

Paul on the Impact of Our Words

Reflect: On Day 3 we observed James and Paul sharing thoughts on how anger and sin are closely linked. Today, we step out of James to consider Paul's thoughts on the impact of our tongue and use of words. What James alludes to as a steering and control issue (impacting the direction of our love toward others), Paul breaks down into a relational consideration with very specific instructions.

In Ephesians 4:29 he reveals the flow of our words and impact on others:



This provokes important questions before a word comes out of my mouth:

- Who is within earshot of what we are talking about?
- How could our conversation be a blessing (or curse) to that person?
- What is the pressing need of the person I am speaking with?
- How might my words build them up?
- Now, prayerfully, carefully, and consciously choose life words over death words. Life words bless. Death words curse.
- Finally, pause to consider the hidden listener observing all of the above. The Holy Spirit is here and hearing. Is he grateful or grieved?

Pray: Lord, help me broaden my thinking to take in who is around me when I speak. I want my words to build others up, not tear them down.

Practice: Re-read today's passages and make a list of what we are to get rid of or do. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you be attentive in the future with conversations—all conversations.

Christians in Conflict

Reflect: In chapter 3, James talked about attitudes that cause conflict and praised wisdom that is peace-loving. Now, he turns his focus to division within the community of believers. There may have been actual physical fights among the Christians. More likely, it was quarrels and disagreements, filled with angry, harsh words. James addresses it swiftly, knowing controversial attitudes and actions will undermine the unity of the church.

The Church has often been divided by arguments. In our day, it still is. We disagree on all sorts of things: politics, theology, how we worship, the type of service we want to attend. Instead of fighting with our brother or sister, James reminds us to ask God earnestly and sincerely for what we need.

The Christians described here are selfish and only interested in praying for things to advance their own self-centered agendas, rather than build up the community. James isn't concerned with the actual content of the conflict, but rather the attitude with which the believers fought. God knows our sinful nature drives us toward division rather than drawing us toward unity. We need the Holy Spirit's help (see Galatians 5:19-25).

Pray: God, help me discern the source of my disagreements with other Christians. Reveal my motivations and forgive any selfishness and bitterness I am harboring toward others.

Practice: When you start to feel angry toward fellow believers, pause. Take a breath. Examine your heart. Wait.

Friendship with the World

Reflect: Many times in scripture, believers are depicted as God's spouse. The Church is supposed to be the bride of Christ. But James reminds us that we are not faithful. He goes so far as to call us adulterous! When we fight for what we want instead of what God wants, it is like we are cheating on a spouse. James is reminding the people that they have made a commitment, but they are walking away. Instead of friendship with God, they have friendship with the world.

We do not always think of what we are doing as cheating on God. Of course, we do not always live in a way that we are intentionally deceitful with God. However, it is all too easy to slide into a place of friendship with the world.

By small, incremental choices day after day, we choose the world over faithfully following God. God desires us to be in a right relationship with him. Thankfully, verse 6 reminds us there is grace, and he will always accept us back when we choose to change with a spirit of humility.

Pray: Lord, I confess that I often choose "friendship with the world" over friendship with you. Help me to see any unfaithfulness to you in my life so I can follow you more closely.

Practice: Recommit yourself to making God your first love. Pay attention to the ways you choose friendship with the world over fidelity to God.

Submitting to God

Reflect: Yesterday we examined the ways we have chosen friendship with the world instead of with God. In today's verses, James continues writing about what it looks like to repent with a spirit of humility.

We must start with a posture of submission (read 1 Peter 5:5-9, which has a similar set of commands). With God's help, we can resist whatever temptations Satan throws our way. Rather than letting him separate us from God, we resist temptation and draw nearer to God.

Verses 8-10 demonstrate how we can draw near to God. James says we are often double-minded (see James 1:8). If we want to follow God, we need to get serious about following him alone. Instead of just "kind of" following God, we need to dedicate ourselves to truly doing what God commands. As *The Message* paraphrase of verse 10 says: "Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet."

Pray: God, please give me a spirit of humility. Help me to be serious about following you on an hourly, daily basis.

Practice: How will you resist the devil today? What are some practical ways you will protect yourself from temptation? As a church community, we want to come alongside each other in this challenge. Contact the church office to meet with a pastor for encouragement and prayer. Contact our Counseling Center for professional help with life patterns you want to change or attitudes you need help addressing.

Do Not Judge Your Neighbor

Reflect: In these verses, James refers back to the royal law of love discussed on Day 7. We live in a time when it is very easy to criticize one another. Our society is polarized. We tear down others, either to make ourselves feel better or to prove a point. Even worse, social media has made it all too easy to say negative things about our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as others. You can easily hide behind a computer screen and say things that you would never say to someone in person.

Critical speech was also a problem in the church in James' time. People were personally attacking one another. They were saying things to tear one another down, rather than build up the body of Christ. (Can you imagine James' reaction if he had ever seen Twitter or Facebook?!)

God has zero tolerance for those who are judgmental. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge" and that is God himself. James then asks us this piercing question: "But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?" He writes that when we disobey what scripture teaches about loving our neighbor, we are actually saying that we are above such commands.

Pray: God, make me aware of those times I am critical in my attitude and speech. Help me to be contrite and repent.

Practice: How will you speak life-giving words this week? Rather than tearing down others, how will you encourage them? In your prayer, did you think of someone who you have gossiped about? Approach them and ask for forgiveness.

“If the Lord Wills”

Reflect: Is James telling us that it is sinful to make plans for the future? Should we throw away our calendar apps and datebooks? No, of course not. Like yesterday’s passage, James is once again warning us that we should not speak and act as though we are God.

Just as we do not sit in judgment of others, we cannot control the future. The problem isn’t with scheduling or preparation, but with an arrogant attitude that believes we are in charge of what will come to pass. This results in a stubborn determination to do things “my way.”

We work to make our own ideas happen, gather riches, and build up earthly treasures, all while forgetting that life is short. (Jesus spoke of a rich man who forgot the brevity of life. He was so busy building bigger and better barns to store his own treasure, he missed out on living a meaningful life! See Luke 12:15-21.)

Rather than adopting a haughty attitude about what we plan to accomplish, we need to trust God’s timing and provision for our future plans and choose to do good for others each and every day.

Pray: Lord, help me to work with you in all I do, whether big or small. I want my life to align with your will and ways.

Practice: Consider this great passage as we begin a new year. How could your life be different if you lived with an “If the Lord wills” approach to 2021? In this new year, seek God’s will in planning and keep an open approach to his leading with your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

A Warning to the Rich

Reflect: As we have seen in previous passages in James, he has strong words for the wealthy who make money by taking advantage of others. There is a time of judgment coming for them. These people have not used their wealth to love their neighbors. Instead, they have hoarded. They have kept their riches for themselves and cheated their workers out of a fair wage.

N.T. Wright describes this lifestyle as “careless luxury.” In James’ time, there were wealthy landowners who owned estates and rarely used their wealth to help anyone but themselves. *The Message* says of these people: “But all you’ll have to show for it is a fatter than usual corpse.” In light of eternity, riches are relatively worthless (see Luke 12:33).

Scripture repeatedly shows that God has special concern for the poor. The Bible does not condemn wealthy people for being wealthy, but instead for misusing their wealth.

Pray: God, reveal to me areas where I have misused my wealth. Help me to be more generous, especially to those in need.

Practice: Most of us are considered wildly wealthy compared to much of the world. Google “Global Wealth Calculator” to see where your income compares to the rest of the world. How does this information change how you feel and what you will choose to do with your money moving forward?

Patience in Suffering

Reflect: Much of James' writing sounds urgent, doesn't it? Verse 8 says "the Lord's coming is near." However, until Jesus' return, we must wait. Waiting is sometimes difficult and uncomfortable. For the faithful, we wait patiently, hopeful for relief from conflict, pain, and suffering.

During our time of waiting, we are called to be patient in the face of suffering. We persevere, build resilience. James uses the example of Job, who faced unimaginable suffering, but trusted God throughout it all. Even though he had questions, Job remained faithful. And in the end, God blessed him for his faith.

It's not easy to wait, especially when you are experiencing something painful. Scripture reveals that in this life we will have trouble, but we can take heart in knowing God's compassion and mercy will always prevail. Jesus shares it this way: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Pray: Jesus, help me to remain faithful in times of suffering. May I feel the peace that only you can provide throughout any trials I experience.

Practice: Spend a few moments considering a time in your life when you experienced suffering. What was that like? How were you patient? What did you learn about God during that time? How will that experience help you remain faithful to God the next time you experience suffering?

Let Your Yes Be Yes

Reflect: Once again, James reminds us to reign in our speech. Here he encourages us to not swear an oath. *The Message* puts it this way: “Don’t add words like ‘I swear to God’ to your own words. Don’t show your impatience by concocting oaths to hurry up God. Just say yes or no. Just say what is true.” Leviticus 19:12 reminds us that swearing by God’s name is forbidden. Jesus gave a similar warning in Matthew 5:34-37.

James says how we speak is important. It is vital for Christians to keep their word. It is important to demonstrate integrity. When we invoke God in flippant speech, it dishonors him. All that is necessary is a simple yes or no, and then following through on what we have said.

The placement of this verse is quite strategic. Having completed another exhortation on our need to persevere in difficult times, James now issues a stern warning. Under pressure our default word choices may not be positive. Remember Peter? He did not respond well the night he betrayed Christ. Earlier that same evening he declared unwavering allegiance to Jesus. Hours later, under pressure, he caved, calling down curses and swearing (see Matthew 26:74). What his heart felt in fear, his tongue revealed in words.

Pray: God, help me to represent you well in the way that I speak.

Practice: Is there any discrepancy between what you think, feel, and say? Consider how you can give simple answers (as this verse encourages). Strive to be a person of your word.

The Power of Faithful Prayer

Reflect: James is wrapping up his letter with some encouragement to the church regarding prayer. As he reminds us, prayer is for all situations. Are you happy? Sad? Sick? In trouble? Prayer is the best response for all of these situations!

Scripture is full of all types of prayer. In the Book of Psalms we find everything from praises for victories to heartfelt cries for God to intervene in situations that seem impossible. There is an entire book of the Old Testament full of laments, a type of prayer where we cry out to God in our grief and sorrow. This book is appropriately called Lamentations.

James reminds us that impressive biblical characters, like Elijah, are merely human beings. Elijah prayed faithfully and God acted in an incredible way on his behalf.

It can be hard to remain patient while we wait for God to work. Prayer sustains us while we wait. Through prayer, ordinary people can access God's power.

As James draws near to the end of his book he addresses the same things he began with: We need patience and prayer to persevere and grow as followers of Christ.

Pray: Lord, I bring my needs to you, trusting that you will hear my prayers and walk with me through the season ahead.

Practice: Do you struggle with worry or anxiety? Try to replace worry with prayer this week.

Loving Those Who Wander

Reflect: James concludes his letter by encouraging Christians to help one another. Those of us who share in Christian community have a responsibility to look out for one another. We have to step up and take the initiative to look after people who are wandering from the faith.

It is never comfortable to call somebody out when they are on a trajectory away from God, but that is exactly what James encourages us to do. The stakes are too high, as verse 20 reminds us. When we see a fellow Christian wandering away from God's will and way, it is our duty to lead them back to the right path.

Sometimes we choose a wrong way, and other times we accidentally stumble upon it. In any situation, the community of Christians can help us find our way back.

Throughout the book, James has been reminding us of the importance of Christian community. Sin is not just a problem for us as individuals, it affects us as a community. Together, we can help one another develop a strong faith, then help others come to know and love Jesus.

Pray: God, show me who needs to be gently guided back to you this week. Give me the words to help if I need to intervene on behalf of a brother or sister in Christ.

Practice: Who did God reveal to you in your prayer? Reach out to that person, even if it is a little uncomfortable. Do it for the sake of loving, genuine, Christian community.

