

The New Testament, Book 20

The Epistle of James

The epistle of James is the second of the six “general Epistles,” the other five being Hebrews, I and II Peter, I John and Jude¹. These five epistles are usually grouped as “general” epistles because they were written to the Church at large, not to a particular person or church. This one is “general” in the truest sense; there is not a single personal reference or message in the entire letter.

James is packed with doctrinal content; it is like a Marine’s well-packed sea bag, shaken down, without room for even an extra pair of socks. For this reason, in selecting highlights, it is difficult to leave anything out. It is written in hammer-like prose, declaring its teaching points bluntly, with few words, one lesson after another. In this way, it reminds us of Proverbs; this may be seen in the number of highlights based upon only one or two verses.

In fact, the style of Hebrew poetry is used in much of the book: brief, pithy statements, often in couplets, using the technique of dualism, i.e. with one statement contrasting with its opposite, or with one reinforcing the other. Chapter 4 is rich with examples, such as, “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble” (verse 6); and “resist the devil and he will flee from you,” and “draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you” (verses 7-8). It is also rich in metaphor.

James is also extremely Jewish in content, written to the 12 tribes of the dispersion (“scattered abroad”); but this should not surprise us. This epistle was written very early--perhaps the first book of the New Testament to be written; and, at the time of writing, the Church was almost entirely (if not entirely) Jewish. In this way the Book of James is a companion piece to the Book of Hebrews.

A. Author. The human author is James, half-brother of Jesus, as he says in the very first verse². He was also head of the Church’s ruling council at Jerusalem--apparently the first over-all leader of the young Church³. It is interesting to note that he does not identify himself as the Lord’s brother; like another half- brother of Jesus, Jude, in his small epistle, James humbly

¹ Some commentators exclude I John as a general epistle, recognizing only five. For more on this subject see “Introduction to the Epistles,” in the introductory material of the study guide to Romans.

² Matthew 13:55-56; Mk 6:3; ANF, Vol VIII, Fragments of Hegesippus, I, p 762.

³ Acts 15:12-29, 21:18; Gal 2:12.

identifies himself only as Jesus' servant. This is generally believed to be because James (like his brother Jude) had not accepted the messianic claims of Jesus while He lived; in fact, until the Resurrection, Jesus' family seems to have thought He had gone mad⁴. Because of their rejection of Jesus until after the resurrection, James and Jude apparently denied themselves the more impressive title, "brother of Jesus."

Josephus refers to the human author of James as "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James⁵."

Ancient historians, and tradition, tell us that James was an unusually good man, a Nazarite, whose Christian life was so exemplary that he was given the name "Justus," or "James the Just." He spent so much time in prayer that his knees were as calloused as those of a camel.

Refusing the command of the Sanhedrin to renounce Jesus, he instead shouted his confession of Jesus. For this he was thrown off a wing of the Temple, to the pavement below, but survived the fall, apparently (supernaturally) unharmed. While subsequently being stoned, he knelt and prayed aloud for the forgiveness of his murderers, and died, put out of his misery by a fuller, with his club⁶. He was buried on the spot, close to the Temple, and a monument ("pillar") to James was placed there, which still stood at the time of the writings of Hegesippus (ca 165-175 AD), about 100 years after the destruction of the Temple.

NOTES:

a. Had I been in charge of throwing that good man off the roof of the Temple and seen him crash to the pavement, supernaturally unharmed, without so much as a bruise, I think I would have fallen to my knees in repentance, rather than proceeding with his murder. But those Sanhedrin members were insane, driven (I believe) by doctrinal demons.

b. Hegesippus wrote that James "succeeded" to the position of ruling elder in the Jerusalem church; the use of this word suggests that he had a predecessor in that position⁷. If there was an over-all leader in the ruling council at Jerusalem before James, he may have been Peter, before he began to travel as an evangelist. There is, however, no mention in Scripture of such a leader before James; and the term "succeeded" may simply mean that James accepted and assumed the office of ruling elder.

⁴ Matthew 12:46-47, 13:55-56; Mk 3:20-35.

⁵ Josephus, Antiquities, 20. 9. 1.

⁶ ANF, Vol VIII, Fragments of Hegesippus, I. pp 762-763; Hegesippus, Book V (no longer extant), quoted by Eusebius, Book 2, Chapt 23. A fuller was one who treated cloths, beating them with a wooden mallet.

⁷ ANF, Vol VIII, Fragments of Hegesippus, I. p 762.

B. Place and Date. James was written very early; it was obviously written before the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. It was probably written before any of Paul's epistles, and was possibly the first book of the entire New Testament to be written. James was written at about the same time as Matthew's gospel⁸.

The internal evidence for an early date is very strong. According to reliable tradition, based on Roman records, James was martyred in 62 AD. His book was obviously written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 71 AD, for there is no mention of that cataclysmic event. Because there is no mention of doctrinal questions concerning Gentile believers, it appears to have been written before the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 (ca 50 AD), presided over by James, which dealt with the questions concerning Gentile Christians and their observance of Jewish Law. In fact, there is no mention of Gentiles in the epistle, nor of the evangelistic outreach to them, nor of the concept of grace. This epistle was probably written in Jerusalem, ca 48 AD.

Notes:

a. The human author of James is obviously familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, as we shall see in the text of the epistle⁹. For this reason, some conclude that the epistle was written after Matthew's gospel.

This conclusion, however, doesn't necessarily follow; for before Matthew's gospel was written, there were thousands of people who had heard, and were discussing, the Sermon on the Mount, which must have been taught many times, in many locations, to many thousands of people. James may have been in those crowds, listening to Jesus teach. And, with the possible exception of his mother, who would be more familiar with the teachings of Jesus than his half brother, James?

The picture of the James Ossuary goes here.

b. Josephus refers to the human author of James as "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James¹⁰." In 2002, an ossuary (bone box) appeared in the possession of an antiquities dealer in Jerusalem with the Aramaic inscription, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." It is dated at AD 63. Jewish custom was to identify a man only as son of his father (e.g., "Simon son of Jonas"); a brother of the man was mentioned only if that brother was of extreme importance. After prolonged controversy, including a criminal trial of the owner for forgery and related

⁸ Mathew's gospel is generally believed to have been written first in Hebrew (35-40 AD) and later in Greek (the form that we have today), ca 50 AD (ANF Vol. 1, Fragments of Papias, VI, p 155).

⁹ James 1:12, 4:4, 5:12.

¹⁰ Josephus, Antiquities, 20. 9. 1.

offenses, in which he was found not guilty, some of the leading epigraphers (authorities on ancient inscriptions) declared the box and its Aramaic inscription authentic. For more on this amazing discovery, see “The James Ossuary” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

C. Occasion. The newborn Church was quickly finding its form, in and around Jerusalem, and James seems to have become its first leader¹¹. After the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jews of the dispersion (“scattered abroad”) had returned to their homes all over the known world and formed fellowship groups. They had knowledge only of salvation by faith in the resurrected Jesus, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. They were without teaching and guidance concerning how they should live as Christians, especially in terms of their responsibility to one another, and to those unredeemed people around them. This epistle was the first such written guidance for the Jewish Christians.

NOTE: Dr. Henry M. Morris has observed that it is a beautiful illustration of God’s grace that James, who had denied the claims of Jesus until after the resurrection, should be chosen to write the first inspired book to believing Jews; and that Paul, who had been a passionate persecutor of Christians, should be chosen to write the first inspired books to believing Gentiles.

D. Theme. The theme of the book is practical Christian living, directed to the Jewish mind. It covers so many topics, with so much compressed truth, and in such a concise way that, in some places, it reads like the Book of Proverbs. It does not touch on the great doctrines of the Church (such as the divinity of Christ, His Messiahship, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, or the Second Advent); in fact, Jesus is mentioned only twice: in the first verses of Chapters 1 and 2. Finis Dake observed that, in terms of doctrinal statements, without these two verses the entire book could be placed in the Old Testament. Although written for, and addressed to, the dispersed Jewish believers, and with illustrations drawn from the OT, James demonstrates a familiarity with the Sermon on the Mount.

Although the Book of James speaks with power on a variety of topics, it is usually thought of in terms of its emphasis on good works (e. g. “faith without works is dead” [2:26]). To Martin Luther, whose entire life was dedicated to the concept of salvation by grace alone, as opposed to salvation earned by the individual’s good works, this was contradictory and offensive; he referred to the Epistle of James as “the epistle of straw.”

E. Highlights. Highlights of the Book of James include the following:

¹¹ Acts 12:17; Acts 15:13-21; Acts 21:17-19; Gal 2:7-9.

1. The Twelve Tribes Scattered Abroad. (1:1)

James addresses the epistle to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” This is significant, because there are false doctrines also “scattered abroad” based on the false belief in “the ten lost tribes of Israel.” The northern Kingdom of Israel (which was created when Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, allowed the kingdom to be divided), with its 10 tribes, was defeated and carried away by the Assyrians into cruel captivity. This occurred about 100 years before the Southern Kingdom of Judah was finally carried away into Babylonian captivity¹².

According to the false legend, those 10 tribes never returned, and their remnants wandered off to the north and west and populated continental Europe and the British Isles¹³. The problem with this idea is that **there were no** “lost tribes” of Israel; remnants of the 10 northern tribes returned with the rest of the Babylonian captives, to rebuild Jerusalem and repopulate the Promised Land. Verse one makes this clear.

2. Count It All Joy. (1:2-4)

James writes that trials and temptations will come, i.e. that they are a natural part of life, and we should embrace the trials with joy (verse 2). This seems to be a strange idea, until we read what follows in verses 3 and 4. These trials and difficult times cause us to grow stronger, and develop patient maturity. We should let this process of strengthening, and development of patience, run its course and do its full, thorough work in us, having its full effect. In this way we will eventually be strengthened and mature in every way¹⁴.

***NOTE:** At this point, we must remind ourselves of the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness feels good, is pleasant, and flows from happy circumstances; it is, therefore, a temporary state. When painful, unpleasant and discouraging circumstances prevail, happiness melts away. Joy, on the other hand, is an abiding, constant thing, and does not depend on happy circumstances. Joy flows from the deep, unshakable conviction that, if we trust and obey the Lord, victory will ultimately come. We can know joy when in tears--even when our hearts are breaking, for joy transcends circumstances. Jesus was not happy on the cross; the physical and*

¹² The carrying away of the southern kingdom of Judah was incremental, because Nebuchadnezzar wanted to keep the southern kingdom as a vassal state, paying tribute. But the Israelites of the Southern kingdom continued to betray his trust and rebel, until his patience was exhausted, and he burned the city of Jerusalem and carried the rest of the Israelites away into captivity.

¹³ For more information on this see “The Ten ‘Lost’ Tribes and the British Israel Theory” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

¹⁴ This same principle is expressed, in almost the same words, by Paul in Rom 5:1-5.

emotional agonies were real, and he despised the shame of hanging there, naked, torn and bloody, the object of public ridicule. Through it all, however, he had the unshakable, transcendent joy of knowing that it would all end in victory, with his purchasing forgiveness, healing, and freedom, that would be available to all of mankind, and for all time¹⁵.

3. A promise of Wisdom. (1:5-8)

To make it through the trials and tangles of life, we need wisdom; and we need God's wisdom--not just the wisdom of man. Here, says James, is a promise of this wisdom, and it is not just for the chosen few. If **any** of us lacks wisdom, he says, we should stop what we are doing and ask God to grant us his wisdom.

This is not a request for a lifetime anointing with wisdom, such as was granted to Solomon; according to the Bible record, he is the only man in the history of the World granted this gift. No, here he speaks of ongoing, crucial, decisions in life. If we ask in faith, single-minded on the solution, not doubting, God will grant us that **moment** of wisdom so that we can make a right decision. If, on the other hand, we ask, doubting and wavering, we will receive nothing; "a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways."

***NOTE:** In v 5, the phrase "upbraideth not" is significant, and interesting. The underlying Greek word for "upbraideth" is "oneidizmo" and its meaning in this context suggests, to chide, to rebuke, or to correct in anger. Concerning us, and our asking the Lord for wisdom, it seems to say that we may ask as often as necessary, and He will not grow weary and irritable for being asked. We human parents can easily understand this concept, for small children can exhaust our patience with continual asking, especially in asking "why?" Our Heavenly Father, however, does not grow tired of being asked.*

4. Earthly Things Are Temporary. (1:9-11)

The poor man of low degree should rejoice, knowing that his condition and position in life are only temporary, for he is exalted as an heir of God, and has a home in glory. And let the rich man be glad when he is humbled, and shown his spiritual poverty, for both he and his earthly riches will certainly pass away, if that is all he has. They will dry up and disappear like flowers or grass that have reached the end of their life cycle.

***NOTE:** At risk of belaboring the point, note that v 9 does not say that those of us of low degree should be **happy** because we are poor and in humble*

¹⁵ See in this regard Hebrews 12:1-2.

*circumstances. No--the verse says that we should have **joy** in our relative poverty and humble circumstances, knowing that our needs are going to be met, and that we will have ultimate victory and spiritual riches.*

5. The Crucible of Temptation. (1:12-16)

Blessed is the man who endures temptation and overcomes it, for he shall receive the victor's crown of life that God has promised to those of us who love Him. But know this, says James: if the temptation is to sin, it does not come from God. It is important for us to know that God cannot be tempted with evil (He won't even look upon it), and He does not tempt any of us in that way. No, says James, those evil desires come from within us--from our sin nature. And, if we allow it, the sinful desire will give birth to sin; and the sin, when allowed to be fulfilled and have free reign in our lives, brings forth death. And, for emphasis, James warns us not to make the mistake of doubting any of this.

6. Swift to Hear, Slow to Speak, Slow to Wrath. (1:17-21)

Every good and perfect gift that we receive comes from God, the Father of lights. And there is no rising and setting, as does the Sun, in partial darkness or shadow in or about Him--only light. He has graciously given us a spiritual birth with the Word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits of his creation. Because of this, we should be always ready to hear, slow to speak, and slow to take offense and become wrathful. For the wrath of man does not promote the righteousness that God desires of us. Wherefore we should reject all forms of wickedness, and receive with meekness the Word which is implanted in our hearts, and which has the power to save our souls.

7. Be Doers of the Word. (1:22-25)

Then follows one of the most important principles and lessons in life; it is expressed elsewhere in the Bible, but nowhere else as clearly and fully as by James. It is that we must not only know the truth that makes us free--we must also be active in performing it. We are not just to hear and learn the Word of God and its lessons; no--we are to act them out in our daily lives¹⁶.

If we are hearers only, and not doers of the Word, we tend to forget who we are in the family of God; we lose the keen awareness of our identity as his children. It is like looking at ourselves in a mirror, seeing what we look like and, as time passes, our knowledge of exactly what we look like fades.

On the other hand, if we are doers of the Word, daily living actively, according to the Word, looking always to the perfect law of liberty and

¹⁶ John 13:17; Phil 4:9.

freedom that we find only in the Word, we will be blessed in our God-pleasing deeds¹⁷.

8. True, Undefined Religion. (1:26-27)

If anyone makes a show of being religious but does not control his tongue, that person is deceiving his own heart, for his religious activity is vain and accomplishes nothing that lasts¹⁸. On the other hand, pure, unblemished religion, in the sight of God, is to have compassion for, and provide help for, the widows and orphans, and to keep one's self uncontaminated by the ungodly world around us¹⁹. The Holy Spirit Who indwells and guides us, as re-born believers, should naturally move us to such a way of life.

9. Do Not Be a Respector of Persons. (2:1-9)

We must not practice the Christian faith while treating some Christians as being more important than others. We are all equally precious in the sight of God, and we should always treat the persons of others as He does; He is not a respector of persons. God is not impressed with our wealth, or with our position in life; and we are to follow his example. It is natural to treat the elder or the bishop with greater deference than the secretary or the one who cleans the church building or mows the grass; but it is wrong. It is natural to treat someone with deference because he is rich in worldly possessions or famous; but it is sinful to do so. Such behavior, James says, making judgments about the relative worth of others, flows from evil motives (seeking to gain favor with the wealthy and prominent).

We must be very careful not to treat the poor and the humble as if they are less important than the wealthy and powerful. After all, on the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and said that we should follow his example²⁰. From the beginning, God has delighted in using and honoring those who are, in a human sense, of low estate (a classic example is Mary, mother of the Messiah); and yet we are slow to catch this vision, understand it, and follow the Lord's example. We must fulfill "the royal law," which is to love our neighbors as ourselves, seeing the value of each life as it is seen in the eyes of God (the only eyes that matter), no matter what his job is, how much money he has, or what he wears. To be a respector of persons is a sin.

¹⁷ Artists who draw or paint self-portraits use a mirror by the easel; one look doesn't work--it doesn't last. an example is the famous painting of Norman Rockwell, painting his self-portrait.

¹⁸ The Greek word rendered "vain" is *mataios*, and means literally, empty or void of effect.

¹⁹ Isaiah 58:3-11; II Cor 6:14-18; Eph 5:11.

²⁰ John 13:3-17.

NOTE: *The commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves is extremely important²¹. Jesus, at the end of his earthly life and ministry, said that it is the second most important of all the commandments; the only commandment that is greater is to love God, with all that we are²². This key principle in the Christian life is found in God's Word from Leviticus to James; but only here is it called "the royal law." It is the law of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; and we dare not ignore it. Any sort of caste system among Christians is wrong and offensive to God. We should treat everyone with respect, and we should honor those who are our teachers and leaders in the Church; but we must not value one above another.*

In liturgical churches, the Thursday before Easter Sunday is called "Maundy Thursday." The word "Maundy" is derived from the Latin word "mandatum," which means a commandment (i.e. to wash one another's feet). In some traditions, bishops go out on Maundy Thursday and wash the feet of the poor, obeying, at least symbolically, the "mandatum" of Jesus.

10. Beware of Legalism. (2:10-13)

It is not only a bad idea to adopt parts of the Levitical Law; it can be deadly dangerous. Jesus has delivered us from the curse of the law; and yet there have always been those among us who are attracted to it, who want to practice some of it, and require it of others. And yet, James says, if we adopt some of the law, we are responsible to perform all of it; and only one man in human history has been able to do that, the Lord Jesus, who has freed us from its impossible demands²³. Not only can we not do it, but to require any of it can cost us everything²⁴. And, if we judge others with harsh legalism, we shall be judged in the same way by the Lord. This alone should give us pause; when I stand before the judgment seat of Christ, I do not want justice--I want mercy.

11. The Great Question: Faith or Works? (2:14-26)

The rest of Chapter 2 deals with the matter of faith versus good works, the signature doctrinal topic of the epistle of James.

We cannot save ourselves by performing good works; the Bible is clear about this. Rather, we are redeemed by the grace of God, through faith in Him²⁵. And yet our faith is empty and vain if we do not try to do those things which please God; and it seems that the thing most important to Him

²¹ Leviticus 19:18, 34; Matt 22:39; Gal 5:14.

²² Matthew 22:37-40.

²³ Galatians 3:10.

²⁴ Galatians 5:1-4.

²⁵ Ephesians 2:4-9.

is that we love one another, not just in words, but in deeds also, by looking to one another's needs. It doesn't do much good for the brother who is cold and hungry, if we pat him on the head and say nice things. He needs to get warm and he needs to eat²⁶.

If our faith is genuine, and if we love our neighbor who is in need, our faith should move us to perform good works by helping him. It is really that simple. Our good works should be the natural outworking of our faith in God, and the impulses of love produced by his indwelling Spirit; but they cannot be the means of our working our way to Heaven. Our redemption should bring about the good works; but good works cannot bring about our redemption. If we could work our way to Heaven, then all that Jesus did for us was meaningless. James expresses this foundational fact in verse 18 with an interesting challenge: if one is proud of his faith, but can demonstrate no fruit in the form of good deeds, James will demonstrate his faith by the good deeds that flow from his faith. And then, in the last verse of Chapter 2, he summarizes the matter with an excellent analogy: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also²⁷."

***NOTE:** Verse 19 is worthy of some separate thought. It doesn't seem to belong with the other verses in this passage; and yet it is an extremely important revelation. The fact of spiritual life expressed in the verse is that mere belief in God's existence and sovereignty does not result in salvation. Evil spirits know the reality of God, and his sovereignty, much better than we do; but they are still, everlastingly, lost. The evil spirits who had the misfortune to encounter Jesus in his earthly ministry knew exactly Who, and What, He was, long before his own disciples caught on. Yet those demons were in terror in his presence, knowing his authority and power, and knowing, also, their own terrible, eternal, destiny. It isn't enough to believe that there is one God; we must go beyond that belief, receive his gift of redemption and be born into his family.*

So, why is v 18 here in this passage? It seems to be saying that the two categories of error can expect the same result. If we claim to have faith but do nothing with what we think we have, we may have reason to question our position before God. By the same token, if we believe in God's existence, but have never gone beyond that to truly know Him, we likewise should question our position before Him.

12. Do Not Presume To Be a Teacher of Others. (3:1)

²⁶ I John 3:17.

²⁷ Matthew 27:50; Mk 15:37; Lk 23:46; Jn 19:30; Acts 7:59.

We should be careful not to become self-appointed teachers, presumptuously instructing and correcting others, because teachers will be judged by a higher standard than those they teach.

NOTE: The word rendered “masters” in v 3 is a rendering of the Greek word “didaskalos.” Its primary meaning is “teacher”; but it is often rendered “master” because, in that time and place, to be a teacher also involved some degree of authority. Many times in the gospels Jesus is addressed with this word, sometimes rendered “teacher” or “rabbi,” and sometimes as “master.” This usage found its way into modern English, in which a teacher is sometimes referred to as “school master,” and the principal as the “head master.”

13. The Power of the Tongue. (3:2-12)

We all stumble and do wrong things; and anyone who does not offend with his words is indeed a mentally, emotionally and spiritually mature man. If one can control his tongue, be slow to speak and careful about what he says, he can control his whole body. The tongue, although it is a small part of us physically, has power to do great things, for good or ill²⁸. With the analogies of the bit in a horse’s mouth and the rudder of a ship, James makes this point.

Then he speaks of the power of the tongue in terms of lighting a fire. In the same way that a match or a spark can ignite an inferno or a wildfire, so can the tongue, with only a word or two, ignite massive trouble and destruction. And then he makes a key point: it is that this potentially destructive tongue, full of poison, cannot be tamed and controlled with only our human resources; by implication, we see that it must be brought under control with the help of the Spirit of God. Left to our own resources we will bless God and curse man with the same tongue; this is wrong.

14. The Deadly Nature of Strife. (3:13-18)

A wise and knowledgeable man will behave himself with humility, avoiding strife. On the other hand, if we have bitter envying and strife in our hearts, if we are contentious and are moved by selfish ambition, we are in conflict with the Truth of God. This is not the wisdom of God; it is the opposite! This ungodly “wisdom” begins as earthly (carnal, human) behavior; but, if allowed to continue, it becomes sensual (passionate) and, ultimately, devilish (demonic). Envying and strife will be the result; and, where these things are allowed to go on, there will be confusion and all sorts of evil behavior.

²⁸ Proverbs 18:21. Proverbs is rich in passages about the power of the tongue; but this is the place to start.

On the other hand, the wisdom that is from above, the wisdom of God, is first of all pure, then peaceful and considerate, gentle, willing to yield to reason, full of compassion and good fruits, impartial, fair and sincere. And those of us who make peace will enjoy the peaceful fruit of righteousness, free from fears, agitating passions, and conflicts. The peacemaker shall have peace.

15. The Origin of Strife. (4:1-3)

James asks, rhetorically, what is the origin and cause of strife among us; and then he answers his question in blunt, unmistakable terms. He says that strife originates within us, in our covetous desire to have that which belongs to someone else. We desire to have the other man's possessions, and some may even kill to obtain them. The basic problem, along with our sinful nature, is that we try to take things from one another instead of asking God for them and trusting Him to provide. And, says James, even when we pray we don't receive the things we ask for, because our attitude is wrong; it is self-serving and lustful. This is the origin of strife--not outside us, but within us.

***NOTE:** James is definitely not a "feel good" preacher, tickling our ears with what he thinks we want to hear; he, like his half-brother Jesus, can hammer us with words that we don't want to hear, but that we badly need to hear, in order to get our attention, clear our thinking, and bring us to repentance and a right relationship with God²⁹.*

16. Friendship with the World is Enmity with God. (4:4-5)

There is a vital principle--a fundamental fact of life in God's family. It is that we cannot live with one foot in the Kingdom of God, and the other in the ungodly world system around us, with its transient, superficial, self-serving, sinful values, and its destructive practices.

Comparing us to adulterous spouses, James says that if we are friends of the ungodly world system, we are the enemies of God. What could be more serious than that? He then refers to something to this effect in Scripture, asking (rhetorically) if we think the Scripture says in vain that the Holy Spirit, Whom the Lord has placed within us, desires that He be welcome within us. He is asking if we take this fact seriously; and our answer should be an emphatic "Yes, Lord!" After all, unless we speak like it, behave like it, and share its values, the ungodly world around us will hate us; Jesus said so³⁰.

²⁹ Proverbs 6:23; Matt 3:7, 12:34, 22:15-33.

³⁰ John 15:18-20, 25.

***NOTE:** The passage of Scripture to which James refers is unknown, and interpretations vary; there is no single OT passage that says this, although the concept of God as the ultimate husband, and the related concept of spiritual adultery, are expressed in several OT passages. It can't be in the NT because at the time of this writing there were no NT Scriptures as such. He may well be referring to the teachings of Jesus concerning God and mammon, for he was surely familiar with the teachings of his half-brother³¹.*

17. Rightly Relating to God and Satan. (4:6-10)

James follows with a declaration of a fundamental principle of the Kingdom: it is that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. This fact of life is of foundational importance; and it is simple. Throughout the Bible we see God offended with the pride of man, and gracious to the humble; pride offends Him, and humility pleases Him³². We are to humbly submit ourselves to God; but we are also to steadfastly resist Satan, and it must be done **in that order**. If we are prideful, we will not succeed in resisting Satan; instead, we may find ourselves in the unhappy state of the seven sons of Sceva in Ephesus³³. We are to draw close to God and, if we do, He will manifest his presence, near and close to us. But we cannot expect a close, happy relationship with God if we allow sin to remain in our lives, or if our affection and loyalty are divided between God and the world system. If we humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord, He will lift us up and honor us (in due time--never too soon, and never too late)³⁴.

***NOTE:** The Greek word rendered "resisteth" is "anthistemi." It is a military term, meaning to set one's self in battle array against an enemy. It is difficult enough in life to be opposed and persecuted by the world around us; we definitely do not wish to be "resisted" by God!*

18. "If God Wills." (4:13-16)

It is natural and easy to take the future for granted; but it is a dangerous mistake, and it can become sinful presumption and pride. A fundamental fact of life is that our life on this planet is uncertain; when the Sun rises in the morning, we cannot know with certainty that we will live to see it set in the evening. To keep this fundamental fact fixed in our thinking, it is good to make it a habit to say, "If God is willing, I will be at a certain place at a certain time³⁵." We are creatures of habit, and habit is a powerful force; so

³¹ Matthew 6:24; Lk 16:13.

³² Proverbs 3:34; I Pet 5:5-7.

³³ Acts 19:13-16.

³⁴ I Peter 5:6.

³⁵ Proverbs 27:1.

why not use the force of habit for godliness? Satan definitely uses it against us; we should turn the weapon around and use it against him; and, in the process, we will be more pleasing to God.

19. The Sin of Omission. (4:17)

There are two basic kinds of sin: they are sins of commission, and sins of omission. Sins of commission are the things we do that we should not do. Sins of omission, on the other hand, are the things which we should do, but fail to do. An example that comes immediately to mind is the great apostle, Paul. Speaking of his own failures, he lamented that he commits both kinds of sin; and, crying out in anguish, he said, “For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do...O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death³⁶?” Therefore, if we know a thing to be good to do, but do it not, we commit the sin of omission.

20. A Stern Warning to the Rich. (5:1-6)

James then warns the rich, that they should not trust in their riches, for they have no permanent value³⁷. And he issues a stern indictment of the rich who have accumulated their wealth by cheating and dealing dishonestly with the poor who work for them. The cries of these abused, over-worked, and under-paid laborers have been heard by the Lord Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts (the military, crushing, overwhelmingly powerful, personification of God), and He will avenge them³⁸!

***NOTE:** This is the aspect of God that we should most desire **not** to offend; and He definitely has some terrible things in store for those with earthly power and wealth who abuse those who are defenseless and poor!*

21. A Comforting Promise to the Afflicted. (5:7-11)

James follows his indictment of the rich and corrupt with a comforting word to those undergoing difficult times. He urges patience, and advises them to concentrate on establishing their hearts, concentrating on the health and readiness of the inner man, for the return of the Lord is near³⁹.

Paraphrasing the Sermon on the Mount and referring to Job as an example, he says that those who faithfully endure persecution and abuse are, like Job, blessed in the end, for God is merciful and compassionate.

22. Stop Taking Hypocritical Oaths. (5:12)

³⁶ Romans 7:19-24.

³⁷ The greatest danger in riches is that it is difficult not to place our trust in them, when we should be trusting in God.

³⁸ Genesis 4:9-16; Rev 6:9-11.

³⁹ Proverbs 4:23.

In ancient times Jews were very much given to promiscuous swearing of oaths, in attempting to convince the listener of their sincerity. They swore by Jerusalem, the holy city, by the Temple, by the altar, by Heaven, etc. This often meant swearing to the truth of something, but with mental reservations; and the result was growing hypocrisy and the searing of the conscience. James tells them to let their “yes” be a simple “yes,” and their “no” be a simple “no”; otherwise they may fall into condemnation⁴⁰.

NOTE: In the introductory part of the study guide to James, we observed that at times the book reads like Proverbs, and that the writer was familiar with the teaching points in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, in this one-verse highlight, we have an example of both.

23. The Ups and Downs of Life. (5:13-15)

James summarizes the way in which we are to respond to the ups and downs of life. In times of trouble, we should pray about the troubles and, by implication, he says that we should trust God with the outcome. When things are going well and we are happy, we should sing songs of praise to the Lord. When we are sick we should call for the elders of the church, who will pray for us, anointing us with oil, and the prayer of faith will save the sick, raising him up from the sick bed. And, if he has un-forgiven sin, as a result of prayer for forgiveness, his sins will be forgiven⁴¹.

NOTE: It seems that healing and forgiveness of sin cannot be separated, as we see here, and in the healing of the paralyzed man by Jesus in Matt 9:2-7. If we have sins that have not been dealt with by repentance and forgiveness, they will hinder (or prevent) our ability to receive healing from the Lord. These sins must first be dealt with, in order to enable us to receive the gift of healing that we need.

24. Confess Your Faults. (5:16-18)

Continuing in the matter of God’s provision for our healing, James enjoins us to confess our faults, one to another, along with praying for one another, in order to be healed. And he adds a word of encouragement to the effect that the fervent, effectual, prayer of a righteous man (one who is rightly related to the Lord) has great power to do good. As an example (and, I think, a rather extreme one) he reminds us that Elijah, a very human man, prayed that it would not rain, and it did not rain for three and a half years. And, at the end of that long drought, he prayed for rain and it fell abundantly, causing crops to grow.

⁴⁰ The Greek word rendered “condemnation” here is *hupokrisis*, meaning hypocrisy. See also Matt 5:33-37.

⁴¹ Matthew 9:2-7; Lk 5:18-26.

NOTE: Verse 15 speaks of **sins** (Greek, “hamartias”) as a hindrance to healing, while v 16 speaks of **faults** (Greek, “paraptomas”, meaning false steps, slips, offenses). Most modern translations render this word as “sins,” which I think is extremely regrettable. The difference is somewhat subtle, but important enough for the Lord to inspire the use of two different Greek words in the two verses. I cannot find anywhere in the Bible that we are told to confess sins to anyone but God; we can only sin against Him, and only He can forgive our sins⁴². When Jesus, before healing the man paralyzed with palsy, forgave his sins, the Pharisees reacted in anger, thinking, and saying, that only God can forgive sins⁴³. Jesus did not correct them; He only identified Himself as God in flesh⁴⁴.

I realize that this conflicts with the Roman Catholic doctrine concerning confession and absolution; however, I am not arguing doctrine here--I am merely stating what the Scriptures state. I hope that my Roman Catholic friends (and I pray that many of them will read this) will accept this for what it says, interpret it as they will, take no offense, and continue the study. The importance of the difference between “sin” and “fault” becomes extremely important, as we shall see as we continue.

Confessing our faults one to another, it seems to me, means confessing to another believer, “I have a problem...” or “I am struggling with this weakness....” We should all have another Christian, whether a pastor or what is sometimes called an “accountability partner,” i.e. someone who cares, someone whom we trust, and who can be trusted to keep our problems private. It may be a friend; it may be a pastor. In some cases, this might be a small, trusted, support group.

The worst interpretation of this passage that I have **ever** encountered is the belief that all sins should be publicly confessed in the church meeting. It may be appropriate at times for a pastor, or other leader in the church who has fallen into sin, to confess a sin and ask forgiveness (or resign his position). On the other hand, however, to have everyone in the congregation confess every sin to the rest of the congregation would be wrong, and for at least two reasons: (1) it would often cause unnecessary pain to others; and (2) there would be no time for anything else to be accomplished in the service. In fact, one might reach the head of the line, confess his sins, and then, on the way back to his pew, have a sinful thought; he would then have to get back in line; there would be no end to it.

⁴² I John 1:7-10.

⁴³ I John 1:7-10.

⁴⁴ Genesis 39:9; II Sam 12:13; Ps 51:4; Lk 15:18, 21.

25. Spiritual Lifesaving. (5:19-20)

James closes his epistle with the admonition to be responsible for the spiritual welfare of one another. He surely doesn't mean that we should all busy ourselves with inspecting the shortcomings of others; that would probably fall under the heading of being busybodies, something that is itself a most grievous sin⁴⁵. However, if it is obvious that another believer is slipping into ongoing sin, straying from the Truth, we are to do what we can to intervene, to turn that believer back to a right relationship with God. In so doing, says James, we will save a soul from spiritual death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

⁴⁵ I Peter 4:15.