

Practically James

A study of the Letter of James

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Introduction

One day four men built a backyard deck. Two men came from the lofty halls of mechanical engineering, two were mechanics of different stripes. As it turned out the deck boards extended past the end of the deck and needed trimmed to even up the edge. The engineers measured and discussed how to trim the boards without cutting into the floor joist beneath. They debated and argued over various methods of how to find the exact right place to mark the top of the deck for the power saw to follow. All progress stopped because of this one problem. The mechanics listened for a few moments to the engineer's discussion. One of them grabbed the power saw and with the help of the other standing beneath to keep an eye on the position of the blade they rapidly trimmed the boards to the right size. True story.

The point of the story is not to put down engineers and elevate the wisdom of mechanics. It is instead meant to provide a touchstone for the difference between theory and application. We, as followers of Jesus often argue about the right way to do things but neglect to ever get them done. We engage in theological arguments and fail to meet the real needs of people. (Do I really need to provide examples?) I find that the New Testament Letter of James has that same kind of get it done attitude as our two mechanics.

We see some early evidence of James' thinking in the 15th chapter of Acts. Gentiles (non-Jews) were coming to accept Jesus as their Savior and Lord in Antioch and elsewhere. The deck building question was whether these new believers should live like Jews and follow the laws of Moses including circumcision or not. Some Pharisees who had also accepted Jesus maintained that Gentile converts should fully follow the law of Moses. Paul, Barnabas, and Peter maintained that they shouldn't be burdened with that yoke.

At this time, James, the half-brother of Jesus, was what we would call the lead Pastor at the church in Jerusalem. While there was plenty of debate it was James that provided the practical wisdom to meet its challenge. After quoting an Old Testament prophecy indicating that Gentiles would be drawn into God's greater kingdom he said, *"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood."* No need for circumcision, no need to observe Passover and other feast days, or other practices found in the Law of Moses. James's solution was simple, to the point, and loaded with grace. We find that same kind of practical wisdom in the James' letter.

The letter itself is addressed to Jewish believers living outside of Judea. Although aimed at Jews, James' instruction is accessible for all believers. James states his purpose early, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."* (James 1:2-4, NLT) A statement that challenges us from the start as we struggle to reconcile troubles, joy, and endurance.

For this study we won't be taking a word for word exploration as we have done with other letters. James doesn't write in Paul's straight lines but bounces between topics. Brushing up against many of them early, returning to them again later with greater detail. There are seven peaks of practical wisdom we will explore in this study: wisdom, words, judging, worldly matters, spiritual works, prayer, and patience.

In each we'll strive to uncover the trouble, the joy, and the endurance. Or to put it another way - how to practically live out the life we have in Christ.

Practically Thinking

James 1:5, 3:13-18

“It’s just common sense!” How many times have you said or heard that phrase? The idea behind it is that there is a well-known set of knowledge and wisdom we all share. It’s common sense that spitting into the wind is unwise. But how often is common sense invisible until someone violates it and trips our “that was stupid” warning light. I wonder though, is common sense, well, common? Is your library of wisdom the same as mine? Probably not. Just by observing the world we see that common sense is the seed of many disagreements, arguments, conflicts, and fights. Whose wisdom is right? Let’s turn to James for the answer.

Early in his letter of encouragement and instruction James says, *“If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.”* (James 1:5, NLT) Boom! Did you catch it? In one decisive blow James removes our experiences, our senses (what we can see, hear, feel, taste, and smell), our “common sense”, our knowledge, and our friends from being sources of wisdom. If you need wisdom (and who doesn’t) ask God. And that’s just the first punch.

James returns to wisdom later in his letter. In a few short verses he identifies the conflict and struggle, the joy, and what endurance looks like regarding wisdom. *“If you are wise and understand God’s ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don’t cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For jealousy and selfishness are not God’s kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.”* (James 3:13–18, NLT) Let’s break this down a bit.

The Conflict

James describes two kinds of wisdom - worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom. That in itself explains a lot, there are many sources of wisdom, but there is only one that leads to peace.

James identifies worldly wisdom as jealous, ambitious, boastful, lying, selfish, unspiritual and even demonic. Worldly wisdom is born out of survival of the fittest and a strong motivation to look out for ourselves above all else. Nothing is forbidden because the only thing that matters is me, myself, and I. The fruit of that wisdom is chaos, disorder, tearing down, and evil of every kind. We’ve all traveled that road to some degree. No one needs to be taught how to be selfish.

In contrast, James identifies the attributes of Godly wisdom. It is pure, without blemish and unseen motives. Godly wisdom loves peace, is always gentle, willing to yield to others, filled with mercy, rejects favoritism, and shines with sincerity. There is an “other-centered” humility inherent to Godly wisdom. It is easy to act that way with some folks. However, James doesn’t give us that luxury.

The problem of course is that these two wisdoms are in conflict. And to be clear, there are many shades of grey between these two black and white pictures. But remember, Godly wisdom is pure. The whitest of white. The battle line are those moments of consequence when our social group, a family member, a

friend, an employer, or a trusted advisor says go right and God says go left. We are conflicted about whose wisdom to follow.

The Joy

The fruit we reap by following Godly wisdom is peace. That's the joy of this mountain. Peace doesn't mean that everything is right in our world, but that our hearts are at peace in the midst of the world's chaos.

Choosing God's wisdom means peace with Him. Our view of God changes from that of a harsh judge to a friend that sticks closer than a brother. We may not understand everything, but we know we can trust Him in all things.

Have you ever noticed that conflict begets conflicts but if someone is willing to bend then peace is possible? An attitude of willingness to be wrong, to go second, to show mercy, and reject favoritism seems to break impenetrable walls and cool intolerable tempers. I've seen it time and time again. Peace is born from listening much more than convincing.

James emphasizes the reward of choosing Godly Wisdom, "*And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.*" Choosing Godly wisdom will bring peace to our hearts, however, we may not see an immediate effect in our world. But as we continue, as we endure, we are planting seeds of peace that will germinate, grow, and ultimately produce good fruit.

The Endurance

James opens this passage with what endurance looks like in regard to Godly wisdom. "*If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom.* Prove it James' demands. We can say anything we want. We can mentally agree that something is right or the right way to go. James is declaring that if we say we're following God's wisdom it will be visible to all.

Living an honorable life means continuing to follow God's moral path. Our worlds are filled with examples of folks that proclaimed a path but didn't follow it themselves. That is not living an honorable life. You could call this aspect of endurance direction.

There is no limit to the way good deeds are done. James is more concerned that they are done. Let's define it based on what we've already looked at. Good deeds are those moments when we put someone else's needs above our own needs in a tangible way. Regardless of your station in life opportunities abound every day for good deeds. Let's call this aspect of endurance action.

Direction and action are fruitless unless planted with a humble attitude. We are constantly pulled in the direction of worldly wisdom, of saying and doing things for selfish reasons. I wonder sometimes if God is less concerned about what we do than our attitude in it. We can all do the right things with a wrong attitude but walking in Godly wisdom means doing the right things for the right reasons with the right attitude.

Consider it...

Following God's wisdom often seems like walking upstream against a herd of hungry middle school students heading for lunch. Everyone else seems to be heading one direction but God's wisdom often takes us in a completely different direction.

The direction of the world today seems to be division, anger, nearsightedness, and tribalism on just about everything. Common sense would say to stay in your bubble of relative peace instead of encountering those angry or challenging voices. Godly wisdom is not common sense, it's not natural, and it is definitely not easy - but it does bring peace in the midst of our storms.

Practically Speaking

James 3:2-12

Ever say something and immediately wish you could retract it? I can think of several times. In fact, the longer I think about it the more examples come to mind and the more I'm embarrassed. The insensitive comment. That joke which inadvertently offended. The rash promise. The harsh line that didn't need to be said. The times of silence when words could bring healing comfort. We've all been there which makes our next lesson from the Letter of James all the more real and relevant.

By way of reminder we're using James' introduction as our outline. *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."* (James 1:2-4, NLT) For each topic we're looking for the trouble, the joy, and the endurance. But again, James doesn't teach in a straight line but bounces between topics as his letter unfolds. It's no surprise then when he doesn't identify the trouble, the joy, and the endurance concerning the words we speak in that order.

The Trouble With Our Words

James wrote, *"Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself. People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring."* (James 3:2-12, NLT)

Let's summarize - yikes! (Okay, take a breath it will be alright). We've all done this right? If you haven't then step forward and tell us how it's done. Oh, and let's get one thing clear. Words are more than just the sounds that come from our mouths, we communicate in many different ways. What we write, our facial expressions, our tone and emphasis, our body language, even our actions and our silence declare blessing and cursing.

So, we have this problem. But it's not a control problem, a habit problem, an upbringing problem, or a wrong thinking problem. It's a heart problem. Jesus taught, *"For whatever is in your heart determines what you say."* (Matthew 12:34, NLT) That's why Political Correctness and all the other variations of thought police utterly fail, it's a heart matter not a head matter. But hey, exchanging hearts is what the Good News of Jesus is all about. Ezekiel prophesied, *"And I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart,"* (Ezekiel 11:19, NLT) This newness of life is described over and over again throughout the New Testament.

The Joy

James doesn't provide us an "if you control your tongue this will be the joy" kind of statement but we can infer a few things. In the long passage above James says, "*Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.*" One joy is simply knowing that we all make mistakes but as we grow in Jesus these will happen less. Another joy is in using our words as a barometer of spiritual health. Are we growing towards Jesus or away from Jesus - our words are one indicator.

Earlier in the letter James says, "*Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.*" (James 1:19–20, NLT) We'll return to this in the endurance section but there is a piece of joy here as well. We all know that our hearts are most exposed when we are angry, the words that spill out are often hurtful and defensive. Human anger does not produce or demonstrate the righteousness of God, no matter how justified we feel. But responding with grace, mercy, patience, and love does produce or demonstrate the righteousness of God at work in our lives. There is great joy to be found there.

The Endurance

While James' doesn't say much about the joy of controlling our words, he does say a lot about doing it. The most obvious is the verse above "*You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.*" Be quick to listen. If we want to be heard, we must connect better with the other person. You may have the right answer, but they may have a different question or concern. We should be deliberate in our words. Even a two-beat pause to consider the words we're thinking of saying will prevent many tongue sparked flames. And of course, we should be slow to let emotions, especially anger, drive our words. Emotions are valuable but not always very wise. The best way to avoid being led by our tongue is to be led by our ears. Listening to what others are saying and to the Holy Spirit.

There is one more verse concerning our words from James' letter. "*If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.*" (James 1:26, NLT) The word "religious" has gotten a bad rap in modern evangelical circles. In part it's because we see religion as a definition of belief instead of its original meaning of how we worship God. The word religion also conjures up images of ritual and rites which seem to have little to do with our relationship to God and others. James goes on to describe pure and undefiled religion in terms of seeing to the needs of widows and orphans along with "keeping oneself uncorrupted by the world." The centerpiece in this is controlling our tongue.

Consider it...

Let me put this in modern terms. If we claim to worship God in spirit and in truth but don't control what we say, we are fooling ourselves, wasting our time and breath. We need to be vigilant in this. Singing a few worship songs on Sunday morning does not make up for the bad things we've said at home or at work or our unspoken curses. Following Jesus, even in what we say, is our full-time enjoyment.

Practically Impartial

James 2:1-13

Our minds are constructed to discriminate. Designed to filter out unnecessary information received by our senses. If you doubt this sit quietly for a moment or two and listen. What noises are suddenly obvious that must have been there the whole time. Perhaps you'll hear the tick of a clock, the whirl of a fan, or the song of a bird. With really good hearing you may even hear your own heartbeat and sound of your own breath. But turn your thoughts elsewhere and those sounds retreat again to the unnoticed background. Those noises were there all the time, but our minds determined, without our bidding or direction, that they're not important. The problem is when we allow this wonderful ability to impact our valuation of people.

The New Testament Letter of James practically speaks to this issue of discrimination and judgement which we all must tackle. Please look up and read the entire passage of James 2:1-13, for reasons of space I won't reprint all of it here.

The Trouble

James writes, *"My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?... doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?"* (James 2:1,4, NLT) Between verses one and four James provides a scenario, probably an occurrence witnessed or reported to him, of how someone rich visiting a service was given preferential treatment while someone poor was relegated to the corner.

The trouble of course is that we're built to discriminate and make preferential judgements. We prefer our own likes and dislikes. We prefer gain; whether that is monetary, prestige, or even acceptance. We prefer our own family. There is a God instilled nurturing reason why parents prefer their children. We can't help but discriminate, judge, and show favoritism when it comes to our kids. But there are also areas of life where God demands we turn off our discriminating engine.

A bit later in the passage James writes, *"it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law."* (James 2:8-9, NLT) Jesus redefined "who is our neighbor" in Luke 10:25-35; the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Bottom line? Everyone is my neighbor. The cashier at the convenience store. The homeless wandering the street. The rich man lost in his accounts. Those living the dream. Those experiencing the nightmare of war, poverty, famine, and discrimination. Even those that I've filtered from view, they're my neighbor too.

The Joy

James describes the joy of impartiality in terms of mercy. The New Living Translation puts it this way, *"There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you."* (James 2:13, NLT) Or consider, *"For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."* (James 2:13, NASB95) I don't know about you, but I need God's mercy. But there are also other joys experienced in this temporary moment before the time judgement.

Consider the simple act of bringing joy to someone else's day. Leaving smiles in our wake instead of sorrow. The first step is seeing others as people and not just cogs in the machinery. The clerk at the gas

station is a person with hopes, dreams, issues, and struggles. The person in the slow-moving car blocking our path is created in the image of God. The janitor that cleans our office space, how can we bring a smile to their face? When we see people as machinery then smiles are not required, but what's the joy in that? This all begins with turning off our engine of discrimination in regard to people.

The Endurance

We also have this other tendency to overcome. The tendency to judge whether someone is deserving of being valued. We may see them as a person and recognize that they are not just part of the landscape. Perhaps even recognizing the divine spark of God's creation in them and still judge them as being unworthy of our favor or attention for any number of seemingly rational (but really irrational) reasons. Those irrational reasons could be their heritage, their cultural expressions, their politics, their theology, or their sin. Once judged we toss them into the landfill of irrelevant and unwanted. Mercy denied.

Every generation of the church has struggled with finding the lines between welcoming and valuing the person while not affirming sin. The problem of judging between sins is a discrimination of a different kind. James is clear in this, *"For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws."* This doesn't mean that we ignore all sin and anything goes. It means we are equally concerned with the gossip as we are the adulterer. We call all to repentance, all to turn from sin and towards Jesus.

The issue of endurance in discrimination and judgement is just that - enduring. It's easy to do a few things once in a while to make us feel good and confirm we're not judgmental. Like giving money to a charity or serving the homeless once a year. All well and good, perhaps even an excellent starting place. But if we fail to grow past that we're not enduring. Turning off our engine of discrimination and seeing value in all people must be an intentional, deliberate, every day and every moment choice.

Consider this...

Our culture tells us that X, Y, and Z discrimination are wrong. But what happens when X and Y collide? Who wins? That's the problem with culturally defined rules, it must choose winners and losers. One thing must be valued above another which is also a form of discrimination. Sorry if I just killed your sacred cow. As soon as X, Y and Z are identified we emotionally debate their relative merits and lose the foundational message of loving our neighbor. God's anti-discrimination plan is not the world's.

If we all truly loved our neighbor as ourselves like Jesus taught, if we all value one another as beings created in the image of God (even though flawed and stained with sin), if we all left smiles in our wake instead of sorrow, then favoritism, judgmentalism, and discrimination would be no more. This doesn't mean we would all have equal outcomes but that we would all be valued and treated with grace, kindness, and dignity. Then mercy would indeed triumph over judgement.

Sure, in a practical sense this vision is impossible, the human heart is bent towards sin. But for those of who have been forgiven at the cross and received God's mercy it is the way of Jesus which we must follow.

Practically Humble

James 4:13-16

What defines who is rich and who is poor? How much money does it take? It really comes down to a matter of perspective. In the USA I'm in the middle with a fairly standard working man's salary. An experienced long-haul truck driver makes about the same amount. But, if I were to move to any number of places around the world I would be counted as very well off, if not rich (even though I'm not). Neither am I poor, although there were times in my life when that was true. Again, in a relative sense. So, while the New Testament Book of James discusses rich and poor, we must not lose sight of the larger lesson.

For today's look into James we are pulling on several separate but related threads. In each of these there is a forefront issue and a background lesson. Because of this, our basic outline of observing the struggle, finding the joy, and acknowledging the endurance will be woven into the sections.

The Plan

Regardless of your station in life we all make plans. A person involved in business plans what exchanges they will make. The farmer plants planning on a harvest. The worker plans on the paycheck that comes in due season from their labor. A homemaker plans for the various stages their children will go through.

Always practical James reminds us of several truths, *"Look here, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.' How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil."* (James 4:13–16, NLT)

Let's get the obvious out of the way. James' issue isn't with planning itself but with leaving God out of it. The struggle with this thread is us. How often do we make plans without asking God? Too often we ask God to bless our plans instead of asking Him what our plans should be. The first is arrogant and boastful. We're in control. The second is humble and God is in control.

That concept of submitting to God's rule and reign in our life is James' larger point and its joy. There's a special excitement that comes with following God's lead. It doesn't mean that everything magically works. But there is a blessing when we step out in obedience even if the risk is great and the step costly. There's an inescapable joy that comes with participating in God's plans even if there is pain, loss, and suffering.

How we endure is wrapped up in one word - humility. It is humbling to submit our ways and steps to God. It's not so much a lowering of ourselves but a recognition of God's greatness and putting things back in their proper order.

Rich and Poor

James says much, the whole Bible says much, about the value of the poor in God's sight. *"Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. The hot sun rises*

and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.” (James 1:9–11, NLT)

To be frank, I don't know many who count themselves as poor that feel honored by God. The daily struggle to put bread on the table, to keep a roof over their heads, to provide shoes for the ever-growing feet of children takes an emotional and physical toll. Nonetheless, God honors them. An honor not counted in dollars but in faith, peace, and provision. One way of looking at it is that God prefers the poor. They see God's hand at work more readily than someone self-sufficient.

A little later in the book James' gives the rich a stark warning. *“Look here, you rich people: Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you. Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags. Your gold and silver are corroded. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This corroded treasure you have hoarded will testify against you on the day of judgment. For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the Lord of Heaven's Armies. You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire. You have fattened yourselves for the day of slaughter. You have condemned and killed innocent people, who do not resist you.” (James 5:1–6, NLT)* The rich struggle to trust God instead of their wealth, power, or self.

The difference that must be grasped is between temporary gain and eternal wealth. Jesus gave us this perspective in his parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. In the here and now Lazarus was a poor beggar covered with sores. A pitiful existence. The Rich Man lived in splendor. Some would even call him blessed by God. But then both died. Lazarus went to Abraham's Bosom or paradise, the Rich Man to a place of torment. That's the setting, the point of Jesus' parable is that the rich are so deaf to God that they wouldn't take notice if someone returned from death to warn them.

Here we must be clear about a few things. God doesn't judge our bank accounts but our hearts. There are poor that act rich; and rich that are humble in their prosperity. Neither do we ignore the poor; followers of Jesus are His hands and feet. Since God honors the poor so should we. Prosperity is a mark of responsibility not an indicator of blessing.

Humility

Humility is the larger background truth James is presenting. It is the endurance portion of making plans, of living poor, and living rich. James writes, *“And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.” (James 4:6–10, NLT)*

Regardless of the hand life has dealt, God calls us to humility. Rich, poor, or in-between we are to humble ourselves before God. Submitting our everything to Him who loves us more than we can imagine.

Practical Faith

James 2:21-24

The Letter from James almost didn't make it into our Bibles. The primary issue was the conflict concerning the roles of faith and works (or good deeds). Consider these two verses. Paul wrote, *"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God."* (Romans 4:2, NASB95) James argued, *"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?"* (James 2:21, NASB95) On the surface they seem completely contradictory, but are they?

The Conflict

Before we can continue our study of James we must solve the dilemma of faith and works. The first thing we must understand is that James agrees with Paul. Faith is preeminently important for justification before God. Consider, *"But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord,"* (James 1:6-7, NASB95) I like to see the apparent conflict between James and Paul in this light. Paul is teaching theologically and warning against requiring acts of the Law to assume one is right with God. James is teaching that for faith to be faith there must be practical, visible, corresponding action.

The key is Abraham. When Paul talks about Abraham's works and faith, he is considering the stumbling block of circumcision. The conflict of the day was whether non-Jewish believers needed to follow the Law of Moses. Paul's conclusion is that works in accordance to following the Law cannot save us, only God's grace through faith can. James nods in agreement but points out Abraham's radical act of obedience (an act that would have violated the later Law) - the near sacrifice of his son. We are saved by faith, but faith must, by its very nature, have practical, powerful, concrete, and perhaps even radical actions. Works can't save us; however, they are evidence that we are saved.

The Trouble

Returning to our study let's consider the trouble, joy and endurance concerning practical faith. James points out our trouble early in the letter. *"But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord."* (James 1:6-7, NLT) Some translations call it double-mindedness.

Our faith can waver between many different anchors. We can have faith in our ability, our experience, and our good works. Promises of the world, of technology, of effort, of programs and formulas, and of success can attract our faith. Our faith, however, must be entirely focused on God; the one right answer in a sea of wrong answers.

The Joy

James identified the joy as completeness. Like the satisfaction of placing the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Practical actions expressing our faith in God complete the picture. James provides two examples.

We've already touched on the first example. That moment when Abraham put his faith into action and prepared to sacrifice his only son. James considers it in 2:21-24, *"Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God. So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone."* (James 2:21–24, NLT) Can you imagine Abraham's joy as he untied Isaac and lifted him from the altar? Abraham's faith was completed in God.

(For the sake of clarity, I believe that Abraham's radical action was a onetime thing that released the hand of God to offer his own son for us all. I would severely doubt the faith and sanity of anyone claiming today that God told them to sacrifice their child.)

The second example James provides is an unlikely candidate for faith. *"Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road."* (James 2:25, NLT) Why does James lift Rahab to the same level as Abraham? Rahab had three strikes against her, she was a non-Jewish resident of Jericho, she was a prostitute, and she was a woman in a male dominated society. Abraham lived a journey of faith, Rahab didn't. But when the time came, Rahab recognized God and chose Him over her country, her society, and her safety. She placed her faith in God and acted on it.

The Endurance

The endurance of faith and good deeds is keeping faith continually focused on God. It's easy to shift our focus without realizing it. Perhaps we have that mountain top experience with God where everything comes together. Lives are changed, people touched, and God glorified. We return to the mountain thinking that God is still there, it worked once then it will work again. Our faith has shifted from God to experience. He may not be on the mountain but wanting us to follow Him into the valley for a completely different need. That's the endurance faith and good deeds requires.

Here's some questions to consider. Are we following Jesus or someone else? Are we free to move wherever the Spirit blows or rooted, waiting for Him to return? Are we focusing on the needs of people or the answer God wants us to demonstrate? Am I trying to repeat something that is already completed but blind to the new opportunity already at hand? Have I discounted or pushed aside promptings of the Spirit because I feel unworthy, lack the ability, or am fearful? Am I trying to please God and earn His favor by keeping the rules? Are we doing it or just saying it?

Do It

James's point is that action will always follow faith or it's not faith. But we should avoid actions not driven by faith. It's easy to repeat an action because it worked in the past but shift our faith from God to the act. We may attend church every week, tithe every paycheck, pray every day but they need to be from faith and not habit, routine, or an attempt to buy God's favor.

On the other hand, we must be ready to radically act in faith. Open our home to the stranger and the needy. Give our last dollar to someone in need. Risk pushing obligations aside to lift someone out of a real or metaphorical ditch. Decide that pounding roof nails for someone that can't afford a roofer is the same as worshipping God with raised hands and loud voices. Sacrificing our reputation and perhaps

even our job for the truth of God's love by speaking up or standing with someone is being put down. To be honest, the list is endless.

Neither Abraham's nor Rahab's act of faith was easy. Both carried great risk and called for radical action. The question is this: what radical action of faith is God asking today of you today?

Practical Prayer

James 5:13-16

Perhaps you've seen those magic quadrant charts that seek to make the complex easier to understand. They typically identify four extremes and then plot points between them. One such chart seeks to understand the diversity of human personality using the tensions between individual and collective, interior and exterior. Is your identify individualistic or community driven? Would you prefer to be alone or in a group? The chart begs us to plot ourselves in between those poles. James has a similar magic quadrant. The difference however is that no matter where you are at on the chart the encouragement is the same - pray.

Magic Quadrant of Prayer

James wrote, *"Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results."* (James 5:13–16, NLT)

There are four types of prayer in James' encouragement. Prayer for our own struggles and hardships. Prayers of worship when we are happy. Receiving prayer when sick and for when we know the guilt of sin. While we could plot these out in quadrant fashion the answer is the same, the difference is the type and direction of prayer.

Our Struggles

James is intentionally broad, broader than the translation "suffering hardships" conveys. Another way to put it is - are you in pain. Any kind of pain, physical, emotional, developmental, financial, worried, anxious, stressed, guilt-ridden, conflicted, or because of a relationship? James bluntly prescribes, "you should pray." If you can pray about it you should, as we'll see in a moment there are times when we need the prayers of others.

James doesn't offer how to pray, what to say, or even how often to pray. Which brings us to a reality. There are no magic formulas for prayer. God doesn't turn us off if we fail to use the right words in the right order. He doesn't care if we begin with "Our gracious Heavenly Father" or "Hi God, it's me again." He doesn't judge our style, only our heart. The key I've found is to give Him the pain, problem, or hardship and let Him provide the answer. It's easy to pray the solution we want instead of giving Him the problem. James' point remains, pray no matter the pain.

Our Joys

The opposite pole from pain is happy. This too calls for prayer although of a different type. James encourages, *"Are you happy? You should sing praises."* Praise and worship are also forms of prayer. Whether spoken or sung they glorify God and remind us that our joy and our happiness is from Him. It is perhaps the easiest prayer to ignore. Our thoughts rarely turn to God when things are good unless we've developed a habit of praise.

Among the prayers, praise is unique. There's no request or need in our words. Just a heartfelt bubbling of thanks and worship. The seed of praise could be anything from answered prayer to simply responding

to God's undeserved love for us. James' point is the same, speak directly to God in praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and worship.

When We Can't Pray

Receiving prayer is just as important to James as praying itself. James said, "*Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well.*" Sometimes we're too broken to pray for ourselves. Perhaps more often than we care to admit. That too calls for prayer.

Let's spread the net just a bit on this. Let's include anything in our lives that makes it difficult if not impossible to pray. Debilitating sickness is the obvious. Heartbreaking depression or grief could also silence our prayers. Any mountain in our lives that blocks our view of God requires the prayer and care of others. In the same vein, while James identifies elders of the church our elders may be identified by title but may also be women and men of faith God has placed in our lives. They may even be children.

When we can't pray; when the mountain is too huge or our strength too weak, we need to willingly ask and receive the prayer of others. Men, I know this challenges our pride. It challenges mine. None of us want to look weak or out of control. We're not fooling God. He already knows and his opinion is the only one that matters. Asking for and receiving prayer is a vital part of our walk with Jesus.

When We Won't Pray

The final of our four types of prayer is confession. Guilt and fear can keep us from seeking God. Adam and Eve hid in the garden. King David went to great lengths, even murder, to cover his sin and guilt. The enemy of our souls loves to whisper reminders of our sin so we feel unworthy to pray in faith. Those are obvious blocks to prayer.

There are two other triggers for not wanting to pray. The first is anger with God whether actively or passively expressed. The second is apathy, we don't pray because it's simply not important to us. In my experience, the second is more damaging than the first.

All of these are rooted in sin which makes James' prescription of confession appropriate. Some sins we can confess before God on our own and receive healing. Others, especially those bearing the fruit of addiction, unbreakable habit, or extreme pain require the listening ears of others. James instructs, "*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*" John promises, "*But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*" (1 John 1:9, NLT)

Healing and release follow confession and prayer. Does this mean that we blurt out our sin to anyone with ears. No, like the prayers for the sick we need to lean on the trustworthy hearts God has put in our lives. These are the folks that want to pull us up out of the ditch we're in instead of wallowing in the mud with us in a vain effort to make us feel better.

Trouble, Joy, and Endurance

Continuing the theme we're following. The trouble in the case of prayer can be anything from external circumstances, through illness, and to our sin, guilt, fear, anger, and apathy. James' provides a menu of prayer for everything going on right now.

The joy of prayer is found in the answer. *“The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.”* To cover the range of results and why some prayers seem to go unanswered is a topic for another day. Even when the answer is not what we expected there is still joy because our trust is in God not in the answer.

Endurance is found by continuing to walk in prayer regardless of the moment. Struggling - pray. Happy - praise in prayer and song. Sick - receive prayer. Fearful, guilty, or angry - confess and pray. The quadrant James constructed does not contain an option or moment when prayer is not desired or necessary.

One warning

James, being the practical person that he was, also gave us a warning. There is a moment when prayers are not enough. Consider, *“Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?”* (James 2:15–16, NLT) Sometimes God is asking us to do more than pray.

This requires a listening ear. We should always pray, sometimes we should also act. Our prayers are a precious gift, never discount their power or value. But let’s also take James’ warning to heart. Our prayers should include the question - what do you want me to do here God? Sometimes we need to risk being taken advantage of and meet someone’s felt need so God can touch their real need. So, yes, pray. And with your prayers seek God’s direction for the action that follows faith.

Practically Waiting

James 4:1-2, 5:7-11

We've probably all experienced the mind-numbing boredom of waiting in line. Standing or sitting until our turn comes around, until our name is called, or it's our turn to ride the roller coaster. Those minutes seem like hours as they drag by. We find ways to distract ourselves. Read a magazine, play a game on our phone, or pick on our sibling because we don't know what else to do. But is that the kind of waiting James has in view when he says, "be patient?"

We framed this study of James with the opening words of his letter. *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."* (James 1:2-4, NLT) Along the way we identified the trouble, the joy, and the endurance in the various topics James wrote about.

Concerning waiting and patience James wrote, *"Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen. You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near. Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door! For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about Job, a man of great endurance. You can see how the Lord was kind to him at the end, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy."* (James 5:7-11, NLT)

We Hate to Wait

The trouble is that we hate to wait yet waiting is a part of the world's design. Seeds do not instantly bear fruit. It may be a bit cliché but consider the simple act of writing a letter and receiving an answer. It wasn't so long ago that such an exchange could take weeks or even months depending on the distance. Today I can write an email or text message and it will be delivered within seconds of being sent even if the recipient is half a world away.

Waiting is stressful, especially when the time exceeds our expectation. We get antsy when the restaurant is slow. That's where the trouble begins, and we begin to "take it out" on someone. It's kind of like being kids on a long road trip. Eventually we've run out of the fun stuff. We're tired of reading comics or coloring or counting license plates so let's pick on sis since there's nothing better to do. James sees that too, *"Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door!"* (Also see James 4:1-4) Why did James stick that warning in the middle of talking about patience and waiting? Could it be that some of our "fights" are simply because we don't know how to wait?

The Joy

James identifies the joy of patiently waiting in terms of experiencing God's kindness, tenderness, and mercy as shown by Job. We won't unpack Job here. The basics are that Job lost everything, family, finances, health, and friends. Even those friends that did hang around weren't exactly full of good

advice. The question being asked is whether Job would turn his back on God when everything was taken away. He didn't and God abundantly restored Job (Job 42:10).

The mercy and lovingkindness of God is our joy. We may or may not fully experience it today, which is James' ultimate point, but let's eagerly look to that day when we will.

Actively Waiting

The endurance comes with actively waiting. The primary example is that of waiting for the Lord's return. Even in James' day there was an "any day now" expectation. Patience is not sitting on our hands waiting for something to happen. Faith is not passive. James uses the example of a farmer that plants a seed and waits as it sprouts, grows, flowers, and is ultimately ready for the harvest. Faith is involved in dedicating that seed, patience is involved as the farmer cares for the plant, joy is involved when it is time for the harvest. Since Jesus' ascension into heaven His followers have lived in the day of patience, caring for the seed of faith until it is the time of harvest.

Actively waiting is tricky. Our boredom meter is not an indicator of how we're doing. Some action is simply distraction and busy-ness instead of being fruitful. Such action takes our mind off of waiting and keeps us busy but does little to encourage faith. But here we must be careful; one church's rummage sale is a distraction while another's is fruitful. The difference is motive, attitude, and obedience. Why are we doing something? Are we doing out of love or duty or guilt or tradition? Did we hear from the Holy Spirit to go this way or are we being driven by something else?

Suffering and Patience

It's easy in Christian circles to confuse suffering and patience. While God uses everything in our lives, even our suffering, He doesn't ordain suffering to teach us patience. So, to say "God must be teaching me patience" when the kids are out of control, when the job fails, when the car won't start, or when we've had a fight with our spouse isn't necessarily true. God could be teaching faith to pray through, love no matter what someone does, humility when our pride is wounded, forgiveness even when it seems unfair, and yes, patiently trusting that God is in control.

It's no accident that James follows his encouragement for patience with a call to pray in all circumstances and moments. We aren't called to wait it out but to wait on Him. Active patience means trusting God with all things, including the right time for the answers. God isn't setting up an obstacle course to see if you measure up. He is instead walking with us and asking us to trust Him as we encounter the struggles, challenges, and stresses of life.

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