

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

JAMES 3-5

Years ago, a Christian magazine ran a cartoon. The lawn marquee in front of the church was advertising: “The LITE Church: 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5% tithe, 15 minute sermon, 45 minute worship services, only 8 commandments - *your choice*. We use just 3 spiritual laws and have an 800 year millennium. Everything you’ve wanted in a church, and less!”

And this is the church the book of James addresses. He speaks to Christians with a zero-calorie, low-fat, watered-down faith. It’s been said, “In our day, the Gospel has become so diluted, if it were a medicine it wouldn’t heal, and if it were a poison it wouldn’t harm.”

It’s tragic when a church dilutes the demands of the Gospel to make it more palatable to society’s tastes. We call it “easy-believe-ism” or “cheap grace.” It’s the idea that saving faith is nothing more than responding to an altar call, or mouthing a prayer, or signing a card. Jump through a few religious hoops and you’ll be saved for all eternity. *You’ve got your fire insurance!*

The book of James tells us that’s not true faith! True, legit, saving faith **leaves tracks**. Real faith shows up in real ways in a person’s life. *We’re saved by faith alone, but faith that’s real, is not alone. It’s a faith that works.*

James 3:1 begins, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” Jewish teachers were called “rabbi.” The word means “my great one.” The Hebrews revered their teachers. Under Jewish law the duty to help a rabbi exceeded even the duty to provide for a parent. And with such a show of respect and privilege, there was no shortage of people who wanted to be teachers.

This situation carried over into the early Church. People wanted to be “pastors” because they saw it as a cushy job. They didn’t consider its responsibilities.

That’s why James warns aspiring teachers of “*a stricter judgment...*” Teachers are incredibly influential. I have a plaque that reads, “A teacher touches one’s life forever.” But a teacher can lead well or mislead.

That’s why a teacher needs to be *accurate, not sloppy; appealing, not boring; genuine, not hypocritical*. Mostly, a teacher needs to live what he teaches! A pastor gets no credit for teaching the Bible if he doesn’t live by it. None of us should ever say, “*Do what I say, not what I do.*” Teachers are held to a higher standard.

Verse 2, “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.” Real faith leaves tracks. For one, you can tell the contents of a person’s heart by what comes out of their mouth - their speech.

He tells us, “Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.” Like a boat rudder or horses’ bridle, our tongue is a steering mechanism. If you can control *what you say* and *how you say it*; you can skillfully navigate life. In contrast, “loose lips sink ships.” *Speak without thinking* and you can shipwreck.

James continues, “Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.” A human tongue is a slab of meat that weighs just 2.5 ounces, yet it’s your body’s strongest muscle. It can be used to inspire or to destroy. “See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.” A single spark from a campfire can burn a whole forest. And likewise one idle or hurtful word can sour the attitudes of many people. A combustible tongue can destroy a church!

The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.” When Satan finds a wagging tongue he sets it on fire to do great damage. Remember how Samson caught 300 foxes, and tied torches to their tails. He then turned them loose in the fields of the Philistines, and destroyed their entire crop. Well likewise, a fiery tongue is Satan’s weapon of choice against the church. When the devil finds a loose tongue he fuels it with evil to burn up God’s harvest.

“For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” The circus sports its *dancing bears*, *trained seals*, and *talking parrots* - bird and beast can be tamed, but no one tames the tongue. An envious or bitter tongue is capable of running wild...

And it can be guilty of extreme contradiction. Verse 9, “With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing.” Folks have entered this sanctuary together to praise the Lord; then cussed each other out after the service while leaving the parking lot. We’re told, verse 10, “My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

“Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?” The tongue is like a spring. Its source lies below the surface. In Luke 6:45 Jesus says of a person, “Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” The tongue is the spigot of the heart. What’s in your heart, eventually comes out of your mouth. **A heart**

yielded to God produces a tongue that speaks kindness. **An evil heart** yields a tongue on fire.

“Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.” *Love for God and hurtful words* out of the same mouth is as incongruous as olives on a fig tree. What spews from the fountain reflects the source.

Verse 13, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.” Notice, evidence of faith isn’t just seen in “good conduct,” but wisdom needs to go with that conduct. *Sometimes the right thing can be done the wrong way, or at the wrong time, and it can undermine the good we’re trying to do.*

Here, James associates wisdom with “meekness” or restraint. Wisdom doesn’t bowl a person over with truth. It picks its timing and works gently, sensitively.

“But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.” *God’s wisdom and earthly wisdom* differ. Earthly wisdom divides us and creates factions. It’s egotistical, and self-seeking, and envious of others.

Man’s wisdom is always a win / lose deal. Someone ends up on top, and someone ends up on the bottom. Whereas, God’s wisdom is a win / win proposition. Both parties benefit from the proposal or the solution. God’s wisdom looks for a way for everyone to benefit.

Verse 16 reads, “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.” Earthly wisdom breeds confusion. Follow it and chaos reigns.

“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure...” In essence, there’s no ulterior motive, no hidden agenda.

“Then peaceable,” (or peace-loving) “gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” Man’s wisdom is concerned with self-interest, while God’s wisdom creates solutions that unify. It keeps the peace!

And has there ever been a time more so than today when such wisdom was needed? Those of us living here below certainly need wisdom from above! In every area of our modern society we need *heavenly wisdom!*

Chapter 4, “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” The Greek term translated

“pleasure” is *“hedone”* - which is our word *“hedonism”* - that pleasure is the chief purpose of life. *This is certainly today’s predominant philosophy...*

Yet it’s our pursuit of pleasure that creates conflict with other people, and ultimately makes us *unhappy*.

Harmonious and healthy relationships require giving, commitment, sacrifice, unselfishness, humility - **things that aren’t necessarily pleasurable**. A hedonist invariably ends up in broken, unhappy relationships.

Verse 2 tells us, **“You lust and do not have.”** It’s the irony of life, **lust for more and you end up with less.**

Samuel Johnson once issued the challenge, *“Of all that have tried the selfish experiment, let one come forward, and say that he’s succeeded. He that makes gold his idol, has it satisfied him? He that’s toiled in the fields of ambition, has he been repaid? He that has ransacked every theatre of sensual enjoyment, is he content? Can any answer in the affirmative? Not one!”*

None other than King Solomon tried the selfish experiment. Gold, ambition, sex - yet he concluded in Ecclesiastes 2:1, *“I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure’; but surely, this also was vanity.”* James nails it, here is the result of pleasure’s pursuit, **“you lust and do not have.”**

“You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.”

We fight and kill and covet to get the other guy’s stuff, rather than simply ask God for *His* blessing. Don’t *lust* just *ask*. God has something better just for you!

Countries battle, neighbors bicker, companies try to bankrupt each other for the same resources. It’s like brothers fighting over a candy bar, rather than asking their gracious dad for the extra candy bar in his pocket.

Verse 3, **“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”** So often, even when we do ask we ask with the wrong motivation. Our concern should be *God’s glory* not our *own pleasure*. Let’s not **“ask amiss”** or selfishly.

In verse 4 James doesn’t mince words, **“Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”** Being born into God’s family involves a vow of allegiance to Jesus! We agree to love Him and desire Him supremely. And the unbridled pursuit of pleasure is a betrayal of that vow. James calls it **“adultery.”** Our hearts belong to God, not this world.

Verse 5, “Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?” God’s Spirit is jealous for our affections. He’s insulted by our flirtations and infatuations with worldly stuff!

And yet we live in a world full of temptation. *How does God expect us to reserve our hearts for Him? Here’s how, verse 6, “He gives more grace.”* It’s God who enables us to live for Him. He fills us with His grace and love and goodness to say “no” to this world.

“Therefore He says (here James quotes Proverbs 3:34): ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” Assume you can do it on your own, and God will let you try. But humble yourself - admit your need for Him, and God will give you empowering grace!

“Therefore submit to God.” The word “*submit*” means “to arrange under, to line up behind.” Let’s arrange our lives around God, and line ourselves up with His Word. As Richard Baxter use to pray, “Lord, what You will, where You will, when You will.” Make that your motto!

Then verse 7, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Stand against the devil in Jesus’ name! Muster some resistance and the enemy will be forced to flee.

In Ephesians 6 we’re told to clothe ourselves with the armor of God, *but the one part of the body that’s not covered is **the back!*** That’s because there’s no retreat, no running scared. We’re called to “*resist*” not “*retreat!*”

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” Notice the parallel, “Resist the devil” and he’ll flee, but “draw near to God” and He’ll draw near to you! Keep your **face** toward God, and your **back** toward the devil.

“Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Don’t be double-minded, or caught between two opinions. Be “*all in*” for Jesus.

I once read of a gang of bank robbers that paused to pray before their heist. They wanted to ask God to bless their burglary. *How silly is that!* We’d all agree you can’t serve God and rob a bank at the same time.

But neither can you follow Christ while living with your boyfriend... or while cheating on your income tax... or while stealing from your employer... or while lying to your parents... *that’s every bit as contradictory!*

Verse 9, “Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.”

We need to get serious about repentance! If there's sin in my life I tackle it with a willingness to change.

Of course, James isn't against all laughter, but he's saying there's something phony about coming to the altar to weep and confess your sins; then 30 minutes later be out in the foyer telling jokes. *Let's get serious.*

Verse 10, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." *Promote yourself* and you'll rise as high as *you can go*. *Humble yourself*, and God will promote you to a place *only He can lift you!*

"Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?" God alone is judge. When we judge another we put ourselves in the place of God. And that's a place where none of us deserve to be.

Verse 13, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow."

Last spring when the New York Jets signed MVP quarterback Aaron Rodgers to their talented team they had hopes of winning a championship. Who could've imagined three plays into their season Rodgers would snap his achilles tendon and be out for the entire year? It just proves no one knows what tomorrow holds!

For us to say dogmatically, "*I'll do this*" or "*I'll do that*" is arrogance. We forget, God has ultimate control, not us. Life is full of unexpected twists and turns. *We should know by now, much of life is beyond our control.*

"For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then *vanishes away.*" Your very life, everybody's life - is like a puff of warm breath on a cold winter's day. *We're here today, gone tomorrow.* How can we speak definitively about our future when there's no guarantee we'll even wake up in the morning?

"Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." Realize, planning is one of life's necessities, but all our plans should be contingent on God's sovereignty. We should say, "*if the Lord wills.*"

The Puritans were fond of the Latin phrase, "*Deo Volente*" or "*God willing...*" As were the early Methodists who signed letters with the initials, "*D.V.*" or "*Deo Volente.*" *Their plans* were subject to *God's plans.*

You would think 2020's pandemic and quarantine would've taught us that our plans can change on a dime. A key to success is flexibility. God is in control, not us. I like the saying, "The bend in the road is not the end of the road if you're willing to make the turn."

Verse 16, "But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." It was a stormy night at sea as the battleship plowed through the fog. The captain saw a light off the port bow. It seemed to be closing in...

The captain ordered the signalman on deck to flash a message, "Alter your course 10 degrees south." The message came back, "Alter your course 10 degrees north." The captain grew angry. *How dare them...* He sent back a message, "Alter your course 10 degrees south - I am a captain." The return message came, "Alter your course 10 degrees north - I am a Seaman 3rd Class." This infuriated the captain even further... This time he sent back, "Alter your course 10 degrees south - I'm a battleship." The final message was, "Alter your course 10 degrees north - I am a lighthouse."

Like the proud captain, many a person has crashed on the rocks of life because they were too arrogant, and too stubborn, and too rigid to alter their course! This is why James says, "All such boasting is evil."

"Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." Since we don't know what the future holds - *or if we even have a future* - then while we have opportunity to do good we should do it! Serve the Lord while you can. You're not promised tomorrow.

Chapter 5, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl..." This is the same Greek word used for the shrieks that are heard in hell. James is warning the rich to "weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!"

Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days." *And how foolish is that!* It's the last days. The world is on its way out. God's kingdom is on the horizon. This world's riches are about to burn; yet folks are still investing in earthly treasures. *It's foolish.*

Now understand, James isn't telling us not to save for a rainy day. Nor does the Bible teach that money is evil. It's "the love of money (that's) a root of all... evil."

James' warning is not to the rich per se, but to those who trust in riches, and live for money. Earthly treasure corrodes and rots. Money has zero value in eternity.

Verse 4, “Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.” The rich people James had in mind had actually gained their wealth dishonestly. And God heard the cry of the victims they had cheated.

“You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.”

James sees these dishonest landowners as a turkey fattened for Thanksgiving - ready for the slaughter.

Yet *that’s not how they saw themselves*. “You have condemned, you have murdered the just; He does not resist you.” These hatchet men cheated and murdered, and God had done nothing to stop them. It was as if God were letting them get away with their crimes.

It reminds me of the Wells Fargo agent who stole a single silver dollar from his company every day for 30 years. He would bring the coin home, and drop it in the trunk in his attic. Until one day he deposited his last coin. The attic flooring could no longer hold the heavy trunk, and that night it fell through the ceiling crashing down on top of the man as he laid in his bed. For years it seemed he’d gotten away with his crime, but not so.

James concludes, “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.” Today is the day of salvation. Right now, Jesus is extending mercy. But the day is coming soon when the Lord will bring judgment.

“See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” A farmer can’t rush the harvest. He has to wait patiently on God. And likewise, judgment comes in God’s time, not ours.

“Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!” Time is running out. We don’t have a single second to grumble or squabble. There’s work to do.

“My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure.”

And he gives a specific example of endurance in the face of hardship. “You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord - that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.” Job 42:10 concludes Job’s trial by saying, “And the LORD restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.” The end of Job’s life proves you never lose out waiting on God. *Perseverance* has it’s own *pay-day*.

Verse 12, “But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes,” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No,” lest you fall into judgment.” Here, James repeats a portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. And again faith leaves tracks. Followers of Jesus will be people of their word!

In 5:13 James begins to ask his readers a series of questions, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” When you’re troubled on earth you need to put a call into headquarters and connect to heaven... pray! To bear your cares, turn them into prayers.

“Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.” There’s a disease that is especially common among Christians. It’s called cheerful-itis. It’s terminal. There’s no cure. It begins in the heart and spreads quickly - *the mouth smiles, the hands clap, the arms raise, the toes tap, the feet dance.* The only relief is *to give God praise!*

Then James asks, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” The Bible teaches us that God heals in multiple ways... For one, the human body comes equipped with amazing recuperative capabilities... God also uses the knowledge accrued by doctors... He can and does perform miracles... He even heals through the church and its leaders... *Rather than non-essential in a time of sickness and pandemic, the church has a role to play.*

This is why James says if anyone is sick he should call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And that is impossible to do if the parties are not *in-person*.

Yet it’s interesting that when we get the slightest sniffle our reaction is usually to skip church. While James says that’s when we need to call for the elders!

And here’s good news... The elders won’t ask if you’re insured, or charge a co-pay, or have you fill out endless forms, or sit for hours in a waiting room. The leaders of Calvary Chapel love God’s people and take very seriously our responsibility to pray for the sick.

And notice, with our prayer, James tells the elders to anoint the person with olive oil in the name of the Lord! In the Bible, olive oil is a symbol of God’s Spirit. The elders are to pour some oil on the person who’s sick, on their forehead or near their wound. *And just a little dab will do you!* The oil has no magical power, or medicinal benefit - it’s a point of contact for our faith.

Jesus yielded to the will of His Father in [the Garden of Gethsemane](#), “[the Garden of the Oil Press](#).” Like oil from an olive, Jesus was crushed for us to be forgiven. Now God’s healing flows to us through Jesus’ sacrifice.

Notice verse 15, James adds, “**And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.**” It’s the “*prayer of faith,*” not the oil, that prompts God to heal. The oil just gives us a tangible target for our faith. We ask God to heal, but *when?... but how?... but why?*

When?... the oil is applied. **How?...** by the oil of His Spirit. **And why?...** Because the body of Jesus was crushed for us. His healing flows through His sacrifice.

Today, Roman Catholics practice the sacrament of extreme unction. They anoint a person with oil to ready them for death. How ironic... In the NT the anointing of oil is a means of healing, not a precursor for dying.

“**And (in verse 15) if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.**” Not every sickness is the result of a sin. Remember, **Job’s** sufferings were no fault of his own. **Paul’s** thorn in the flesh was God’s way of humbling him in light of his revelations - not the result of any sin.

Yet there are times when a sickness **is** God’s punishment for a particular sin, and when that’s the case the healing comes when forgiveness takes place.

Verse 16, “**Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.**”

Some ailments have psychosomatic causes. Stress is produced by guilt and shame, and can have adverse effects on us physically. The lines etched in a person’s face can be caused by the burdens carried by their soul. Secret sins that get buried spiritually find a way of pushing themselves to the surface of our lives in the form of physical maladies. Sin is harmful to our health.

Some folks suffer mysterious symptoms they’ve tried treating with all kinds drugs and other cures. *But here’s what few people have tried...* They’ve never taken a ruthless inventory of their sins. For years they’ve swept their own hurts and how they’ve hurt others, under the rug - with lies, and cover ups, and self-deception.

But what if you came clean? Imagine the relief. What if you actually confessed your sin and let God heal you.

It reminds me of the college freshmen. On his first trip to the laundromat, he took his duffle bag full of dirty clothes, and just tossed it into the washing machine.

When it was done he went to fold his clothes, but he was disappointed. His clothes were still dingy and dirty.

An older lady had watched him. She explained if he wanted clothes that were thoroughly clean he had to separate them before putting them into the washer.

And this is how we have to treat our sin. Some people make a vague, ambiguous, general admission of sin, *and wonder why they still feel dirty*. **Serious confession gets as specific and thorough as possible.**

In Roman Catholicism you enter a dark booth and confess your sins to the priest... In psychotherapy you lie down on a couch and confess your sins to a psychiatrist... Some folks go on television and confess their sins to Dr. Phil... But God tells us to go to church, and confess our sins to one another. **This is another reason Christians should meet. Church is essential!**

True confession is living an open, transparent life. It's about emptying my closet of its skeletons, and being honest with my weaknesses. Pride causes hypocrisy. It's humility that allows me to be real with my struggles.

God wants His church - our fellowship together - to be a grace-filled, judgment-free zone - where honest confession can bring about genuine acceptance.

Next, James makes such a hopeful statement. It's a promise, **"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."** What an incentive to pray!

I've heard it said, **"Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence."** God answers the persistent, and God-glorifying, and heart-felt prayer.

And James gives us an example, **"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours."** Elijah wasn't a Superman. He was a mortal man - a human being like you and me.

Elijah had his highs and lows. There were moments of bravery and moments of cowardice. He stood up for heaven; then ran scared before an evil woman named Jezebel. In the end, Elijah was just a regular guy, trying to live a righteous life, **but he knew how to pray...**

"And he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit." Notice first about Elijah's praying... He prayed **"earnestly."** He didn't just mouth some words, he meant what he prayed. It's been said, **"Elijah didn't just say prayers, he prayed prayers."**

And he **"prayed again."** He wasn't a one time user. Prayer was his habit... Elijah **prayed** and it didn't rain for 42 months. He **prayed again** and it down-poured.

The OT says when Elijah **prayed again** he prayed seven times. And the answer to his prayer was a tiny cloud the size of a fist. Yet that was enough to stir Elijah's faith. He told his servant a real frog-strangler, a gully-washer was on the way... **"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man (had again) avail(ed) much!"**

Verse 19, “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” We need to reach out in love not only to a *lost world*, but to *fallen saints* who can’t get up on their own

When an actual sheep can’t stand up it’s said to be “*downcast*.” Its own body prohibits it from lifting itself.

And spiritual sheep are also vulnerable. You can get so depressed you need a hand from someone else. We’re acting like our Great Shepherd when we help.

But again James’ point is this, *does your faith leave tracks? If you or I were put on trial for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict us?*

Let’s adopt James’ attitude, “*Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*” Let’s be doers of the Word, not hearers only!