

THE MARKS OF A MATURE PERSON

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - PART 1 OF 15

INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, probably the number one cause of problems in the world is immaturity. I have counseled hundreds of couples regarding marriage. The number one marriage problem is people just need to grow up. They are acting immature. We get ourselves into all kinds of problems by saying immature things, making immature decisions and acting in immature ways. We just need to grow up. God's will for every person is that they grow. In Hebrews 6:1, "Let us go on to maturity." God says grow up. That is why one of the purposes of our church is to help everybody grow spiritually, emotionally, mentally, in every way and have balanced Christian living. What is maturity? How do you know when you have arrived? Maturity is not age. It has nothing to do with how long you have lived or how long you have been a Christian. You can be a Christian for fifty years and not be mature. Bumper sticker: "I may be getting older, but I refuse to grow up."

I have seen some 50 and 60-year-old kids. Maturity has nothing to do with your age. Granted, God's ideal is that as we grow older, we get more mature, but that is not always the case. Maturity is not appearance. Some people just look mature. Some people just look more spiritual than the rest of us. They look kind of dignified; they look like they are holy. For the rest of us it is just tough luck. The fact is, you can look real spiritual and not be spiritual at all. It has nothing to do with your appearance. Maturity has nothing to do with achievement, what you accomplish. You can accomplish a lot and still be very immature. You don't have to be mature to make millions. Maturity has nothing to do with academics, how many degrees you have gotten, how much education you have gotten. When I graduated from high school, I thought I knew it all, and then I went to college. I thought, "I don't know so much anymore." Then I went to seminary and got a master's degree and went on toward a doctorate and now I don't think I know much at all. You can have so many degrees but that does not make you mature.

You don't want to be a spiritual baby anymore. It is time to grow up and live the blessed life you are meant to live. God uses his Word, people, and circumstances to mold us. All three are indispensable for character development. God's Word provides the truth we need to grow, God's people provide the support we need to grow, and circumstances provide the environment to practice Christ likeness. God says maturity is attitude. Attitude is what makes the difference. It is your character. D. L. Moody said, "Character is what you are in the dark." Recognition is what people say about you, character is what God says about you. God says it is your attitude that determines whether you are mature or not. God wants you to grow up and have Christ like attitudes. How do you measure spiritual maturity? Not by comparing yourself to other people but by comparing yourself to the word of God. In the book of James, we have a manual on maturity. The word "mature" in Greek is the word "teleaos" – it is translated mature, complete, and perfect. James uses this word five times in five chapters. James is a manual on how to be mature. James gives us five marks of maturity.

THE MARKS OF A MATURE PERSON

1. A MATURE PERSON IS POSITIVE UNDER PRESSURE.

James 1:2-4 "Consider it pure joy, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance and perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete not lacking anything." How do you handle trials? The first test of maturity is how do you react to problems? Do they blow you away? Do you get nervous, uptight, and negative? Do you grumble and gripe? How do you handle problems? Christianity is a life. It is not a religion; it is a life. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life." Life means problems, and part of life means solving problems and facing them with the right attitude. What is your natural attitude, your natural bent when things don't go right and you are irritated? Are you negative or are you positive? Are you basically a supportive person or are you a skeptical person? Is your life filled with gratitude or grumbling? Are you affirmative or are you angry most of the time? James says, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him." You can be great in the knowledge of the Bible and be cantankerous as all get out! Are you positive under pressure?

2. A MATURE PERSON IS SENSITIVE TO PEOPLE.

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself' you are doing right." James 2:8. A mature person is sensitive to people. He doesn't just see his own needs; he sees other people's needs. He understands their hurts. He is not just interested in himself. My children, when they are immature, only see themselves, "I want that, I want this, I don't care about anybody else." God says that love, being interested in others, is a mark of maturity. James gets very specific. James 2:1-6: Don't show favoritism, don't be a snob, don't look down on people, don't judge by an appearance, don't insult people and don't exploit people. The second test of maturity is love: how do you treat other people? Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, "I may win all kinds of people to the Lord, I may build great church buildings, I may give my money to the poor, but if I have not love, I'm as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal; it just doesn't amount to much."

Matthew 25, Jesus says, "At that judgment they will stand before the Lord and they will say, 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you visited me.' We will say, 'When, Lord, when did we do that? When were you sick and we visited you? When were you in prison and when were you thirsty and we gave you drink?' Jesus said, 'In as much as you have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto Me.'" It is interesting to me that in the Matthew 25 judgement the one thing we will be judged for is how we treated other people. Not how many Bible verses we knew, how many times we were in church, not how great a reputation we had as Christian leaders, but how we treated other people.

3. A MATURE PERSON HAS MASTERED HIS MOUTH

James 3:2 says "We all stumble in many ways. (This is an understatement! Nobody is perfect.) If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check." The first thing a doctor will say when you go for a checkup is "Stick out your tongue."

He uses your tongue to check your health. God does that spiritually, too. In World War II there was a saying, "Loose lips, and sink ships." Loose lips destroy lives. They hurt! Definition of gossip: hearing something you like about somebody you don't like. It is mouth-to-mouth recitation. Self-control comes from tongue control. We get ourselves into so much trouble at what we say and what we think and what we speak. James 3 gives several illustrations. He says our tongue is like a rudder, a bit in a horse's mouth, a spark, a snake and a spring. He says that you put a little bit in a horse's mouth and that little bit can control the direction of the horse.

A little rudder on a boat can control the direction of the boat. Your tongue, which, by size is very insignificant, controls your life. What you say directs your life, what you say can destroy your life. It can delight people's lives; it can discourage people's lives. Your tongue is a powerful force for good or for evil. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I just say what is on my mind?" They are kind of proud of it. Being frank, up front, they say what is on their mind. Maybe there is not a whole lot on their mind. Maybe what is on their mind shouldn't be said. The Bible says that that is not frankness that is immaturity. A lot of people just need a large dose of tactfulness. Ephesians 4:29 "Do not let any negative talk come out of your mouth but only what is helpful for building up others according to their needs. Watch what you say. When you talk you don't just say things to build yourself up. You say things to build other people up. If it doesn't build somebody else up, don't say it even if it is the truth. If it doesn't build up, don't say it. That is a mark of maturity.

A mature person manages his mouth. It doesn't matter how long you have been a Christian, if you can't master your mouth, you have missed the point. James 1:26, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." If I have memorized a hundred thousand verses and been through every Bible study in the book and go to church and never miss a service, but if I am a gossip, my religion is worthless. If I spread rumors, it is worthless. If I'm always saying things that are not always accurate or exaggerate or speak impulsively, it is worthless. The test of maturity is to manage your mouth so that no corrupt communication, no negative talk comes out of your mouth. "Speak the truth in love" means the right attitude, the right timing, the right place, the right location and the right motive. The Bible is very practical. It doesn't matter how much you know about the Bible, if your attitude isn't like Christ's you are missing the point.

4. A MATURE PERSON IS A PEACEMAKER NOT A TROUBLEMAKER

James 4:1 "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" He is talking about conflict. He says there are inner quarrels and fights and they come from our own inner desires. You want something and you don't get it. You kill and covet but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight and you do not have because you do not ask God. Am I a peacemaker? Am I a troublemaker? Do I like to argue? Am I a contentious person? Do I get my feelings hurt? Do I get defensive easily? Do I hurt other people's feelings? Am I a peacemaker? Or am I a troublemaker? The mark of a mature person is the lack of conflict in his own life. Paul told the Corinthian church, "You guys are a bunch of babies". They argued about everything. They argued about the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, leadership, and everything. That is a mark of immaturity. Why is there so much conflict in the world? Why is there conflict in my marriage? Why is there conflict where I work? Why is there conflict between a former friend and me? Why is there conflict between me and another Christian?

Why is there conflict between God and me? Why is there conflict? James says there are two reasons for conflict. James 4:3 "When you ask you do not receive. But you ask with the wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." The first cause of conflict is selfishness. When I want what I want then, I'm going to have conflict with somebody. The issue is pride. How do you know if a person is immature? Look at their prayers. If their prayers are always self-centered; bless me, prosper me, protect me, use me, help me... if this is the only kind of prayer you pray, that is immature. Do you pray for other people? Bless me; all I see is me. An "I" problem; selfishness. Proverbs says, "Only by pride come contention." All conflict is ego, pride.

When my wife and I have a conflict, it is because I'm proud and I don't want to admit I was wrong or she was proud and she doesn't want to admit she was wrong or we are both proud and we both don't want to admit it. Pride guarantees conflict at work, church, home, school, wherever. Selfishness is we want things for ourselves. James 4:11-12 "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him, speaks against the law and judges it. There is only one lawgiver and judge, one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor?" The other source of conflict is judging others which is judgementalism. All of us are guilty of judgementalism. God says, "Don't judge people." If you do this, you are asking for a fight. You are always finding fault, always stirring up strife and always spreading rumors. Don't judge! Why? Why should I not judge?

- i. I'm not God. When you judge somebody, it is playing God. There is only one judge, only one lawgiver -- God.
- ii. Only God has all the facts; you don't and neither do I. When I judge you, I don't have all the facts.
- iii. I don't know the motives, and you don't either. You can't tell what is in somebody's heart. You don't know. Only God does.

So, it is only God who has the right to judge. He has all the facts, He knows everything, He knows all the motives, He sees into our heart. He has the truth so He can judge. But we are limited in our insight. We don't have any right to judge. God says selfishness and judgementalism causes conflict. The fourth characteristic of a mature person is whether that person is a peacemaker or a troublemaker. God says judgmental people are immature.

5. A MATURE PERSON IS PATIENT AND PRAYERFUL

James 5:7, 11 "Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming... As you know, we consider blessed those who persevere." v. 16 "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." God says the mark of a mature person is: he is patient and prayerful. Those are the two keywords in chapter five. "Patient" is used four times. "Prayer" is used seven times. The mark of a mature person is he is patient and he is prayerful. Those two go together. They express an attitude of dependence upon God. James 5:7 says "Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, how patient he is for the fall and spring rain. You too be patient. Stand firm because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged." He is saying, "Be patient." He gives an illustration of the farmer. If anybody has to have patience it is a farmer.

He does a lot of waiting. He plants a seed, waits, prays, hopes, expects as he waits. There are no overnight crops. Just like a farmer has to wait, sometimes we have to wait. We have to wait on God in answer to prayer. We have to wait on God for a miracle. We have to wait on God to work in our lives. We have to wait. Patience is a mark of maturity. The only way you learn patience is by waiting. My children had to learn the difference between "No" and "Not yet". For a long time, they thought that "not yet" meant "we are not going to get to do it." They thought it meant "No" it just meant "Not yet." Many times, God will say to you, "Not yet." He doesn't mean "No." He doesn't mean He is not going to answer your prayer. He is just saying, "You have to wait, I want you to develop, to grow." James 5:16 says "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain and it didn't rain on the land for three and a half years. Again, he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crop." If anybody was patient it was Elijah. Elijah was patient and prayerful. That is a mark of maturity.

CONCLUSION.

How do you handle problems? Do you get uptight, negative, grumble, gripe, complain or are you positive under pressure? Are you sensitive to other people? Are you concerned about their needs, desires, cares, hurts, or do you only see yourself? Do you only pray for yourself or do you pray for others? Can you manage your mouth? Have you learned to put a muzzle on it sometimes and just not speak? When you have a juicy tidbit of gossip and it is tempting because knowledge is power, do you share it -- "... so you can pray about it." You can damage people just by innuendo. Are you a troublemaker or are you a peacemaker? Do you have a tendency to stir things up? Do you have a hair trigger temper where someone can tick you off quickly? Do you carry a grudge? Do you find yourself nursing bitterness? Or are you a peacemaker? How long can you wait for an answer to prayer without giving up? Maybe God has every intention of giving it but He is waiting to teach you maturity.

TALK IT OVER.

1. How can you practice to be positive under pressure today with people and in the activities, you have committed to?

2. Being sensitive to the needs of other people, how can you sympathize with someone who is going through something that you have never experienced?

3. Why do we need to be especially careful with our words in an "explosive atmosphere"?

4. Discuss this statement: Peacemakers can disagree without being disagreeable.

A VERSE TO REMEMBER.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word from this book of James that is such a practical manual on Christian living. Thank you that it deals not with theory, but with areas that I need to work on like my attitudes, my actions, my words, my thoughts, and my relationships. Help me to mature, to grow up and to be more like you. In Jesus' name. Amen

HOW TO PROFIT FROM YOUR PROBLEMS

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - Part 2 of 15

Read James 1:1-5

INTRODUCTION

We are going to look at "How to Profit from Your Problems". James is the most practical book in the New Testament. It is the "How To" manual for the Christian life. When you write a letter you normally figure that the guy is going to warm up and ease into his subject. He is going to have a few preliminaries, opening remarks and then move into the message. Notice what James calls himself; "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" He is a leader among God's people, a world renown leader. Yet his glory is not in the title of his position, but in the fact that he is a servant of God and Christ. Despite his position and world-wide reputation, what matters to him most is intimacy of his relationship to God and his Lord. This is clearly seen when the word servant is understood, for the meaning of the word shows that James deliberately chose the word to describe his relationship to the Lord.

But James drops a bomb in verse 2. He announces who he is and then in verse 2 he says "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. How would you like to get a letter like that? "This is a letter from me. You have problems? Be happy!" How? There is no way I could be happy. You don't know my situation. The key is the phrase "because you know." "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." James writes this letter not to people who are sitting back in the living rooms comfortable with a chilled glass of lemonade at their side but he is writing to people who have literally run for their lives. They had to leave home, jobs, family and possessions behind because of their faith in Jesus. They have been paying a price for their faith. You won't find any health, wealth and prosperity gospel in James. Because it was not part of the real world in which they lived.

James is writing to people with real problems, real issues going on in their lives. And he wants to give them counsel as they are facing their problems. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." Imagine going through what these early Christians had experienced and the first words you read from James is "Consider it pure joy when you have problems of various kinds" How would you have responded? "You are kidding!" James wants to help them change their perspective about their problems. He wants them to see problems as opportunities. Life is a series of problem-solving opportunities. The problems you face will either defeat you or develop you depending on how you respond to them. Unfortunately, most people fail to see how God wants to use problems for good in their lives. They react foolishly and resent their problems rather than pausing to consider what benefit they might bring.

Sometimes God must light a fire under you to get you moving. Problems often point us in a new direction and motivate us to change. Problems, when responded to correctly, are character builders. God is far more interested in your character than your comfort. Your relationship to God and your character is the only two things you are going to take with you into eternity. Your attitude is determined by your understanding. Rejoicing is not just positive thinking but based on some facts of life. Let us look at four facts of life from James that will help you with the problems you are going through right now:

FOUR "FACTS OF PROBLEMS" YOU NEED TO KNOW

1. Problems are inevitable.

Scripture doesn't say, "If you encounter trials consider it joy" but "whenever" count on it. You are going to have trials. If you don't have trials, check your pulse. It is a fact of life. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation." (John 16:33). Peter said, "Don't be surprised when you have problems." (1Peter 4:12) Count on it. Trials are not an elective in life. They are a required course. You don't get out of them by saying you don't want to have any trials. Nobody is immune. God had one Son without sin, but no son without a cross. It just goes with the territory. In this world we will face all kinds of problems and we should be wary of any doctrines or teachings that say we shouldn't have to face these things. Why? Because the Lord said we will have trials. So, the encouragement He is giving is simply this: You are going to face trials, but GOD is greater than any problem you will face in this world! So, lift up your head, and don't expect "no obstacles" in this life. Continue looking up, and be filled with His joy, because the Lord has already overcome this world and our problems, and we will experience that when we simply give them over to Him!

Talk it over.

In your own words, what would you say to someone who asks why God allows bad things to happen to good people?

2. Problems are unpredictable.

He says, "...whenever you face trials ..." The word "face" in Greek is "peripipto". It literally means "to fall into unexpectedly." It is the same word used in the story of the Good Samaritan where the man fell among thieves. It was unexpected. Trials are not planned. We rarely can anticipate the problems we are going to experience in life. That is probably good because if we could anticipate them, we would run the other way and we would not get the benefit from them. We don't plan to have a flat tire, or a crisis. They are unplanned and unpredictable. Often it is inconvenient when you fall into it suddenly. There is a Story of a guy who was riding on a New York subway for the very first time. He got motion sickness standing cramped in next to the door. The subway stopped suddenly, the door opened and he lost his lunch right on the first guy standing in line. The thing was, the doors didn't shut and it took off again. "Why me?"

Talk it over.

How does your response to a difficult situation change when you realize that how you respond is your choice? _____

3. Problems of many kinds

They come in all shapes and sizes. One thing about trials, you don't get bored with them. There are a wide variety of them. Have you ever tried to match paint? The word in the Greek for "many kinds" is literally "multi-colored" There are problems of many shades and varieties. They vary from intensity, in variety and vary in duration. Some are minor inconveniences. Some are major crises. We have all kinds and shapes of problems. They come in more than 31 flavors. Some problems are custom made and you know it.

Talk it over.

Discuss with your group members about various trials you have encountered in your Christian life. _____

4. Problems are purposeful

They have a purpose. Pain can be productive. Pressure produces. Suffering can accomplish something. It has value in our lives. What value? Three purposes of problems in your life:

- ***Problems purify your faith.*** He uses the word "testing", as in testing gold and silver. You would heat them up very hot until the impurities were burned off. Job 23:10 says "He has tested me through the refining fire and I have come out as pure gold." The first things trials do is test our faith. They purify us. Christians are a lot like tea bags. You don't know what is inside of them until you drop them in hot water. Then you know. Your faith develops when things don't go as planned. Your faith develops when you don't feel like doing what is right. It purifies your faith. Christians are like steel; when they are tested, they come out stronger.
- ***Problems fortify your patience.*** "...the testing of your faith develops perseverance." He is talking about staying power, not a passive patience, but staying power, endurance. The ability to keep on keeping on, the ability to hang in there. The Greek here is literally "the ability to stay under pressure." We don't like pressure and we do everything we can to avoid it. But God uses problems in our lives to teach us how to handle pressure, how to never give up. There has been a time in my life I prayed for patience, and the problems got worse. Finally, after a while, I realized I was a lot more patient than when I first started out. How does God teach you patience? By everything going your way? No. God teaches you patience in traffic jams, in grocery lines, the waiting periods of life. We live in a comfortable and convenient society. Everybody wants it now. If I can't have it now, forget it. Endurance today is a rare quality. Lombardi said, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

- ***Problems sanctify your character.*** They make you like Jesus. They help you mature. They help you to grow. "The testing of your faith produces perseverance that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." That is God's long-range goal. His ultimate purpose is maturity. God wants you to grow up. He wants you to mature. In the Christian life, character is the bottom line. So many Christians I talk to have absolutely no idea of God's agenda in their lives. They don't know what is happening and as a result they are overwhelmed by their problems. God's number one purpose in your life is to make you like Jesus Christ. God is much more interested in building your character than in making you comfortable. If God is going to make you like Jesus, He is going to take you through the things Jesus went through. There were times when Jesus was lonely, fatigued, tempted to be depressed and discouraged. The Bible says there are two ways that God makes us like Jesus: first is through the word of God. John 17:17 "Sanctify them through Thy truth. Thy word is truth." James 1:22-25 "The word makes us like Jesus" it builds our character and matures us.

But even if you read the Bible two hours a day, how many hours of your life are you not reading God's word? God demands even more in the second way that is through the circumstances of life. Here is where James hits it right on the head. So many Christians I meet say, "Everything was going great when I first became a believer. Then all of these problems came. Maybe God doesn't love me. Maybe I'm not a Christian. Maybe I'm not really saved. Maybe I have missed the boat." You are exactly where God wants you. You are in a character course. He is making you like Jesus. Romans 8:28 "We know that all things work together for good" [not all things are good but they work together for good] if we love God and are called according to His purpose." The secret of Romans 8:28 is 8:29 "For whom he did foreknow He did predestine to become conformed to the image of the Son of God." Why do all things work together for good? In order to make me like Christ.

How does God teach us the fruit of the spirit? It is by putting us in the exact opposite situation. If God wants to teach you love, He puts you around unlovely people. If he wants to teach you joy, he puts you in times of tragedy and sadness so you will learn joy in the situation. Peace? God puts you around chaos. The dinner's burning, the telephone rings, the cat grabs the dog, the kid's diaper is dirty that is where you learn peace. It is easy to be peaceful when you are laying on the beach. Anybody can do that. Patience? Through times of waiting. Ephesians say "We are God's workmanship" God wants to make a masterpiece out of you. He wants us to be mature, complete, not lacking anything. That is a picture of Jesus Christ. That is what He wants you to be like. This is what you need to know. And then there are three things you need to do.

Right now, God is at work in some of our lives and he is applying pressure to one or more areas of our families, our relationships, our finances and our personal lives. He is always done that with his people through the ages. What is God's purpose in our problems? In V.3 tells us the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. The testing of faith is such an important part of spiritual life. He is a testing God. Is it possible to find any book in the Bible where faith is not tested? Start with Adam and Eve; they failed the test. Come to Gen. 22 and it says "God tested Abraham."

This is what it says in Hebrews about this moment in Abraham's life: By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. (Heb. 11:17-19)

Talk it over.

Discuss with your group members how the fruit of the Holy Spirit has been tested in your life.

HOW TO HANDLE YOUR PROBLEMS

1. Rejoice.

"Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials ..." v. 1. Don't misunderstand what he is saying. He is not saying "Fake it." God never asks you to deny reality. He doesn't mean some kind of psychological pump-up based on nothing. He is also not talking about masochism. "Good! I get to suffer! I just love to suffer! I feel so spiritual when I feel bad!" He is not having a martyr complex. We don't rejoice for the problem; we rejoice in the problem. We don't thank God for the situation. Why would I thank God for evil? But I thank God in the situation. One of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible is I Thessalonians 5:18 "In everything give thanks for this is the will of God concerning you in Christ Jesus." If you want to know God's will for your life it is simple. "In everything give thanks." It does not say, "For everything give thanks." Why should I thank God for giving me leukemia? "Thank you for that accident.... Thank you for that war.... Thank you that I just lost my mother." No! What kind of God do you think He is? It says "In everything give thanks." Why? It means we can thank God because we know that He can even take the bad in our lives and turn it around and bring good out of it. I don't care where your problems come from. You may have caused them yourself. The devil may have caused them. They may be a problem that society has brought on you. But the source of your problems doesn't really matter. God can use them all for your growth and His glory.

What makes a difference? It is your attitude. It says "Consider it pure joy..." The word "consider" means a deliberate look at. It means to evaluate, to make up your mind once and for all. While I'm living in the present, I look to the forward benefit of this problem. Consideration is a choice. Although I cannot control the circumstances that happen to me in life, I can control how I will respond to them. Victor Frankl, the Jewish psychologist who spent time in the Nazi concentration camp in Germany said, "They stripped me naked. They took everything; my wedding ring, and watch. I stood there naked and all of a sudden realized at that moment that although they could take everything away from me; my wife, my family and my possessions but they could not take away my freedom to choose how I was going to respond." You choose to rejoice in the situation. Psalm "I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth." Even when I don't feel like it, even when things aren't going right. Problems do not automatically produce blessings. For some people, problems destroy them. You will either be bitter or better.

The difference between bitter and better is the letter "I". I make the difference, my attitude. Problems break some people, make some people brittle. It is how you choose to respond. Choose to rejoice. From Strange and Unusual Events of 1982 from the Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook: Brian Hise had more than his share of bad luck in July. His apartment in Provo, Utah became flooded from a broken pipe in the upstairs apartment. The manager told him to go out and rent a water vacuum. That is when he discovered that his car had a flat tire. He changed it and went inside again and called a friend for help. From the electric shock he got from the phone, he inadvertently ripped the instrument from the wall.

Before he could leave the apartment a second time a neighbor had to kick the door down because water damage had jammed it tight. While all of this was going on, someone stole Hise's car. But it was almost out of gas so he found the car a few blocks away, but had to push it to a gas station where he filled up the tank. That evening Hise attended a military ceremony at his university. He injured himself severely when he somehow sat on his bayonet which had been tossed in the front seat of the car. Doctors were able to stitch up the wound but no one was able to resuscitate four of Hise's canaries who were crushed to death from falling plaster. After Hise had slipped on the wet carpet and badly injured his tailbone, he said he began to wonder if "God wanted me dead but kept missing." That is what I call a good attitude! It is your choice to rejoice.

Talk it over.

How does your perspective change in the midst of your suffering when you consider that Jesus suffered on the cross for your redemption?

2. Request.

Pray. Of all times to pray, pray when you have problems. What do you pray about? v. 5 "If any of you lack wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him." You ought to pray for wisdom when you are in the middle of problems. Why should I pray for wisdom? So, you won't waste the opportunity to grow. If you don't learn it this time there will be one more lap around the desert! God will give you another opportunity. Learn from the problem. We become overwhelmed when we don't understand what God is doing. Pray for wisdom. Wisdom is seeing life from God's point of view. Pray for wisdom to understand the problem. There is no situation of life that you can't learn from if you have the right attitude. Don't ask "Why?" ask "What?" "Why" is to purify your faith, fortify your patience, sanctify your character. But ask "What do you want to teach me in this problem, Lord? What do you want me to learn? What characteristics can I develop?"

Talk it over.

How can your prayers change, knowing that God is listening and that he will answer?

3. Relax.

Trust God to know what is best for your life. Co-operate with His purpose so you don't short circuit the process. That is what is called faith. "When we ask, we must believe and not doubt." Relax and Let God work. The fact is if you are God's child, then your problems are his problems. And he is much better at fighting your battles and solving your problems than you will ever be. Your job is to trust him to work it all out. Perhaps the reason we have so many tired, fatigued, and discouraged Christians is because we think, "It all depends on me." He is faithful. He does not bring us this far just to let us down. He won't bring you out on a limb and then cut off the limb. Have faith in nature and character of God. God's Word is faithful. You can count on the promises found in the Bible.

Talk it over.

If you have ever wondered if prayer really works, how did God show you that he was listening and that prayer does work?

CONCLUSION.

My heart breaks when I think about the heartache and pain many of the people in our church feel. There are some people in this church that are going to be in God's Hall of Fame. You have maintained a sweet spirit in the odds of incredible pressure things that people did to you and situations you have been living with. It is not always easy to have a joyful heart in the middle of problems. Even when you want to have a joyful attitude it is still difficult. That is why you need to pray for two things: wisdom to understand the trial and faith to endure the trial. You need them both. James says you need wisdom to know what is going on and faith to hang in there and never give up. You are never a failure until you quit. God says the devil wants to use problems to defeat you, but God wants to use those problems to develop you. Which will it be?

When we go through difficulties in life, the first thing we often try to do is blame somebody else. But it doesn't matter where your problem came from; God still has a purpose for it in your life. Even when you do stupid things, God can use it. Even when other people hurt you intentionally, he can use it. Even when the Devil plans bad things for your life, God can bring good out of it. God's purpose is greater than your problems and your pain. He has a plan! You need to look past the temporary pain and look instead at the long-term benefit in your life.

Romans 5:3-4 says, not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. What is the purpose of your problems and difficulty? God wants you to learn something. Every storm is a school. Every trial is a teacher. Every experience is an education. Every difficulty is for your development. Most of us are slow learners. If you don't learn anything, God will bring it up again in your life. It will come back, because God is more interested in your character than he is in your comfort. He is more interested in seeing you become more like Christ than he is in making things easy for you. Maybe you are facing a major difficulty right now.

It may be an illness or guilt or a financial problem or strain in a relationship. Does God have a word for you while you are going through your difficulty? Absolutely. God is saying to you “Don’t give up. Grow up.” Fulfill the purpose of your difficulty; becoming more and more the person he created you to be. Some of you are going through some tough times right now. It is pretty hard. God cares. He cares about you very much. God sees everything you are going through. He has your number! The very hairs of your head are numbered. He knows exactly where you are. He hasn’t lost your number! He cares. God has the power to do something about that problem. He could change it in a snap. He is a miracle working God. Why doesn’t He? Because there is a greater purpose. The greater purpose is what He wants to do in you. God is more interested in building your character than in making life comfortable. Once you have learned those qualities, He may be free to remove that situation. But there are some things in life we are never going to be free from on this side of Heaven. They are thorns in the flesh. We will deal with them and carry them.

Nothing comes into your life without the Heavenly Father’s permission. There is a fantastic promise in v. 12 “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. When he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him. “God says there will be a reward. The rewards will go to the people who quietly put up with difficult situations and developed the character of Jesus Christ in their life. He says, “There will be a crown of life. Cast all your cares upon Him.” True joy does not come cheaply or as a fleeting, superficial emotion. Real joy is produced by much deeper factors than the circumstances that produce superficial happiness. If you are struggling through the negative circumstances of life, floundering in doubt and dismay, you have forgotten that genuine joy resides in the confidence that your life is hidden with Christ in God.

In God’s providence, that joy and assurance can be most strong during a trial. *“Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials ...”* v. 1. Don’t misunderstand what he is saying. The key word is *count*. It is a financial term, and it means “to evaluate.” Paul used it several times in Philippians 3. When Paul became a Christian, he evaluated his life and set new goals and priorities. Things that were once important to him became “garbage” in the light of his experience with Christ. When we face the trials of life, we must evaluate them in the light of what God is doing for us. This explains why the dedicated Christian can have joy in the midst of trials: *he lives for the things that matter most*. We are to evaluate our trials on the basis of eternal realities.

What realities?

1. **That God is in control.** Genesis 50:20 “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”
2. **Trials are God’s special gifts to us.** Psalms 55:22 “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.” - Hebrew literally reads “Commit to the Lord what He has given to you (or laid upon you)” - Word for the burden literally is “that which is given (as a gift)”
3. **God promises his deliverance and eternal blessing** – Hebrews 12:2 “Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

TALK IT OVER.

1. Life is full of trials. How have the trials that you have experienced brought you closer to or pushed you further away from God _____?

2. According to this text why should we rejoice when we find ourselves in a trial? Can you think of a personal example of this in your life? _____

3. Does this kind of thinking about trials come easily to us? Why do we need “wisdom” in this area?? _____

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. James 1:5

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Heavenly Father, let every problem in my life not to break me, not to destroy me, but to develop me and make me to be triumphant under trials. In hours of loneliness, weariness, and trials, Jesus, help me. Always in spite of weakness, falls and shortcomings of every kind, Jesus, help me and never forsake me. This is my prayer to you in Jesus Name! Amen.

HOW TO MAKE UP YOUR MIND

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - Part 3 of 15

Read James 1:5-11

INTRODUCTION.

I want us to look at what James has to say on "How to Make up Your Mind." Life is full of decisions and life is basically a series of choices we make every day. We have to evaluate, decide and draw conclusions. Frank Borham said, "We make our decisions and then our decisions make us." The quality of your life will be determined by the kind of decisions you make in life. Some of them we regret and some of them we feel good about. A young businessman went to an executive one day and asked for his wisdom, "What is the secret of business success?" The man said, "Wise decisions." "How can I learn to make wise decisions?" "Experience." "How do you get experience?" "Dumb decisions!" The fact is, because we are human, we all have a great possibility for error. We wait too long, we pay too much and we say the wrong thing. Some of you are making difficult decisions this very week. Some of you don't know it yet but you will have a major decision tomorrow. Life is full of choices. James talks about how to make decisions. How do you make up your mind? He gives us the problem, then he gives us the prescription, then he gives us the promise from God.

I. THE PROBLEM: INDECISION

V. 8 "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways." In Greek, the word "double-minded" literally means "two-souled" pulled apart in different directions, divided loyalties and divided priorities. James makes up the word, but you have felt that way when you are trying to do two things at the same time. You are not really sure what you want. There is a story by Dr. Seuss about a guy who couldn't make up his mind. Did I ever tell you about the young Zoad who came to two signs in the fork of the road? He looked one way and the other way too. The Zoad had to make up his mind what to do. Well, the Zoad scratched his head, and his chin, and his pants. And he said to himself, "I'll be taking a chance. If I go to place one, that place may be hot. So how will I know if I like it or not. On the other hand, though, I will feel such a fool if I go to place two and find it is too cool. In that case I may catch a chill and turn blue. So, place one may be best and not place two.

On the other hand, though, if place one is too hot, I might get a terrible earache and die. On the other hand, though, if place two is too low, I might get some terrible pain in my toe, so place one may be best. "And he started to go. Then he stopped and he said, "On the other hand though, on the other hand, other hand, other hand though...For thirty-six hours and one half that Zoad made starts and made stops at the fork in the road saying, "No, don't take a chance. It may not be right. Then he got an idea that was wonderfully bright. "Play safe," cried the Zoad, "I will play safe, I'm no dunce will simply start off to both places at once." And that is how the Zoad who would not take a chance went no place at all with a split in his pants. Sometimes you have to make a decision. Decision-making can be a daunting task for anyone, but Christians have the unique advantage of making decisions that are informed by God's Word.

Double-mindedness is devastating and debilitating. It makes you unstable. The word is translated "confused" in many parts of the Bible. It is used to describe a drunk who is staggering, reeling, and unstable in all his ways. He is saying, "If you can't make up your mind it produces an unstable lifestyle. All your ways will be unstable. Double-mindedness in decision making is an enemy of great influencers. Often, the sincerest people struggle with this the most. Whether it is a fear of missing the will of God, or the fear of missing out on the highest options in life, many live-in doubt and uncertainty about their choices

THREE WAYS INDECISIONS MAKES YOU UNSTABLE:

1. Unstable emotions. It is a strain when you can't decide. You worry and strain, you are confused. You can't sleep and can't eat. You wonder, "Did I do the right thing?" It creates emotional instability in your life when you can't make up your mind. A guy goes to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist says, "Are you indecisive?" the guy says, "Yes and no." "What do you mean by that?" "I used to be but now I'm not sure." William James said, "The most miserable person in the world is the person who is habitually indecisive." It causes unstable emotions.

2. Unstable relationships. Lack of commitment destroys relationships. When you can't decide. Do I want in or do I want out? I can't get on with it, I can't get out of it, and I can't get with it. What am I going to do? Instability in relationships. Instability can be evident when you are unstable on the job and switching back and forth between careers; when you are a parent and say one thing then you say another thing, you end up giving double messages to your kids. It causes instability. You can't decide in a relationship. Am I going to get out of it or am I going to get on with it? I have discovered many times it takes more energy deciding than it does to do it. Once you do it, it is a snap, but the key is deciding.

3. Unstable spiritual life. V. 7 "That man will not think that he will receive anything from the Lord." It blocks your prayers. Indecision keeps God from giving and you from receiving what God has to offer. Some of you say, "Why doesn't God answer my prayers?" Maybe you are not specific enough. Maybe you have never really decided what it is you want and you don't have a clear-cut goal. Double-mindedness can lead to a double life, a spiritual schizophrenic as described by Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde.

In Pilgrim's progress it talks about a man named Mr. Facing-Both-Ways. That is when you want to do your will and God's will at the same time. When you know what is right but you do wrong anyway. It is when you are trying to live for two people. On Sunday you come and sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" and Monday you go and do all sorts of wrong things. Double-mindedness produces a double life. It causes instability in all of your ways. It produces an unstable life style. The problem is indecision. What is the solution? James says, "Get wisdom". "If any of you lacks wisdom you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him."

THREE PRACTICAL STEPS TO GET WISDOM.

1. Admit your need.

V. 5 "If any of you lacks wisdom..." I detect a little sarcasm in that statement. "If any of you don't have it all together." James is the book of wisdom in the New Testament like Proverbs is the book of wisdom in the Old Testament. We all lack wisdom. It is universal. We all lack wisdom. Wisdom is different from knowledge. Wisdom is knowledge put into practice. Wisdom is seeing life from God's point of view. Wisdom is making decisions the way God would make decisions. The word for wisdom in Greek is the word "Sophia". "Phila - Sophia" equals "Philosophy" which is the love of wisdom. Wisdom means practical application of knowledge. The Bible talks a lot about wisdom, but all we are interested in is knowledge. The world is impressed with knowledge but God is impressed with wisdom. What do you do with your knowledge? Do you put it into practice and make use of it? Wisdom is the ability to make decisions the way God would make decisions.

Proverbs 11:2 "When pride comes then comes disgrace. But with humility comes wisdom. "Pride blocks wisdom. You can't learn anything if you think you know it all anyway. One of the reasons why we never learn wisdom is we think we have it all together. He is saying admission of the lack of wisdom is the beginning of wisdom, "I don't have it all together. I don't have all the answers." For some of you that may be hard for you to go home and say to your wife, "I was wrong." When was the last time you said, "I was wrong.?" That shows how wise you are. The admission of lack of wisdom is the beginning of wisdom. For me, that is never been too hard, because I know myself it is been very easy to admit that I don't have all the answers. I don't even know all the questions. But the key to wisdom is to start by saying, "I don't know, God. What do you want me to do?" Admit that you don't have all the answers. Admit your need.

2. Ask.

Ask for wisdom. Pray to God. Talk to Him. "If any man lacks wisdom, he should ask God." How do you get wisdom? By listening to Phil Donohue? By reading Cosmopolitan magazine? By watching TV? By taking smart pills? The Bible says you get wisdom by asking God. That is where wisdom comes from. So, you talk to Him about it and you ask for wisdom. Proverbs 2:6 "It is the Lord who gives wisdom, from Him comes knowledge and understanding." If God were to come to you one day and say, "I'm going to give you one wish. You can ask for anything in the whole world. You can have one wish." What would you ask for?

A guy got a chance at that one time. In the Old Testament, God came to Solomon and said, "You are the king of Israel. I'm going to grant you one wish. What do you want more than anything else in life?" Solomon thought it over and said, "I'm as inadequate as a leader. I don't know what to do with these people. More than anything else I want wisdom. I want to be able to think the way you think, to see things from your point of view, be able to make decisions the way you would make them.

I don't want to make mistakes. I don't want to look back on my life later have regrets. I want wisdom." The Bible says that God was pleased with that request. He granted it to him, just like God always gives wisdom to those that ask for it. He said, "Solomon, because you asked for wisdom, I'm going to give you the other things too: wealth, fame, long life." Solomon not only became the wisest man, but he was the wealthiest man, a famous person, and he lived a long life. If God came to you and said, "What do you want in life more than anything else?" If you could have one wish from God, what would you ask for? Would you ask for wisdom? He says, that is how important wisdom is. Proverbs says, "If you don't get anything else, get wisdom." The reason we don't have wisdom is we don't ask. James 4:2 "You have not because you ask not." Twenty times in the New Testament it says, "Ask, and it shall be given." This word in the Greek literally says, "keeps on asking, be persistent, be continual."

As your pastor, I wouldn't dare presume to lead our church without continually asking God for wisdom. I pray this prayer every single day of my life. Some days I might ask God 50 times for wisdom. That is not an exaggeration. Some of you might call me at the office and before I pick up the phone I say, "God, give me wisdom as I speak to this person." My secretary will buzz me to tell me I have an appointment. Before I open that door, I will say, "God, give me wisdom as I speak to that person." On the land decision, every step of the way we have prayed, "God, give us wisdom. We want to go as far as you want and no further." I wouldn't presume to try to lead our church otherwise. It is not my church or your church. It is His church. The spiritual responsibility of the Shepherd is to discover what God wants to do in His body.

3. Anticipate it.

Expect an answer in faith. You anticipate an answer. "When you pray, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask of God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt." If you want wisdom, first you ask the right person and ask the right way that is in faith, believing and not doubting. This means the key to wisdom is prayer, the condition is faith. Have you ever prayed a prayer then later while talking to someone says, "But I knew I wouldn't get it?" You set yourself up! God says; if you can't believe you are going to get it, don't even waste the time praying. Pray in faith, believing, and thanking God in advance. Doubt is debilitating. It hinders God from working in your life.

Remember Peter. Peter's in the boat one day and Jesus comes walking on water. Peter jumps out and starts walking toward the Lord. (If you want to walk on water you have to get out of the boat. You have to take risks in life if you are going to live by faith. It doesn't require any faith to stay in the boat. You have to jump out of the boat and take that step of faith and then God will take care of you.) He starts walking across the water. He got his eyes on the Lord. All of a sudden, he looks down and thinks, "I'm not supposed to be able to do this." He sinks instantly. The moment you get your eyes off the Lord and onto the circumstance, you are dead! Some of you have a major problem you have to make a decision this week.

The reason you don't have wisdom is because you are looking at the problem and not the Lord. "This giant problem! How will I ever solve it? I'm backed into a corner. It is impossible!" God specializes in the impossible! Get your eyes off the problem, off the circumstance. Get your eyes on the Lord. If you have your eyes on the problem, you are going to sink! You must believe and not doubt. "He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind." A lot of Christians are like corks in the ocean, blown around, back and forth. They are victims of their circumstance. Some of you are blown away right now because you have not been asking for wisdom. Eventually you pray, as if prayer is the last resort. That ought to be the first option. Hebrews 11:6 "And without faith it is impossible to please God. Anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." If you want to receive anything from God you have to believe in advance you are going to get it. That is faith. If you thank God after you have it that is not faith. Faith is thanking God in advance.

Talk it over.

How has indecision or procrastination kept you from doing something great for God?

III. THE PROMISE: GOD WILL GIVE IT!

"If any man lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him." God wants to give you wisdom. He is eager. Just like it pleased God when Solomon asked for wisdom, it pleases God when we come to Him and say, "I haven't the foggiest idea what I am supposed to do. ..." Ask God. It is God's nature to give. God is a giving God. Look how God says He will give wisdom: Continually. "Ask God who gives..." In the Greek that is in the continuous tense. He keeps on giving. He doesn't run out of energy. He never wears out. He gives generously because His resources are unlimited. He has enough resources for everybody. God gives without finding fault and he gives cheerfully. Have you ever received a gift from someone you knew was giving it to you grudgingly and it took the joy out of it? They knew they had to and there was not any joy in it.

The Bible says God does not give wisdom that way. He loves to give because it is his nature to give. You never need to feel embarrassed. There should never be any hesitation. God does not resent when you ask for wisdom. He is pleased when you ask. Aren't you glad it is God's nature to give? God is our model for giving. If we want to be like God, we need to become giving people. God wants us to give continually, generously, and cheerfully. That is what giving is all about. He says, "You give because I give." Where do you need wisdom right now? What is the big decision in your life? Is it a career decision? Marriage? Kids? Church membership? An investment? It is interesting that James, in 5-8 and 9-11, gives us a practical application of where we need wisdom. Of all the areas that James could have chosen to give as an example, he chose money. Why? More people make unwise decisions and foolish choices regarding their finances than almost anything else in the world. More people are double-minded and unstable when it comes to money than any other area.

I see so many Christians in financial bondage, because they are violating God's principles. The point James is making in these verses is that regardless of poverty or prosperity we all need to realize that wealth is temporary and won't last forever. Jesus said you can't serve two masters. You can't love God and money at the same time. We need to decide. Have we made up our mind what we are going to save, to spend, tithing, giving, those kinds of things? This is a fantastic promise here and all we have to do is claim it. A couple of things James is saying about decision-making:

1. God does not want to make the decision for you.

It doesn't say, "Pray and ask God to make the decision for you." Otherwise, you will never mature. God wants you to grow up. When God made man, Genesis 1, He made him in His image. Part of that image is free will. God gave you a lot of responsibility when He gave you the freedom to choose. He didn't give you the freedom to choose and then override it to make all the decisions in your life. He wants you to make the decisions, but based on His wisdom. He does not want to make the decision for you. Many times, I have genuinely heard sincere Christians say, "I don't know what to do so I'm going to leave it up to the Lord." That sounds spiritual. Sometimes that is exactly what you need to do. Sometimes that is exactly what God will tell you to do. But a lot of times the phrase "I'm going to leave it up to the Lord" is a cop-out. It is saying, "I am a poor decision-maker."

I don't know which way to turn; therefore, I am going to accept whatever happens and call that God's will. "The fact is, God's will is not always done. Everything that happens is not necessarily God's will. That is why we are to pray like in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In heaven, God's will is done perfectly. But it is not done perfectly here on earth. A lot of things are done that are not God's will because we made the wrong decision. We just let things go. Sometimes passivity is the exact opposite of what God wants you to do. He wants you to get on your knees and pray for wisdom until you know the right thing to do. He wants you to make the decision. He will not make it for you because He wants you to grow up. Maturity in the Christian life is making decisions the way Jesus would. Don't blame God for indecision.

2. God's wisdom is found in God's word.

If you want wisdom you get it in his book. I get on my knees and pray, "God, tell me what to do! Give me wisdom. Teach me principles that will apply in this situation." Then I need to read, study, memorize and meditate on this book. God's wisdom is found in God's word. We need to be reading through the Scripture continuously. The Bible says in Psalm 119:105 "God's word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." It shows the way. In New Testament times they didn't have high beam flashlights with Eveready batteries. How did they walk in the dark? They had little tiny lamps that would not slosh out the oil. They would light them and tie them to the front of their feet. As they would walk, each step they took, the way would be lit that far. The Bible says, "God's word is a lamp unto my feet." It gives me guidance. It is not a high beam that shows me everything that is going to happen in my life in the next 20 years. God doesn't want you to know that. He wants you to take life one day at a time. His word is one step at a time.

He lights the path. He says, "I will give you wisdom for the next step". As you take that step-in faith your way is lit. That is why you have to pray in faith, not doubting but believing. What is James saying? You will live your life either by chance or by choice. Either based on the circumstances where you are a victim of the circumstances and let everything batter you back and forth or you will choose to make choices. The quality of your life is determined by the decisions and choices you make and the wisdom that is behind those decisions and choices. James is saying that when we do not trust God it produces a lifestyle of instability in our lives. The cause of all the frustration in my life is not my indecision over the job, the marriage, my kids, my health, although those are important. There is a deeper issue and that is my inability to trust God and lay it all in His hands and ask for wisdom. Where are you double-minded? Where have you been wavering and trying to live two different ways, trying to live for the Lord on Sunday and then downplaying it during the week? That produces instability.

Talk it over

Think of a time in your life when you depended on your feelings and not Gods wisdom to make a big decision. What was the result?

CONCLUSION

In Dr. Seuss' poem "The Zode in the Road," a young Zode comes to a fork in the road and spends quite some time trying to decide which direction to go. He thinks about the possibility that one place may be too hot and the other too cool or one too high and the other too low. After scratching his head in indecision, the Zode finally decides to play it safe and "start out for both places at once!" And that meant the Zode got nowhere. What decision do you need to make? I urge you to do something great with your life for Jesus' sake. Don't be a Zode. Don't waste your life. Don't live in mediocrity. Don't just exist! Make the decisions that will determine your destiny. I want to talk to you about life's greatest decision. The greatest decision you will ever make in life is this: Who is going to be number one in your life? Are you going to be number one? Is your job going to be number one? Is your family going to be number one? Is money going to be number one?

There is only one thing that will produce stability in your life. That is when God is number one in your life. No man can serve two masters, Jesus said. You will hate one and love the other. The most important decision you can ever make is to make Jesus Christ number one in your life. "Lord, you call the shots. You are the Chairman of the Board. I am going to check in with you on a regular basis. You guide my life. I want to find the niche for which I was created. "Jesus Christ came to earth to teach us a few things. He came to say you are not here by accident. God made you for a purpose. He loves you. The Bible says, that we have all gone our own way, done our own thing, made foolish choices, made decisions where we didn't consult God but did what we wanted to do. The Bible calls that sin. We choose to do what we want to do rather than checking in with the Lord.

As a result, we are separated from God. God feels far away and distant. Jesus Christ came to be the bridge. He died on the cross to make a way back to man. You will only need to make one major decision in your life: Who's going to be number one? I challenge you to put Jesus Christ on the throne of your life. It will produce incredible stability and as you lean on Him moment by moment you will find guidance. God gave Moses the dream of leading the children of Israel out of 400 years of slavery, but Moses had to make the decision to confront Pharaoh. God gave Noah the dream of saving the world from the flood, but Noah had to make the decision to build the ark. God gave Abraham the dream of building a new nation, but Abraham had to make the decision to leave everything he had and go out into the unknown. Just like these men, you will never realize God's dream for your life until you come to the stage of decision-making and step out in faith. Whether it is about your career, marriage, finances, health, or children, there is a simple, workable plan for making biblical decisions that will keep you on track toward pursuing God's dream for your life.

TALK IT OVER.

1. Is there a decision you need to make that requires you to trust God? What step of faith do you believe he is telling you to take? _____

2. What do you think it means to commit your decisions to the Lord? _____

3. What is the difference in taking a leap of faith and taking biblical steps to make wise decisions?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER.

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. James 1:6

PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

God, I want your wisdom. I admit that I have made choices without consulting you. I ask you to forgive all of those bad decisions I made. Help me to put them behind me, as I look to the future. I want to live for you and be the person you want me to be. Help me to fulfill the purpose for which you made me for.

HOW TO WIN OVER TEMPTATION

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - Part 4 of 15

Read James 1:12-18

INTRODUCTION

I want us to look at what God has to say about man's oldest problem, temptation. It goes all the way back to Adam. We all eventually face it. Sometimes even when you know what is right to do it is difficult to say "No". It is difficult. Oscar Wilde once said, "I can withstand anything except temptation." The only way to get rid of temptation is to give into it. The Bible talks about two different kinds of testing. One is called trials. The other is called temptation. Both of them use the same word in Greek -- "peirasmos". Sometimes it is translated "trials", sometimes "temptations". It doesn't matter because sometimes a situation can be both a trial and a temptation. But to distinguish them, trials are situations designed by God in order to help us grow. Temptations are designed by the devil in order to cause us to sin. v. 12 "Blessed is the man who endures temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him."

There is a prize, a reward, for enduring temptation. First it said "blessed" or happy. Happiness comes from having your life under control, so that there is no bad habit that is devastating you. When you know how to say "no" to temptation it produces happiness in your life. It also says there is a "crown of life". In the Greek this literally means "life itself". James says, when you understand the temptation, when you overcome it, when you learn to say "no" then you begin to really live. It is a crown which is life and is abundant life in itself. The question is, "How? How do I handle temptation? How do I say no when I want to say yes?"

HOW TO HANDLE TEMPTATION.

James, being the practical apostle that he is, gives us five principles.

1. Be Realistic.

Face the fact: You will be tempted. Even Christians are tempted. All of us are tempted. "When tempted ... " not "if tempted..." It is just like trials, temptations are inevitable. Have you ever met a pious person who says, "I thank God I have never been tempted in 42 years!" That is what you get when you cross a crocodile and a crock of baloney. Everybody is tempted. You are tempted. I am tempted. Every day we are tempted. You never get too old for it. You never overcome it by getting too spiritual. Everybody is tempted. The more you grow toward the Lord, the more you are going to be tempted. It is a fact of life. Reality is all of us are tempted. There is a misconception that says; once you are born again you have it all together. You have arrived so you fake it and wear a mask and pretend like, "How could anybody do something like that?" We all are tempted.

1 Corinthians 10:13 "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man." That means we are all in the same boat. We all have the same temptations and the same problems. Don't be surprised, shocked. Don't try to hide it. Some of you are caught in a compromising situation right now, but it is liberating to know that other people feel the same way you do. We all have the same struggles and problems. It is not a sin to be tempted. It is a sin to give in to temptation. Hebrew 4:15 "Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are yet he sinned not." He was perfect. He was tempted but He never gave in. I meet a lot of Christians who are intimidated by temptation. They think "How could I have such a thought?" The devil put it in your mind; it is not your fault. You are human. Temptation proves you are human, not that you are evil. The more committed you are the more you are going to be tempted. We should never be surprised when we are tempted. We need to understand several things about temptation.

- a. ***Temptation is universal.*** Everyone is tempted. If you meet someone who is never tempted by anything, there is one conclusion that you can draw about that person. He or she is dead. Only dead people are not tempted. The moment we entered this world, we were drafted into a lifelong battle with temptation. We need to understand at the outset that as Christian soldiers there is no sin in being tempted and no one can eradicate these enticements. But we are responsible for our reactions to them.
- b. ***Temptation is inevitable.*** If temptation comes to every person, which it does, then it is inevitable that it will come to us. If you are not being tempted right now, just hold on because it is coming. Temptation is not something that you get past. It has come around before and it will come around again. It is inevitable.
- c. ***Temptation is personal.*** We all have our personal temptations. We are all vulnerable in different ways. Temptation is a personal thing. Some things that do not tempt you tempt me. And some things that do not tempt me may tempt you. And you can be sure that your temptations will be the tailor made for your weaknesses. There is no doubt that temptations will come to all of us. So, we need to prepare for those moments. We need to be ready. We need to expect temptation. We should never be surprised.

Talk it over.

How will you choose to respond to the stress and people in your life that are testing your faith?

2. Be responsible

Accept responsibility. Don't blame other people for your problems. We love to blame people, even God. Will Rogers said you could summarize American history into two great movements: the passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck. We are in a society of irresponsibility. Blame society, blame the government, blame the environment, blame heredity, blame your parents, blame your spouse, blame the devil, and even blame God. Some people say, "It must be God's will or He wouldn't have let it happen." That is called blaming God. I had a guy tell me, "God told me to leave my wife and go marry someone else that I met at church." That is called blaming God. Don't make your bad choices and then blame them on God. God does not tempt. He never contradicts His word. God is not going to tell you one thing and have the Bible say something different. If the Bible says something and you say something different, you are wrong. Be responsible. Don't blame God and don't blame other people. It is a sign of immaturity. The shifting of blame actually began in the Garden of Eden. Adam excused himself for his disobedience to God by saying, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I ate." And the woman, said, "The serpent deceived me and I ate." (Genesis 3:12-13)

Today we carry on the tradition of our first parents with very subtle reasoning; we say "people behave the way they do because that is how God made them." He created them with a certain temperament and so they can't help doing what they do. So, it is ultimately God's fault. That was Adam's logic also. Notice that when confronted by God for his sin, first he blamed Eve "The woman" but indirectly he blamed God "The woman whom you gave me." Man is still playing the same old blame game. James quickly refutes the idea that evil comes from God, when he says absolutely and categorically in v.13, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." To believe that he is the source is a faulty analysis. Unless we understand the real source of our temptation, we will respond to it incorrectly.

God is not the author of temptation, nor does He have any capacity in his holy nature that would make him vulnerable to evil. Satan certainly does tempt us. He tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. So, Satan does have a hand in our temptation. But often Satan gets too much credit. You see, there must be something there for Satan's temptations to be effective. Besides declaring that each person is responsible for his own temptation, James is careful to point out that temptation is not an event, but a process. James is the only place in the Bible the process of allurements is clearly explained. If we don't want Satan to take advantage of you, it is vital that we understand the adversary's strategic process, what Paul calls "Satan's devices" (2 Cor. 2:11).

- a. It begins with desire.* James tells us that it is "each one is tempted by his lust" or "own evil desire." This is the beginning of a process that can only be described as a downward death-spiral of sin. The desire to sin is already within us. If it were not, sin would not be attractive to us. On first glance, you might think that sin is some sort of a magnet. But that is not true. The magnet is within you. It is your desire. Our desires are extremely powerful. Now not all desires are wrong. Many desires keep us alive and cause us to be healthy, well-adjusted human beings.

But even good desires, taken to excess, can cause us great harm. The desire for food, or sexual fulfillment, or relief from pain can turn into obsessions that control our lives. Temptation begins with desire.

- b. *It leads to deception.*** James tells us that because of our desire we are “dragged away and seduced” or “enticed.” The word “enticed” is a fishing term that means “to lure by bait.” And the purpose of bait is deception. If you bait your hook with a nice juicy worm, you have two purposes in mind. The first is to lure the fish. In order to pull that fish out from its comfortable hiding place, we have to find bait that will interest it, one that it can’t resist. The second is to hide the hook. We are enticed by sin, in part, because we do not see the consequences. The fish does not see the hook. And neither do we see.

But the hook is there. We are simply deceived into believing that it is not. The consequences of sin are real, but we are blinded to them by the strength of our desire. If we saw them clearly, we would without doubt make another choice. Committing adultery or having pre-marital sex may seem pleasurable at the time; but when the marriage is ruined, and you see the kids just on weekends then in the end, the pain outweighs the pleasure. Running around with your friends and drinking may seem like a good time. But when you see the flashing blue lights, or your car wrapped around a tree, or the tragic loss of life caused by your drinking you will see that the pleasure was not worth it.

- c. *It results in disobedience.*** It begins with desire, leads to deception, and results in disobedience. Sin is disobedience to God. James tells us, “After sin or desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.” (v. 15a) the two elements (the bait and the desire) join together to give birth to sin. That is bad enough, but it does not end there.
- d. *It ends in death.*** “And sin, when it is fully formed, brings forth death.” (v. 15b) Even though sin sometimes brings a temporary period of pleasure, it always leads to death although this is not immediately apparent. We have all sinned and God did not strike us dead that very moment. But we must not be misled about the ultimate result of sin because of God’s mercy. Because God has not immediately judged our sin does not mean that God will not ever judge our sin. What we have been experiencing is God’s mercy. If we continue to sin and do not respond to God’s mercy by forsaking our sins, death will follow. “James is not referring here to physical death, for then none of us would be alive. Nor is he referring to spiritual death, for then no one could be saved. The fulfillment of our lust brings about in the believer’s life a death-like existence.”

If you want to handle temptation successfully, take a good long look at it. Analyze it. Look at what is causing it. Look at where it is taking you. Look at the consequences. Look at where you will end up. If you do, you will come to one conclusion. It is not worth it. Now you might have already come to that conclusion. The battlefield for resisting being drawn away from God is in the mind. Each time we yield to temptation we believe a lie and what is worse, we start living one too. The fact is I bring most of my problems onto myself. So, do you. We bring them on ourselves.

Talk it over.

How can you shift from fixing blame on the other person to fixing the problem instead?

3. Be ready

When temptation comes, be ready. Be prepared for it. Peter says, "Be on your guard." Jesus said, "Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation." Paul said, "Put on the whole armor of God." Be ready. Be prepared. "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desires, he is dragged away and enticed. Don't be deceived my dear brothers. We need to be ready and prepared for temptation. Temptation does not warn you in advance. One of the reasons it is a temptation is because you don't even know it is there. It catches you by surprise. You have to be ready and on your guard. We are most vulnerable after a tremendous success. We think we are doing OK. The Bible says, "Let him who thinks he standeth, take heed lest he falls." I think of Bobby Leach who went over Niagara Falls in a barrel and came out unharmed. A couple of days later he slipped on an orange peel and broke his leg. It is the little things in life that kill us. James is saying, "Be ready, don't be deceived." How do you prepare for temptation? How do you get ready for it? By understanding how it operates.

II Corinthians 2:11 "In order that Satan might not outwit us, we are not unaware of his schemes." God wants you to know how the devil operates, how he tempts. The only thing you can say about the devil that is good is this: he is consistent. He is been using the same old bag of tricks for 2000 years and longer. In order to overcome temptation, in order to break a bad habit, be realistic, and admit you have a problem. Then be responsible and not blame anybody else and quit making excuses. Then get ready by understanding what happens during temptation so you can learn how to avoid it. All of a sudden in verse 17, James switches gears. He starts talking about the goodness of God. It looks like he forgot what he was talking about at first. v. 17 "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights who does not change like shifting shadows." James is talking about temptation then all of a sudden, he redirects our thoughts to the goodness of God. First, he is talking about something negative then he is talking about something positive. He is refocusing our attention on something else.

Talk it over.

What makes it difficult to keep a long-term, eternal perspective when we deal with temptations?

4. Be refocused

Did you know that in the Bible, not once are you told to resist temptation? We are told to resist the Devil, and that is a whole different issue. But the key to overcoming temptation is not to push back. It is to change your focus. Whatever gets your attention gets you. The battle for sin always starts in the mind. That is why the Bible says in Psalm 119:6, *"Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments."* (KJV). If you are thinking about God's truth, you are not thinking about the less important stuff. It is true in every single area of life good or bad. If you focus on godly things, it is going to pull you that direction. If you focus on the stuff that is at the movies and in magazines, it is going to pull you that direction. Whatever you focus on gets your attention. Whatever gets your attention is going to get you. The key is to just change your mind.

Temptation always follows a predictable pattern: attention, arousal, and action. Your mind gets hooked, your mind kicks in, and then you act on it. So, you don't fight a temptation; you just turn your mind to something else. *"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."* (2 Corinthians 10:5 NIV). The thing is, we are not very good at capturing every thought and turning it to Christ, because it takes lots of practice. You can't always control your circumstances, and you can't even always control the way you feel. But you can control what you think about. That is always your choice. And if you change the way you think, it changes the way you feel, and that will change the way you act.

If temptation begins with our inner thoughts then changing what we think about is the key to overcoming it. This is the principle of replacement, the key to overcoming temptation. The key to overcoming temptation is not to fight temptation but simply refocus your thoughts. Change your attention. Turn your attention on something else. Shift your thoughts. Change your mind. Refocus. Instead of looking at what you are being tempted by, just look somewhere else. Refocus. Philippians 4:8 says "Think on these things, things that are good, positive, just, honest." Focus your mind on the goodness of God. Why? Because the more you fight a feeling the more it grabs you. Don't focus on what you don't want. Focus on what you do want. Turn your attention. Be refocused. Get your eyes off the negative.

Get your eyes on the goodness of God. Are you a chronic worrier? It is because you doubt the goodness of God. Whatever gets your attention gets you. Whatever you resist persists. Stop fighting it, just refocus. Turn your back on it. How do you get out of depression? Not by looking at what you are and telling yourself what you are. That never changes you. Focus on what you want, "This is the day the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad." It is a choice. "I will bless the Lord at all times ... His praise will continually be in my mouth ... I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Get God's word in your mind and refocus. Quit fighting the feeling. What you resist persists. You can't fight a feeling. But if you ignore it, you weaken it. Don't try to argue with the devil. He is a lot better at it than you are. He had thousands of years of experience. When temptation calls, drop the receiver, and forget it. When you refocus, it may physically mean removing yourself from the situation. If you don't want to get stung, get away from the bees. Maybe you need to change the channel on the TV. Maybe you need to walk out of that movie. Maybe you need to change jobs. Maybe you need to change a car pool. Joseph was in a tempting situation and he left his coat and ran. If you have to leave your coat, leave your coat. Walk out.

I Corinthians 15:33 "Bad company corrupts good character." You know your weakness and God does to. Maybe you need to be redirected. "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first fruit of all that he created." He is not talking about physical birth. He is talking about being spiritually born.

Talk it over

In what situations do you know your mind will focus on things that will cause you to sin?

5. Be reborn

The single most important principle in breaking bad habits and getting control of your life is to let God have control of it. Get Him in your life so that He can start changing your character. Being born again gives you a new capacity to resist temptation. You don't have enough power in your own willpower. That is why you keep falling. You need some supernatural power. You need Jesus Christ in your life. That is what it means to be reborn. It means you get a fresh start on life. Ask Christ in. Ask Him to make the changes and give you the power you need to do what you know is right to do anyway. You will not be able to say no to temptation until you first learn to say yes to God. You need His power in your life. You need to not only be redirected and these other things but you need to be reborn. That is the starting point. Then you will have more than just your own power.

When the criminal hanging next to Jesus on the cross asked Jesus to remember him, Jesus replied, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."* (Luke 23:43 NIV). With his response, Jesus was also giving us four characteristics of salvation that we can trust and believe in. First, he said "today." That means salvation is immediate. The moment you ask Jesus Christ to save you, it is done. When you die, you either go straight into the presence of God or you go straight into separation from God. Second, salvation is certain. He said, "Today you *will*." Not "You might," not "I hope." Not "Let me think about it." When God says, "You will," you *will*. When you accept Christ, you can be certain of your salvation. Third, salvation is a relationship. He said, "You will be with me." Salvation is not a religion. It is not rules or regulations or rituals. Salvation is a relationship. That relationship doesn't begin when you get to Heaven. It begins here on Earth.

Jesus Christ wants to be your best friend, and he wants to talk to you all the time. God made you for a relationship with him! Fourth, Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Heaven is a real place, and it is forever. There were two criminals crucified with Jesus, one on either side. Jesus gave them the choice of salvation, and he gives you the same choice. He is not going to force you to love him. He is not going to force you to trust him, and he is not going to force you to accept Heaven. There are two responses. One of those criminals rejected Jesus, and the other turned to him in faith. You can make the same choice. Romans 10:13 says, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* If you are ready to call on the name of the Lord and you acknowledge these truths about salvation, then settle this issue of your eternal destiny once and for all.

Talk it over

What is the proof in your life that you are assured of your salvation?

CONCLUSION

Do you struggle with temptation? I heard of someone who said, "I don't struggle with temptation, I just give in to it!" Surely that is not the answer! But the fact is there isn't a day that goes by that we are not tempted in some way. Temptation comes in many forms; we are tempted not to tell the truth, to take something that does not belong to us, to take advantage of someone, to gossip, to over eat, to hold a grudge, or to withhold from the Lord that which rightfully belongs to him. "The magazine "Discipleship Journal" asked its readers to rank the areas of greatest spiritual challenge to them. The results came back in this order: the top 5 was

1. Materialism
2. Pride
3. Self-centeredness
4. Laziness
5. (Tie) Anger/Bitterness and Sexual lust

The respondents also noted that temptations were more potent when they had neglected their time with God (81%) and when they were physically tired (57%).” (Morgan, 2000). The truth is that temptation is everywhere. What is yours? How do you handle temptations? Do you struggle? If so, can anything be done to help you win that struggle? Is it even possible to successfully resist temptation? It is common sense that if you don't want to get stung, stay away from the bees! If you don't want to get burned, don't get close to the fire! If you don't want to fall off the cliff, don't hang off the ledge! The goal is not to see how close you can get to the temptation but rather how far away from it you can stay. Proverbs 14:16 says, "*A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless*" (NASB). A fool thinks he can handle temptation, but who is he kidding? You don't go to a bar just to eat pretzels! You need to do a frank assessment.

You need to analyze when and where you are most tempted and vulnerable. Then, you need to stay away from those situations as much as you can. The Bible says to run from temptation: "*I pondered the direction of my life, and I turned to follow your laws*" (Psalm 119:59 NLT). If you have to physically remove yourself, do it! When Potiphar's wife tempted Joseph, he left his coat and split. Sometimes you may have to leave your coat. Get out of the situation. Run from it. Don't stick around. When you are tempted, get up and change the channel. Or take a shower. Or turn on music. Go for a walk. Read the Bible. Call a Christian friend in your support group. Do something to break the spell. Here is some practical advice: Don't ever try to argue with the devil. You will lose every time. He has had thousands of years to think up lines to counter anything you could come up with. Don't rationalize it.

Don't justify it. Don't argue it. The key thing to do is break the focus. Don't look at the cookies and repeat, "I don't want them! I don't want them!" Who are you kidding? Turn around! The more you fight a feeling, the more it grows in intensity. What is your most vulnerable area today? What is your weak spot? God knows it. The devil knows it. Have you ever figured it out? If you haven't, you need to because once you have figured out where you are weak you will know when and where you are most likely to fall and you can avoid it. It is stupid to put yourself in situations that will automatically tempt your weakest area. Where are you vulnerable? Be realistic about the problem. Where do I have a lack of self-control? Is it my temper? Is it my appetite? Is it spending? Is it my words that I'm continually talking all the time and say things I later regret? Is it drinking? Is it lustful thoughts? What is the area that Satan knows is my hot button and he is always baiting me in that area?

Figure it out and then admit it to God. Say, "God, you know the areas I have fallen in. I have stumbled. I want a clean slate. I want to start over. Get free of the past. Get forgiveness. That is available. Then salvation is the first step in victory over temptation. Ask Christ to come into your life and give you the power. I Corinthians 10:13, "God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so you can stand up under it." What a great promise! God never puts more on you and He never allows more on you than He puts in you to bear it up! You say, "I just couldn't help myself!" "It was too strong of a temptation, I just couldn't help myself!" God says that is not true. You just depend on yourself instead of depending on Him. God says, "I will make a way out if you trust me." The fact is there is hope and you can change if you want to and if you will let Christ change you from the inside out.

There is a way out if you trust in Him. You can't pray "Lord, lead us not into temptation" if, at the same time, you are flirting with temptation. You have to co-operate. Some of you are flirting with temptation in many different areas. Satan is baiting you for a trap. What is it that you want in your life so badly that you are willing to compromise in order to get it? A promotion? A thrill? Confess it to God. The time to deal with temptation is right at the start. When it starts in the desire stage, nip it in the bud. Martin Luther said, "We cannot keep the birds from flying over us, but we can keep them from making a nest in our hair." You cannot live in a temptation free world. It is all around you. It is not a sin to be tempted. So, don't be intimidated by it. It is a sin when you begin to dwell on that temptation and think about it so that it eventually begins to take form in your life and heart.

RESOURCES YOU NEED IN ORDER TO FIGHT TEMPTATION:

1. Fellowship with other Christians.

You will not make it if you do not have fellowship with other Christians. We were not meant to fight the battle by ourselves. Get involved with some Christian friends. Get involved in a Bible study, a small group.

Find a place where you can share, meets some friends and then begin to share on a gut level. Share the problem you are struggling with. We are all in the same boat. Temptations are common to man. When you are able to talk about a problem you are able to get control of it. Revealing your feelings is the beginning of healing. If you hold it in and you don't tell anybody, it just gets worse and becomes something that scares you to death. When we come together in fellowship, we teach each other things. God gives us a gift of learning and growing when we come together in fellowship, we show each other how to live as God wants us to live, and how to walk in His footstep.

That is why God made fellowship so important. He wanted us to come together so that we always know we are not alone. Fellowship allows us to build those lasting relationships so we are never by ourselves in the world. No matter where we are in our faith, fellowship provides us with strength. Being around other believers gives us the chance to learn and grow in our faith. It demonstrates to us why we believe and sometimes is the excellent food to our souls. It is great to be out in the world evangelizing to others, but it can easily make us hard and eat away at our strength. When we deal with a hard-hearted world, it can become easy to fall into that hard-heartedness and question our beliefs.

2. Get into God's word.

This will help you to build up your strength before any temptation comes towards you. If you fall when tempted, your strength is small. Build up strength by heeding to God's word. The Bible is our secret weapon against temptation. It is the truth. Jesus said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Do you want to be free from that bad habit? Fill your mind with this book. Refocus on it. Instead of thinking about what is getting you down, get your mind on what is good, whatever is true, and just and holy. Study it, memorize it, and meditate on it. Fill your life with it and get into a Bible study. If you know the truth it will keep you from being deceived. If you want to know how Satan attacks, study the Bible. What is the payoff? "Blessed (happy) is the man who endures temptation... (It is that good feeling of self-confidence and self-esteem because you realize you are not being controlled by anything except the Lord) ... when he is tried, he shall receive the crown which is life... (you begin to enjoy the abundant life) ... which the Lord has promised to them that love Him."

TALK IT OVER

1. What changes do you need to make in your schedule or lifestyle to minimize your exposure to these situations? _____

2. How can you train yourself so that it is more natural for you to focus on God's Word and truths instead of the things of this world? _____

3. How can you keep from losing your footing on the “slippery slope?” What works? What doesn’t work? _____
- _____
- _____

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Blessed is the man who endures temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him. James 1:12

PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Lord, help me to study your word so that I will know how the devil tries to get at me. Help me to recognize those areas of weakness and avoid them. Help me to refocus on you, to fill my mind with the good things, the true things, the right things, not to resist my feelings but to replace them with what you have to say. "Lord, you promised to make a way out of temptations. Give me the strength. In Jesus name

HOW TO BE BLESSED BY THE BIBLE

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - Part 5 of 15

Read James 1:19-27

INTRODUCTION.

In our generation, Bibles are everywhere. You can find them in grocery stores, bookstores, motel rooms and everywhere. They are available in all sizes, shapes, translations, versions, leather bound and paperback. There are over 500 million Bibles published in the world in 18,000 different languages. We are glutted with the word of God on the airways, radio, TV, books and magazines. It is everywhere. Yet millions of people still miss the blessing of the Bible. Why? Because it is not automatic. Just because you own a Bible doesn't mean that you are going to get any benefit from it. You must be a doer of the Word and not just a hearer. James is a very practical book and James tells us how we can get blessings from the Bible.

The Bible is a book of blessing. It promises comfort, strength, hope, wisdom, joy, power and purpose. But just because you have a Bible doesn't mean you are going to get the benefit from it. James, being his practical self, gives us three steps on how to be blessed by the Bible. v. 25 is the key verse, "The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard but doing it, he will be blessed in what he does." The Bible is called the perfect law because it is exactly what I need. It promises freedom and it promises blessing. James here is talking about reading, studying and following the guidelines of the Bible. He calls the Bible the: "Perfect Law of Liberty." It is the Perfect Law of Liberty because it promises us freedom and blessings. It has exactly what we need.

HOW TO BE BLESSED BY THE BIBLE.

1. YOU MUST RECEIVE GOD'S WORD. VS. 21.

Have you ever stopped to think about how often you are exposed to God's word? Every time you open up the Bible for time with the Lord, the God of the universe speaks. Every time you go to a small group and discuss a passage of Scripture He is speaking. When you quote verses in your head that you have memorized, He is talking. When exposed to his word he tells you who he is, he tells you how to live, he tells you what other people are like and he even tells you about the future. James says, "Accept the word planted in you." This word 'accept' in Greek is a hospitality term which literally means "to welcome"; come in. If we are going to be blessed by the word of God, first we must welcome the word into our lives. We must be receptive. James gives an illustration. He says it is planted in you. He gives the illustration of a garden and seed. The Bible, all through Scripture, compares itself to seed. Jesus told the parable of the sower and said, "The word of God is a seed and it is planted in our hearts." (Luke 8:11-12) Let us say you are a gardener. You have learned that you can take the exact same seed and plant it in three different locations and get three different results. In one spot, you will get giant tomatoes.

In another, you will get small tomatoes. And in a third, you will get nothing. What is the difference? It is not the seed; it is the soil. The soil must be prepared for the seed. The same is true when you hear God's Word. Your heart has to be prepared for the Word. If you get up late, have trouble finding a parking spot, and are irritated as you rush into church, you are probably not going to hear God's voice! You are not in a receptive mood. That is why you can take two people to church, set them side-by-side, and one will walk out thinking God really spoke to him and the other won't get anything out of the service. The heart of one person was prepared; the other's heart was not. James says we must receive the word of God with the right attitude. He gives us four attitudes you need to be blessed by God's word. They are hearing-aides.

A. Be careful. You must have a careful attitude. v. 19 "Be quick to listen..." Give it your full attention. Be alert. Don't miss it. "... slow to speak ..." When I am talking, I am not listening. God gave us two ears and one mouth so we ought to listen twice as much as we talk. Many of our problems are caused because we are quick to speak rather than being quick to listen. Be careful in your attitude. Be ready. Be intent. Be ready to receive God's word. Be careful.

B. Be calm. Be calm if you are going to receive God's word and be blessed by it. v. 19b "... and slow to become angry ..." A relaxed attitude increases receptivity. If you are relaxed, people can communicate with you more. We work on relaxing people in our services for that reason. We don't hear much when we are angry, upset, bitter and resentful. Bitterness is a barrier, an emotional block that keeps us from hearing God's word. Some may ask, "How come God never speaks to me." Maybe you have some resentment in your life you need to get rid of. An article I read from Reader's Digest said when you listen it actually it lowers your blood pressure. When you speak it raises your blood pressure. James says be calm, be slow to anger. What is your emotional state, normally, when you come to church on Sunday morning? Do you come with a calm attitude? In many homes on Sunday morning it is kind of hectic. Then at the last minute we come and expect God to speak to us. What preparation? You need to be calm. Maybe you need to get up a little bit earlier.

C. Be clean. v. 21 "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent..." Before you can plant the seed, you need to do a little weeding. The word "filth" that he says you have to get rid of is actually the Greek word that means "earwax". When you have a sin in your life it blocks your hearing. It prevents God's word from getting into your heart. He says get rid of the evil, anything that we know that is not right in our lives. God says, "Lay aside all of the emotional garbage, the old habits, the junk in your life so that God's word can get through to you." How can we be clean? It is by confession. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The Living Bible says "Get rid of all that is wrong in your life, both inside and out."

D. Be compliant. This is to be teachable, yielded, humble and willing to be changed. He says "humbly accept the word of God planted in you..." Don't act like you know it all. If you know it all, God's word can't get through to you. Pray, "God, do what you need to do in my life." God says if you want to be blessed, first you have to receive it, be receptive with these four hearing aids...

We receive God's Word when we listen with an open, receptive attitude and then accept it. The parable of the sower illustrates how our receptiveness determines whether or not God's Word takes root in our lives and bears fruit. Jesus identified three unreceptive attitudes: a closed mind (hard soil), a superficial mind (shallow soil), and a distracted mind (soil with weeds) and then he said, "Consider carefully how you listen" (Luke 8:18a NIV). Any time you feel you are not learning anything from a sermon or a Bible teacher; you should check your attitude, especially for pride, because God can speak through even the most boring teacher when you are humble and receptive. James advises, "In a humble (gentle, modest) spirit, receive and welcome the Word which implanted and rooted [in your hearts] contains the power to save your souls" (James 1:21b AMP).

Talk it over.

Why are silence and active listening such difficult things to practice? What can you do to minimize your distractions so that you are able to listen well? _____

2. REFLECT ON THE WORD OF GOD.

Verse 23 says "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself immediately goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." James uses an illustration here. God's word is like a mirror. The purpose of a mirror is to evaluate us. We use them to evaluate ourselves. We look in a mirror to assess the damage from the night before. Then we do something about it. What good is a mirror if we don't do anything about what we see? God says a mirror reflects what we are like on the outside. God's word reflects what we are like on the inside. Have you ever seen yourself in the Bible? Hebrews says, "God's word detects the thoughts, intents, motives and desires of the heart." Many years ago, Queen Elizabeth, who was beautiful in her youth, ordered that all of the mirrors be removed from Buckingham Palace because she couldn't stand to face that she was growing old. A lot of people don't read the Bible because they are afraid. They are unwilling to face themselves and see themselves as they really are. They don't want to look in the mirror of God's word.

James gives us three practical ways to reflect on the word of God:

- a. Read it.** v. 25 "the man who looks intently into the perfect law". He is actually talking more about research that he is reading. It is investigating. The word "look" in Greek means "to stoop down and gaze in". It is the word used when Peter went to the tomb on resurrection Sunday when he stooped down and peeked in. He investigated. Focus your attention on the word of God. There are two ways you can look at a mirror. You can gaze at it, or you can glance at it. All of us have done both. It is human nature that you can't walk by a mirror and not look at it. When you glance at it, you immediately walk away and forget what you have seen. It didn't do you any good.

Many people try to have a quiet time that way. They don't want to gaze at it, but glance at it. Give God five minutes. God says that He wants us to gaze at the word.

Look at it intently in detail. Nine things to look for -- **S.P.A.C.E.P.E.T.S**

- **S** - Is there a Sin to confess?
- **P** - Is there a Promise to claim? Look for promises, there are over 7000 promises in the word of God.
- **A** - Is there an Attitude to change?
- **C** - Is there a Command to obey?
- **E** - Is there an Example to follow?
- **P** - Is there a Prayer to pray? There are lots of prayers in the Bible. You can take those prayers and pray them for yourself and for others. You can know they will be answered because they are in the Word of God.
- **E** - Is there an Error to avoid?
- **T** - Is there a truth to believe? Is there something I just need to believe God for?
- **S** - Is there something to thank God for?

That is how you look intently at the word of God. Look at the details. James says we need to receive the word of God.

- b. Review it. v. 25** "...and continues to do so..." That means over and over and over. The Bible calls this meditation. When you think about something over and over, it is meditation. Meditation is not, put your mind in neutral and contemplate lint in your navel. Meditation means to think seriously about something over and over. If you know how to worry, you can meditate. Take a negative idea and think about it over and over, and it is called worry. Take God's word and think about it over and over, and it is called meditation. The Bible says, "Meditate on God's word." Jesus said, "...if you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples." Read it and review it. God says, "You want to be blessed by the word? Review it." Psalm 119:97 "I meditate on your word all day long."

Every businessman ought to memorize Joshua 1:8. If you will do one thing God promises to bless you with success. And that promise is if you meditate on His word. Read it and review it continually. Stay in it and be faithful to the book. I know some people that are more faithful to sports page, movies, social media among others than they are to God's word. How many of you believe everything you read in the newspaper or watch on TV? Then why do we spend more time reading or watching something we don't believe than something we do? We need to fill our minds with the word of God. James says, "You want to be blessed? Reflect on the word. Think about it by reading it and reviewing it."

- c. Remembering it. v. 25** "... not forgetting what he has heard." Nothing will do more for your spiritual life than developing the habit of memorizing Scripture. If you are serious about being spiritually strong and mature, the greatest habit you can develop is memorizing Scripture. Nothing will benefit your personal spiritual life more than developing the habit of memorizing Scripture.

"Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee." Memorize God's word if you want to be blessed by it. You don't want to be a spiritual baby anymore. It is time to grow up and live the blessed life you are meant to live. Hiding God's Word in your heart is an important way to start. You may not think you have a good memory, but you remember what is important to you. You remember the phone numbers and dates that you care about. I have heard people say they can't memorize anything, but they can quote songs from the 1960s and rattle off the statistics of their favorite sport players.

Memory is a skill you can learn. It is a muscle you can strengthen. In fact, memorizing Scripture will cause your brain to have a stronger memory in other areas. I guarantee it. Study after study has shown this. Why is it important to memorize Scripture?

- **You will always have God's Word with you.** When you are tempted, you don't have a Bible open or by your side. When you are witnessing to someone who doesn't know Jesus, is under stress, needs comfort, or is in a crisis, there is usually not a Bible around. You need God's Word in your mind so you can remember it and review it right when you need it.
- **You can meditate on Scripture wherever you go.** You can't review God's Word unless you remember it. If you have memorized Scripture, you can think about it when you get into bed at night or as you drive to an appointment. You can think about the Bible because you have memorized it. That is called meditation. The only promise of prosperity and success that God gives us in the Bible says that meditating on his Word is the key (Joshua 1:8).

If you have never memorized Scripture before, it may be intimidating. But you can do this! Anyone can do this. It doesn't matter how smart you think you are or how well you do at memorizing other things. Here is how you do it:

- **Pick a verse that speaks to you.** Don't choose a verse because you think you should memorize it. Memorize it because it will make a difference in your life.
- **Say the address before and after the text.** The address, where the verse is found in the Bible, is the hardest part of the verse to remember. Make it easier to remember by saying it aloud before and after the verse.
- **Read the verse aloud and read it many times.** We remember what we say and not what we read. That is how you record what you are trying to learn.
- **Memorize it exactly.** Don't try to manipulate the Scripture before you learn it. Learn it as it is in the Bible.
- **Start by memorizing one verse a week.** In time you may be able to learn two verses a week, but start slowly. If you memorize one verse a week, you will memorize 52 in a year; that is all the major verses that a Christian should learn! If you memorized two a week, that would be more than 100 in a year. You would be a virtual Bible compared to most people.

We remember what is important to us. Take notes, write things down. If you value God's word you are going to take notes on it.

Hebrews 2:1 "Write things down so we don't let slip what we have heard." The United States Air Force did a study and found that we forget 95% of what we hear within 72 hours. This statistic depresses a pastor. A pastor spends all week preparing a message to give on Sunday. By Wednesday you have forgotten 95% of what he/she has said unless you have written it down.

Talk it over.

What changes do you need to make so that you are regularly reading and studying the Bible?

3. RESPOND TO THE WORD OF GOD

You must do something about it, act on it, live it and practice it. vs. 22 "Do not merely listen to what the word says and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." Practice it. What good is a mirror if you look at it and don't do anything about it? The word "listen" in Greek is the word for "auditor". If you audited a class in college you didn't take it for credit, no tests, no responsibility, and no research. You were totally relaxed. You just listened; you didn't have any intention of applying it. We have a lot of auditors in the church. They come to church, walk in, hear the word of God, and walk out with no intention of ever being changed. I was one for years. I took notes, wrote things down, but it never changed me. We must respond to God's word, let it change us if we are going to be blessed by it. James says it is self-deception when we don't let it change us.

We think that by just gaining content is making us spiritually mature. The test of maturity is not knowledge. The test of maturity is character. A lot of people have great Bible knowledge and they are spiritual midgets. I need to practice it, apply it, and put it in my life. And knowledge increases responsibility. The more we know the more we are accountable for. What am I doing about what I know? Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is required." And James said, "To him who knows to do good and doesn't do it, it is sin." It is not how many times you have been through the word of God; it is how many times it has been through you. You have to be a doer of the word. I deceived myself in thinking that because I had knowledge that made me mature. Just because we know something doesn't mean we act on it.

There was an article in the Orange County Register. They did a poll of Christians in Orange County. "Many in Orange County believe but don't practice." We live in a hotbed of Bible teaching. Some of the top Bible teachers of the nation are within driving distance of where we are right now. You can turn on the radio at any time of day and hear godly men teaching the word. We are in a gospel glut in Orange County. You can hear the word of God 24 hours a day. A lot of us are lulled into the fact that because we are hearing a lot about God, we are maturing. Many believe but don't practice. James would say, "They are hearers but not doers." "From scores of well-kept churches Orange County residents appear average or even devout in their religious beliefs but when it comes to practicing those beliefs, a Register poll reveals that most residents are more inclined to worship the golden calf than the Lamb of God." It goes on and talks about hearers not doers.

That is what James is attacking. He is saying, "If you want to be blessed, you live the word of God, not just hear it. Not just know it." I really work at making the Bible simple. There is a lot in the Bible that is difficult to understand, complex and deep. Yet I try to present it in such a way that is very clear and very easy to understand and easy to put into practice. When you are done with today's study, I want you to be able to do the word not just hear the word of God. I work at making it practical. I try to make it simple so we can put it into practice. I heard about the guy who came to church late. He walked in just as the service was completing. He said to an usher, "Is the sermon done, yet?" The usher was wise and said, "The sermon has been preached, but it is yet to be done." Be ye doers of the word, don't merely listen. Put it into practice.

My honest prayer is that you will remember what I said and put it into practice. I pray that our Church will develop the reputation that people say, "They are doers of the word. They practice what everybody else talks about. They live it." People have a Living Bible. You ought to be a Living Bible. The best translation of Scripture is when you translate it into your life and let it change you. What pleases me even more than a comment or compliment is when somebody says they will put it into practice and use it. They say they will do the sermon this week. "Let us not deceive ourselves," James says. v. 25 (Phillips) "The man who puts the law into practice wins true happiness." Jesus, in Matthew 7, tells the story of the wise and the foolish builder. He says the foolish builder builds on sand. He is like the guy who hears the word of God but doesn't do what it says. The wise man is the one who hears it and then goes out and makes an honest attempt to put it into his life. Practice it.

Jesus said in John 13:17 "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." I think the simplest definition of maturity is to be a doer of the word. That is what it means to be mature. You do what the Bible says. We must not only read the word, we must heed the word. Every single one of us knows more spiritual truth than we are putting into practice right now. You don't need to know more, you already know enough. It is not the matter that we need to know more. We just need to put into practice what we already know. I just need to practice what I already know to do, not learn anything new. Be a doer of the word.

CONCLUSION

James concludes this section with three examples of practicing the word. He covers each of these in the rest of the book so we will be back to them. In v. 26 he says, "One of the ways you can know that you are a doer of the word is you have a controlled mouth." "If any one considers himself religious and does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." One of the ways you can know if you are a doer of the word is you have self-control over your words. This is a caring heart. "Religion that our God and Father accept as faultless is this: "to look after orphans and widows in their distress." I help the helpless by Social concern, a caring heart and a clean mind. To keep oneself from being polluted by the world is Spiritual integrity. That is genuine Christianity. What is James saying to us? He is saying "What are you going to do about what you already know?" Without God's Word, we could never be saved. We wouldn't be headed for Heaven. We wouldn't know about Jesus' death on the cross. We wouldn't know about God's purpose for our lives.

Without the Bible, we can't know God. God wants to give you all of that but it starts with his Word. Through the Bible, God re-creates our lives. When I feel like I'm at the end of my rope, God uses the Bible to give me a fresh start, a do-over. The Bible calls it being "born again." In James 1:18a, the Bible says, *"He chose to give us birth through the word of truth"* (NIV). The Bible is often compared to a seed. Once the Bible takes root in your heart, it begins to sprout and grow and bear fruit. As God's Word does that, God changes your life for the better. Jesus says this in John 6:63b about his Word: *"The words I have spoken to you they are full of the Spirit and life"* (NIV). God's Word is not just words on page. It is spirit and life. It is spiritual power. His Word can transform society and transform history. It can do the impossible. It can change your life. It is no wonder that Proverbs 4:22 tells us that God's word is **"life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh."** So, if you are under the weather or if symptoms are attacking your body, double up on God's medicine. Simply feed more on God's Word, and you will find life and health flowing through your body again.

Jesus said that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. If it is important to eat our meals every day, how much more feeding on God's Word? Jesus wants us to know that we need God's Word even more than our daily meals. He made us, so He knows best what our bodies need daily. So, whatever you do, remember to get your daily feeding of God's Word. Read your Bible in the comfort of your home or in the office during your lunch break. Play sermon CDs while driving to work or doing household chores. If you prefer something more visual, watch DVDs on the preaching of His Word. Choose whichever form you prefer and get His Word into you! Beloved, you cannot live when you stop breathing. In the same way, you cannot live without the Word because it is the very breath of God which gives you life and health!

D.L. Moody, a famous Chicago pastor from 100 years ago, said, "The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge; the Bible was given to change our lives." How do you need your life changed? What part of your life do you feel powerless to change? The Bible says the Word of God can change things that you cannot change on your own. Make God's Word a regular part of your life, and get ready for the impossible! God wants to use his Word to give you a fresh start in life. What are you going to do about it today? Maybe some of you need to decide to start preparing better for worship. Get up a little earlier so you are not so rushed and coming in late halfway through the songs. I sit down here for the whole service, I tune in to God and get calm and connected and I'm quiet and ready. I can say, "Lord, here I am. Teach me, so I can be blessed by God's word."

Maybe some of you need to say, "I am going to read through the Bible this year." About five chapters a day and you will go through the Bible in a year. "I'm going to start memorizing Scripture. I will pick a verse a week and hide God's word in my heart." It is a condition for answered prayer. John 15:7, "If you abide [continue] in me and my word abides in you, you can ask whatever you will and it will be done for you." The word of God in your heart is a condition for answered prayer. "I need to find a place of the ministry where I can get involved." The article in the Register said that all these people believe but less than one-third ever devote any time for ministry. Impression without expression leads to depression. If you are always taking in, one study after another, and never get out in the ministry, it is going to dry up your spiritual life. James is saying that the blessing of the Bible comes when we start living it.

TALK IT OVER

1. Why are silence and active listening such difficult things to practice? What can you do to minimize your distractions so that you are able to listen well?

2. What emotional or spiritual garbage is keeping you from hearing God's voice today?

3. How do you respond when God brings Scripture to mind in certain situations? How should you respond?

A VERSE TO REMEMNBER.

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. James 1:21(NIV)

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Father, I can't ignore what your word says. You have told me to be doers of the word and to practice what we already know. Lord, help me to do what I need to do, not to deceive ourselves, not to glance at the mirror of the word and walk away unchanged. Help me not to miss the point that I need to receive your word with the right attitude and reflect on it through reading and studying and memorizing. But Lord above all I need to respond to it and allow it to live in my life.

HOW TO TREAT PEOPLE RIGHT

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - Part 6 of 15

Read. James 2:1-13.

INTRODUCTION.

One of the greatest tests of your character is how you treat people who are trying to serve you. Whether it is a waitress, a waiter, a clerk, an employee, a secretary, your children, or your spouse, how you treat those who serve you tells me a great deal about you. In fact, when I have been involved in hiring decisions of staff, I often take people to restaurants to see how they interact with the server. Someone who is rude and demanding in those situations has a character flaw that I don't want as part of our team. The social psychologist Eric Hoffer once said, "Rudeness is the weak man's imitation of strength." It takes no intelligence at all to be rude. The best place to practice this important character trait of respect is at home. More marriages are ruined by rudeness than anything else. When I used to do marriage counseling, I was amazed at how many marriages are buried by one little dig after another. Often, we are the most disrespectful to the people we care about the most. I know people who treat their families in ways they would never treat a stranger.

I read a news story a few years back about a couple that got an annulment on the basis of the husband's rudeness. The wife went to court and claimed her husband burped all the time. She filed for an annulment. The judge ruled in her favor and granted her an annulment on the basis that if the husband really loved his wife, he wouldn't burp so much. If it annoyed her to that degree, he should be more considerate and refrain. Courtesy is just love in the little things. It is showing respect for people by being kind even in the smallest areas of our lives. I want us to look at what James has to say about "How to Treat People Right." Your biggest problems and mine are people problems that are getting along with other people. "To dwell above with those you love, that will be a glory. But to dwell below, with those we know, that is another story." How you and I treat other people matters deeply to God. 2 Chronicles 19:7, ". . . the Lord our God does not tolerate perverted justice, partiality, or the taking of bribes." James talks about "How do you get along with people? He gives us the common ways of showing partiality, why partiality is not right and how should we treat people.

I. COMMON WAYS OF SHOWING PARTIALITY.V.1.

"My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." James 2:1 (NKJV). Whenever James begins a sentence with "My brethren" then watch out! He is getting ready to nail you. He is getting ready to talk about prejudice, partiality and favoritism. I want you to note the word "partiality". The Greek word is a compound word that means "to receive" and "face". It literally means "to receive someone because of what you see" that is by outward appearance. But beware of outward appearance because it is what you see when you look at a person. This is a superficial judgment of someone. James is telling us, "Don't do that. Don't accept people based on what you see on the outside.

All of us do it though; don't we? If someone has an outward appearance that is pleasing to us and we treat them differently than if we don't like what we see. Here are some common ways that we show partiality to people:

- a. Gender/appearance.** Is the person male or female? Depending on your gender you respond in different ways. We discriminate often because of appearance. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." There is a lot of truth in that statement. If you are a cute kid you have made it. If you are plain, tough luck! In various cultures and generations our concept of beauty changes. How do you judge people? Do you judge them immediately on how they look? How they dress? If a man has long hair and a beard do you treat them different than if they were clean shaven? Do you judge a person because they are wearing overalls rather than slacks and collared shirt?
- b. Ancestry.** We judge people according to their race, their nationality, their ethnic background. What is their family background? Who do they belong to? Do they come from good stock? I heard about a black man who went to a church in the south and was trying to get in. It was full of bigots and they wouldn't let him in. He went to the pastor and told him. The pastor said, "You just need to pray about it." About three weeks later the pastor saw him and asked, "Did you talk to the Lord about it?" The man said, "Yes, and God said, 'Don't worry, I have been trying to get in that church 20 years and I still can't get in.'"
- c. Race/Tribe.** What is their ethnic background? What is the color of their skin? What is the language that they speak?
- d. Age.** How old are they? Are they from my generation or are they too old or too young?
- e. Achievement.** Our society gushes over winners and forgets losers. One minute you are a hero, the next you are a zero. Success and status are keywords. I am bothered by the increasing celebrity consciousness even in Christianity. We have our own superstars mostly on TV. James says, "Don't do that. Don't ask for special treatment."
- f. Wealth.** This is the most common distinction around the world. Are you rich or are you poor? What is your economic status? What attitude do you have about people who have more money than you? What attitude do you have toward people who make less money than you do? This is the area that James picks out of all the areas we can discriminate in. He talks about economic distinction. v. 2
- g. Appearance.** We discriminate often because of appearance. Beauty is everything in our world. We judge people on their appearance; how they look, how they dress. I heard about an experiment with some hitchhikers. They dressed them up in different ways. The dressier the hitchhiker was, the more likely he was to be picked up.

Talk it over

How would you react if someone came into your church who wore sloppy clothes, was dirty or had body odor

II. WHY FAVORITISM IS NOT RIGHT? -V.2-4.

All of us show favoritism base on a variety of elements. "Suppose a man comes to your meeting wearing gold rings and fine clothes and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say 'Here is a good seat for you' but say to the poor man 'You stand over there' or 'Sit on the floor at my feet', have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Guy King calls this the "case of the nearsighted usher." Two guys are strangers. They arrive at the church at the same time. The first guy is wealthy that can be seen by the clothes that he wears. The other guy doesn't have much money that can be seen by the clothes that he wears also. The ushers standing at the door take the wealthy man and seat him in the place of honor. The poor man they tell him to go and stand in the corner. James tells us that it should not be this way. James tells us that we should not show favoritism because of a person's affluence. We should not show favoritism because of the amount of money a person has in his or her bank account.

James doesn't criticize the guy for being wealthy; he criticizes the members for being partial to him. He doesn't say there is anything wrong with having the wealth. It says he has "fine clothes". In the Greek, it literally meant the Roman toga the politicians would wear when they were running for reelection. This is Rich Gold finger. Then comes the guy who is poverty stricken. This is Bum Poor boy. He is destitute and shabby. He has holes in his Levis but doesn't have his shoes on. He doesn't have any deodorant and his hair is unkempt. He looks bad. The usher has to make a decision. Where will he seat him? The usher takes the rich guy to the front row and seats him. Prov. 28:21, "To show partiality is not good; yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread." We will compromise for selfish gain. We will show favoritism and partiality when it serves my cause. We are willing to show favoritism to the rich person to get a little something in return.

Why waste my time talking with the poor man, he can't do anything for me? I'm not going to invest my time and attention on orphans and widows, what purpose would that serve? We choose to give someone preferential treatment because they have something we want. They have something to offer so we throw them some favors. We might show preferential treatment to someone in the church because of how much they contribute financially or because they are talented and serving in various ministries. I might not be willing to confront them on something lest I lose what they bring to the table. When I show favoritism shows I'm selfish. We think we have it all together so we make sure we associate only with those who look like they got it all together too. We don't want to associate with those people.

We would rather identify with people who look successful rather than people who look like failures. We would rather die than be seen talking to certain people. It would demean our reputation. I might come to be categorized with them if I associate with them. James attacks this prideful attitude by basically saying, ‘who are you? You have not sinned? Are you perfect? Are you any better than the ones you are unwilling to associate with? NO! Could it be, though, that we want to associate with the people who look like they got it all together because in doing so, we will look like we got it all together too? We can have the tendency to discriminate toward certain people for various reasons. We are biased toward people because of their color or culture or because of their sexual preferences or because of their political preferences.

Prejudiced means to pre-judge which means if we are prejudiced against someone, we are judging them without knowing them. We are judging them based on something specific we notice or, in some cases, it is merely speculative. We think a certain person in a certain way and we form an opinion based on nothing more than assumption. The problem is we see them for the label we put on them rather than them being a creation of God. Proverbs 22:2, “Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is Maker of them all.” If I show favoritism then it shows that I am prejudiced toward certain types of people. Showing favoritism is not right because of the following:

- a. *It is ungodly.*** If you want to be Godly that is to be more like Jesus then you should not show favoritism. Look at what James tells us “If you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” James 2:9 (NKJV). In Romans, it says: “For there is no partiality with God.” Romans 2:11 (NKJV). Faith and favoritism are incompatible. We are to respect all people and treat them fairly. Jesus treated everyone with dignity. God loves everyone. If there is one place in the world where there should NOT be any kind of discrimination then it is in the church. The church ought to be a place where all people are welcomed no matter how they dress or the color of their skin. Jesus does not show favoritism and if you do you are not acting in a Christian manner.
- b. *It is unreasonable.*** Go ahead and note this phrase, “God has chosen the poor”. The Bible is not saying that it is good to be poor and bad to be rich or poor. James is not saying that only the poor will be saved. What the Bible is telling us is that, “Wealth in itself does not deserve special treatment or special attention. Everyone has been made into the image of God regardless of how much money they have in their pocket, wallet or purse. Do you remember the beatitude? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:3 (NKJV). When we compare our holiness, our righteousness, and our purity with that of God’s, all of us are poor. God has chosen the humble of this world; the poor of the world to show those who are full of pride how to receive a blessing. God has chosen the poor of this world to show the rich how to be rich beyond compare.

- c. *It is unloving.*** The Bible says that how you treat people matters. We are to treat people in the same way that we would want to be treated. That is "the royal law." God is disgusted if we treat people unfairly, unjustly or show favoritism. Look at what first John 4:4 chapter tells us: "If someone says, "I love God," and hate his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also." 1 John 4:20-21 (NKJV). The Bible says that how we relate to people shows how much we really love God. Favoritism is unloving.
- d. *It is judgmental (vs. 1-4).*** In some cases, we might convince ourselves that we are being discerning when we look down on someone. "Look at him, he doesn't look right. Those beady eyes; he just looks guilty of something". So therefore, he must be shady and untrustworthy. But James says these thoughts are judgmental and evil. I can't spiritualize this attitude; I have a critical spirit towards the person. Any why such disapproval? Because they look different? Because they act different? I am judging you when I don't know anything about you. I have condemned you without a fair hearing. I have rendered you negative without determining if there was anything positive about your make-up. My judgment of you was harsh and my criticism quick. Favoritism highlights a judgmental spirit.
- e. *It is getting backwards (vs. 5-7).*** When we show partiality to the rich or the smart or the good looking, we are making appearance more important than character. When we do that, we have our priorities backwards. James is saying, "What is wrong with you? Why do you show such preferential treatment to the very people who are making you suffer by dragging you into the courts and exploiting you? Why would you show favor to those who are slandering the name of Jesus? Whose side are you on? You got it backwards. Here is the poor man among you who is lean in money but rich in faith and yet you shun him. And then there is the man who is plentiful in money but lacking in spirituality yet you honor him. You got it all wrong." In showing favoritism, I got things backwards.
- f. *It is unloving (vs. 8-13).*** Just as James said before that the failure to practice control of the tongue renders my religion worthless, so too if I uphold all these aspects of the law yet show favoritism, I am a lawbreaker and are thus just the same as someone who has broken all of them. I can do many amazing things for the church and be a spiritual super hero but if I don't have love for the poor man as well as the rich man what good is it? I need to be careful and come out of denial because if I think I can be in God's favor and not be merciful I'm wrong; I will be shown judgment without mercy. Favoritism shows that I am unloving. Favoritism is unloving. That is why you shouldn't do it. "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

You are doing right. "Why is it called the royal law? Because if we obeyed that one, we wouldn't need all of the rest. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:14, "All the law is summed up in one sentence, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'." If I play favorites, I'm being unloving. The Bible says that how we relate to other people shows how much we really love God. I John 4:20 "If a man says he loves God and hates his brother he is lying. How can you love God whom you haven't seen if you don't love your brother whom you have seen?" How I relate to you proves how much I love God. Favoritism is unloving. Few of us know how to love unconditionally. Most of us are like this poem: Paul's girl is rich and haughty my girl is poor as clay Paul's girl is young and pretty mine looks like a bale of hay. Paul's girl is smart and clever my girl is dumb but good would I trade my girl for Paul's? You bet your life I would! We don't know how to love unconditionally. All we know is how to show favoritism. V. 9" If you show favoritism you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

- g. *Favoritism is unchristian.*** If you want to be like Jesus you can't play favorites. "My brothers as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ don't show favoritism. "Faith and favoritism are incompatible; we are a family. This word "favoritism" is used only four times in the Bible. Every other time it is referring to God and it says, "God does not play favorites." Romans 2:11 "God does not show favoritism"

Has not God chosen the poor to be rich in faith and inherit the kingdom? He is not saying that it is good to be poor and bad to be rich. He is not saying that only the poor will be saved. Everybody in this room is rich compared to the majority of the world. It doesn't make any difference to God. Aren't you glad God doesn't check your wallet before He saves you? Aren't you glad your salvation is not based on your savings account? Wealth in itself does not deserve any special treatment. Maybe the person got it dishonestly. Your value is not based on your valuables. Don't confuse your net worth with your self-worth. There is big difference. I drive a 1974 Buick with a rusty hood. I could afford a better car but I happen to believe you drive cars for transportation not for status. I have a \$4 watch. It tells me the same time it tells you on your Rolex. I don't wear a watch to impress people; I wear a watch that tells time. I could afford a lot of neat things, but that is not my priority.

My net worth and my self-worth have nothing to do with each other. I don't get my strokes by impressing you by wearing certain kinds of clothes or driving a certain kind of car. It doesn't matter where you buy your clothes or what you drive, you are welcome here. "It is illogical," he says. Don't confuse where you get your self-worth from. God chooses the poor. He doesn't expect them to be wealthy in order to be saved. "On top of this," he says, "the rich could care less about you". Why worry about catering to them. "Is it not the rich exploiting you? "In New Testament times it was the Roman nobility who were feeding the Christians to the lions. It was the upper crust (a bunch of crumbs held together by their own dough) that were persecuting the Christians, judging the Christians, insulting the Christians and throwing the Christians to the lions.

James says, "Why are you worried about impressing them? They are certainly not worried about impressing you. They are doing the opposite." Do you know why we like to kiss up to people who are affluent? Why we like to cater to and get close to people who are celebrities? Because we hope they will do something for us. You don't have to know the key men if you know the Man who holds the keys. He has a way of opening and closing doors regardless of your network or your contacts. James says, "Don't show favoritism. How many laws do you have to break to be a lawbreaker? One. How many crimes do you have to commit to become a criminal? One. How many links do you have to break to break a chain? One. Have you ever been in a shop that has the sign "You break it, you have bought it.?" They don't care if it is broken in one place or into a thousand pieces, if you broke it you bought it. James is saying that people think favoritism is such a small sin. But, he says, if you break God's rule, you break God's rule. Be careful it is serious business. v. 11 "for who said, 'Do not commit adultery' also said 'Do not murder'. If you don't commit adultery but you do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker."

What is he saying? He is illustrating his point about being unloving. If I come to your house and say, "I really respect you a whole lot. The way I'm going to prove how much I love you is I'm not going to commit adultery with your wife. However, if you tick me off, I reserve the right to murder you." Are you going to thank me for that? Will you appreciate my love? How absurd! It is ridiculous! "I don't drink, smoke, cuss, chew or run around with girls. What does God care if I'm partial to certain kinds of people?" God says it is all the same! It is all important. V. 12 "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom because judgement without mercy will not be shown to anyone who has been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgement. "Love treats people with mercy. Love gives people what they need, not what they deserve. James is probably thinking about his half-brother Jesus who said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy."

Talk it over.

In what sense is violating one law as serious as breaking every law?

III. HOW TO TREAT PEOPLE RIGHT

In order to treat people right you must love them. People are attracted to the person that loves them and to a place where they feel loved. A strong healthy church is a church that loves people. How do you have a loving church? There was an article in the paper that said, "A loving connection in church growth. More people are drawn to caring facilities. In a survey of 8,600 people from congregations in 39 different denominations they measured their 'love quotient'. The institute reports growing churches are more loving to each other and to visitors than declining churches. Loving churches attract more people regardless of their theology, denomination or location." They surveyed them and gave them a quotient of 1 to 100. Of the 12 denominations scoring below 65 all of them except 2 were declining. Of the 13 denominations scoring above 65 all of them were growing in the past 10 years. Most churches that are growing today have learned how to love.

A church that loves people is a church that grows. Typically, in analyzing reasons for growth in a church the focus in the past has been on such factors as pastoral leadership, attractiveness of facilities, location, liberal or conservative theology and evangelical fervor. But there is increasing evidence that none of these influences a church's growth or decline as significantly as how much love and acceptance people experience when they attend." The number one denomination, the most loving denomination, was the Southern Baptist Convention "the largest Protestant denomination scoring 74, the highest love quotient, with a growth rate of 16% a year. It is love that reaches people. You don't argue people into the kingdom of heaven. You love them into the kingdom of heaven. How do you do that? Three steps:

1. Accept everybody.

Have you ever been in a church of spiritual snobs? We got it and you don't. Do you know why people have a hard time accepting others? They confuse acceptance with approval. There is a big difference between acceptance and approval. You can accept somebody without approving of his lifestyle. He may be doing something totally contrary to the word of God, but you can accept him as a person without approving of the sin he is involved in. Romans 15:7, "Accept one another just as Christ accepted you." As a church we need to cultivate an attitude of acceptance. The church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints where they dress up for the dress parade. Some people go to church to close their eyes; others go to eye their clothes. If you are perfect, you don't belong here. This is a church where people are growing. This is a church for people who don't have it all together. We have every kind of background you can imagine in this church. We have Catholics, Charismatics, Jews, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Assembly of God, Pentecostal, and Evangelical Free. It doesn't matter where you have been. It matters where you are now and if you know Jesus. If you want to grow up more and more like Him every day you are welcome here. In the essentials we have unity. Jesus is Lord. The Bible is God's word. In the non-essentials we have liberty and, in all things, we have charity. Acceptance is the key.

Some of you are not going to like Heaven because it is not exclusive enough. If we can't learn to get along together here on the earth, what makes us think we will get along together in heaven? Christ accepted us while we were still sinners. We need to do the same with others. Jesus said, Luke 19:10 (NIV), "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." We need to accept those who have lost their way. It should not matter where people have been or what dark alley they have been down. Some of us have been down dark alleys too. We need to accept people just as they are. God accepts us, despite our messy lives, impure motives, and irritating attitudes. One of the ways we reflect God's love and bring him glory is to accept each other just as he accepts us. This means we accept others' quirks and look past their faults in order to see a person created in the image of God. To make the changes in your life that lead to health, the Bible teaches that we should seek the support of others, such as your small group. It is very difficult to get and maintain good health just working by yourself. And we get support by giving support. The Bible teaches us to accept one another unconditionally, just as Christ has accepted you and me unconditionally. The Bible says, "*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God*" (Romans 15:7 NIV). This acceptance will make your group a safe environment, where people are not afraid to express their fears and doubts or talk about their struggles. And that will help each of you to experience lasting change in your lives.

Talk it over

Why do you think people are more likely to change after, rather than before, they find acceptance? _____

2. *Appreciate everybody.*

Appreciation is having admiration for others and communicating your approval to them. It is taking your time to make people feel welcome and special by using the fruit of God's work in you to encourage and uplift others. It is a form of valuing others. This goes a little bit further than acceptance. To appreciate someone, you need to find something that you like about the person, something that you admire. With some people this may require a little creativity. You may have to look for a while. If nothing else you can value them for their uniqueness. Like Baskin-Robbins which is the world's largest chain of ice cream. It has 31 Flavors. What if we were all vanilla? What a boring church we would be! God has 31 flavors of personality and more than that. We need to appreciate everyone. Look at what Philippians says: Philippians 2:35 "Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself. Each of you should look not only to your own interest but also the interest of others."

All of us are different from one another. God likes it that way. He has created each of us in a unique way. We need to accept one another, to value one another and to appreciate one another with all our differences. Appreciate everybody. Find something you can like, not just accept. Tell them so. You can have a ministry called the ministry of appreciation. Appreciation carries with it an amazing power. As a leader, I hope that is something you already realize. Appreciation literally means to *rise in value*. It is the opposite of depreciation. Depreciation is what happens when you buy a new car and it drops in value as soon as you pull out of the car lot! Appreciation, on the other hand, means to rise in value. When you appreciate your husband, you raise his value. When you appreciate your wife, you raise her value. When you appreciate your kids, you raise their value. When you appreciate your co-workers, you raise their value to you and to the company. When you appreciate your boss, you raise his or her value.

Expressing sincere appreciation can encourage and motivate others. It can even inspire greater spiritual growth. That is real power! The ministry of appreciation raises the value of people. The more you appreciate a situation, the more it rises in value. You can make a ministry out of raising the value of people simply by appreciating them Paul understood this. He had a continuous attitude of gratitude. Philippians 1:3-5 says, "I thank my God every time I remember you because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day." When was the last time you thanked those on your team for their "partnership in the gospel"? You should. Be an encourager. Continually value those you lead. You can appreciate them in four different ways.

- a. **Appreciate their efforts.** At one time at our church, I regularly awarded the Giant Killer award. I picked up five stones from the same brook in Israel that David did before he killed Goliath. I mounted them on a plaque and handed it out for someone on my team who tackled the biggest problem of the month. They didn't have to solve the problem. They just had to tackle it. That is about effort.

- b. Appreciate their loyalty.** If you have been in ministry/place of work in your current location for any time at all, it is likely you have had people with you that have stayed with you through tough times.

Whether they are serving in a paid position or a volunteer one, they could go elsewhere maybe for better pay. Take some time to let those you lead know much you appreciate their loyalty.

- c. Appreciate their differences.** You should be glad the people on your team are different. It would be very boring if they were alike. Differences on your team are not weaknesses; they are strengths. Good teams will have introverts and extraverts; people-orientated and task-orientated folks. God puts people with differences together on the same ministry team because it makes the team stronger.

- d. Appreciate their ideas.** As a basic rule, I try to say “yes” to any new idea. Then I come back later to figure out if something’s wrong with it. Since I usually take that approach, I typically ask those close to me to tell what is wrong with their idea when they share it. We need someone thinking of potential pitfalls! Your ministry will be as creative as your organization allows it to be. Unfortunately, most churches have structures and traditions that limit or kill creativity. Don’t be like most churches. Affirm ideas that come from your team. When you appreciate an idea, you greatly enhance the possibility of getting another one!

Radical gratitude means you are going to walk through life being grateful in every situation, no matter what in times of plenty, when times are tight, when times are good, bad, right, and wrong, whatever. You can develop an attitude of gratitude by choosing to be grateful in every situation. The attitude of radical gratitude actually serves others. It becomes a ministry. Every believer is a minister. You are a minister! Every Christian is a minister, which means we are to serve other people. We are saved to serve. That is why God says radical gratitude is a ministry. One of the things I have discovered is that everybody in life needs massive doses of encouragement. I have never met anybody who has said, “Oh no! I don’t need a compliment! I have too much. Please, stop! I’m too affirmed. Don’t give me anymore.” You have an unqualified need to be affirmed, to be loved, to be appreciated and so does everybody else. If you want to be used by God, here is one way: Affirm everybody. Appreciate everybody. Show gratitude to everybody.

Talk it over.

How have other people’s appreciation drawn you closer to God?

3. *Affirm everybody.*

Give everybody a lift whenever you can. Don't tear them down. No one likes to be told how bad they are but they sure like to get a pat on the back. Look at what the Bible tells us: I Thess. 5:11 "Encourage one another and build each other up." When people stumble, don't criticize, sympathize. Be an encourager, not a complainer, not a condemner, a critical person, not a judge. You can encourage people just by smiling at them. The ministry of ushering in this church is crucial and vital. It is not uncommon to have 50-100 new visitors in our church on a weekly basis. You only have one chance to make a first impression. Give a welcome handshake, a smile. What is God saying in James? The church that accepts, appreciates and affirms people is the church that God blesses. Absolutely nothing can stop the church that is filled with love. Nothing. It doesn't happen accidentally. It requires an all-out effort by each of us.

Everybody needs to contribute to the atmosphere of the church. Everybody here contributes to the atmosphere of the church either negatively or positively. Would people come back to this church just because of you? Are you a greeter or can you smile? There are two kinds of pillars in the church: one that holds the church up and caterpillars that walk in and out. Together we need to make a commitment that this church will receive people unconditionally. We don't expect people to act like believers until they are believers. Love draws outside people in. I want our church to have a reputation for love. I believe that God is just waiting for a church that will love people unconditionally. He can use that kind of church to spark a spiritual awakening in this valley that all the forces of hell couldn't stop. It would change the climate of this community for Christ.

Nothing can stop a loving church. Maybe you are a visitor. Maybe this is your first time. You are as welcome as a charter member of this church. It really doesn't matter what you wear or your economic status or whether you have been married, never married or widowed. It doesn't matter if you speak in tongues in your prayer closet. You are welcome here. It doesn't matter what color or race you are. It was said of the New Testament church, "See how they love one another." "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples that you love each other." You accept, affirm, and appreciate. Jesus Christ breaks down all barriers and the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We are all equal in God's eyes. God wants you to know Him.

Galatians 3:26-27 "For now we are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. We are no longer Jew or Greek or slave or freemen or even men or women." We are all the same. There is no distinction in the body of Christ. We are Christians. We are one in Christ Jesus. We affirm people when we treat them with dignity, knowing that they matter to God. If you want to stand out in your leadership, one secret puts you head and shoulders above everybody else – **be an encourager**. Encouragement is very difficult to find today. The Bible says, "*Encourage each other and build each other up.*" We live in a very negative culture. Most people get far more jeers than cheers, far more pokes than strokes. We live in a society where the number one form of humor is put downs. People are put down, criticized and maligned. God calls us to do the exact opposite. God says, as believers we are to value *everybody*. When you look around at people, even people who are insulting you and putting you down, you must realize that God died for them. He sent His Son for them and they matter greatly to God.

How can you affirm people?

- a. **Listen to them.** “Share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ.” Galatians 6:2 (NLT). One of the greatest gifts you can give people is an attentive ear. When you listen to someone it says “You matter. I value what you have to say. I value who you are. I think what you have to say is important.” Every time you genuinely listen to people, you are ministering to them. By listening, I show I care. It says by doing this you obey the law of Christ, also called the great commandment... *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*
- b. **Use positive words.** “Speak only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs [not your needs, but theirs] that it may benefit those who listen.” Ephesians 4:29 (NIV). God wants us, as believers, to be people builders not people users. Most of the world is filled with people users. God says that when you speak positive words of encouragement to people and you build them up, you are ministering to people. Would you like to know how to change somebody who doesn’t want to change? Treat them the way you want them to become as if they have already become it. That is called speaking in faith.

People tend to live up to our expectations of them. The other night I saw Sally Fields in an interview. She was talking about how one director in one play said, “That was brilliant!” and it gave her the confidence to become an actress. Just one little compliment can change a life. You don’t know the power of your words. If people make any effort toward the Lord, commend them on that. If they make any effort to being more mature, more productive, whatever... when you see something good in their life, compliment it and that area will grow. What you compliment tends to grow.

- c. **Pray for them.** “You are helping us by praying for us.” 2 Corinthians 1:11 (NLT). Make a prayer list of the people you lead. Now put it in your Bible or keep it handy on your mobile device. Pray for them and watch what happens in your church. *You cannot pray for people and not see them start to change.* And I encourage you to tell them you are praying for them. You can even ask them, “What do you want me to pray about?” Even unbelievers appreciate people praying for them. Every time you do that you are building a bridge on which you can minister to people.

Talk it over.

Write down a person you will this week encourage. You will affirm them either through positive words or listening to them or praying for them.

IV. HOW CAN WE OVERCOME THE SIN OF FAVORITISM?

The story is told of a pastor who never ministered to an individual or family in his church without first checking a current record of their financial contributions. The more generous they were with their money, the more generous he was with his time. That is an appalling and flagrant display of favoritism, but in effect it is the same kind of situation James dealt with. If we are God's children, we will not be favoring certain people because of their status, education, money, fame, prestige, looks or whatever. There is no place for favoritism in the heart of God and there is no place for favoritism in the heart of His people and therefore there is no place for favoritism in the church. How then can we overcome this sin?

- a. ***Practice humility.*** Rom. 12:16, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." Outside the church you can have people in authority and power and status along with those who are under them. And sometimes the higher-ups are not willing to associate with those who are 'beneath' them. However, in Christ we are all on equal ground. No one is more important or special than another. A Boss and employee become brothers. General and private become equal. Social distinctions exist in the world but they shouldn't in the church. The church needs to be set apart, it should be different; it should stand out. Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." We are not to be showing favoritism with selfish ambitions, we are not to be showing favoritism in our vain conceit but rather, in humility, consider others, all others, important and special. If I practice the principle of humility then I won't be practicing favoritism.
- b. ***Practice sensitivity.*** There are consequences to showing insensitive favoritism. What if our shunning of someone causes someone to walk away from the church that otherwise would have come to Christ and received salvation? Brian Warner started going to church with a friend years ago. Brian was a skinny pizza faced nerdy looking kid that nobody liked. He was also a loner who looked out of place most of the time. The youth group took a trip to an amusement park one weekend and when they got there the Youth Pastor instructed everyone to pair up with someone so nobody would get lost or left behind. Everybody got a partner except Brian. Nobody wanted to hang out with him, so he was left by himself.

The weeks went by after that little trip and Brian came to church occasionally but he was never really accepted there and he never felt welcome. Eventually he just quit altogether, and sadly, nobody seemed to notice. Years later that Youth Pastor got a call from one of the teens that had been in that group. The former teen asked, "Do you remember Brian Warner?" The youth pastor didn't. The former-teen said "Let me refresh your memory, he was a skinny nerdy kid that nobody liked" The youth pastor said, "Oh, I remember him. Whatever happened to him?" The teen said, "He changed his name. He took the first name of Marilyn Monroe because she committed suicide and the last name of Charles Manson because he was a serial killer. Now he calls himself Marilyn Manson. He formed a band and all the members have taken the first name of a movie star and the last name of a serial killer."

Most people have heard of Marilyn Manson because he sings some of the most satanic and anti-Christian songs of all time. One of his albums is titled, “Antichrist Superstar”. He once said it was his goal to totally wipe out Christianity. When I’m insensitive I push people away from Christ. God wants everyone to be saved but that won’t happen if we show favoritism.

- c. **Practice acceptance.** Acts 10:34-35 [9-16]. Peter needed to understand that there was now no ‘impurity’ between Jews and gentiles. Don’t call unclean what God has declared clean. Peter understood that the vision was not so much about animals as it was about people; specifically, gentiles. They needed to hear the gospel too but before Peter was to visit Cornelius the gentile he needed to be changed in his thinking. What about us? Before we accept and minister to certain people would we need to be changed in the way we think about them?

There is a story of a young hippie who gave his life to Christ during the Jesus Movement of the late sixties and early seventies. One Sunday he went to a church, not knowing it was one of the more “upper- class” churches in the area. He was late to the service, and the pastor was about to begin the message. As he walked in, he saw that the place was packed and he could not find a place to sit. So, not knowing any better, he sat down on the floor in front of the platform where the pastor was standing. Well, you can guess what kind of reaction he caused, although people were quiet about it. Everyone was wondering how the pastor was going to handle the situation, and how they were going to get rid of this unmannered young man.

After what seemed like an eternity, an elderly gentleman rose from his seat and headed down the aisle toward the young man. “Finally, he got some action. He will tell this guy what is what, and be done with him.” Everyone held their breath as they waited to hear how the old man would tell the hippie to leave. The old man bent over as if to talk to the young man, then bent his knees, and sat down next to the young man, worshiping with him for the rest of the service. He saw past the social barrier and saw the heart of the matter. Romans 15:7, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” I need to practice acceptance if I am going to get rid of favoritism.

- d. **Practice Christ.** Mark 12:13-14. In Luke’s version of this event the men said, “We know that you do not show partiality”. They recognized that Jesus was impartial. They knew this not because he said he was impartial but because he displayed that he was impartial. Jesus ate with the “sinners” and was criticized for it. Jesus didn’t show favoritism to the religious leaders, like others did, but rather he went after their hypocrisy. God told Samuel that man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart. When we practice this principle, we are practicing Christ. Ron had long hair, listened to heavy metal music, drank alcohol, and experimented with drugs. He had also tried church but had been ‘turned off’ by the judgmental eyes of some. One summer he was hired to work in a lumberyard. He was partnered with a skinny, fair-skinned Christian teenager name Joe, who immediately thought Ron was ‘cool.’

“Over the weeks, Ron and Joe laughed, ate, and talked. Ron drilled Joe about God and the Gospel, but Joe never pretended to know all the answers. One day, Joe asked Ron if he would like to come over to his house for dinner the next night. A couple of weeks later, Ron got brave enough to ask Joe over to his small house in a poor neighborhood. As the summer drew to a close and Joe prepared to return to college, they both knew their days together at the lumber yard were numbered. As they walked out to the car on Ron’s last day, he looked up at Joe and tearfully said, ‘A lot of people have tried to tell me about Jesus, but Joe, you are the first person who has shown Him to me’. We can’t practice favoritism and practice Christ.

CONCLUSION

There was once a town drunk that was moved in his heart toward God. He immediately stopped drinking and began to look for a church. Determined to turn his life around he found a church and went in. He was met at the door by a couple of ushers and they told the man, "Please go home and clean up, take a bath, cut your hair, shave your beard and then you can come back to church." The man left and did what they asked and came back to the same church the next week. Once again, the ushers met him at the door. The former drunk said, "I have done what you asked and I am ready to come to church." The ushers said to the man, "That is good but your clothes are dirty and torn up. Go get a suit so that you will look nice for church." The man felt sad but he decided to do what they asked; after all this was the church, he felt he was supposed to attend. So, he went out and bought a nice suit, determined that this time they would let him in so he could worship God. The next Sunday the former drunk returned to that same church but this time the man was met by the two ushers and the senior pastor. Together, the three of them explained to the man that he could not come into the church because of his past. How would it look if the town drunk came to their church? The man walked out of the church totally dejected because he desired to seek God in a house of worship alongside the men and women of God. He sat down on the steps in front of the church and put his head in his hands and began to cry.

As he sat there, he felt the hand of someone touch his shoulder. Before he could look up, he heard a voice say, "Don't worry my friend, I have been trying to get into that church for years and they won't let me in either." The former drunk looked up and saw a man dressed in a white robe with nail pierced hands. I know we often come across injustice and partiality in our life. Maybe some of you here have been neglected by parents. You feel your parents did not give you a good deal whereas your siblings were more preferred, pampered, and given more opportunities. Maybe you applied for a promotion and you were neglected and someone who was not qualified got the promotion. Maybe you have been a victim of favoritism at a Christian ministry somewhere. How do I handle favoritism by others?

Jesus Christ is a great example for us. Right from his birth laws were made and altered to attack and kill him. The Sanhedrin had been very critical and judgmental on him. Even when he was arrested and tried Jesus was at the receiving end of man’s favoritism. According to the gospels, it was customary for the Romans to release a Jewish prisoner during the Passover festival. The Roman Governor Pontius Pilate tried to use this custom as an excuse to release Jesus but the crowd in the courtyard demanded that a prisoner named Barabbas be freed instead, and Pilate eventually gave in to the pressure. Thus, Barabbas was released, and Jesus was crucified.

He faced favoritism like anyone of us and this resulted in his death. That was the will of God that Jesus is betrayed, not favored upon, and died on the cross. Even death could not hold him and he came out victorious on the third day.

Talk it over.

1. If your character was being judged by how you treat people who serve you, how do you think it would be assessed?

2. How do you serve others when you listen? Why might this practice be considered countercultural today?

3. Verse 5 says God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. Is God showing favoritism in this way? Explain

4. What are some ways you can “fill your life with love”?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. James 1:8-10

PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Heavenly Father, this is a message we need to hear. Lord, it is so easy to become smug and presumptuous, to look down on others who have less. Lord, I pray that there may be an outstretched hand and a warm hug and a loving smile for every person who worships here. Lord, forgive me for making judgements about people based on outward appearance. Help me to realize that favoritism and faith do not match. I commit myself to accepting people, appreciating them, and affirming them because you have accepted us. In Jesus Name.

HOW TO HAVE REAL FAITH

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS PART 7 OF 15

Read James 2:14-26

INTRODUCTION.

It seems if you put the word "real" in front of anything it sells more. Real coffee or real leather. We are interested in the genuine article. There was a TV show that used to be on "Real People". There is a book out Real Men Don't Eat Quiche. Coke used to be the "real thing". I want to talk to you today about what James has to say about how to have a real faith. There are a lot of phony religions out there; people who think they are Christians and really aren't. The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, tells the story of a make-believe country in which only ducks live. "One Sunday morning all the ducks came into the church, waddled down the aisle and into their pews, and squatted. Then the duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck Bible and read, 'Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!' All the ducks yelled 'Amen!' and they all waddled home." That is the kind of hearing that goes on every Sunday morning in the multitudes of congregation across the different churches; people encountering truth but responding to it in a way that never changes them.

James asks, "Can such faith save him?" In this passage James describes how we can know who we are. He explains the difference between authentic believers and questionable faith. So, how do I show I am a believer? Paul says, "By grace, through faith, we are saved." James comes along and says, "It is not just faith but faith and works." What is he talking about? James and Paul are both right. They are talking about different things. Paul was fighting the problem of legalism; the problem of "I have to keep all the Jewish laws and regulations to be a Christian." Paul is talking to that group. James is not fighting legalism but laxity; those that say "It doesn't matter what you do as long as you believe." They are fighting two different enemies. But they both use the word "works" in different ways. When Paul uses the word "works" he is talking about Jewish laws like circumcision and things like that. When James uses it, he is talking about the lifestyle of a Christian; acts of love. It is totally different.

Paul focuses on the root of salvation; what happens to me internally. James focuses on the fruit of salvation; what happens on the outside. Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them." Paul is talking about, "How to know you are a Christian." James is talking about, "How to show you are a Christian." Paul is talking about his passages on faith alone, how to become a believer while James talks about, how to behave like a believer. It is not a contradiction. It is summed up in Ephesians 2:8-10 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, for a life of good works that God has already prepared for us to do." There are three prepositions in this passage; "by grace", "through faith", "for good works". If you get those out of order, you are in trouble. If you think you are saved by works, for faith you are in trouble. But he is saying we are saved by grace through faith. We are saved just by accepting God's gift. But how do I show I am a believer? James says there are five ways you can know you have the real faith. He gives us five steps or principles here in this passage.

Talk it over.

Consider your response to this analogy of faith: Wedding rings don't make people married, but they declare it in a visible way.

PRINCIPLES OF REAL FAITH.

1. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOMETHING YOU SAY. V. 14

Real faith is not just something you say, something you talk about. "What good is it my brother if a man claims to have faith, but has no deeds? Can such `faith' save him?" It doesn't say he actually has faith, he just claims to have it. He talks about it. He knows all the right phrases. There are a lot of people who claim to be Christians. George Gallup says that 50 million Americans say "I'm born-again," but you don't see anything in their lifestyle. Today we tend to label people as Christians if they make the slightest sound of being a believer. It is more than just talk that is involved in real faith. Jesus said, "Not everybody who says to me `Lord, Lord' is going to enter into the kingdom of heaven." Not everybody with a Christian bumper sticker is a believer. Not everybody who is a professor of Christianity is a possessor of Christianity.

"Can such faith save him? What value is this kind of faith?" Nothing. Talk is cheap. Remember when Larry Flint, the publisher of Hustler, said he was born again? But you never saw any change in his life. He kept right on printing pornography. No difference. No change. James is saying that real faith is not just something you say. Do you know anybody that claims to be a Christian but you don't see any evidence in their life? That is a phony faith. Real faith is not just something you say. Faith is active. It is not passive. It is a commitment. Look at your lifestyle and see what kinds of actions follow as a result of it. If you have faith that is real, it can be demonstrated. If you have been baptized, you made a statement to God and the people around you. You said, "I'm in!" But it doesn't stop at baptism! What else do you do? You start following the pattern of Jesus. Faith is proven by how we live. And don't misinterpret this. Your salvation is not based on your works. The things you do won't get you into heaven. Your actions don't make you a Christian; they *show* you are a Christian.

Talk it over

According to James, what good is faith without deeds? Explain why he says this

2. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOMETHING YOU FEEL.

When you are a baby Christian, God gives you a lot of confirming emotions and often answers the most immature, self-centered prayers for you to know he exists. But as you grow in faith, he will wean you of these dependencies. God wants you to sense his presence, but he is more concerned that you *trust* him than *feel* him. Faith is what truly matters to God, not what we feel. The situations that will stretch your faith most will be those times when life falls apart and God seems nowhere to be found. This happened to Job. On a single day he lost everything; his family, his business, his health, and everything he owned. Most discouraging for Job was that for 37 chapters of the Bible, God said nothing! Faith is more than emotions. A lot of people confuse emotions and sentiment with faith. You can be emotionally moved and never act on it. You can go to church and get a quiver in your liver, goose bumps, but it never makes any difference. Then he gives an illustration. v. 15. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him 'Go, I wish you well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"

I saw a Peanuts cartoon. Charlie Brown and Linus are inside all bundled up and Snoopy's out in the cold shivering in front of an empty dog food bowl. Charlie and Linus are having a discussion on how sad it is that Snoopy is hungry and cold. "He is cold and hungry. We ought to do something about it." They walk outside and say to Snoopy, "Be of good cheer, Snoopy." Do you know where Charles Schultz got that idea? It is from this verse. What good is it if you see someone in need and you say, "I feel for you?" He is saying, "It is more than just words. It is more than just feelings." If, after church, you are getting into your car and you happen to slam eight fingers in your car door, and you are standing there in agony with blood on your fingers, and I walk up and say, "I really feel for you!" can that any help? Real faith is more than just sympathy and feeling and emotion. You get assistance. You do something about it. You act on it.

Real faith takes the initiative. A real believer has real faith and it is practical. It gets involved with people. He is talking about Christians here. (This is the only time in Scripture that Christian women are called sisters.) When you become a part of God's family you have some family responsibilities. A real believer will care about other believers. 1 John 3:17 "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" Real faith is generous. It wants to give. Who can count on you in a crisis? How many Christians have the freedom to call you up in the middle of the night if they are in an emergency? Not just talking the talk. Not just feeling for people. 1 John 3:14 says that one of the proofs of salvation is that we love other Christians.

Do you have fellowship with believers? Real faith wants to be around other believers. You love them. It is known we are Christians by our love. We are a lot better at verbalizing our faith than practicing it. I can't meet everybody's needs but I can meet somebody's. Even Jesus couldn't meet everybody's needs. James is saying that if my faith doesn't lead me to share with others it is wrong. v. 17 "In the same way, faith by itself if it is not accompanied by actions is dead." If I don't feel like helping other Christians, I don't have a sick faith, I have a dead faith. James is laying it on the line. He says, "Do you want real faith? It is more than just something you say and it is more than just something you feel."

Talk it over.

What does it look like to follow your faith instead of your feelings?

3. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOME SOMETHING YOU THINK

For some people, faith is an intellectual trip; a matter to be studied, debated, talked over and discussed. James imagines this intellectual objector v. 18 "Someone will say `You have faith, I have deeds'" He is imagining some intellectual guy who says, "You are into faith, I am into works. That is cool. Different strokes for different folks. Let us debate it. You have your thing, I have mine. Each one of us has its own way. Stimulate me mentally but don't ask me to make any commitment." "Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do." Real faith is visible. You can see it. It is apparent. If you claim to be a Christian, people will be able to see it. It is visible. We have a lot of Lady Clairol Christians; nobody knows for sure. Only God knows for sure. Faith is odorless, weightless, and invisible so anybody can claim to have it. How do you know for sure? James says, "Show me." If you claim to be a Christian, I have a right to ask you to prove it by looking at your lifestyle.

Somebody said, "Faith is like calories. You can't see them but you can sure see the results." You can't see faith but you can see the results. James would have made a good Missourian. The theme of the state of Missouri is "Show me". James is saying, "You say you are a Christian? Prove it. Let me see your actions back up your words." If I say, "I believe my health is very important. Personal health is a high priority in my life. I believe that health is one of the most important things we ought to have." You say, "Do you eat right?" No. "Do you exercise? Do you get your proper rest? Do you take vitamins? Do you ever go for a checkup?" No. It doesn't matter what I say. What counts are my actions. Real faith is more than just something you think. You can point it out and see it in people's lives. My kids sing a chorus: "If you are saved and you know it then your life will surely show it." That is what James is saying. Show me. You claim to have real faith. It is something more than something you say, something you feel, and something you think about. You can prove it.

2 Corinthians 5:17 "Any time a person becomes a Christian he becomes a new person inside; the old things have passed away. All things become new." Not overnight. But they start becoming new. If you grab onto a 220 volt wire you are going to know it. I don't see how somebody as big as God can enter your life and it not change you. James says, flat out that, if it doesn't change you there is a question whether He is really in your life. What can I see in my life that proves it? Jimmy Carter in his book *Why Not the Best?* Said "one of the things that were a turning point in his life is when somebody asked him the question, `If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?'" That is a good question. That is what James was talking about. If you say "I know it!" Show it! How do you know you are a believer? You will see some changes in your life. Real faith always produces change. Real faith is not just something you say. It is not just something you feel. It is not just something you think.

Talk it over.

How does James answer the objection "You have faith; I have deeds"?

4. REAL FAITH IS NOT JUST SOMETHING YOU BELIEVE

"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that and shudder!" There are a lot of people who have strong beliefs in God, the Bible and Christ. They can recite creeds to you and catechisms and talk about doctrines of the Trinity and quote bible verses. James says, "big deal!" Just saying I believe in God is not enough to get you to heaven. Even the devil believes that. The Bible says in Psalms 14:1, "The fool has said in his heart, there is not God." It is foolish to be an atheist and the devil is no fool. The devil believes in God! The devil is a great theologian. He knows a lot more about the Bible than you do. He has been around a whole lot longer. He knows theology backwards and forwards. He believes. His demons believe and shudder. The Greek word is "to bristle" their hair stands up on end. It is the kind of word you would use reading a Steven King novel. Why? Because the devil understands the majesty and awesomeness of God. They believe in God and they tremble.

The word "believe" in Greek means "to trust in, to cling to, to rely on, and to commit yourself completely." I believe in Hitler but I am not a Nazi. I am a Christian because I believe in Jesus. But it is more than just head knowledge. A lot of folks are going to miss heaven by 18 inches. They got it in their head but not their heart. They say "I believe in God." James says, "Big deal. Everybody believes in God. How do you have a creation without a Creator? But that is not enough." Real faith is not just saying "I believe." Article in the Register: "Many in Orange County believe but don't practice." They did a survey and asked people all over Orange County and they found a high degree of belief. "Sure, I am a believer. I am a Christian." Do you attend church? "No." "Do you donate your time?" "No." "Do you tithe?" "No." James would say that is a phony belief. You are just conning yourself. A lot of people are doing that. If it is not just something you say or think or feel or believe, what is real faith?

Talk it over

In what ways can you bring your actions more in line with your beliefs?

5. REAL FAITH IS SOMETHING YOU DO

In the next couple of verses James gives two illustrations that say real faith is something you do. Faith is active. It is not passive. It is a commitment. There is an illustration of two very different people, Abraham and Rahab who are exact opposite extremes. Abraham is a man while Rahab is a woman. Abraham is Jewish while Rahab is a Gentile. Abraham is a patriarch while Rahab is a prostitute. Abraham is a major character in the Bible while Rahab is a minor character. He uses these illustrations to say, it doesn't matter who you are as long as you got the important thing.

They only had one thing in common; their faith in God. Their faith in God led them to an action. V.20" You foolish men. Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? His faith and his actions were working together. His faith was made complete by what he did. Scripture was fulfilled when it said, "Abraham believed God." How do we know it? We saw it. He behaved in a way that his belief came out visibly. "Abraham believed God and it was accredited to him as righteousness and he was called God's friend." You remember the story. It is the ultimate test where God asked Abraham to give up his own son. This has nothing to do with salvation. Abraham was already a believer. Twenty-five years earlier God had said, "You are righteous." He is not talking about being saved by his works. He is saying that this just shows how much you believe.

Abraham obeyed God. It was immediate. He followed Him. He took his son up. He did all those faith steps. He cut the wood, built the altar and was ready to sacrifice his own son. Abraham says to his son while walking up the mountain, "We [not I] will return". He knew that God would provide somehow even if it meant raising him from the dead. Abraham was about to sacrifice him and God says, "I was just testing you to see what is most important in your life." It was an action. His works proved his faith. He held nothing back from God. James also talks about Rahab. The story is in Joshua 2. It is the story how a prostitute helped a couple of spies when they were coming into Jericho. Rahab ends up in the family line of Jesus. She risks her life to save the spies. Our faith is not determined by what we do, it is demonstrated by what we do.

About 35 years ago there was a famous tightrope walker named George Blondin who, for a publicity stunt, decided he would walk across Niagara Falls on a tightrope. On the appointed day they stretched a tightrope from one side of Niagara Falls to the other. He got out there and there were crowds lining both the Canadian and American side. Thousands of people showed up to see this unbelievable feat. Blondin walked up to the edge of the tightrope, put one foot on the tightrope and put another foot out and began to walk across inch-by-inch, step-by-step. He got out in the middle and everybody knew that if he would make one mistake in balance, he would fall off the rope and into the Falls and obviously be killed. Blondin got to the other side and the crowd went wild, shouting and cheering. Blondin said, "I'm going to do it again." He got to the other side and the crowds went crazy. Blondin said, "I'm going to do it again but this time I am going to push a wheel barrow full of dirt." He pushes the wheelbarrow across. He got to the other side. He did these nine or ten times. On about the tenth time, he pushed the wheelbarrow right in front of a tourist who said, "I believe you could do that all day." Blondin dumped out the dirt and said, "Get into the wheelbarrow."

CONCLUSION

In a very real sense that is what God says to you. Talk is cheap. Put your money where your mouth is. "I believe in Jesus!" Prove it. Our faith is demonstrated by our actions. Actions speak louder than words. Our behavior shows what we really believe. 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith." Test. Check it out. See if you are really a believer or not. A couple of questions: Am I really a Christian after all? In the light of what James says, am I really a Christian? What changes can I point to in my life? Is my lifestyle any different at all from unbelievers? So many people think it doesn't matter what you do as long as you believe.

James says that is not true. He is not saying you work your way to heaven. He is not saying works deliver salvation. He is saying they demonstrate it. He is saying that if your faith doesn't work, what good is it? How do I know for sure? You settle it in your mind. Maybe some of you have had doubts whether you are really a believer or not. You are a good person, you go to church, and maybe you have known about Christ, and you have read the Bible, and you have a religion and you have gone to classes. But are you absolutely sure that if you died tonight you will go to heaven? The fact is you can be sure. You don't have to leave here and have the shadow of a doubt. You can settle it right here. How do you do that? Ephesians 2:8-9 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, for a life of good works God has already prepared for us to do." God's grace reaches down. He says, "I want you to know me. I want to have a relationship with you." That is grace. And you look up and say "I want to know You, Lord. I want to have a relationship with you." When God's hand of grace comes down and your hand of faith goes up, that is called salvation. That is what it means to be a believer. Saved by grace, through faith to do exactly what God made you to do in the first place. He has a plan for your life. You are not here by accident.

TALK IT OVER

1. What are some ways you can share your faith with others?

2. What people come to mind when you think about this?

3. What are some specific ways you can *show* your faith to others?

4. How do your actions demonstrate the reality of your faith?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. James 2:18

PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Almighty God, every good thing comes from you. Fill our hearts with love for you, increase our faith, and by your constant care, protect the good you have given us. Keep us faithful to your law in thought, word and deed. Strengthen within our hearts the faith you have given us. Let not temptation ever quench the fire that your love has kindled within us.

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR MOUTH

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - Part 8 of 15

Read James 3:1-12

INTRODUCTION.

Today we are going to look at what James has to say about "How to Manage Your Mouth". We love to talk. There are talk shows everywhere. Everybody seems to have something to say. The average American has 30 conversations a day and will spend 1/5 of life talking. In one year, conversations will fill 66 books of 800 pages a book. If you are a man you speak an average of 20,000 words a day. If you are a woman you speak 30,000 words a day. A guy who was asked, "Do you resent that your wife has the last word?" He replied, "No, I am just glad when she finally gets to it!" Or the wife who broke her jaw. When they took an X-ray, it turned out to be a motion picture. Some of us are born with a saliva foot in our mouths. We have this natural ability to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. Nothing is opened more wrongly at the wrong time than our mouths.

A stock boy at the grocery store was asked by a Lady, "Can I buy half a head of lettuce?" He walked back to the manager to ask, not realizing she was walking right behind him. He said, "You are not going to believe this, there is an old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce." He turned around and saw her standing there and said, "And this fine lady would like to buy the other half." Our mouths get us into a lot of trouble. James talks more about the tongue than anybody else in the New Testament. Every chapter in the book of James says something about managing your mouth. "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check." James says, if you can control your mouth, you are perfect. He is not talking about sinless. The word "perfection" in Greek literally means "mature, healthy." When you go to the doctor and say, "I am not feeling well," the first thing he says is, "Stick out your tongue." Your tongue reveals what is going on inside of you, not just physically but spiritually. James says that you have to learn to manage your mouth. You have to learn to tame your tongue. You have to get your tongue under control.

WHY MUST I WATCH WHAT I SAY?

Sometimes our words are like a sledgehammer. We swing away without thinking, and all of a sudden, we look around, and all we have is a pile of relational rubble. When you thoughtlessly sling your words around and tear people down, your relationships are going to suffer. One of the reasons we are not constructive with our words is we don't realize how powerful this tool is; our mouth and the words that God has given to us. We say things without thinking. And people remember them. Certain things people said to you in a careless way even as far back as grade school or college or when you first started working, you still remember today. That is how powerful words are. So, when it comes to your mouth, you have to think of it as a power tool and be very careful with it. One time I went into my garage and grabbed a manual for a power saw. As I was reading through the directions, I was struck by how it related to the use of another power tool that God has given us: our mouths.

The directions said:

- i. Know your power tool.
- ii. Keep guards in place.
- iii. Be careful around children.
- iv. Store idle tools when not in use.
- v. Don't over reach.
- vi. Never use in an explosive atmosphere.

How can you use your mouth more carefully so you are using it to build relationships and not to tear people down? "Why must I do that? It is only words; I am just kidding." "Words are significant", James says. Three reasons we have to learn to manage our mouth. Then he gives us six illustrations, two for each of the points. He was a great communicator because he knows how to illustrate.

1. MY TONGUE DIRECTS WHERE I GO

It has tremendous influence and control over my life. Where are you headed in life? Where are you going to be in ten years from now? Look at your conversation. What do you like to talk about? What do you talk about the most? We shape our words and then our words shape us. James says, "The tongue is small, it is tiny." And because it is tiny, we think it is insignificant. But it has tremendous power. v. 3 Consider a bit in a horse's mouth. You have a huge stallion, 2,000-3,000 pounds, and a 95-pound jockey on his back. The jockey can control the tremendous mighty horse by a little piece of metal stuck strategically over his tongue. Likewise, your tongue controls the direction of your life wherever you want to go and a little bit of a word or a phrase can influence the total direction of your life. Then he says, "Consider a ship." The Queen Mary has 3 acres of recreational space. The anchor is equal to the weight of ten cars. Yet a relatively small rudder directs the huge ocean liner out in the middle of the waves, winds and seas. A little rudder keeps it on course.

Our tongue is like that. Our tongue is like a rudder that steers us. Ships are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. My tongue directs where I go. Your tongue is the steering wheel of your life. It is the guidance system. If you don't like the way you are headed right now, change the way you talk. Many people think, if the tongue has such influence maybe it is best to say nothing. Not talk at all, be silent. There was a guy who joined the Trappist monastery. For three years he was given a probation period where he was not to speak at all, but at the end of each year he could say two words. The first year at the end he said, "Bed hard." At end of the second year he said, "Food cold." At the end of the third year he comes in and says, "I quit." The head priest says, "That doesn't surprise me. All you have done is complaining since you got here." James says that my tongue directs where I go, so I have to learn to control it.

Talk it over.

Give an example of how the mouth can be used for good but also for bad. If you are willing, share an example from your own life and how it affected those around you.

2. MY TONGUE CAN DESTROY WHAT I HAVE

v. 5 James give another illustration. Imagine a beautiful forest with tall beautiful trees everywhere. Now imagine it in one minute up in smoke, completely destroyed instantly with a little tiny match. It only takes a spark to get a fire going. In 1983 in Australia, one fire overnight destroyed 600 miles of land, villages, and livestock all from a single match. James says that your tongue can destroy like that. You can lose it all. A careless camper can destroy an entire national forest overnight. A careless word can destroy a life overnight, thousands of lives. Gossip is like fire. It spreads quickly and it wreaks havoc. I wonder how many people because of a careless word have destroyed their marriage, or their career, or their reputation, or the reputation of another, or their church, or a friendship. The tongue not only has the power to direct where you go but also to destroy what you have if you don't learn to control it. It is like a fire.

Have you ever met a verbal arsonist? Their words are always inflammatory. Senator Joseph McCarthy was a verbal arsonist. He spoke and he destroyed lives everywhere he went. James says that words, like a fire, can burn people. Why do you think they call it "Dean Martin's Celebrity Roast"? Because you can burn people with what you say. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." It does hurt. Fire and words under control can give tremendous warmth and light, but fire and words out of control can be devastating. It can destroy miles and miles of homes and peoples. Proverbs 18:20 (Good News) "You have to live with the consequences of everything you say. "vs. 6 "... it sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." He is saying here that words can create a chain reaction. You can say something that you didn't mean to have any harm, but it can have devastating effects that are beyond your control. Just a few inflammatory statements set off a chain of events that we now look back on and call World War II.

On a more personal level, you come home from work and you are tired and grumpy and cranky. The husband walks in and yells at the wife. The wife yells at the oldest kid. The oldest kid yells at the baby sister. The baby sister goes out and kicks the dog. The dog goes and bites the cat. The cat comes in and scratches the baby. The baby bites the head off the Barbie doll. Wouldn't it be a whole lot simpler if the husband just bit off the head of the Barbie doll himself? Chain reaction is the course of hell. "Set on fire by hell" itself. A couple comes in for marriage counseling. "I said this and then she said that, then I said this..." Then what happened? "All hell broke loose." Our words can cause "all hell to break loose." James says you have to learn to manage your mouth, not only because it can direct where you go but it can destroy what you have. You can lose your family, your kids, and your career simply by what you say. It is like a fire. Proverbs 21:23 "If you want to stay out of trouble be careful what you say!"

James uses another illustration. He talks about a zoo. "All kinds of animals have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. [It's humanly impossible. Only God can do it.] It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (vs.7-8) Of all the animals we have tamed, no man can tame the tongue, humanly speaking. He says it is restless. That means it is always liable to break out at any moment. When Lion Country Safari was open there was a big sign as you dove in "Do not get out of your car. Do not roll down the window." Why? Those animals that look so tame and peaceful could rip your head off in a second. They are restless and always liable to break out. You never know what your mouth is going to say.

It is like poison. The word in Greek is literally "snake venom." Just a few drops can kill. You can assassinate somebody with your words. Assassinate their character. The tongue is a deadly weapon.

Talk it over.

How would you describe the difference between the "life in the tongue" and "death in the tongue"? Describe how someone might exemplify one kind or the other.

3. MY TONGUE DISPLAYS WHO I AM

It reveals my real character. It tells what is really inside of me. First James points out how inconsistent we are in our speech. v. 9 "The tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with the same tongue we curse men who have been made in God's likeness. From the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be." We say these things out of the same mouth. We come to church on Sunday. The highest use of your mouth is to use it praising God. We sing praises to the Lord. Then we walk out; get into the car and on the way home we argue about where we are going to eat lunch. Isn't it amazing how quickly your attitude can change? In one minute, you are saying, "Praise the Lord", the next you are saying, "Shut up!" The tongue is a strange contradiction. It is so inconsistent. It is amazing how quickly it can change, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. One minute we are praising God and the next we are cursing other people. Cursing here doesn't necessarily mean profanity. It means any kind of put down, label. ["You good for nothing... You will never amount to nothing ... You are just like ..."]

Any kind of put down is a curse. He says, "Why curse men? They are made in God's image." This bothers me immensely. I think how it is possible that we can love people. We love our kids, wives, husbands and the next moment we are harsh, cold, and mean to them? How is it possible? How is it possible in one minute to be talking to my kids in gentle, loving tones and the next minute I'm being mean to them? I hurt them. I am saying things that damage their self-esteem. How is that? I grieve over that a lot. I find myself asking forgiveness a lot in my family, especially to my kids. Do you struggle with an inconsistent tongue? James says we all have it. We speak lovingly in one breath and then lash out in the next. What gives? What is the problem? Why do we do that? Why can we genuinely mean something in love and kindness one minute and then genuinely mean something in hate the next minute?

James gives the answer in v. 11-12. He says consider the source. "Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olive or a grapevine bear fig? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water." The point is, whatever is in the well comes out in the water. Whatever is in the tree comes out in the fruit. What is the likelihood of an apple tree producing cherries? Zip! My problem is not really my tongue. My problem is my heart. What is inside is what comes out. My mouth eventually betrays what is really on the inside of me. I can fool you and pretend but eventually my tongue is going to catch me. It is going to let you know what is really inside. Have you heard this excuse? Someone says something really mean or hurtful and they say, "I don't know what got into me. It is not like me to say that. I don't know why I said that. It is totally out of character. I didn't really mean it." James would say, "Yes, it is.

It is just like you. You meant it. Quit kidding yourself. What is inside is going to come out. You don't have a spring that one-minute gives salt water and the next gives fresh water. That is inconsistent. It is a natural law: what comes out of the well is what is inside of it." Jesus said in Matthew 12:34 "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." Jesus explained the Freudian slip years before Freud even existed. He said what is inside of you is what is going to come out. My tongue just displays what I am. It directs where I go. It can destroy what I have. But most of all, it simply displays what I am. It reveals my character. If you have a problem with your tongue, it is much more serious than you think. It portrays you have a heart problem. A person with a harsh tongue has an angry heart. A person with a negative tongue has a fearful heart. A person with an overactive tongue has an unsettled heart. A person with a boasting tongue has an insecure heart. A person with a filthy tongue has an impure heart. A person who is critical all the time has a bitter heart. On the other hand, a person who is always encouraging has a happy heart. A person who speaks gently has a loving heart. A person who speaks truthfully has an honest heart.

Talk it over.

Sometimes people appear to be sincere and Christ-like until they say or post something that reveals their true motivations. Please do not share any names, but have you seen this happen? If so, how did the experience make you feel? What did you learn about your own life and speech?

II. WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

1. Get a new heart

When you get angry, your mouth just reveals what's inside your heart. A harsh tongue reveals an angry heart. A negative tongue reveals a fearful heart. A boasting tongue reveals an insecure heart. An overactive tongue reveals an unsettled heart. A judgmental tongue reveals a guilty heart. A critical tongue reveals a bitter heart. A filthy tongue reveals an impure heart.

On the other hand, an encouraging tongue reveals a happy heart, a gentle tongue reveals a loving heart, and a controlled tongue reveals a peaceful heart. You need to get a new heart. Ezekiel 18:31 "Rid yourself of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit!" Painting the outside of the pump doesn't make any difference if there is poison in the well. I can change the outside, I can turn over a new leaf, but what I really need is a new life. What I need is a fresh start. I need to let go of all the past and be born again and start over. I need to get a new heart. How do I get a new heart? 2 Corinthians 5:17 "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new person. The old has passed away. Behold all things have become new." New life, new heart, new spirit. When you come to Jesus Christ, He wipes out everything you've done in the past. He says you are starting over. It is like being born again. You need a new heart. We need to pray like David prayed in Psalm 51 "Create in me a clean heart, O God" because what is in my heart is going to come out in my mouth.

Talk it over.

Do our attitudes shape our words or do our words shape our attitudes? Explain

2. Ask God for help every day.

You need supernatural power to control your tongue. You can't do it on your own. Your life is a living proof of that. We cannot control it on our own. We need supernatural power so we ask God to help us. Psalm 141:3 "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips." This is a great verse to memorize and quote every morning. "God, put a muzzle on my mouth. Guard my lips. Don't let me be critical today. Don't let me be judgmental. Don't let me say things off the cuff that I then regret." You need to ask God for help daily because you need His power in your life. Sidlow Baxter: *"The proof that God's Spirit is in your life is not that you speak in an unknown tongue but you control the tongue you do know."* You watch your words, and God gives you the power to not slander, not lie, and not exaggerate.

Getting into God's word is a part of asking God for help. As you ask Him for help you need to read His word. Computer statement: Garbage in, garbage out. What goes into your mind goes into your heart, and what goes into your heart, comes out of your mouth. Fill your mind with the word of God with positive things, whatsoever things that are true, etc. think on these things.

Talk it over

What are some of the ways our words can negatively affect the people around us?

3. Think before you speak

Engage your mind before you put your mouth in gear. James 1:19 "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." There is a designation here. They go in order. First be quick to listen and then slow to speak. If you are quick to listen you will be slow to speak. If you are slow to speak, then you will be slow to become angry.

Anger confounds many people in our world today. We simply don't know how to handle our anger like we have in the past. One of the Bible's simplest yet most profound answers for our anger comes in Proverbs 29:11 (GNT): "Stupid people express their anger openly, but sensible people are patient and hold it back." Think before you speak. Delay is a tremendous remedy for anger. You don't need to delay indefinitely. If you have got an issue you need to deal with, you need to do so. Anger delayed indefinitely becomes bitterness. That is worse than anger. Anger isn't always a sin. Bitterness is. If you respond impulsively, you tend to respond in anger. If you wait to talk about whatever conflict you are dealing with, you will be more rational and reasonable when you do. The longer you hold your temper, the better your response will be. Give yourself time to think.

When conflict arises and you give yourself time to think, what should you think about? Consider these five questions:

- a. **T:** Is it truthful? Is what I am about to say the truth?
- b. **H:** Is it helpful? Or will it simply harm the other person?
- c. **I:** Is it inspirational? Does it build up or does it tear down?
- d. **N:** Is it necessary? If it is not necessary, why do I need to say it?
- e. **K:** Is it kind?

Think before you speak. Reflect before you react. It will slow down your anger every time. If you have a problem with anger you need to work on being quick to listen and slow to speak. The result will be you will be slow to anger. What does your tongue say about you? What does it reveal about you? If we were to play back a tape of every conversation you have had in this past week, what would we learn about you? God hears it all. Our tongues display who we are. What direction is your tongue leading you? Some people say, "I'm just sick all the time" or "I can never do anything", "Things are just getting tougher and tougher". What directions are they headed? Our tongues control the direction of our lives like a rudder, a bit. A bit and a rudder must be under the hand of a strong arm. James is saying that the only way to get control of your tongue is let Jesus Christ have control of your heart. What is in your heart is going to come out in your mouth. You let Christ's hand be on your bit, your rudder and let Him direct your life.

Maybe you need to ask forgiveness. Maybe you need to go to your kids to say, "I'm sorry. I'm inconsistent the way I talk to you. Sometimes I'm loving, sometimes I'm harsh. That shows I'm like everybody else. I'm human." We all stumble in many ways. Maybe you need to apologize to your wife or your husband. "I'm not as loving to you in my speech as I ought to be. I tend to be apathetic, cold, and indifferent. I talk to you harshly. I boss everybody around. I'm inconsistent and inconsiderate." Ezekiel says, "Get rid of all your offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit."

Talk it over

Which question in the THINK acronym is most likely to be helpful to you when you are angry?

CONCLUSION

Every one of us today needed this message. It is a universal problem. Some people never do learn to control their tongue. What direction is your tongue leading you? Where are you headed in life? Where will you be ten years from now? What do you talk about the most? That tells me where you are headed. Your tongue can destroy what you have. You could lose it all in a minute by a few careless words, just like a cigarette dropped can destroy an entire park. Maybe some of you need to say, "God, I have been a verbal arsonist. I say things that hurt. That hurt my husband, my wife, and my kids. I say things at work that are unkind. I'm harshest with those I love." The Bible says that displays what is inside. That is where the change needs to take place. "If you have an overactive tongue, ask God to put peace in your heart so that you don't have to talk so much.

Maybe you have been negative. Ask God to help you not to be fearful. Maybe you tend to brag a lot. Ask God to help you not to feel insecure. God is able to melt the hard heart and give you a caring, and a loving heart. Let Jesus Christ, take control of the rudder of your life and guide you in the direction that you wish." It is only God who will help us to manage our mouth. We cannot do it on our own. But by his spirit in our lives we can have victory. Remember that our tongue can damage but it also can delight. What a great potential we have. It should be our main desire to use our mouths, our tongues to bless people. Use your tongue to bless your wife, to bless your children, to bless the people you work with because there is tremendous potential in it. Your tongue should give light and warmth rather than destruction.

TALK IT OVER.

1. Why do we need to be especially careful with our words in an “explosive atmosphere”?

2. What is something you can practice doing in your relationships that will help you talk less and listen more?

3. Think back through a recent argument. Would more time before you responded have helped the situation?

4. What is the biggest challenge to giving yourself more time before responding when you are angry?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER.

Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil so that I take part in wicked deeds along with those who are evildoers; do not let me eat their delicacies Psalm 141:3-4

PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

God, I need a heart transplant. I need a new heart and a new spirit. Come into my life. Maybe for the first time or as a recommitment you say, "Take control of my life." God would you give me help every day? Would you put a guard on my mouth? Would you help me to think before I speak? Lord, forgive me for the things I have said that were out of place. Help me with a new start this day. I can't do it on my own; I need your help. Help me to read Your Bible and fill my mind with good things.

HOW TO RELATE WISELY TO OTHERS

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - Part 9 of 15

Read James 3:13-18

INTRODUCTION.

Every day you encounter many different kinds of people. Some are very delightful. Some are very difficult. Some of them are inspiring. Some of them are irritating, fascinating and intimidating. The fact is, a lot of the problems we have in life are because of personality conflicts. We don't get along with people. When your relationships are bad, life stinks. Life is miserable. You may have lots of money and lots of opportunities but if your relationships are bad, you are miserable. It is very important that we learn how to get along with other people. James gives some practical advice. Today we are going to look at what he has to say about, "How do we relate wisely to other people." v. 18 is the key verse, "And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness." James says, every day in every relationship, you are planting seeds. You are planting seeds of anger, jealousy, peace, confidence, insecurity and many different kinds of seeds. So, you will inevitably reap in your relationships. How can I plant seeds of peace? How can I be a peacemaker? How can I have peaceful relationships? It is through wisdom. We need to learn how to be wise in the way we act toward people.

Often, we treat people in very foolish ways and we provoke the exact opposite behavior of what we would normally like to see in them. Common sense is not so common. A lot of smart people are not too wise. They may be educated but they don't have wisdom. They may have all kinds of degrees but they are a wash out with relationships. James, in this passage, does three things: he defines real wisdom, then he shows how it differs from human wisdom and then he details how it operates. The first thing he says in v. 13, is that wisdom is a lifestyle. It has nothing to do with your intelligence. It has everything to do with your relationships and your character. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom." Imagine James coming into our church and asking, "May I see the hands of those who are wise?" If you are dumb enough to raise your hand he would say, "Prove it! Show me. Show me your wisdom by your lifestyle."

It is not a matter of what you say with your lips but a matter of what you live with your life. Not a matter of your words but of your works. Not so much the diplomas on the wall, but your disposition that really shows how wise you are. How do you get along with other people? That shows how wise you really are. It is a lifestyle. Wisdom has more to do with character in relationships than it has to do with education and intelligence. Wisdom creates humility. Knowledge causes pride, but wisdom causes humility. Verses 14-16 James says lack of wisdom causes problems; all kinds of problems. v. 14 "If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart don't boast about it and deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, and even of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition there you find disorder and every evil practice." Lack of wisdom causes all kinds of disorder and problems, chaos and confusion.

Do you have confusion in your home? Do you have chaos at work? Is your life a mess? If you can't get it all together you lack wisdom. It causes all kinds of problems in our lives. How can I know if I'm wise in how I relate toward people? Today, we are going to take a wisdom test. We are going to test your wisdom and see how wise you really are. James in v. 17, lists the characteristics of wise people. "But wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

CHARACTERISTICS OF WISE PEOPLE

1. WISE PEOPLE WILL NOT COMPROMISE OTHERS INTEGRITY.

"The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure..." Pure means uncorrupted, authentic. In 1 John 3:3 this word is used to refer to Christ's character and this is integrity. "We refuse to wear masks and play games. We don't maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don't twist God's Word to suit ourselves. Rather, we keep everything we do and say out in the open." (2 Corinthians 4:2 MSG). Integrity demands that every area of your life is treated with the same intensity. You have the same commitment to excellence in your marriage as you do in your career. You have the same commitment to excellence in the ministry as you do in your parenting. Let me give you six ways you can work this week to become a person of integrity. You become a person of integrity by ...

a. Keeping your promises. People of integrity keep their word. If they say they will do it, they do it. If they say they will be there, they show up. The Bible says in Proverbs 25:14, "A person who promises a gift but doesn't give it is like clouds and wind that bring no rain." (NLT).

b. Paying your bills. You may not think this is a big deal, but it is a big deal to God. Do you spend more money than you make? That is a lack of integrity. Do you get yourself in debt for things that you can't pay off? That is a lack of integrity. Psalm 37:21 says, "The wicked borrow and never pay back."

c. Refusing to gossip. God is looking for men and women of integrity who know how to keep a secret and not pass it around on social media. Don't talk about people behind their back. Don't even listen to gossip! "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret." (Proverbs 11:13 NIV).

d. Faithfully tithing. Wherever you put your money first is what is most important to you. Malachi 3:8-10 says, "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."

e. By doing your best at work. The Bible says in Colossians 3:23, “Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (NLT). If you are a believer, your real boss is God, and whether or not anybody else sees your work, God does.

f. By being real with others. A person of integrity doesn’t act one way in church and another way at work and another way on the golf course. “We refuse to wear masks and play games. We don’t maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don’t twist God’s Word to suit ourselves. Rather, we keep everything we do and say out in the open” (2 Corinthians 4:2 MSG).

If I am really genuine, if I'm wise, then I'm not going to lie to you, I'm not going to cheat you, I'm not going to manipulate you and I'm not going to be deceitful. I will be a person of integrity. All relationships are built on trust and respect. If you don't have honesty who is going to trust you? If you don't have honesty who is going to respect you? You have to have integrity in your life. Dr. Leonard Keeler, the man who invented the lie detector, tested 25,000 people and came to the conclusion that people are basically dishonest. There are two books of wisdom in the Bible. James in the New Testament, Proverbs in the Old. They both talk about wisdom. Proverbs 10:9 "The man of integrity walks securely." He is not afraid of being found out because he doesn't say one thing to one group and something else to another group. Someone said, "No man has a good enough memory to be a habitual liar." Eventually you are going to slip up. If you have integrity you have confidence, and you walk securely in your relationships. You know you are not putting people on. If I am wise, I will not compromise my integrity.

Talk it over.

How would you change the way you act and perform at work if God was sitting in your boss’ office and checking up on your work?

2. WISE PEOPLE WILL NOT ANTAGONIZE OTHERS ANGER.

We desire to live in a place and a community where there is fraternal love, concern and charity towards each other. Without peace, there can be no security, progress and a future for humanity. Without harmony, we cannot move forward as one. I won't make you angry. Wise people work at maintaining harmony. They are not always looking for a fight. "Wisdom is peace loving." Have you ever met someone who is always arguing and always looking for a fight? I heard about one guy who was so argumentative he would only eat food that disagreed with him. If you are smart you don't antagonize people's anger. Proverbs 20:3 "Any fool can start arguments. The wise thing is to stay out of them." What causes arguments? Do you know? If you are wise you know because then you can avoid them. There are three things that cause arguments. If you are wise you will avoid these:

- a. **Comparing.** "You are just like ...", "Why can't you be like ...", "When I was your age..." You are asking for a fight. "2 Corinthians 10:12 says it is unwise to compare. Comparing is the root of all envy. If you can get rid of comparing in your life, you can get rid of envy in your life. Here is the problem: Comparing is our favorite indoor sport. We compare everything. We compare our size, our shape, our color, how we talk, and our intelligence. We compare our families, our kids, our jobs, our talents, and even our lawns. God warns about the foolishness of comparing yourself to anybody else: *"We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise"* (2 Corinthians 10:12 NIV).

Every time you compare, you are going to fall guilty to either pride or envy. You are always going to either find somebody who is doing a better job than you, and you get full of envy, or you are going to find that you are doing a better job than somebody, and you get full of pride. Pride or envy is always the result of comparing. And God says it is foolish. You should not do it. You are unique. You are one of the kind. You are incomparable. The Bible says in Galatians 6:4 *"Let everyone be sure that he is doing his very best, for then he will have the personal satisfaction of work well done and won't need to compare himself with someone else"* (TLB).

When you get to Heaven, God is not going to say, "Why weren't you more like *this* person or *that* person?" No! He is going to ask, "Why weren't you more like *you*?" You can't focus on your purpose while you are focusing on other people. When you get to Heaven you are not going to be judged on talent you didn't have. You are not going to be judged on opportunities you were not given. You are going to be judged on how you lived and what you did with what you were given. There is no need to compare yourself with others. God has called you to be the best you can possibly be given the background, experiences, and talent that he gave you.

- b. **Condemning.** "It is all your fault", "You should be ashamed." You lay on the guilt. "You always", "You never", "You ought to", "You should...", "You shouldn't..." Someone said, "You can bury a marriage with a lot of little digs." God knows that failure is part of life. He doesn't expect us to be perfect. He is not surprised when we mess up. In fact, he sent Jesus to clean up our mess. He didn't send him to point an accusing finger. That means no matter how bad you blow it in life, God will never condemn you. He is for you, not against you.

This is especially encouraging when you are trying to make changes in your life or get healthy or overcome a tough circumstance. Knowing that God is for you, not against you, will change the way you respond to the times you slip up. It should give you the confidence to keep moving forward in faith, because God is on your side. He wants you to have victory through him over your hang-ups and mess-ups! God does not expect you to be perfect in life. That is why he sent his perfect Son to cover the sin that you wouldn't otherwise have been able to overcome. You are not a failure to God. The only time you fail is when you refuse to get up and keep going.

- c. **Contradicting.** How do you like to be interrupted in the middle of a sentence? It is irritating. James says, "If you are wise you don't sweat the small stuff." William James says, "The secret of wisdom is knowing what to overlook." Some things are just not worth the fight. Wisdom is peace loving. If I am smart, if I'm wise in relationships, I won't compromise my integrity and I won't antagonize your anger. Proverbs 14:29 "A wise man controls his temper. He knows that anger causes mistakes." How many of you have ever done something stupid in anger? Anger causes mistakes. "'In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" Ephesians 4:26 (NIV)

We all get angry from time to time. We may handle it differently, but none of us can escape the emotion entirely. But just because we get angry doesn't mean we are sinning. Already we have seen the verse "If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin" Paul tells us in this passage not to let our anger lead us into sin. That means that anger is not necessarily sin. The truth is we can deal with our anger in both appropriate and inappropriate ways. Unfortunately, most of us express our anger in ways that get us further from our goals instead of moving us closer to them. For example, here are three things to avoid when angry:

- i. **Don't suppress your anger.** Don't store it up inside. When you suppress anger without expressing it in proper ways, it is like taking a soft drink bottle and shaking it up. One day it is going to pop! It will impact your body eventually. Doctors tell us a number of physical ailments are often brought on by suppressed anger.
- ii. **Don't repress it.** When you repress your anger, you simply deny it is there. Deny your anger often enough and you will be depressed. When I used to do more counseling, I would hear many people tell me they were depressed, but they were really just angry. They just didn't think that Christians should get angry, so they simply bottled it up inside. Denying anger is a sin. It is called lying
- iii. **Don't express it in inappropriate ways.** We can express anger in a variety of inappropriate ways. We pout, spit sarcasm, manipulate, or do something stupid (get drunk, have affairs, etc.). None of those approaches get us anywhere near the result we are looking for.

So, what should we do with our anger? We must confess it. You don't just admit the anger, but you also admit the cause. You tell God and whoever you are angry with that you are frustrated or you feel threatened. The more honest you can be in your relationships, the easier it will be to get to the root causes of your anger. Here is the good news about your anger: You may have grown up in a home where anger was consistently expressed in appropriate ways. Inappropriate anger is learned, but it can be unlearned, too. You can change. You don't have to stay the same.

Talk it over.

What anger are you dealing with now? How does God want you to handle it?

3. WISE PEOPLE WON'T MINIMIZE OTHERS FEELINGS.

"Wisdom is considerate" and "considerate" means "mindful of the feelings of others." There is a common mistake that if I don't feel the way you feel then your feelings must be invalid or illogical or irrational or silly. James says, "Wise people are considerate; they don't minimize other people's feelings." If I'm wise I will not minimize your feelings. I don't have to accept them but I can understand them. Proverbs 15:4 "Kind words bring life, but cruel words crush your spirit." Typically, when we react to people's emotions, we say things that hurt. Often, we belittle the feeling. We put people down, or we play psychologist. "I know why you feel that way..." We are condescending toward people. James says if I'm wise in relationships I will not minimize your feelings. I will be considerate. Do you ever play this game: My day can beat your day?

A husband comes home worn out and starts complaining, "The traffic was bad, my boss got upset, the air conditioning went out." His wife says, "Oh, yeah? Junior dunked the cat down the toilet, the beans burned..." The fact is they both had a tough day. Wisdom is considerate. Allow your spouse to be tired without having to say, "I'm more tired than you are." The fact is, you are both tired. If you care you will be aware. Two of the biggest mistakes we make in relationships are when we react to what people say and not how they feel and when we invalidate someone else's feelings because we don't feel that way ourselves. Do you know what the antidote is for both of these? When we are simply being considerate, we do the following:

- a. **We react without trying to understand.** We pay too much attention to someone's words and not enough attention to the emotions behind the words. People say stuff when they are angry that they don't even mean. They use words they don't even intend to use. They exaggerate things. But you need to look behind the words at the emotion because people don't always say what they mean, but they always feel what they feel. So, if you are wise in a relationship, you stop focusing on what your kids or your husband or your wife or your boss says that just ticks you off and you start being considerate. That simply means you are mindful of the feelings of others. Unkind people are those who need your kindness the most. When people are rude and unkind, they are screaming to the world, "I'm in pain!" Hurt people always hurt people.
- b. **We invalidate any feelings that we don't feel ourselves.** This is when you believe something is dumb or irrational or illogical because it is not what you feel, and you dismiss it. Let me ask you this, can one person be cold and another be warm at the same time? Yes. So why try to argue people out of what they feel? When we dismiss someone else's feelings because we don't feel what they feel, we belittle the other person. Guys, if your girlfriend or your wife says to you, "I feel ugly," don't dismiss it and say, "You are not ugly!" That doesn't help at all. What you need to do is say, "Why would you feel that? What would make you say that?" because you need to look beyond the words and get to the real issue.

Feelings are neither right nor wrong. They are just there. She shouldn't have to defend her feelings. She just needs you to say, "I hear you." And the same is true for anyone, male or female. The Bible says, *"The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere"* (James 3:17NIV). With Heaven's wisdom, you will stop minimizing other people's feelings. You will let her feel tired when she is tired and not try to talk her out of it. You will let him feel depressed when he is depressed and not try to talk him out of it. Wise people are considerate of other people's feelings.

Talk It Over

What habits might you need to change or adopt to become more considerate of people's feelings?

4. WISE PEOPLE WON'T CRITICIZE OTHERS DECISIONS/SUGGESTIONS.

A wise person can learn from anybody. He is not defensive. He is open to reason. He is not stubborn but he is willing to listen and learn. "Wisdom is submissive." This word is used only one time in the New Testament. It doesn't really mean submissive. It really means reasonable, willing to listen, willing to be open to ideas and suggestions. The Revised Standard Version says, "It is open to reason." The Living Bible says, "It allows discussion." It is easy to be entreated. Are you a reasonable person? Can your kids' reason with you? The Bible says if you are wise, you are reasonable. You are open to suggestions. "Don't confuse me with the facts; I have made up my mind. When I want your opinion, I will give it to you." Most of us are too oversensitive. If somebody makes a suggestion, we take it as a personal criticism and we are defensive. James says that is dumb. A wise person can learn from anybody.

A new pastor preaches the first day. When it is over a guy walks out and says, "Pastor, that sermon stunk." Pastor is trying to be really open about it, reasonable, wise, "What didn't you like about it?" "In the first place you read it. In the second place you read it poorly. In the third place it was not worth reading in the first place." Another guy walks out right behind him and says, "Don't listen to old Jim. He just repeats what he hears everybody else say." If you are wise you will be open to suggestions. Don't criticize. Don't get defensive. Proverbs 12:15 "A fool thinks he needs no advice. A wise man listens to others." If it is true, listen and learn from it. If it is false, ignore it and forget it. If I'm wise I will be open to reason. I won't criticize your suggestions. I will listen to them.

Talk it over.

What effect do you see in people when you accept and not criticize their decisions?

5. WISE PEOPLE WON'T EMPHASIZE OTHERS MISTAKES.

"Wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit." Do you jump on people every time they blunder, every time they make a fault and fumble it? Do you always use everybody in your family as the butt of your joke? That is dumb. Wisdom is full of mercy. I won't emphasize your mistakes. Do you ever let people go, or do you keep hounding them about their past mistakes? Do you hold them in leverage, and they never can be set free even if they have asked forgiveness? "Remember the time you did..." You are always holding on and bringing up the past for leverage. That is dumb. If I am wise, I won't emphasize your mistake. I will be full of mercy. I will give you what you need, not what you deserve. There were two guys at a convention with their wives who were long-lost friends. They sat in the lobby all night talking and it came to their mind that they would be in trouble with their wives. They went back to their rooms.

The next day they happened to see each other. "What did your wife think?" "I walked in the door and my wife got historical." "Don't you mean hysterical?" "No, historical. She told me everything I ever did wrong." If I am wise, I won't emphasize your mistakes. Proverbs 17:9 "Love prospers when a fault is forgiven, but dwelling on it separates close friends." If you are wise you don't rub it in, you rub it out. You don't hold it over their heads. You forget it. When somebody stumbles, you don't judge them. You encourage them. We don't need judgment. We need encouragement when we stumble. Are you that way at home? If somebody forgets something maybe forgets to fill the car with gas and you run out on the freeway, or somebody forgets to bring the mail in, do you rub it in or do you rub it out? The wise thing is to not emphasize the mistake. Wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit." Good fruit is kind actions, it is something you do. You don't just show sympathy. You don't just say, "You brought it all on yourself." You do something about it. You take action. It is a kindness. It is being a doer of the word. James 2:12 says "Mercy triumphs over judgement." Mercy is a greater principle than judging.

Talk it over.

Have you gotten into trouble because you dwell and talk of somebody's mistakes? How did God deliver you in that situation?

6. WISE PEOPLE WON'T DISGUISE THEIR OWN WEAKNESSES.

A mark of a wise person is they don't try to hide and disguise their own weaknesses. "Wisdom is impartial and sincere." These two words in Greek sound similar. They sound like "hypocrite" and that is where we get the word from. It means "without hypocrisy" straightforward, right on. In the Greek theater they often would have just a couple or three actors playing an entire play. These people would change parts. They would hold masks in front of their face. One person would have five or six different masks and parts and that person, that actor, was called a hypocrite. They have all kinds of masks. James says if you are smart and wise, you are not phoney. You don't wear masks and try to be something you are not. I have said before, if you are perfect this is not the church for you.

If you are going to wear mask this is not the church for you. This is for real people, with real sins, real hang ups, real faults, real emotional problems, and real family problems. Real wise people are honest and open. They are not phoney. They are genuine. They are real and authentic. "What you see is what you get" with a really wise person. They don't attain or pretend perfection. If I'm wise I'm not going to disguise my weaknesses. There are so many phony relationships today. People try to be something they are not. The number one place you can see this is singles' bars. There are Phony relationships. Where else in our society do you offer to buy something for a total stranger? Phony! Trying to be something you are not. Proverbs 28:13 "You will never succeed in life if you try to hide your sins." It is dumb to pretend that you are perfect, that you have it all together because nobody does. When you start telling people what your weaknesses are, they are not going to be shocked because they already know.

Everybody knows your weakness. You are the only one who won't admit it. We see each other's weaknesses all the time. Why do we walk around pretending that we don't know? We do. It is obvious to everybody. But we don't want to admit it. If I'm wise I won't disguise my weaknesses. People appreciate honesty, being gut level and sharing where they are. It also helps them to be more open. They might be struggling with it too. Instead of hiding and denying our weaknesses, we need to learn to recognize them. We need to learn to share them. If God is ever going to use you greatly, you will walk with a limp the rest of your life. God uses weak people! Paul had a handicap and he said, "I glory in my weakness." It is an absolute myth that you must be a super human being to be effective in the ministry. The goal is to last. What kind of ministries last? One that is real and authentic and vulnerable and honest and non-hypocritical about our weaknesses.

I have met many pastors who are very interested in declaring their spirituality. But I haven't met too many pastors in my life who are interested in declaring their humanity. But your humanity is actually one of your greatest strengths. God loves to use weak people to work his life through and work His work through. Why? 1 Corinthians 1:27 says, "God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to put the wise men to shame. And what the world considers weak in order to put powerful men to shame. He receives glory." God puts His greatest gifts in ordinary containers so that He alone gets the credit. What are the benefits of weaknesses in our lives?

- i. Weaknesses create a dependence on God.
- ii. Weaknesses prevent pride and act as a governor in your life.
- iii. Weaknesses cause a greater dependence upon other people.
- iv. Weaknesses expand our capacity to minister.

If you are going to have a Christ like ministry, it means that sometimes other people are going to find healing in the wounds that are in your life. Who can better help an alcoholic than someone who is a former alcoholic? Who can better help a childless couple than a childless couple? Who can better help than the person who has been there? I believe that our greatest life messages come out of our deepest hurts. Your weaknesses can only help the people in your church if you will have the guts to share them. There are things that you have never told your church that they need to know so that they can pray for you. Vulnerability enhances your leadership. All of us are a bundle of strengths and weaknesses. I have some very great strengths and I also have some very great weaknesses. And so, do you. Humility is not denying your strengths.

Humility is being honest about your weaknesses. Humility is not me saying, "I don't know how to preach." I do. I know how to craft sermons. But humility is saying, "In addition to those strengths, let me tell you a few things about myself." We are all combinations. Paul was honest about his strengths because he was honest about his weaknesses. He was not claiming perfection. He was just saying, "At least I'm making an attempt to live for Jesus. Follow me." How you handle the weaknesses in your life will determine whether they help you or hinder you. People want to follow a pastor who is real. You don't have to be super-gifted to grow a church, but you do have to be real. The more honest you are about your weaknesses the more you are perceived as being real and the more real you are the more credibility you have. The more credibility you have, the more influence you have. The more influence you have, the more you can get done. Maybe it is time to get real.

Talk it over.

Have you always wanted to change the weakness you have? What do you need to do to experience that change? _____

CONCLUSION.

How do you rate on the wisdom test? Do you compromise your integrity? Do you use people, manipulate them and use them for the things you want? Do you tend to antagonize anger, always saying things that tick people off? You know if you say it, it will press their hot button, but you say it anyway. James says that is dumb. It is not being wise. If I'm wise I will not antagonize your anger. If I'm wise I won't minimize your feelings. Feelings are neither right nor wrong, they are just feelings. When my wife has a feeling, it is valid. Whether it is logical, whether it makes sense, the fact is she feels it. If I'm wise I'm not going to minimize that. If I'm wise I won't criticize your suggestions. Can your kids make suggestions to you? Can your husband make suggestions to you, or your wife? If I'm wise I won't emphasize your mistakes. I don't rub it in, I rub it out. If I'm wise I don't try to disguise my feelings. How do I get wisdom? How do I become one of those wise people in relationships so that I have that peace that everybody is talking about? Do I just make a New Year's Resolution that today I'm going to be wise! No. This is the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

Knowledge comes from education. Wisdom comes from God. To get knowledge you look around. To get wisdom you look up. Knowledge comes from reason. Wisdom comes from revelation. Knowledge is something you learn. Wisdom is a gift. James 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God." Wisdom is a gift from God. I sometimes ask 50 times a day, "God, give me wisdom." I want to be wise more than anything else. If I love and I'm wise, I'm going to make it in life. If you are loving and wise you are going to make it in life. "Ask of God who gives generously." He loves to give. Colossians 2:3 "The secret is Christ Himself. In Him lie hidden all God's treasures of wisdom..." It is all wrapped up in a person, Jesus Christ. If you want God's wisdom get Jesus in your life. You invite Him into your life and say, "Christ, think your thoughts through my mind and say Your words through my mouth. Help people through my hands. Love people with my heart. And put your wisdom in my mind."

The wisest thing I ever did was to give my life to Jesus Christ. Why didn't I do it sooner? That is where wisdom comes from. When you get God's wisdom in your life, day by day, as you allow Him into your life and develop your character, you will find your relationships getting better and better. Even if the person on the other end isn't making an improvement, they will get better because you are getting better. You know how to relate wisely instead of stupidly to people. How wise are you? Where do you need wisdom? Do you need wisdom in your marriage? Do you need wisdom with your kids? Do you need wisdom at work? How to relate to people? That cantankerous person who just ticks you off... a secretary... a boss... an associate; you don't get along with them at all. Where do you get that kind of wisdom"? It is all wrapped up in Jesus Christ. The first step is to invite Him into your life. Wisdom begins by knowing God. Psalm 111:10 "Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It starts with salvation. Ask Him into your life. Then day-by-day you continually ask Him for wisdom and fellowship with other Christians. The Bible says, as iron sharpens iron, a wise friend sharpens another friend. A man is wise by the company he keeps. Read God's word. All God's word has wisdom. The more you read God's word, the wiser you will be.

Talk It Over

1. When someone you know has a victory or accomplishment or reward, are you able to rejoice with that person? Why or why not?

2. What are the gifts and abilities God has given you? How are you using them to be the best version of yourself?

3. How important is listening when it comes to understanding people's feelings?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. James 3:18

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

"Lord, I need your wisdom in my relationships. Please give me your wisdom. I'm asking in faith, as best as I know how. Lord, help me not to compromise my integrity in relationships. Help me to keep my life pure in an impure world. Help me not to give up my convictions just for a friendship. Lord, help me not to antagonize people's anger. Help me not to say those things or do those things. Help me to be wise. Help me not to minimize other people's feelings, that I will respect it whether I agree with it or not and not put it down, whether I understand it or not. Help me to be wise and not be defensive and not criticize other people's suggestions but to be open to learn and to be reasonable and willing to talk things out, to discuss things. Jesus Christ, come into my life. Give me your wisdom.

HOW TO AVOID ARGUMENTS

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - PART 10 OF 15

Read James 4:1-10

INTRODUCTION

We are going to be looking at what James has to say on “How to Avoid Arguments.” James is a very practical book, perhaps the most practical book in the Bible. As we get to chapter four James talks about how we are to avoid arguments. He doesn’t beat around the bush when he discusses arguments he gets right to the point. This verse can be applied to arguments in your home or to international conflicts. As I talk with couples one of the most common complaints, I hear from people is “We just can't seem to get along. We argue so much. We love each other. Why is it we have major blow ups over such minor issues?” I talk with parents who say, “With my kids there is constant tension. I don't understand why we are always in an argumentative mode.” James talks about that. In this passage on how to avoid arguments he gives us the causes and the cures, the reason for argument and the remedy. At the very start of this message, think of the person that causes the most conflict in your life. You are going to get the most out of this message if you think about the person who causes conflict in your life and how to avoid arguments with him/her.

James doesn't beat around the bush. He gets right to the point. He doesn't waste any time. Long before modern psychology came along, he had some profound insights on the cause of conflict. He writes in V.4:1 “What causes fights and quarrels among you. Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?” James says that the cause of arguments is conflicting desires. When my wants conflict with your wants the sparks are going to fly. Conflict starts early in life, even before you could talk. Have you noticed that a baby, if his needs are not instantly gratified, he lets you know? You can argue even if you don't know how to talk. Marriage has built in conditions for conflict. Think about the things you expected of your spouse before you got married? How idealistic and unrealistic you were about marriage. What a rude awakening that was, the day you woke up! Let me remind you that all marriages go through three stages:

- i. **Stage one; happy honeymoon.** The key idea in the happy honeymoon is it is thrilling. There is intensity. There is focused attention. All you can see is that person. You have a tendency to put your partner on a pedestal. They are perfect thus total disregard of differences and faults. In this stage, there is a lot of giving in and a lot of giving up. “Whatever you want, darling!” You go along to get along. You cater to every whim. You are pampering each other. You can't stand sports but you go with your husband to the sports game. There is extreme happiness, this feeling of well-being. High in love. Everything seems great. The world seems great, you seem great, and your mate seems great. “I'm in love!” The fact is, you don't really even know that person. You are in love with an ideal of them. You don't know what they are really like and you don't know what you are in for. During this first stage we tend to ignore our differences and overlook our faults and put our hang-ups aside and any major conflict is swept under the carpet. The fact is this stage doesn't last. It can't last. Sooner or later we waken to two or three realities that we have differences and faults.

You are different in temperaments, you have different responsibilities. And there is more to life than just having fun. You start having to pay bills again. The first stage kind of floats off to the side and we come to stage two

- ii. **Stage two, the party is over.** What happened? His delight turns to disillusionment. His dating turns to debating. His romance turns to resentment. The ideal turns to the ordeal. Boredom sets in. It is back to the routine. You become complacent. You lose interest. In dating you looked perfect. But then, after you get married, you start letting it all hang out. The attitude before marriage is "Anything you want, darling." After marriage it is "Get it yourself, Buster!" You begin to clash over differences and you begin to argue. There is some strife in your marriage and some hang-ups and you experience disharmony. You start protecting yourself. You are not as open as you were. You don't let your guard down, you watch your rear flank and you are not as open and vulnerable. There is a communication breakdown.

You don't want your faults used against you. You start protecting yourself, because you think they could use that as ammunition against you. We accuse and excuse. We excuse ourselves and we accuse our mates. We blame them and start finding fault with each other. Resentment builds up and defensiveness. Before it was everything, she does is right! Now, nothing she does is right!" What a change in attitude. There is a lot of nagging and criticizing and complaining. The wife says, "I just don't respect him anymore." Respect goes down the tubes. We criticize and jab. You become disillusioned. I have had so many people say to me, "I feel cheated. I got in this marriage. I have these secret feelings of regret and I'm trapped. And I don't know how to get out of it. What have I gone it myself into?"

The doubts come along, "Did I do the right thing? Did I marry the right person? Did I make a mistake? Was I not listening to God? Why didn't I listen to my mother?" Doubts and disillusionments are taking place. The inevitable result in stage 2 is either depression or divorce. Divorce you split up, dump the bum! A lot of times we think the only alternative are depression. It is enduring the misery for the rest of my life, internalize the anger. I have so many people say, "My relationship to my wife/husband is really getting me down. I am down! They make me feel so bad!" In my pastoring ministry I have discovered there are usually three alternatives: breakup, breakdown or breakthrough. That is what happens. Most marriages never get past Stage 2. That means they never get to Stage 3. They go through the honeymoon stage. Then they get stuck in the debating stage. The party is over and everything comes crashing in. They realize, "We do have differences! We look at the world differently." There is either a breakup or a breakdown or there is a break through into Stage Three.

- iii. **Stage three, let us make a deal.** It is the stage of **mature love** not infatuation, not romanticism, but mature love, and love is a choice. There is tenderness in your marriage. You are gentle not judgmental with each other. You are careful with each other's feelings. You are tender with each other's egos. You realize you are on the same team. You are not out to destroy each other. You are tender. You respect your spouse.

You treat them with appreciation. You accept responsibility for your part in the marriage to make it work. The only way you make it to stage three is to know and accept your differences, to recognize and realize that we are different. We are never going to be alike. But that is OK. God didn't make another person just like me. I'm unique. I'm the only one like myself. You know your temperaments, you know your faults, but you still accept them. Out of that understanding comes security. Mature love has a security that says, "No matter what happens, we will make it." You are not threatened by disagreements. When an argument comes along you don't get afraid and think, "Maybe the marriage is dying, maybe it is ending." You think to yourself, "We have gone through too much together to let this slip away."

We have had too many good experiences to let this current crisis or argument destroys our marriage." The security comes from an unreserved commitment to each other. You say, "I'm committed to you regardless." That security will revolutionize your marriage and your communication and your sexual relationship and everything. You are at home with each other's bodies because you are secure in each other's love. Mature love is truthful. You are honest. You say what you feel. You are truthful but you are tender. The Bible calls it *"Speaking the truth in love."*

At stage three you have to learn how to handle arguments because it is going to happen. There are going to be arguments and conflicts in life and how you handle them makes a difference. There are going to be conflicting desires. Frustrated feelings cause fights. What desires? The Bible makes very clear here and other places in Scripture that there are three basic desires we have that cause conflict. These desires are legitimate desires unless they are out of control. They are God-given desires. But when you put them above other people, when they become number one in your life, they will cause conflict.

COMMON DESIRES THAT AFFECT EVERYONE.

1. THE DESIRE TO HAVE POSSESSIONS.

We all want to have "stuff". We like nice things. It is either materialism or possessions. v. 2 "You want what you don't have ... you long for what others have." God created things to be used and to be enjoyed. That is what they are there for. We use things and love people but the problem arise is when we start loving things. When we start loving things, we get the equation backwards. We start loving things and use people by manipulating them, controlling them and moving them around to get what you want because things become more important in your life. It is very easy to fall in love with things these days with all the TV commercials. The desire to have becomes number one in your life and that creates conflict. It is not by accident that Gallup says that 56% of all marriages that end in divorce end because of money problems. Things become a battleground. Someone asked Howard Hughes one time, "How much does it take to make a man happy?" He said, "Just a little bit more." The thrill wears off very quickly. We have to learn to deal with the desire to have. If you decide to base your life on comparing it to other people, you will never be happy no matter how much you get. Just the time you catch up with the Jones' they refinance. There is always something more. In the Article "Yuppy Angst: Coping with the Stress of Success. They are well stocked with MBA's, VCR's and BMW's, but they feel SAD.

Their houses may be stuffed with antiques and high-tech gadgetry but the owners feel empty inside. The boomers have embraced everything from aerobics to Zen but they still have the feeling that something is missing. Maybe a beach house or breasts lift?" It goes on to talk about the emptiness of people trying to fill their lives with things, the desire to have. It doesn't satisfy. It leaves you empty. The ads tell us that so it must be true! There is not any doubt about it. Here is an ad for a car that plainly says, "You can buy happiness." If it is in the paper, it has to be true, right? Here is one for Chevrolet. "Make you feel good inside." I want to feel good inside, don't you? If I buy a Chevy, then I will feel good inside. The fact is things can bring happiness. The problem is it is temporary. It is just for a while. Things do make you happy. If you get a gift, you are happy about it.

But it doesn't last and after a while the thrill goes away and the excitement fades and boredom set in because things never change and people change. We get bored with things that don't change so we want to redecorate. It is fun for a while but the happiness doesn't last. How many of you are still thrilled over last Christmas's gift? If you remembered last Christmas's gift, this year you want the bigger model, the better model, the nicer model and you want to redecorate. You have to have more. *Ecclesiastes 5:10-11* "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. (NIV) Andy Rooney said, "Having enough is nowhere near as much fun as I thought it was going to be when I didn't have any." There never seems to be enough. Sure, it will make you happy but it is temporary.

What are some of the things you spend money on that do not have an eternal impact?

2. THE DESIRE TO FEEL

I want to feel good. I want to be comfortable. I want to have my senses satisfied. v. 3 "You want only what will give you pleasure" It is not wrong to enjoy life. 1 Timothy 6:17 "God made everything for our enjoyment." But when pleasure becomes the number one goal in your life and if it feels good, do it then you are asking for conflict. It is going to cause problems in your life. When my pleasure takes the place over what is needful then I am in trouble. The fact is I am more interested in my comfort than I am in yours and all I think about is what makes me feel good. The desire to feel good creates conflict. The desire to have and the desire to feel good are two of the desires that when they are thwarted cause conflict. Why do you think people argue about sex in marriage? The desire for pleasure is strong. When it is thwarted, resentment builds up. I want to share with you four important reasons from God's Word why you need to learn to deal with what you feel.

- a. **Learn to manage your emotions because they are often unreliable.** Your gut is often wrong. Your intuition is often flawed. Your emotions often lead you down a blind alley. You can't depend on everything you feel! Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end, it leads to death" (NIV). You don't have to accept everything you feel, because not everything you feel is right or authentic or will lead you in the right direction.

- b. Learn to manage your emotions because you don't want to be manipulated.** If you don't control your emotions, they will control you, and you will be manipulated by your moods. And if you are always guided by your feelings, other people will take advantage of you. Worst of all, negative emotions are Satan's favorite tool. He will use fear, resentment, and worry to wreak havoc in your life. The Bible says in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (NIV).
- c. Learn to manage your emotions because you want to please God.** God cannot rule your life if emotions rule your life. If you make your decisions based on how you feel, then you have made your feelings god, and then God can't be God in your life. Romans 8:6-8 say, "The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God." (NIV)
- d. Learn to manage your emotions because you want to succeed in life.** Study after study has shown that your emotional quotient is far more important than your IQ when it comes to success. How many people do you know who ruined their reputation because of something said in anger or missed a job opportunity because of their lack of self-control? The Bible says in Proverbs 5:23, "He will die for lack of self-control; he will be lost because of his great foolishness." (NLT) When you give your heart to Jesus, that commitment includes your emotions. So, when you say, "I gave my heart to Jesus," you gave your emotions to him to be managed by him. Jesus wants to be Lord of how you feel not just what you think and do. He wants to be Lord of your emotions. The Bible says in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (NIV).

When you give your heart to Jesus, that commitment includes your emotions. So, when you say, "I gave my heart to Jesus," you gave your emotions to him to be managed by him. Jesus wants to be Lord of how you feel not just what you think and do. He wants to be Lord of your emotions.

Talk it over.

Do you base your decisions on your feelings? How do you know if a "feeling" is right or wrong?

3. THE DESIRE TO BE

This is pride, power, prominence and popularity. I want to be number one. It is the desire for "me first." Frank Sinatra summarized this desire in a song, "I Did It My Way." This is "ME" decade. The "ME" generation. Get on top. Be the big shots. Strive for success. We walk around saying "Watch me." Little kids say, "Watch me, daddy", we say "Watch me, everybody" but we say it in subtle ways: Watch me by the way I dress. Watch me by the kind of clothes I buy.

Watch me by the kind of car I drive. Watch me by the kind of things I stock my house with.” It is a desire to impress. It is the desire to be full of pride, to be number one, and to impress. Proverbs 13:10 says “Pride leads to arguments.” That is so simple. “Only by pride comes contention.” Why? I’m too proud to compromise and that causes conflict.

We don't want to give in. Have you ever been in an argument where you knew you were wrong but you wouldn't admit it? Why? It is because of pride. Pride causes arguments. This is the bottom line of all these things. The next time you are in an argument, stop and ask “Is it worth it?” James tells us that pride is when we think we can do things on our own and it causes two problems. v. 2-3 “You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.” Here James tells us two reasons why our desires aren't fulfilled:

- a. **We don't pray.** We don't ask God. We look to the wrong source. We look to people to fulfill our needs instead of looking to God. He says, “I will meet your needs, just pray.” And when we do pray, we usually pray with the wrong motive. We ask things in a selfish way. The Bible has said that everything I need God has promised to provide. He will meet my desires to have, to be, to feel not just luxury but all my needs. Philippians 4:19 “My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” if we will ask in prayer. But we would rather fight than pray. We would rather argue about something than go look to the Lord for the answer. When I'm upset with my wife, the last thing on my mind is prayer. We are not thinking about that.

But James says that that is the problem. We look to others instead of looking to God and that causes conflict. We would rather try to work it out ourselves. Prayerlessness in itself is an evidence of pride. Why don't I pray? I don't think I need God. If I really thought I was more dependent upon God and I needed Him more I'd pray more. Prayerlessness in itself is an evidence of pride. James says we would have a lot more peace if we just prayed more. We would have a lot less to worry about, a lot less to argue about and a lot less to fight over if we just prayed more. The old song, “Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.”

- b. **When in conflict with God.** Pride not only causes conflict with other people but it causes conflict with God. v. 6 “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” God declares war on selfishness. Have you noticed that God has a unique way of engineering circumstances to pop our pride? Just about the time you think, “I have it together!” He puts you in your place if you think you don't need Him. To be in opposition to God is a dangerous place to be. You are on a collision course.

There is no way you are going to win. If pride is the cause of arguments and that is the case James is making “I'm going to have my way when I want it, my time, my place” What is the cure?

This is the idea that is promoted by shows like “Lifestyles of the Rich and Tackey” that if I have money, then I must be important. The misconception is, I am what I own, that my valuables determine my value, that if I have little then I must be worth little. So, since I want to be liked and respected and looked up to, I must continually keep on getting more and more and more. I have to keep up with the Jones'. Don't worry about keeping up with the Jones', they just refinanced.

If I have more things, I will be happier. The fact is, we buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't even like! Having more things will make me happy for a while. But it doesn't last. Having more things does not make me more important. It is amazing what people will pay for a status symbol. Some people will pay \$50 more for a shirt because it has a little thing up in the corner. It is still made out of cotton. You pay \$50 more for that little horse. Luke 12:15 *"Be on your guard against greed in any shape or form. For a man's real life in no way depends on the number of his possessions."* Don't confuse your net worth with your self-worth. Notice it says, "Be on your guard" continually evaluate yourself. Ask yourself the tough questions: Am I expecting more things to make me happier? Am I expecting more things to make me more important? It says be on guard continually evaluate yourself.

Talk it over

Are you okay with not "having it all"? Why or why not? _____

THE CURE FOR ARGUMENTS

James 4: 6 & 10 " But he gives us more grace. The grace of God is referring to the divine life, power, and ability of God flowing and operating through us. Our God is the God of all grace because He is gracious and extends His grace, His unmerited favor toward us in so many different ways. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." |Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up." What is grace? Grace is God's power to change. What would you like to change about yourself? Whatever it is, you need grace to do it. What do you want to change about your relationships, your marriage, and your family? Whatever you would like to change, you need grace. You can't change it on your own. You need God's power and that is called grace. Grace is the power to change, and there is only one way you get grace. You humble yourself. God doesn't give grace to people who are full of pride and think "I can do it on my own." He gives it when we come and say, "God, I need your help." And that is where we get the power to make the changes we would like to see. In the next few verses, James gives several short sentences. He is so practical. He gives four specifications that need to be taken in order to stop the fighting. Here is how you diffuse a conflict, whether it is between you and a kid, you and your wife, you and someone at work.

WHAT DIFFUSES ARGUMENTS?

1. GIVE IN TO GOD

"Submit yourself then to God." v. 7. Let God be God in your life. Give Him control. Put Him in charge. Yield yourself to Him. This is the starting point. Quit trying to run your own life. In v. 1 it says "...your desires that battle within you..." James says that conflict that happens with other people happens because you have conflict on the inside. You don't get along with other people because you have a civil war in your life. This is the real issue. The starting point is getting peace inside before you can have peace outside. Find peace of mind; find peace in your heart. The real conflict is inside of you. It is you who is in charge of your life. If you are in charge, then anytime somebody comes along that doesn't go the way you want to go then you get uptight.

You get irritable. You get upset. You want things to go just the way you want them to go and when they don't go that way, it makes you mad. But if God's in charge of your life, it doesn't irritate you as much. Colossians 3:15 "Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart." When we have the peace of Christ in our hearts then we will be at peace with other people. If we don't have God's peace in our hearts, then we try to manipulate others, try to control them and try to move them around to get what we want out of life. In the early years of our marriage, Kay and I had tremendous conflict. We fought over everything. We were in love with each other. We felt God had brought us together, but we just didn't get along. We fought over everything. I would be divorced today if it were not for the Lord. The fact was that we were both saying "Divorce is not an option; we are going to work on this thing if it kills us" and it nearly did.

I ended up in the hospital. Kay thought she was having a nervous breakdown. It was terrible. We just didn't get along. Why? It is because of the desire to have, the desire to feel, and the desire to be was clashing. In every marriage there is some kind of power struggle. It is just we use different tools. We tried everything to make it work and we just didn't get along. The turning point was the day we gave up. We just gave it to God and said, "Only You can save this marriage. We can't do it on our own. Do whatever you have to do in our lives to make this thing work." You stop praying, "Lord, change my partner" and start praying, "Lord, change me." You work on you and watch what happens. The starting point of getting along with others, to avoid arguments, is get peace in your heart through the rule of Christ. Give in to God. This means you learn to say "Thy will be done" instead of saying "Me first". That is the difference. When you can say "Lord, whatever you want that is what I want" then the peace process starts.

Talk it over.

Why does submitting to God lead to freedom and adventure? _____

2. GET WISE TO SATAN

Be aware, be alert. Realize what he is doing. Realize where the conflict comes from and that he is the source behind it. Don't be dumb. Don't be ignorant. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." The word "resist" is a war term. It means to be prepared, to stand against or to withstand an attack. The devil wants to destroy your marriage. He wants to destroy every other good relationship. Why? It is because he loves conflict and arguments. He wants to cause confusion, arguments, stress, hurt feelings, disappointment, anger and chaos. He loves to do it. James says give into God and let Him have control. Then do some defensive action. Resist the devil and realize what he is doing. If you get up in the morning and you don't run into the devil, head on, it means you are already going in the same direction. 2 Cor. 2:11 "In order that Satan might not outwit us, we are not unaware of his schemes." Paul says, wise up! Recognize his tactics. Know how he operates. How does the devil operate? He doesn't stand around with a pitchfork and a red suit, like Underwood's deviled ham. How does the devil operate? He plays on our pride. Particularly wounded pride. He tells us what we want to hear. He whispers in our ear. He gives us little thoughts, suggestions and ideas. When you are in the middle of an argument, he starts whispering in your ear, things like "You don't have to take this kind of stuff. Retaliate. Who do they think they are? Get even. Assert yourself. Don't put up with this kind of stuff. Show them who is boss."

He tells you all the things your pride would love to hear. You need to say, "Satan, I know that is you." Resist him. How do you resist the devil? The same way Jesus did it. He quoted Scripture. Memorize Proverbs 13:10, "Pride leads to arguments." The next time you get into an argument, that can be brought to mind by the Lord and you stop and think, "How am I being prideful here. What am I not willing to admit? Why am I not willing to compromise? Where am I only thinking of myself and not the other person's needs, desires and attitudes?" There is a great promise here. It says, "Resist the devil and he will flee." You don't have to put up with him. Give in to God and get wise to Satan.

Talk it over.

Discuss on ways that a Christian can use to resist the devil. _____

3. GROW CLOSER TO GOD

How does this affect arguments? First, how do you grow closer? It is by reading the Bible, by going to church, and by getting involved in a Bible study. All of these kinds of things help you grow closer to God. I have made an amazing discovery that the more time I spend alone with God, the better I get along with other people. Count on it! When the argument level rises in our marriage it means somebody is not spending time with the Lord. It is that simple. Grow closer to God. Isaiah 26:3 "He will keep him in perfect peace all those who trust in Him, whose thoughts turn often to the Lord." When you spend time with the Lord, you turn your thoughts to Him, then you get along better with others because He keeps perfect peace in your heart and you are not as irritable.

Have you noticed some people only draw close to God when they are in trouble? They only pray when they have a need. You need to spend time with Him in Bible study, Sunday morning and daily quiet time. Make time for these things. You say you are too busy? Then maybe you are too busy. Maybe you need to cut some things out of your schedule to make more time to spend time with the Lord. The more you spend time with the Lord, the more you are going to enjoy the rest of your time. It will be more productive, more beneficial. You will get along better with others; have fewer arguments, because you are spending time with God. "Draw closer to God; he will keep you in perfect peace." Get up 15 minutes earlier each morning. Maybe start with the book of John. Read and pray and notice the difference in your attitude and the relationships the rest of the day. I challenge you to do that. The conflict in your life is in direct proportion to the time you are spending with God. There is a great promise here too. When I in genuineness draw close to God, "He will come near to you." He doesn't back off. He draws close to you. When you move toward Him, God moves toward you.

Talk it over

Think of two practical ways you can increase or improve your spending time with God, and put them into practice today.

4. BE WILLING TO ASK FORGIVENESS

If you want to stop the conflicts in your life, if you want to get along with other people, avoid arguments; learn to ask forgiveness from God and from those you hurt. v. 8 "Wash your hands ... purify your hearts..." Our hands represent our conduct and hearts represent attitudes. He is saying, clean up your act. v. 9 (LB) "Let there be tears for the wrong you have done." Don't minimize what has happened. Take it seriously. Be sorry for your self-centeredness. It is a big deal when your wife's feelings are hurt. Take it seriously. If someone says you hurt them, you have hurt them. It may not be a big deal to you, but it is to them. Be willing to ask forgiveness. Now go back to that person I asked you to think about a few minutes ago. Would you like to begin to resolve the conflict with that person? How do you do it? Are you willing to go and apologize for your part? Maybe they are 95% wrong and you are only 5% at fault, but you take care of your 5% and let God handle the other 95% in their life.

Their response is their response. "I know we have had our differences and I know I haven't always been thoughtful. A lot of times I have thought more about myself than your needs." How humbling that would be! Right! Because God gives grace to the humble! If you want to change, the only way you are going to change is to be humble, and the only way to be humble is to go and ask forgiveness. It is hard but do you want to change? Do you want to reduce the conflict? Maybe the way you do it is by cracking the door open by you taking the first step even if they are primarily at fault. Admit what you've brought into the relationship that was wrong. It is humbling, sure, but God gives grace to the humble. Maybe this week you need to write a SMS, make a call, or make some restitution even to that person who has irritated you. Take the first step. v. 10 "Humble yourself before the Lord and He will lift you up."

God does not want to keep you down on the ground. The way to honor is humility. I used to think the way to be honored by my wife and my kids were to never admit that I was wrong. If my kids thought I was wrong they wouldn't respect me anymore. What kind of dad is he if he is not perfect? It was not a surprise when I found out they already knew I was not perfect. I found that the way I rose in honor before my kids and my wife was to admit I was wrong, I was selfish and I was thinking about only my own needs. The Bible says that God lifts up the humble and the more honest we are about our weaknesses and our faults; the more God honors us. If you want to be honored be humble. Coming and saying "God, I give up. I can't do it all on my own. I need your power to resist the devil when he says, live for yourself." I grow closer to God and spend time with Him and I'm willing to ask forgiveness.

Philippians 2:3-5 "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, [Why? It is because pride causes arguments] but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interest but also the interest of others." [He doesn't say don't look about your own interest because you also have needs. He is not saying to lie down and be a doormat. But look out also for the interest of others] your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ." How do you get that attitude? Let Jesus Christ live through your life. When Jesus Christ lives in me and Jesus Christ lives in you, Jesus is not going to argue with Jesus. There is no ego there.

CONCLUSION

"Where do wars and fights among you come from? Do they not come from your lusts that war in your body? You lust and do not have, so you kill. You desire to have and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:1-2). The first biblical step toward diffusing conflict is to talk to God before talking to the person. Discuss the problem with God. If you will pray about the conflict first instead of gossiping to a friend, you will often discover that either God changes your heart or he changes the other person without your help. All your relationships would go more smoothly if you would just pray more about them. As David did with his psalms, use prayer to ventilate vertically. Tell God your frustrations. Cry out to him. He is never surprised or upset by your anger, hurt, insecurity or any other emotions. So, tell him exactly how you feel. Most conflict is rooted in unmet needs, and some of these needs can only be met by God.

When you expect anyone a friend, spouse, pastor or family member to meet a need that only God can fulfill, you are setting yourself up for disappointment and bitterness. There are many needs only God can meet. The apostle James noted that many of our conflicts are caused by *prayerlessness*: "Where do wars and fights among you come from? ... You lust and you do not have ... Yet you do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:1-2). Instead of looking to God, we look to others to make us happy and then get angry when they fail us. God says, "Why don't you come to me first?" If your desire to have is greater than the relationships you have around you, it means that the kids suffer, your wife suffers, your husband suffers, and your friends suffer because the desire to have has taken preeminence in your life. That causes conflict. I have noticed kids don't want things as much as they want our time. Sometimes we struggle with the desire to feel good. "I have my rights!"

That is something the devil likes to say an awfully lot. That is the exact opposite of what the Scriptures are saying, "Think about other people, not just yourself. What are their needs?" Is your desire to feel comfort cause conflict? "I would really rather think about what I need right now than what the family needs." How about the desire to be? Do you find it difficult to admit it when you are wrong? Do you find it difficult to back down in an argument when you have been in error? Do you find your schedule pushing out time for the Lord?

Talk it over.

1. Which of these desires cause the most conflict in your life?

2. Re-evaluate your schedule and discuss with your group if you have time to spend with God.

3. Many people in life are unsatisfied with the way they are living. Discuss what gives satisfaction?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER.

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. James 4:7-8

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Lord, would you help me to think of others and not just my own desires? Help me to be willing to admit when I am wrong. I have been selfish and I am sorry. God, give me the power to change and become the person you have always wanted to be. God, today I want to give in to you. I give you my life, my marriage, and my career. I submit it all to you and I ask you to put the peace of Christ in my heart to rule. Help me to get wise to Satan, to realize he plays on my pride and tells me things I want to hear but really only make matters worse. Father, help me to grow closer to you, to make time in my schedule for time with you. Father, I admit that many times I have put me first and I ask you to forgive me. Help me to become like Jesus, to have the attitude that He had, to not only look after my own interest but also the interest of those around me.

HOW TO QUIT PLAYING GOD DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS – PART 11 OF 15

Read. James 4:11-12

INTRODUCTION

We are playing God when we Judge others! This is a harsh but true passage that we all need to hear and heed. I have tried to put all the love in it while remaining true to the integrity of the text—there is no intention to put anyone down, just as the passage commands. If you are a person who is up to no good and you do not want to be found out, you can attack those who are good with false allegations, gossip, and slander. This works well and covers your "rotten butt" by taking the focus off yourself and putting it on someone else. Some people love to put down those who do good things. They may see others as good and themselves as not good, so they think, *I will point the dogs to them so they do not chase me*. Or, perhaps, they just use a well-placed, crafted *put down* or word play to make themselves look better.

Yet, what these behaviors really do is grieve the Spirit, bring disrepute to the church, and cause the person involved to forfeit any learning or growing. Therefore, he or she remains in sin and then he or she dies in condemnation. The wake they leave is a church of dysfunction and strife, putting disease into God's family, hurting people, and creating disillusioned saints who, striving to serve and do good are thwarted by those who are evil and malevolent. This is exactly what James was dealing with in his church; so, he is telling us not to expose the sin in others to cover our trail of misdeeds. We are not to gossip, slander, or judge falsely (Matt. 7:1-27). Why? Because God is a God of truth and wants us to act out, in truth, in all our relationships as well as in the managing of His Bride, His Church. We are to be His witnesses—not His accusers (2 Cor. 5:20)!

WHY DO WE LIKE TO JUDGE OTHERS?

1. To excuse our own faults (Romans 2:3)

The reason we like to judge others is it makes us feel better, superior and like we are not so bad. There is some faulty logic here. Let us say you and I both owe money to the same man. I'm in debt 20 million dollars and you are only in debt 10 million dollars. You say, "Since you are in more debt than I am, therefore I am free from debt." Does that make sense? No. "His sin is worse than mine!" Does that negate your own sin? No. We think by judging others, we are put in a better position, that we are going to escape judgement. God doesn't grade on the curve. Paul says don't think that by pointing out other people's sin, that you are off the hook. When you point a finger of criticism at somebody, you have three fingers pointing back at yourself. Anytime you start to judge somebody else you have three fingers pointing back at yourself judging your own sin in your own life.

Talk it over

How can we deal with personal blind spots? _____

2. It appeals to our pride. (Proverbs 26:22)

We compare others to ourselves. We contrast that with the way God judges because God judges based on the truth. The problem is we are blind to the truth. All of us have blind spots, areas of weakness we don't see. I don't see my own weaknesses. You don't see your own weaknesses. Many times, we don't see where we are at fault but we only see where other people are at fault. It is ironic but we tend to judge in other people what we dislike in ourselves. If you have a problem with pride you are going to be very quick to judge people who are full of pride. If you are very lazy you will be very quick to judge people who are lazy. It is just our nature. When we start to judge things, we have the tendency to judge the things we dislike about ourselves the most. When you see someone violently reacting to a certain sin it may be, they have a fear of it or they are guilty of it. We measure by the wrong standards and tend to play God.

WHY SHOULD WE NOT JUDGE OTHERS?

1. It is unchristian (James 4:11a)

James says here that judging others is unchristian. He starts here by saying; Brothers, do not slander one another. The word SLANDER and the word DEVIL are the same word. The Bible calls Satan the accuser. The devil's number one activity is going around and putting people down, accusing them, slandering them and destroying their reputation. We are most like the devil when we judge people and talk cruelly about them. When we speak against somebody else (including all kinds of criticism, maligning, judging) we are doing the devil's work for him. I heard about a guy who came to a pastor one time and said, "I only have one talent." The pastor asked, "What is your talent?" The man said, "I have the gift of criticism." The pastor told him that the gift of criticism does not come from the Holy Spirit but from the devil. The pastor thought about the parable in the Bible and said, "The guy who had only one talent went out and buried it. Maybe that is what you ought to do with yours as well."

2. It is unlawful (James 4:11b)

James goes on to say that judging others goes against God's law. He writes; anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. So why is it unlawful to judge other people? Because it breaks God's Royal Law; James 2:8 if you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. Judging others is unloving. It is breaking God's command to love one another, so therefore it is also unlawful.

3. It is unjustified (James 4:12)

He goes on to say that judging is not your job, it is unjustified. James 4:12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

WHEN IS IT WRONG TO JUDGE OTHERS?

1. When we do the same sin (Romans 2:1-3)

It is wrong to judge people when we ourselves do the same thing or worse. Remember the woman caught in adultery? What did Jesus say to the Pharisees? "He who is without sin cast the first stone." They all walked away. I don't have any right to judge anyone else if I'm guilty of the same thing. We need to be consistent. Romans 2:1-3: *you, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So, when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?*

Paul says here that one of the reasons we tend to judge other people is to excuse our own faults. You think by pointing the finger at somebody else, God is going to forget what you have done, or when you point out how somebody else has fallen then you don't look so bad. We try to accuse others and excuse ourselves. Matthew 7:1-5: *Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*

Hebrew humor is humor by exaggeration. The Sermon on the Mount it has a number of laughs lines in it. Imagine two guys: one guy has got some sawdust in his eye and the other has a telephone pole hanging out of his eye. Jesus is making a point here with humor. He is saying it is wrong to judge others because it overlooks my own faults. If judging you cause me to not look at myself realistically, then it is wrong. We are great speck analyzers, when we have a logjam in our own eye. A woman named Marilyn Helleberg told about being a teenager at church camp. She said an ugly rumor got started there about two of the counselors and it quickly became the talk of the camp. The next day, at Morning Prayer, the minister read the story of the adulterous woman. He spoke of Jesus telling the crowd that if any person who had no sin, they could cast the first stone. And one by one, those who had come to stone her to death walked away. Then the minister passed around a bucket of stones and insisted that we each take one and carry it in our pocket throughout the remainder of camp. Any time we felt like criticizing someone else or talking behind another's back or passing on an ugly rumor we were to reach into the pocket, touch the stone and ask ourselves if we were without sin.

That shut down the gossiping. Because true love remembers how much Jesus has forgiven us and because of that refuses to "delight in evil" and the spreading of gossip. Isn't it true that the things that often bother us the most about the faults of others are the fact that they are also our own faults? We criticize the actions of others, not recognizing that they are really just a distorted reflection of our own lives. A man wanted to impress his friends with his eye for art as they went to an art gallery together. However, on the way he lost his glasses and was very nearsighted so he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. But he figured he could wing it anyways with any abstract comments and observations he wanted to make.

So, he approached a frame and began criticizing: "Why would anyone want to paint something so hideously ugly? I mean, it is a true rendering of the object, but why waste time painting such a disgusting subject?" Everyone was laughing by this time as his wife whispered into his ear, "John, it is a mirror!"

Talk it over.

What is the speck of sawdust and the plank in the eye referring to? _____

2. When we draw conclusions based on outward appearance (John 7:24)

We tend to make our impression of people in about the first 15 seconds and most of that is in the way that they look. We judge people based on appearance. We size them up by looking their face, clothing, and hairdo. If you judge just on the basis of appearance, that is unwise. John 7:24 says "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment." Remember the story when God sends Samuel to choose a new king for Israel? 1 Samuel 16:6-7 When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Samuel said this when he chose David, the runt of the family to be king of Israel. Others were saying, "Not David! That scrawny kid! He is nothing. The other brothers are the sharp ones!" Samuel said, "God doesn't look at the appearance. God looks at the heart."

In his little book Illustrations of Bible Truth, H.A. Ironside pointed out the folly of judging others. He related an incident in the life of a man called Bishop Potter. "He was sailing for Europe on one of the great transatlantic ocean liners. When he went on board, he found that another passenger was to share the cabin with him. After going to see the accommodations, he came up to the purser's desk and inquired if he could leave his gold watch and other valuables in the ship's safe. He explained that ordinarily he never availed himself of that privilege, but he had been to his cabin and had met the man who was to occupy the other berth. Judging from his appearance, he was afraid that he might not be a very trustworthy person. The purser accepted the responsibility for the valuables and remarked, 'It is all right, bishop, I'll be very glad to take care of them for you. The other man has been up here and left his for the same reason!'"

Talk it over

Talk about a time when your first impression of a person was wrong. How did what you later learned about the person change your relationship with him or her? _____

3. When we condemn before hearing all the facts

There are times when we can be in the middle of a situation and think one thing is going on when in fact, we have completely misread what is happening around us. John 7:50-51 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 51 Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing? That is a rhetorical question. The obvious answer is "no." It is unwise to make a judgement about somebody before you know all the facts. If you study scripture you will find that even if your conclusions are right about that person you are still wrong because you did it without getting the facts.

There is always more than one side to a story. There are three sides to a story: your side, their side, and God's side. Usually we have partial truth. Chuck Swindoll told of his being at a pastor's conference where he would be speaking. The first day there a man approached him and said how greatly he had looked forward to hearing him speak. That evening Swindoll noticed the man was sound asleep only a few minutes into of the sermon. Swindoll thought to himself that perhaps he was tired after a long day's drive and couldn't help himself but this continued to happen night after night. Dr. Swindoll soon became very upset in his spirit with this man! On the last night the man's wife came up and apologized for her husband's inattention to the messages. She then explained that he had recently been diagnosed as having terminal cancer and the medication he was taking to ease the pain made him extremely sleepy. But it had been one of his life-long ambitions to hear Dr. Swindoll speak before he died, and now he had fulfilled that goal.

Talk it over.

Based on Jesus' teaching, why should his followers avoid adopting an attitude of judgment and condemnation toward others? _____

4. When you judge on outward religious observances

Sometimes as Christians we judge others based upon our own understanding of what the Bible says. Colossians 2:16-17 *therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17 these are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.* Paul is saying it is wrong to judge people, their spirituality, on the basis of externals, religious observances. You can't tell a person's walk with God based on their outward external observances by what you eat or drink or if you worship on Saturday or Sunday. These are just a shadow of the things to come. Reality is found in Christ. When I judge somebody on the basis of their outward religious observances, I'm missing the point. It is wrong when we judge people on the basis of external observances. Christians disagree on many different things.

An umpire once called Babe Ruth out on strikes. When the crowd booed with sharp disapproval at the call, the legendary Ruth turned to the umpire with disdain and said, "There are 40,000 people here who know that the last pitch was a ball, tomato head." Suspecting that the umpire would erupt with anger, the coaches and players braced themselves for Ruth's ejection. However, the cool-headed umpire replied, "Maybe so Babe, maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts." Believers need to realize that God's judgment is the only one that counts and resist the temptation to argue over silly secondary issues. There are many things that we need to simply agree to disagree on. That does not mean that all issues are secondary or unimportant. We need to stand for truth. Wisdom is understanding issues that concern what God has said verses what culture and the church have said.

Talk it over

How can you go to someone privately with constructive criticism in love, and offer gentle, humble criticism and help that would uplift them? _____

5. When it causes you to speak evil of another Christian (James 4:11)

This is a fine line we have to face here. There are times in scripture we are called to be discerning and there are at least four times we are called to judge, not with this kind of condemning attitude, but with an evaluative attitude. There is a fine line. We are to hate sin but love the sinner. We are to hate wrong but love the people that are involved in it. Ephesians 4:29. This is talking about the whole concept of speaking positively about other Christians. *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths but only what is helpful for building each other up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen."* He gives some qualifiers here on the way we are supposed to speak to other Christians. You speak in ways that build them up and not you. Speak in ways according to their needs, not your needs. Speak to edify, to encourage, and to strengthen. We should speak positively to other people by not letting any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths.

Talk it over

What would be the right way to help someone with faults? _____

6. When we judge people's motives (1 Corinthians 4:5)

It is premature to judge people's motives. Why is it premature? Nobody really knows what is in somebody else's heart. You can guess but you don't know. To judge somebody means we are judging without all the facts. Only God has the right to judge because he can see in the heart. The Bible says that someday when the Lord comes back. 1 Corinthians 4:5 *therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.* I have a hard-enough time just trying to figure out my own motives about a lot of things, much less making a good guess at yours. So, do you. A lot of times we don't know why we do what we do.

What makes us think we can figure out what makes other people do what they do? We have a hard time just judging our own selves. But one day it is all going to be brought to light. The Apostle Paul understood this truth more than most. If you had seen Paul while he was still persecuting and locking up Christians, you would have had a very different picture of him. That was the pre-Jesus Paul. There are a lot of people today that we may look at and write them off thinking they will never change. But maybe all we are seeing is the pre-Jesus version of them. Please do not misunderstand what I am trying to say here today. I am not saying that we turn a blind eye when it comes to sin. I am not saying that we should not continue to point out sin in the society around us. What I am saying is that we need to be a people of grace.

Romans 2:1 *you, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.* This is not a call to either suspend our critical faculties or to renounce all criticism and rebuke of others as illegitimate; rather it is a prohibition of standing in judgment of other people and condemning them, especially when we fail to condemn ourselves first

Talk it over

What should we do before we judge someone else motives?

HOW TO BREAK THE HABIT OF JUDGING OTHERS?

1. We will be judged by the same standards that we judge others. (Matthew 7:1-2)

Jesus said that judgment always reciprocates. In other words, the measuring stick they used to measure the lives of others will be the same measuring stick held up against their lives by God himself. Consider this: It is one thing to be judged by your fellowman, but quite another to be judged by God himself. The hypocritical Pharisees were in danger of the latter. Notice that Jesus says the hypocrite will be the one with the bigger problem. Why? Because their sin was not merely comparable to a speck of dust; it was more like a wooden plank (quite a difference). And they refused to take it out. What this means is that the greater judgment is reserved for the one who has purposefully overlooked his own mammoth sin while pointing out the smaller sins of others. Jesus emphatically says this must change, so he gives two commands: *Stop judging others in a hypocritical fashion, and get the sin out of your own life.*

Jesus is not suggesting that we have no right to make moral judgments about human behavior, and he is certainly not suggesting we have no right to hold others accountable. He doesn't condemn mutual accountability and moral responsibility and the need to address sin in the church. Jesus addresses hypocrisy. But it makes little sense to approach a Christian brother or sister about their specific sin (even if you should rightly do so) if you are committing the very same sin and are unwilling to address it or break free from it. Therefore, Jesus does not forbid all moral judgment or accountability. Rather, he forbids harsh, prideful, and hypocritical judgment that condemns others outright without first evaluating one's own spiritual condition and commitment to forsake sin.

Talk it over.

1. What can you do to help prevent yourself from being judgmental, critical, comparing others to you or your ideas, gossiping, or crafting the well placed *put down*?
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2. Remember each of us is accountable to God (Romans 14:12-13)

Words spoken in haste and in anger are certainly subject to divine judgement. However, Jesus warns that even our careless, thoughtless words will bring us into judgement before His throne. Ours is a rebellious society. We have assumed that the church is a democracy and that 50% plus one lends legitimacy to our actions. However, our actions and our speech are judged by a fixed standard of righteousness revealed in the Word of God. Consequently, the issue is whether we are

righteous according to God's standard and not whether we feel good about what we have done or said. Thus, we are accountable as Christians for every word spoken.

We are accountable to God. Every day, God holds us accountable for our actions and deeds. In our lives, we may be able to hide our character flaws and sins from our families, our friends, and our church. But we cannot hide anything from God. God evaluates everything that we do. Psalms 139:1-8. Since we are accountable to God, we need to make sure that we are always striving to please Him by obeying His commandments. We need to always keep in mind that one day we will stand before God Almighty and give an account of our life. we will *all* give account. Christ is showing that even words uttered carelessly one moment and forgotten the next will be included in this judgment and in fact they are much more important than we usually give credit to because they show our true nature.

Talk it over.

Why is it important to see God as both a Father and a Judge? What do we lose if we forget one?

3. Remember how much mercy God has given you (James 2:13)

No characteristic describes God more fully than *mercy*. It is the first trait that God uses to describe himself in Scripture. It is also an important characteristic for any serious follower of Jesus to develop. If it is such a core part of who God is, it is got to be essential for us. Before you judge others for their sins and failures, remember how many times God has forgiven you. When it seems inconvenient to help somebody in need, stop and remember how God has comforted you when you were hurting. When you think about those people who try your patience, stop and remember how patient God has been with you. And when you feel like getting even with somebody who has been unkind or unfair to you, stop and remember how kind God was to you when you were his enemy.

Talk it over

How is God's mercy toward you more likely to help you demonstrate mercy to others?

CONCLUSION

We must be careful not to speak against other believers. Any attacks on their character and motives are contrary to the love that God demands we demonstrate toward one another. The tendency of our sinful flesh is to attack and destroy others. We exalt self and destroy others in the process. We must remember that we will all someday stand before the One who has the power to save and to destroy (**Matt. 10:28**). Our preparation for that day requires - first and foremost - faith in the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ (**John 3:16,36; 5:19-29**). Then we must live submissively toward Him as He has revealed His will in His Word.

Talk it over.

1. Have you ever considered that when we gossip, we are putting disease in God's family, hurting people, and creating disillusioned saints who, having strived to serve God and others and to do good, have been thwarted by those who are evil and malevolent? What can you and the church do about this?

2. What do false allegations, gossip, and slander do to the church? How is this attractive to other Christians or to non-Christians? What do these behaviors really do to the Kingdom of God?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? James 4:11-12

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

I lay down my self-imposed responsibility of judging the heart, motives, intentions, and actions of the people in my life. You have instructed me in this, and I will obey you. I remove the back-breaking burden of being the judge, and I repent of the pride in my life that is evident every time I have a critical, judgemental thought. I acknowledge that You are the righteous judge over all creation. I surrender to You.

HOW TO FACE YOUR FUTURE

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - PART 12 OF 15

Read: James 4:13-17

INTRODUCTION

In one of Charles Shultz' *Peanuts* comic strips, Lucy and Linus are sitting in front of the television set when Lucy said to Linus, "Go get me a glass of water." Linus replies, "Why should I do anything for you? You never do anything for me." "On your 75th birthday," Lucy promises, "I will bake you a cake." Linus gets up, heads to the kitchen and says, "Life is more pleasant when you have something to look forward to." I think Linus is right. We do like to look forward to the future. That is why so many of us want to know what is going to happen next: next year, next decade, and even next century. People try all kinds of different things to forecast the future: astrology, palm reading and psychics with names like *Sister Julia*. We want to know what we have to look forward to or what we have to dread.

We are going to look at James 4:13-17 today and see what James has to say about "How to Face Your Future." Americans have always been a forward-looking people. An article in U.S. News and World Report said right now Americans are obsessed with the future. They want to know what is going to happen next, next year, next decade, and next century. They are preoccupied with the future. It is amazing how people try all kinds of different things to try to forecast the future: tea leaves, fortune cookies, astrology, and palm reading. We try many different ways to get a grasp on the future. We read books and subscribe to seminars that forecast the economic predictions. We attend conferences and seminars on planning and goal setting. What is the Christian viewpoint toward the future? How am I to relate toward what happens? What should be my reaction to that?

James in this passage talks about how to face the future. He says there are three mistakes that are commonly made that we should be aware of. He gives us a warning. He says plan for your future but be aware of these three mistakes. He illustrates the first mistake with a typical conversation between couples of businessmen. One guy has his MBA from the University of Jerusalem and the other is the CEO of a Tel-Aviv 500 company. They are talking and discussing their plans. In v. 13 we drop into their conversation, "Now listen you who say, today or tomorrow. We will go to this or that city spends a year there, carry on business and makes money." What is wrong with this? People make plans every day. These are just a couple of entrepreneurs, go-getters. There is detail in the business plan; they have it all planned out. When? Today or tomorrow. Where? This or that city. How long? We will spend a year there. What? We will carry on business. Why? Make money. What is wrong with this? The Bible doesn't condemn making a legitimate profit. The Bible talks a lot about planning too. This man has planned everything. His purpose, the place and the progress. He has all the bases covered. What is wrong here? It is the mistakes that he made about the future that we are going to study.

COMMON MISTAKE WE MAKE ABOUT THE FUTURE

1. PLANNING WITHOUT GOD.

There is not a single mention of God in this entire business plan. He knew what he wanted, he knew how to get there, but he didn't check it out with God first. Don't misunderstand. The Bible talks about planning. "No man goes out and builds a house without first considering how much it is going to cost." (Luke 14:28) And the book of Proverbs says over and over again that if I don't plan, I'm a fool. It is wise to plan. He is not talking about planning; he is talking about presumption without God. It is great to have dreams. It is great to have goals as long as you include God and as long as you pray about it. There is nothing wrong with what he did. All of these things are fine. It is what he forgot to do. He forgot to include God. His attitude was one of the self-sufficiency.

An Article in Readers Digest by Alexander Saul says: "Since I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of the Russian Revolution, in the process I have collected hundreds of personal testimonies, read hundreds of books and contributed eight volumes of my own. But if I were asked today to formulate as precisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some sixty million Russians, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat the phrase, 'Men have forgotten God.' What is more if I were called upon to identify the principle trait of the entire Twentieth Century, I would be unable to reflect anything more precise than this statement, 'Men have forgotten God.' " "This is what James is talking about. You can be a believer and forget God in your daily life. I know a lot of people who love the Lord with all their heart but when it comes to planning their business or career or their school education, they are practical atheists.

It is sad to meet somebody who says, "I don't believe in God. I don't believe He exists." But it is sadder to find somebody who says, "I believe He exists," but then acts like He doesn't exist. He doesn't make any plans involving the Lord. He just goes off on his own as if all depends on him. You say, "I believe in God." Does He have a say in your business? "I don't believe in mixing business and faith." All business is God's business if you are a believer. Don't plan without God. That is presumptuous. Planning without God is practical atheism. What is the solution? Include God in your goal setting. V. 15 "Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" Have you realized that even the best laid plans of mice and men often fall through? There is a thing called Murphy's Law. If things can go wrong, they will. Count on it!

Life is just one big if. Right in the middle of life is **if**. Life really is pretty if-fy. I don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, you don't either. I can make an educated guess. But planning without God is presumptuous. The starting point in facing the future is to say, "God, what do you want me to do. What do you want me not to do?" Planning without prayer is presumptuous. He says we should preface all of our planning with the phrase, "if the Lord wills." Couldn't that become a cliché? Of course. You could trivialize it. But he is not saying that. He is saying that the whole attitude of our life should be "It is up to God. Whatever He wants me to do is what I want." It is just a good reminder. Christians for hundreds of years used to write the initials D.V. at the end of their letters. They would sign their name and then write D.V. They stood for the Latin phrase "Deo Valente" which means "Lord willing." James says that ought to be our response to life. It is OK to plan but include God in your plans and goal setting.

There are three possible responses to God's will:

- i. I can make reference to it. That is what he is saying here. I admit that God has a will and I accept it, acknowledge it and make reference to it.
- ii. I can show deference to it. I really want God's will and I accept it into my life.
- iii. I can show preference for it. More than anything else I want God's will in my life. What God wants will be my plan. I deeply desire it

A man is riding his motorcycle along a country road and stops to talk to a preacher standing in the churchyard. As they talk, the rider tells the preacher he is going into town to sell his motorcycle. The preacher reminds him "You ought to say that you are going to town to sell your motorcycle if it be the Lord's will." The man rolls his eyes, laughs, and then roars off down the road. Later that afternoon, the preacher is sitting on his front porch, and sees the motorcycle man stumbling and staggering up the road. The knees of the man are torn open exposing bloody, skinned and scratched up legs. His arm is in a makeshift sling. His shirt is half torn off his back, and his face was swollen black and blue. His hair is a mess; his forearms are bloody and covered with pieces of gravel. "What in the world happened to you?" the preacher asks. "After I left you, I was on my way to town to sell my motorcycle and a big storm came up. I tried to outrun it, but as I was going around a curve, I hit some loose gravel and my motorcycle slid out from under me. I skidded more than a hundred feet on the pavement. I managed to get up, but the motorcycle was a total loss."

"Somehow, I staggered to a nearby farmhouse. As I walked to the door, a frightened woman pointed a shotgun at me. I started running and she started shooting. I ran through the briars and got all scratched up. Finally, I came to a clearing and found a tree to shelter me from the rain. As I stood there picking the buckshot out of my back, lightning struck the tree and knocked me out." Proverbs 16:1, "We may make our plans, but God has the last word." Man proposes, God disposes. Proverbs 16:9 "We should make plans by counting on God to direct us." Stop praying "God bless what I'm doing". Don't pray that anymore. God, I have made my plans. I have worked them all out now you bless them. Instead pray, "God, help me to do what you are blessing." God is doing a lot of fantastic things in the world. I just want to be in on them. Help me to do what you are blessing. I don't want my plans. I want your plans in my life because your plans will provide success in my life. Planning without God is the first mistake. You overcome it by including God in your goal setting.

God is not playing games with you. He wants you to understand his will, his purpose, and his plan for your life. You may say, "I want God to guide me, but I still get confused. I don't know what to do." Often the problem is we are looking for the wrong thing. You need to know what you are looking for before you can find it. So, what is God's will? God's will is not a feeling. Maybe you are looking for a feeling or a supernatural sign. You want God to pull your heartstrings so you will know exactly what to do. The problem is that feelings are unreliable; they will often guide you the wrong way. Feelings can come from fatigue, hormones, or an event you have just experienced. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "*The heart is deceitful*" (NIV). Even your heart plays tricks on you. Even the Devil can create a feeling. Don't wait for a feeling when you are trying to figure out God's plan for your life. God's will is not a formula. In our culture, we want everything to be easy. We want things to follow a simple formula that will instantly change our lives. We want a step-by-step guide. But there is a problem with this approach: There is no room for mistakes.

If God's will is a recipe, what happens if you leave out one ingredient? Leaving baking soda out of a recipe is the difference between a birthday cake and a pancake. What if you have "52 Steps to Knowing God's Will," and you skip step 37? God's will is not a closed system. It is dynamic! It is not always an issue of choosing A or B. In fact, many times you can choose from A to Z, and any of them will be okay. It is your choice. Why would God give you a brain and not expect you to use it? He lets you make choices, and he gives you second chances. If God's will is not a feeling or a formula, what is it? God's will is a relationship. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 1:9, "God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (NIV).

Talk It Over

If you experience a feeling that you believe is telling you something about God's will, what is a right and appropriate response? _____

2. PRESUMING ABOUT TOMORROW.

The women of the church were preparing to serve lunch after a funeral when they found a box of sandwiches filled with roast beef. They went a little overboard exclaiming how delicious they looked. Finally, one woman said, "I had no idea so many of you were crazy about roast beef sandwiches. The next funeral we serve, I will bring some." After a split second's pause, she added, "Unless, of course, the funeral is mine." Presuming about tomorrow is taking it for granted; assuming I'm going to live forever and I have got the rest of my life. v. 14 & 16 "Why you don't even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil." There are a couple reasons we shouldn't presume about the future and assume that we have tomorrow.

- a. Life is unpredictable.** "You don't even know." None of us know what is going to happen tonight much less next year. All we can do is make guesses. Life is so unpredictable. A war could start, the economy could turn around and your friends could leave you. None of us know what is going to happen in life. Life is so unpredictable. Many of you work on commission, or you are self-employed. You go from feast to famine in your income. One day it is great and the next day it is the pits. You don't have any assurance. There is no guarantee of perpetual success. None of us do. Realize that you can't presume on tomorrow. We shouldn't let that frighten us, that life is uncertain. Don't worry about it or be afraid. Just let it cause you to trust God more. Let it cause you to be more dependent on God. You don't know what is going to happen in your life or your business. It just forces you to trust God more. Life is unpredictable.
- b. Life is brief.** "You are a mist". "Mist" in Greek is "atmos" where we get the word "atmosphere." Your life is like fog; it rolls in, in the morning but it burns off by noon. Who knows how long we are going to live? None of us do. How does the Bible describe your life? It uses phrases like a leaf, grass, shadow, cloud, and puff of smoke, vapor. I'm only one heartbeat away from eternity. I don't know how long I'm going to live. Life is short. It goes so fast from hot wheels to wheelchair. Diapers - Dignity - Decay.

Life' is brief. Watch out and don't presume you have the rest of your life. Don't take tomorrow for granted. Isaiah 56:12"Come,' each one cries, `...Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today, or even better!' "Do you know anybody with that kind of attitude? Life is great! Let us party! Let us get drunk! Bring on the beer! The guys who say this have a bumper sticker on their camel:" It's party time in Jerusalem!" Live it up and have fun. We are going to live forever. James says that is a dumb attitude toward life. You can't presume that tomorrow is going to be just the same as today. You can't presume that you are going to live to be 100. Proverbs 27:1"Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."

We love to announce our plans, to make our goals and declare them. Next year I'm going to double my income! Next year I'm going to take over three territories! Announcing a goal can either be a statement of faith or it can be a statement of arrogance. What makes the difference? It is your motive. Why are you saying? God says it is great to have goals but check in with me first. Let me share with you what I think your goals ought to be. Don't presume on tomorrow. What is the solution? Matthew 6:34 (LB) "So don't be anxious about tomorrow; God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time." Live one day at a time that is how God says to face the future. The future could be overwhelming but fortunately it comes in bite-size pieces, a 24-hour segment at a time. Plan for the future but you can only live now. I can't live the future, I can only live today. Plan for the future but take advantage of the present.

Life is what happens to us while we are planning something else. We are always planning what is going to happen in January and miss Christmas. Today is the Good Old Days you are going to talk about in 15 years. Enjoy now. Make the most of now. Don't make the mistake of planning without God. Don't make the mistake of presuming about tomorrow. I don't know if I have next week, much less next year. I shouldn't just assume it. Spencer Johnson, the man who wrote the book "The One Minute Manager" wrote another book called "The Perfect Present." In this book he said the perfect present is literally the perfect present. It is the present time. That is all I have and that is all I have to give to this world. Not next hour or next month but right now. That is the gift that God has given to me so I ought to use it. The present is all I have. Just because the future is uncertain and unsure and brief, doesn't mean you get all uptight and get paralyzed with panic and worry. It is the motivation to trust God more. You face your future by putting your trust in God. I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future. That is what counts. David said in Psalm 35:15 "Lord, my days are in your hands." James is talking about commitment. Don't make the mistake of planning without God and don't make the mistake of presuming about tomorrow. Instead, include God in your planning and make the most of today. Live your life one day at a time

Talk it over.

Why do you think God wants you to take it one day at a time? _____

3. PUTTING OFF DOING GOOD.

"Anyone then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." (v. 17) James is talking about the issue of procrastination. "I'm intending to do it." Have you ever met somebody who is always "aiming to do it?" I always want to say, "When are you going to pull the trigger?" Procrastination is my sin. It only caused me sorrow knows I ought to change my ways.

In fact, I will but tomorrow. We love to put off. James says that is a trap. Just because you know the right thing to do doesn't mean you are going to do it. How do you define sin? We think of evil activities: murder, commit adultery, cheat, lie, and steal. Those are sins of commission. But there is another kind of sin that is known as sins of omission. "To him who knows to do good and doesn't do it, it is sin." I can do nothing and still sin. Because there are things I ought to be doing. You can be a part of a legalistic church. "I don't drink, smoke, cuss or chew or run around with girls that others do." You don't do anything but you still forget God in your life. Christianity is more than simply avoiding evil. If all that the Christian life was a bunch of "don'ts; don't do this, don't do that, then everybody who is dead would qualify as a Christian, because they don't do anything. Procrastination is a subtle trap. It is the land of "Someday I will..." "One of these days ..." and you never do because we presume upon tomorrow. "One of these days I'm going to get serious about God. I'm really going to get committed."

God says you don't have any guarantee of tomorrow, none at all. The solution is "Do it now". Proverbs 3:27-28 "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Come back later; I will give it tomorrow' when you now have it with you. "If somebody comes to you and asks you a favor, don't say "tomorrow or later". Don't procrastinate. If you can do it now, do it now. There are three things you can do with your life: spend it, waste it, and invest it. You can waste your life; there are a lot of ways. TV commercials will show you lots of ways to waste your time, money, or life. Or you can spend it. You can spend your life trying to acquire things: fame, pleasure. Or you can invest your life. The best use of life is to invest it on something that is going to outlast it. "He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep for that which he cannot lose." Jim Elliot. What is going to last forever? The Word of God and people. People will last one of two places for eternity. Where I spend my time now may determine where I will spend eternity.

Invest your life in a thing that will last and that is the word of God and people. Make it count. There was a commercial years ago on TV by the Peace Corps: "It doesn't matter how long you live if you are not doing anything with your life." We worry about the duration; how long are we going to live. Am I making my life count or frittering it away on non-essentials, things that aren't going to count? God says make your life count do it now! Remember the story that Jesus told about the talents? The master gave one talent to one man, five to another and ten to another. He left and came back years later. Two guys had doubled their money. (A talent was a weight of gold.) The third man had taken his gold, buried it in the ground and did nothing with it. The master said, "At least you could have put it in a passbook account and got interest on it!" He said, "You wicked servant!" Why? What had he done? Nothing. That is wickedness.

Doing nothing with your life is bad. Make your life count. I can do all kinds of things that keep me from doing those no-no sins but if I'm not doing anything in a positive sense, what does it matter? God said it doesn't! Whatever you intend to do for the Lord, do it now! Not next week, next month, next year. Thinking about witnessing to a friend and inviting him to church? Do it now! Thinking about teaching a class and getting involved in Bible study? Do it now! Thinking about starting to tithe and giving? Do it now! Do your giving while you are living, then you will know where it is going'. A businessman in Dallas gives 50% of his income back to the Lord. There is a guy who has the concept of doing it now! 2 Corinthians 6 "Right now God is ready to welcome you. Today He is ready to save you!" When is the best time to get it together with God? Luke 12 Jesus told a story that illustrates what James is teaching in this passage of Scripture.

He tells the story about a man who is very successful in life but he made a very foolish decision. He made the same mistakes that James talks about all three mistakes. He planned without God. He presumed about tomorrow. He put off doing good. V. 16 "Jesus told them a parable,' the ground of a certain rich man produced good crop [literally, abundant crop] and he thought to himself "What shall I do. I have no place to store my crops." Then he said, "This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods and I will say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy. Eat, drink, be merry,'" but God said to him 'You fool. This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get all that you have prepared for yourself.'" This guy has "I" problems all he can see is himself. Doing "my" thing for "me". God says, "How dumb!" You don't know how long you are going to live. Don't get morbid about it. Don't worry all the time, "Am I going to die tonight?" I invite you to give your life to Christ, not because you are going to die tonight, but because you have to live tomorrow!

CONCLUSION

The fact is none of us have any certainty how long we are going to be here. Just consider that in your planning and do three things: plan with God; don't presume on tomorrow, but live today by making it count; don't wait on the things you know are the right things to do. "Right now, God is ready to welcome you. Today He is ready to save you!" For some of you, today is your day to give your life to the Lord. It is today. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Today! In the book of Acts is the story how Paul was a prisoner before King Felix in the northern part of Israel. Paul talked to the King, "Felix, God has a plan for your life and God wants to work in your life. You are not here by accident. You were not made and created just to breathe and take up space, get up in the morning, go to work, come home and watch TV, go to bed, retire and die. There is more to life than that.

It starts when you give your life to Jesus, God's Son, and you commit yourself to Him. He becomes the manager of your life and He will direct you." Paul tells him exactly, "Start by getting in tune with the Lord and establishing that relationship with Him." Felix said, "That is really interesting, Paul. In fact, I'd like to hear more about it. Why don't you come back in a few days and we will discuss it some more?" He never got another chance. It is presumptuous to depend on tomorrow. What are your plans for the future? Have you set days, marked your calendar, scheduled appointments and then prayed, "By the way, God, I want you to bless my life?" God says that is practical atheism. The person who acts as if God doesn't exist in his planning is no different than the person who doesn't believe He exists. Does God have a say in your schedule or do you just fill it up? Does God have a priority in your planning?

Let us get specific. Have you talked to God about how you are going to retire? Or have you just thought you can do it any way you want to? Have you talked to God about your plans to go back to school to get that degree? Have you talked to God about your plans, to date, to get married, or to remain single? Don't you think He is interested in those kinds of things? Have you talked to God about your business? A career change? Your investments and how you spend your money? James is saying that none of us have any right to just plan our lives as if God doesn't even care. Check in with Him first. Consult Him. Do you have a tendency to take tomorrow for granted? "There will always be time to spend time with my kids. Right now, we are just trying to make ends meet. Once we reach a certain economic level, then I'm going to spend more time with my husband/wife." Right! What starts out as a temporary condition ends up as a permanent lifestyle.

People are going 100 km an hour, bringing in the bucks. And then once they have them, there are no relationships left. If you only had a week left, how would you spend it? What would you do with your husband, wife, and children? God says, live each day and each week as if it were your last. Don't get morbid about it. And plan for the future. But you can only live right now. That is what counts. The number one way we presume on tomorrow is by credit buying. An undue amount of credit buying is presumption in the future. "We can afford it. Things are only going to get better!" That is presuming on tomorrow. Live each day as if it were your last.

TALK IT OVER

1. Why do you think God allows us to make choices and even mistakes when we are searching for his will? _____

2. Think of something you've been worrying about. What is an action step you can take instead of worrying? _____

3. Is God a partner in your business? How? Prove it. _____

4. What have you known that you ought to do and you know is the right thing to do but you have just been putting it off? _____

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. James 4:17

PRAYER FOR THE DAY:

God, I want you in my life. I realize you made me for a purpose. Help me to understand it more. I want you to be the Chairman of the Board in my life. Lord, I don't want to do planning without you. Lord, I want you in my plans. I want to know what your will is. Lord, help me to live one day at a time. Help me to plan for tomorrow but to live in today, not worry but to trust you. Lord, help me to stop putting off doing what I know I ought to do. I thank you for your presence and for your word that it is practical and it applies to my life in areas I need it most.

HOW TO BE WISE WITH YOUR WEALTH.

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - PART 13 OF 15

Read James 5:1-6

INTRODUCTION

In 1923, some of the most powerful and wealthy financiers met at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. They had met to strategize and collaborate together on their personal fortunes as well as discuss the economies of the civilized world. Among the powerful movers and shakers of the last century who attended this meeting were:

- The president of the largest independent steel company in the world;
- The president of the New York Stock Exchange;
- A member of the President of the United States own cabinet;
- The most successful trader on Wall Street;
- The head of the world's largest industrial monopoly.
- The president of the Bank of International Settlement.

Collectively, these men controlled more wealth than there was in the United States Treasury; for years, the newspapers and magazines had been printing their success stories and urged the youth of America to follow their examples. Money talks. Has it ever occurred to you that no one has ever been encouraged by our world system to imitate poor people? See that guy in the lane next to you driving that old car? Find out his secret? See that woman wearing clothing so out of fashion . . . find out what it takes to become like her! Not hardly. Eight years after that historic conference in the Edgewater Beach Hotel, in 1931, James Truslow Adams coined that phrase when he delivered a speech during which he encouraged everyone to join in this American Dream in the pursuit of gaining status and personal recognition. According to the world system, the golden rule is: the person with the gold, rules. Money talks and people listen! So, if you want to have a voice, make sure you are in pursuit of the American dream.

The Bible, on the other hand, delivers a different message and an entirely different path. We have thirty-eight parables recorded in the Gospels, delivered by Jesus Christ. Of the thirty-eight, sixteen deal with the subject of money. In fact, one out of ten verses in the New Testament mentions possessions. God, the heart of the believer will always want something better; something easier; something newer, something bigger; something more. The truth is, money does talk but when it does, what is it really saying?! The Apostle James knew that money talked in his generation just like in ours. Today James is going to tell us how to be wise with our wealth. Many people wrongly believe that the Bible teaches that it is wrong to be wealthy. They think that the Bible says: "Money is the root of all evil". But the Bible does not teach this. What the Bible says is: "The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang." 1 Tim 6:10 (NASV). Money is a necessity for living; but the love of money, being money focused, is the root of all evil. What is the focus in our daily lives today? God is not opposed to wealth. In fact, many people in the Bible were extremely wealthy. Abraham was probably a millionaire if it was valued according to today's standards.

David and Solomon were both wealthy men of their time. Job was also wealthy and the list could go on and on. It is not wealth that is evil but the love of money that causes all kinds of problems. In New Testament times, there was no such thing as a middle class. The people in the entire New Testament times were either very rich or very poor. You were either a have or a have not. The system caused the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer. The rich tended to manipulate and oppress the poor people, who were continually abused. James lashes out at non-Christian use of money by the wealthy. He gives a rebuke probably one of the most negative passages in the entire New Testament. He devastates them with his words. He condemns them with four specific abuses they were guilty of. Although we may not commit these sins to the same degree, this passage is a healthy warning to us to make sure that no matter how much money we have, we use it wisely.

We are going to look at the wrong and the right uses of wealth. Everyone in this room is wealthy according to world standards. If you own a car, you are wealthy. If you have more than one change of clothes, you are wealthy. If you own a home, you are in the top 5% of the world. By world standards, we are wealthy. I think this can apply to us. I'm not saying this to load on a bunch of guilt. I think we need to be aware of the fact that God has blessed us. We need to be grateful for what we have. James mentions four common abuses of wealth. Let us look first at the wrong uses of wealth and how to avoid them and then we will look at the right uses of wealth. James lashes out at the wrong use of money by the wealthy. He gives a rebuke probably one of the most negative passages in the Bible against the misuse of money. He looks at three specific areas we need to be aware of when it comes to money. James gives his listeners a healthy warning of how they should handle their wealth. In other words, how to be Wise with Money.

I. THE WRONG USES OF WEALTH

1. Wrong accumulation of wealth.

He says, "Don't hoard it." V. 3, "You have hoarded wealth in the last days." Of the four errors James points out that these people are guilty of, James says, "You have hoarded wealth." God says that money is not to be stockpiled, collected in piles just for the sake of having it. God wants his money in circulation. He is not talking about savings. There is a legitimate place for savings. God encourages us to save money. But He is referring to getting more and more simply for the sake of getting more so you that can have it. Once in a while you will read in the newspaper of an elderly person who died. They were in obvious poverty. When the bed mattress was moved, they found hundreds of thousands of shillings.

This is not somebody who saved their money but who had hoarded it. Why did they do it? They were afraid of losing it. Money had become an end in itself. Accumulating had become the goal of life. They were so afraid of losing money they wouldn't spend it. In the New Testament times you could hoard wealth three ways: Stockpile food, collect clothes and Gather precious metals and jewels. This is the way wealthy people showed off their wealth in New Testament times. If you had money you would show it by having a lot of food, clothes, and precious metals and jewels. James speaks about these three types of wealth in v. 2-3: "*Your wealth has rotted, moths have eaten your clothes and your gold and silver are corroded.*" Everything you have (the food has spoiled, the moths have eaten your clothes, the gold and silver is rusting, corroding.)

The point he is making here is that whatever you simply accumulate deteriorates. What you accumulate will deteriorate. God doesn't want us to get wealth just for the sake of getting wealth. He wants us to put it in circulation. He says your clothes get moth-eaten. Which clothes get moth-eaten? The ones you wear all the time or the ones you keep stockpiled in the back of your closet? It is the ones that you hoard. Your food has gone rotten. Which food goes rotten? The food you eat every day? No, it is the stuff in the back of the refrigerator that has been there for three months. We have created new life forms in our refrigerator! Wealth is to be used not hoarded. In our last study, we talked about the man in Luke 12 who was very successful and had a great crop harvest. He said, "I know what I will do. I will just go build bigger barns." He didn't think about giving any of it away. He didn't think about keeping any of it in circulation. It was a selfish use of wealth. He said, "I'm going to hoard it." James says the wrong use of wealth, number one when it comes to accumulation, don't hoard it.

Talk it over.

What would be the most difficult possession you have to give away? What would make it so hard? _____

2. Misappropriation of wealth.

God is not only concerned with what we have got but also how we got it. "Don't steal it." Don't use dishonest means to rip people off. There are a lot of different ways to make dishonest money. One way is to simply not pay your debts. In the New Testament, you worked on a daily basis. You were hired at the beginning of the day, you worked all day, and at the end of the day you were given your check. A man would go into town and hire the workers. There were no contracts or labor unions and no laws to protect workers. If the boss wanted to rip you off, he could. You could work all day and the boss come out and says, "I don't like your work," then you went home with no money. He kept the money and also got your work. This is what James is criticizing. *"The wages you have failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you."* v. 4

James is saying that in the accumulation of wealth, don't hoard it. In the appropriation of wealth, don't steal it. Don't be dishonest. If I charge too much, if I sell a used car to you and don't tell you about major repairs, if I cheat on taxes, if I waste time and I'm being paid for it, that is wrong and I'm no different than the unscrupulous employer. James is picturing a person who is squeezing every last dollar out of another, even to the point of stiffing what is due to them. We are squeezing money so tightly will not give what is right to another. If someone works for us, they must be given what is due to them for their work. We must not be swindling our employer, trying to get more money out of them than what is due to us. Pay people back what we owe. How awful to let our debts to remain outstanding especially when we have borrowed from our Christian brothers and sisters.

3. Wrong allocation of wealth.

The way we spend our money is very important. James blasts these guys for how they spent their money. V. 5 "*You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.*" In the allocation of money don't waste it. We are not to waste our wealth. One of the greatest temptations, I think, that we have to avoid as we make more and more, we are tempted to spend it selfishly on ourselves. The more money you make the easier it is to waste it. We tend to say things like, "I'm worth it. I can afford it, so why not?" Just because I can afford something doesn't mean I ought to buy it. James says don't waste it. It is very easy to waste your money, the more you have of it. Our society gets pleasure watching people waste money.

I don't think it is by accident that the most popular programs were *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, wealthy families we watched having lavish parties and spending millions. The dresses and gowns alone would pay off the national debt! We don't see very many shows on TV about poor people, lifestyles of the Poor and unknown. Christmas, one of the holy days of the year, has turned into the consumer event of the year. By August merchandisers began planning how we would spend our money. There are millions of ways to squander money. James says in the accumulation of wealth, don't hoard it. In the appropriation of wealth, don't steal it. In the application of wealth, don't waste it. Don't just spend it on things and pleasures that don't add anything to your life. Just because I can afford it doesn't mean I should have it. v. 5 "*You have fattened yourself for the slaughter.*"

Talk it over.

What are some of the things you spend money on that do not have an eternal impact?

4. Wrong application of wealth.

James is talking about how we use it is influence. He says, don't abuse it. Wealth gives us much more than simply buying ability. Richard Foster in his book *Money, Sex and Power*, an excellent book, says that money has a lot more power than simply buying power. When you have money, it gives you influence, and authority. We listen to people who make money more than people who are poor. Why do they get away with things that we don't get away with? Scripture says, "The children of this world are wiser than the children of light." They recognize that money is influence. They use it to influence people. It is often for very poor reasons. They use it to manipulate and finance campaigns. Christians ought to recognize that it has influence and use it for good. The point that James is making in this passage is that we ought to use our affluence for good influence. James says that we should recognize that it is powerful and not abuse it. Use it in good ways. V. 6 "*You have condemned and ruined innocent men, and they are powerless to stop you.*" Evidently in James' time, the rich were buying off judges and circumventing justice.

If they wanted to take advantage of a guy, they would take him to court, talk to the judge and slip him a couple of bills, and then they would get their own way. James said, *"You have condemned and ruined innocent men, and they are powerless to stop you."* Even today, a lot of people use money to manipulate others. I have known of families where one person would keep the relatives under control by threatening to cut them out of the will. We can keep our kids under control, a lot of times, by bribing them with their allowance. This is the wrong application of wealth. There used to be company towns in the United States where the company would get the people who worked there so in debt to them that they couldn't leave if they wanted to. They were using money to manipulate them. The consequences of misused wealth are in v. 2-3. Hoarded wealth is going to decay and devalue. Dishonest, wasted and abused wealth will be judged in eternity. James has some pretty strong words on the abuse of wealth. Now let us look at what the Bible says are the right uses of wealth and things we ought to practice. Go back over these four issues; the wrong accumulation of wealth, the misappropriation of wealth, the wrong allocation of wealth, and the wrong application of wealth and see what God has to say about how to manage my money.

Talk it over.

Have you ever struggled with being ethical with your finances? How did you deal with this?

THE RIGHT USES OF WEALTH.

1. Right accumulation of wealth.

Proverbs 21:20 *"The wise man saves for the future, but the foolish man spends whatever he gets."*
Proverbs 30:24 *"Consider the ant how it stores up in the winter."* This is the principle that the Bible says, we ought to save money faithfully. The average American only saved 4% of his income. The average European saves 16% of his income. The average Japanese person saves 25% of his income. Those who save very little is because they live for today. We are the Now Generation. I want it now whether I can afford it or not. I will put it on my credit card. God says the wise person saves and invests his money.

Jesus told a number of parables. Over half deal with money. He talked more about money than he did about heaven or hell. He talks about investment, how the wise man invested his money and the unwise man didn't invest his money. The master came back and said, "You are wicked." It is wicked not to make our money work for us. When we save our money, we get our money to work for us rather than working for our money. In order to develop the habit of saving you have to do two things: You need to learn to live on a margin. That means live on less than you make. John D. Rockefeller said many times, "Save 10%, tithe 10%, live on 80%." Obviously, that worked for him. He was a very wealthy and influential person.

I think the principle of living on a margin applies also to our time. One of the reasons we are late to things is because we plan to arrive on time. If you want to arrive on time you actually have to plan to arrive early. Leave on a margin so when all the unexpected things that are going to happen come up, you will arrive on time. You learn contentment. You have to learn contentment with what we have. If you don't learn contentment you will spend all the money you have as soon as you get it. A friend used to say, "Use it up, wear it out and make it do or do without." Today that guy is a millionaire. One of the biggest enemies of contentment is advertising. We see things and think, "How am I going to get along without that?" What is the purpose of saving? Here is where the Bible differs from the world's thinking in a major way. The world thinks you save money for security. If I could just accumulate a big enough bank account, I would be financially secure. The problem is, there is no such thing as absolute security. No matter how much money you have, you could lose it instantly.

Bunker Hunt, a billionaire, in 1986 Time Magazine said he lost over one billion dollars. Bunker Hunt said, "A billion dollars is not what it used to be." You can lose it no matter how much you make. No matter what kind of job you have, you could break a leg, get sick, the economy can turn around and the place can burn down. In order to have security you have to put your security in something that cannot be taken away from you. Everything that I have in life can be taken away from me: my family, my money, my reputation and everything. There is only one thing that cannot be taken away from me and that is my relationship to Jesus Christ. I have to put my security in Christ and not a passbook account, CD's, stock. We don't save like the world saves simply for security. Paul said in Phil. 4:19 *"My God shall supply all your needs."* That is security. That is the way to be prepared for financial reverses to find security in the Lord. Why do we save? The Christian saves for stewardship reasons, not for security reasons. Three reasons for saving:

- a. **It prevents us from impulse buying.** We don't spend money on foolish impulses. If we are not saving it, the tendency is to spend it as soon as you get it. You will see things you want and buy it and you really don't need it. Proverbs 21:20 *"The wise man saves for the future, but the foolish man spends whatever he gets."* He does it hastily too. You have to save it so you don't use it on foolish impulses.
- b. **It allows us to be able to help other people when they have a need.** We save in order to help others. If you want to be one of those rare, unselfish people, you have to change your focus. You have to shift your focus away from yourself to other people. That is not something that comes naturally, so it is something you have to learn to do.
- c. **It gets your money working for you rather than you working for your money.** That is the principle of investment. When you are saving your money, it is being invested wisely. That is the right accumulation according to scripture.

Talk it over.

Have you been saving money faithfully? If not, how will you start?

2. Right appropriation of wealth

The Bible says in Proverbs 13:11 *"Wealth from gambling quickly disappears; wealth from hard work grows."* What is gambling? A get-rich-quick scheme. In the book of Proverbs, at least six or seven times, scripture teaches us don't get involved in get rich quick schemes. Easy come, easy go. You make it quick; you will lose it quick. Proverbs 14:23, *"Hard work brings a profit; mere talk leads to poverty."* Over and over again in Scripture the Bible teaches the value of hard work. It is a legitimate honest way to increase your income by making money honestly through work. If you talk all the time, dream, plan get-rich-quick schemes you are not going to prosper in life. God approves of work as a means to wealth. Proverbs 14:23 (LB) *"Work brings profit, talk brings poverty."* Proverbs 11:16 (GN) *"A lazy man will never have money but an aggressive man will get rich."* Proverbs 12:27 (GN) *"If you are lazy you will never get what you are after. But if you work hard, you can get a fortune."*

What matters to God is not so much how much money you make but how you make it. In a message I did on the Ten Commandments series on "How to Prosper with a Clear Conscience" I talk about the proper ways to increase your income. I'm often asked, "How much money can I make as a Christian, legitimately?" There is no set limit to the amount of money you make. Scripture says you can make as much money as you can in your lifetime as long as you meet these four qualifications:

- a. **As long as it doesn't hurt your own health.** Some people literally work themselves to death. They amass a personal fortune then have a heart attack. In our society it seems like the workaholics are the heroes. Scripture teaches that health must always take priority over wealth. Proverbs 23:4, *"Do not wear yourselves out to get rich. Have the wisdom to show restraint."* There are so many people that are working themselves to death trying to afford things that really, we don't need. Don't wear yourself out trying to get rich. Health must take a priority over wealth.
- b. **As long as it doesn't hurt your family.** How many homes have fallen apart because kids are being ignored while parents are too busy making money to buy things for the kids? I have discovered that what my kids want is not so much things as me. They just want me to spend time with them. They would rather have my time than anything I could afford to buy for them. We can get so busy making a living that we can forget to make a life.

- c. **As long as it doesn't hurt other people.** This is the exact opposite of the world's view which says, "It is a dog-eat-dog world, get all you can, can all you get, sit on the can and spoil the rest." God demands we make money honesty and fairly. Proverbs 21:20 "*A fortune can be made from cheating but there's a curse that goes with it.*" *We are going to reap what we so.* Proverbs 16:8 (GN) "It is better to have a little, honestly earned, than a large income dishonestly gained."
- d. **As long as I keep my spiritual life on the same level.** The principle of balance. As long as my spiritual growth is progressing at the level as my financial prosperity, go ahead and make whatever you can. 3 John 2 "*Beloved I wish that you may prosper and be in health even as your soul prospers.*"

John says, "I pray that God will bless you financially as you are blessed spiritually." I pray that you will prosper as much financially as you prosper spiritually. God wants us to be in balance. If my income and your income were at the same degree as your walk with the Lord, would you be a millionaire or a pauper or somewhere in between? There must be a balance. God says that if you are going to set financial goals you need to set spiritual goals too. Set some relational goals. If all you do is set financial goals, then you are out of balance and God says it is wrong.

Talk it over

Have you been making money honestly? _____

3. Right allocation of wealth.

The Bible says we are to spend money wisely. The Scripture says, "*The plans of the diligent lead to profit as sure as haste leads to poverty.*" He is talking about planning your money and planning your spending. We spend 16 years in school learning how to make money but not six weeks learning how to spend it wisely. It is easier to get into debt than to get out of debt. Buy now, pay later. I have never had an easy payment. They are all difficult. The number one reason for financial pressure is not that we don't make enough but we don't spend it wisely. The problem is not that we don't make enough, but we don't spend it wisely. The more your income goes up it seems your expenses go up. Our yearning capacity always tends to exceed our earning capacity. How do you spell relief? BUDGET. Have a budget. Spending money wisely means having a budget. What is a budget? It is planned spending. Telling your money where you want it to go rather than wondering where it went. The wise man plans. "*The plans of the diligent lead to profit as sure as haste leads to poverty.*" The opposite of budgeted spending is impulse buying. That leads to poverty. I see it, I want it and I'm going to buy it. Part of this means keeping good records. Proverbs 27:23 (LB) "*Riches can disappear fast so watch your business interest closely.*" God wants us to make money honestly, save it faithfully and spend it wisely.

Talk it over.

Share with your group member if you have been spending money wisely or not.

4. The right application of wealth.

How do we use the influence that money has? We are to give money generously. Proverbs 11:24-25 *"It is possible to give away and become richer. It's also possible to hold on too tightly and lose everything. Yes, the generous man shall be rich. By watering others, he waters himself."* This principle is taught over and over again in Scripture. Give and it will be given unto you. Just like seeds, the more we sow the more we reap. There are more promises in the Bible related to giving than on any other subject. It is incredible what God promises when we learn to give. He wants us to learn to be givers because God is a giver. If we are going to learn to become like God, we have to learn to be giving people. No matter how wealthy I have become, I'm not financially free until I have learned to give. In order to live abundantly, I have to give abundantly. "When it comes to tithing, some people have sclerosis of the giver." The root of the word "miserable" is "miser". When I'm a miser, when I hold on and I'm not a generous person with my giving then I'm miserable. But if I learn to give, I will be a very happy person.

You have heard many people say, "You can't take it with you." That is very true, but you can send it on ahead. "Store up for yourselves treasure in Heaven." Matthew 6:20 "Where your treasure is your heart will be also." In Heaven there are no moths or rust of the things James mentioned. There are not any up there. I heard about the guy that died and got to heaven. He saw all the big mansions and then one little shack. He said, "Is that where I'm supposed to live? Why?" Answer: "That is all the building material you sent ahead." How do you send it on ahead? How do you store up treasure in heaven? The only way you can store up treasure in heaven is by investing it in people who are going there. There are only two things that are going to last forever: the word of God and people. Everything else is going to burn up at the judgment. Invest your time and money in the word of God and people.

When you invest in those two things, then you will store up treasures in heaven. How do you do that? How do you invest in people? Jesus told a parable that illustrates this. In Luke 16 Jesus told a story that shocked a lot of people because he used a crook as an example to make a spiritual point. Luke 16:1 "Jesus told the disciples, 'There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So, he called in the man and said, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management because you can no longer be a manager.'" The manager said to himself, "What am I going to do now? My master is taking away my job. He was fired for being dishonest. I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm too ashamed to beg. I know what I will do so that when I lose my job people will welcome me into their homes." So, he called in each one of his master's debtors and asked the first one, "How much do you owe my master?" "800 gallons of olive oil," he replied. The manager told him, "Quick, take your bill.

Set down quickly and make it 400." Then he asked the second, "How much do you owe?" "1000 bushels of wheat," he replied. "Take your bill and make it 800." He was being dishonest again simply to make friends with these guys. "The master commended his dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." Jesus told a story about a crook and used the guy as an example. He didn't commend his dishonesty. "But the master said, that really was pretty smart. You are just taking care of yourself. For the people of this world are shrewder in their dealings with their own kind than the people of light." People in the world realize the influence that money has. But they often use it for the wrong reason. Then he says, "So I say to you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself so that when it is gone you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

Jesus is saying that when you use money and invest it in people who come to know Christ, you are making friends for eternity. When you get to heaven, they will say they are there because of you. You will be welcomed in. "You gave to a missionary fund that caused a missionary to come and tell me about the Lord. I'm here because you gave" or "You gave for a building fund to build a building and I came to that church and came to know the Lord. I'm in heaven because of you." Jesus says; use your affluence for good influence. Then people will welcome you into eternal dwellings. Who is going to be the welcoming committee for you? Who is going to say, "I'm here because of you?" This is what Jesus is talking about here. We should use the right application and give money generously.

Talk it over.

Have you been giving money generously? Give an example _____

CONCLUSION

Everything we give on this side of eternity is being accredited to our account on the other side in eternity. Giving is to be regular. It is to be consistent. I Corinthians 16:2 on every Sunday, put aside something from what you have earned during the week, and use it for the offering. The amount depends on how much the Lord has helped you to earn. It is proportional. In Deuteronomy 14:23 (LB) The purpose of tithing is simply to teach us to put God first in our life. God doesn't need our money. He is wealthy. But he wants us. He wants what money represents. He wants our lives. I believe the Scripture teaches that God wants us to be financially free. If your finances are in a mess right now, God promised over and over again to care for us who will place our financial burden in His care and follow His principles. These principles are all through Scripture. When you think about it, unmanageable finances are really a symptom of a much deeper problem of an unmanageable life. That is, trying to live without God's guidance. If we try to live without the principles of this book we are going to get into trouble in our time, money, relationships, health, and any area of life. Unmanaged finances simply mean misplaced priorities. We are putting physical things before our spiritual relationship. True financial freedom involves understanding and applying God's principles for handling money.

God is serious about teaching us the right way to handle money. Be warned: The choice to follow God's plan for money may require you to reject some financial practices that are widely accepted. The starting point for financial freedom is to make Jesus Christ the manager of your life. You start to live abundantly by letting Him come into your life and making Him the manager of not just your money but of your time, home, past and make Him number one in your life.

Talk it over.

1. What would you say is the desire of your heart? Does the way you spend your money support or contradict your answer? _____

2. What would you say is the desire of your heart? Does the way you spend your money support or contradict your answer? _____

3. Think about your own financial situation. God wants you to be financially free. Which of these principles have you been violating or not been following clearly? _____

4. What is your biggest temptation when it comes to managing your finances responsibly? _

A VERSE TO REMEMBER.

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. James 5:4

PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Heavenly Father I pray, that as I have looked at your word today, I will take it and apply it to my life in areas I need to use it that I might be a testimony to the world in finances. Lord, thank you that you are never finished with me. Thank you for the reminder that the riches of this life are temporary. Change my heart to be invested in eternity and your kingdom. Thank you for all that you have blessed me with and guard me from any selfish desires. Thank you that you promise the coming of your presence in my life. I pray that you would strip away anything in my heart and mind that would hinder intimacy in our relationship.

“HOW TO DEVELOP PATIENCE” DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS PART 14 OF 15

Read: James 5:7-12

INTRODUCTION

A family was out vacationing at the lake one summer. Dad had been puttering out by the boat house. His 3-year-old, little Billy thought that would be a good time to check out the shiny aluminum fishing boat tied up at the end of the dock. So, he went to the dock and put one foot on the boat, and one foot on the dock. He lost his balance and fell into the water, which were about 5 or 6 feet deep. Hearing the splash, the dad came running from the boat house, jumped into the water, swam down, but was unable to see anything in the murky water so he came up for air. Sick with panic, he went right back down and began to feel everywhere around the bottom. He couldn't feel anything. Finally, on his way up, he felt little Billy's arms locked in a death grip on one of the posts of the dock, about 4 feet under water. Prying the boy's fingers loose, they burst up together through the surface to fill their lungs with life giving air. Finally, when the adrenaline had stopped surging, and nerves had calmed down a little bit, the Father asked his son, "What on earth were you doing down there hanging onto the post so far under the water? And little Billy's answer was a classic, laced with the wisdom only a toddler could give. He said, "I was just waiting for you dad. Just waiting for you."

Life is full of waiting. As a child we wait to start school. Then we can hardly wait till we can get out. We go to college and we wait to graduate. We wait to find our first good job. We wait at stop lights. We wait in line at the store. We wait in the doctor's office. And you know what? We hate to wait. Did you know that when you go into a restaurant there are five distinct waiting points? Let me tell you what they are: Number one: You wait to be seated. Number two: You wait to place your order. Number three: You wait for the food to arrive. Number four: You wait for the bill and Number five: You wait for the change if you use cash or if you use a credit card you wait to sign the slip. There is a lot of waiting in a restaurant. No wonder the person who serves you is called a "wait-er" or a "wait-ress". They assist you in waiting.

Most parents would agree that their children don't want to wait for anything. The last thing kids want to hear is Mom say, "Not now." It can prompt anger, frustration and even hopelessness. This "dis-ease" of waiting follows most of us into our adult years. We may not respond with the same emotional outbursts as children, but most of us still hate waiting for what we want. And our modern society just makes it worse. We want everything done quickly and new devices constantly spring up to meet those demands and encourage our impatience. We are not used to waiting, and the more our technology caters to our immediate desires, the less we feel willing to wait. Such is our dilemma as Christians. While society makes every attempt to make our life easier and faster, God works on a very different timetable. In his mind, nothing is wrong with waiting. In fact, waiting can actually be a positive good that he often uses to make us more like his Son. Today we are continuing our walk through the book of James. Today we are going to find out how to develop patience.

Today I want us to look at three questions about “Developing Patience”. They are:

- I. WHEN SHOULD I BE PATIENT?
- II. WHY SHOULD I BE PATIENT?
- III. HOW SHOULD I BE PATIENT?

I. WHEN SHOULD I BE PATIENT?

There are three special times when all of us need an extra dose of patience. We need to wait:

a. When circumstances are uncontrollable.

Did you know that a lot of your life is not in your control? There are a lot of things that you have no control of. What you do have control of is: “How you respond to the circumstances of life.” James uses the example of a farmer to prove his point. Follow along in verse seven with me: “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain.” James 5:7 (NKJV) you don’t become a farmer unless you have a lot of patience. Part of the job description of being a farmer is you do a lot of waiting.

Farming requires a lot of faith. The farmer waits to till the soil, wait to plant the seed, wait to cultivate and wait to harvest. There are so many factors that the farmer has no control over; weather, rain, heat and the economy. Do you know how most people try to control the uncontrollable? They worry about it. Is anyone in here a worrier? We think that somehow by worrying then we can fix the situation. But to worry about something you can change is dumb and to worry about something you can’t change is useless. Either way to worry is senseless. We need to develop patience when situations are uncontrollable.

Think over

Discuss the uncontrollable circumstances that you have faced in life and how did you respond?

b. When people are unchangeable.

You can’t change people and you can’t keep people from changing. Can you influence them? Yes. Can you change them? No. There are times when patience can be your only response. The word for patience in the Greek is the combined word “macrothumos” – “macro” means “long” – “thumos” means “heat.” It literally means – putting up with the heat for a long time. In other words, the word means “endurance.” In dealing with people, there are a lot of situations where you must develop patience. James gives an example of the prophets. James 5:10: *“Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”* What was the role of prophets? To help people change. The prophets needed a lot of patience because they were dealing with people who would not change. They sought to bring people back to God so that their behavior would be transformed.

Have you noticed that people resist change? Maybe you have heard the expression that the only person who likes change is a baby in wet diaper. For most people, when you make any little tiny suggestion, they resist you!

Talk it over

Do you have anybody in your life right now who refuses to change? Do you know how difficult it is to live with that kind of person? From this study what will you do?

c. When problems are unexplainable.

James gives us the greatest example in the Bible of having patience when unexplainable circumstances happen to a person when he says: "You have heard of the perseverance of Job..." James 5:11. Many translations use the word "patience" or "endurance" instead of the word "perseverance." Job he was a wealthy man but in the period of two days he lost it all. Life for him fell apart. He lost all his wealth and he lost his health. His children were killed, and he developed sores from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet, people who walked by him just shook their heads and said: "Poor Job! What did he do to make God mad at him?" He was suffering physically, financially and emotionally. God allowed Satan to test Job. The worst part of his suffering was that Job had no clue why he was suffering and God was not giving him any answers. For thirty-seven chapters in the book of Job, God is silent even when Job seeks an answer from God. Yet Job keeps looking to God for an answer anyway. He kept calling God for an answer. He never gave up. That is why James says: "Remember the patience of Job."

Folks I know that there are times when life does not seem fair but who told you it would be? A lot of things in life just don't make sense. You may never understand this side of heaven why things happen. Job never understood why bad stuff happens to good people when he was going through his suffering. There was no apparent reason for his misfortune. Of all people, Job had the privilege to say, "Why me?" Life is not fair! That is true. God never said it would be fair. A lot of things in life just don't make sense. Job didn't understand. In all of those unexplained problems, Job maintained his faith. Sometimes we just can't figure out our problems. With all the suffering, Job maintained his faith. Did he question God? Yes. Did he pray to God? Yes. Did he plead with God? Yes. Did he turn his back on God? No!

Max Lucado in his book, *Gentle Thunder* wrote; once there was a man who dared God to speak. Burn the bush like you did for Moses, God and I will follow you. Collapse the walls like you did for Joshua, God and I will fight. Still the waves like you did on Galilee, God and I will listen. And so, the man sat by a bush, near a wall, close to the sea and waited for God to speak. God heard the man, and he answered. He sent fire, not for a bush, but for a church. He brought down a wall, not of brick, but of sin. He stilled the storm, not of the sea, but of a soul. God waited for man to respond. He waited . . . and he waited . . . and waited. But because the man was looking at bushes, not hearts; bricks and not lives, seas and not souls, he decided that God had done nothing. Finally, he looked to God and asked, 'Have you lost your power?' And God looked at him and said, 'Have you lost your hearing?'

Talk it over.

Share with your group member what you have been waiting on God to do in your life? What has been your response to the season of waiting?

II. WHY SHOULD I BE PATIENT?

We need to wait because it shows that we know:

a. God is in control.

In verse seven James talks about, “the coming of the Lord.” In verse nine he says, “The Judge is standing at the door!” God is in control and Jesus is coming back. That is the ultimate proof that God is in control. Nothing can stop it. God says it is going to happen. God knows the end of history. He has it all planned out. Everything is on schedule. Nothing is late. God is in control. God’s timing is always perfect. He is never late. He is never tardy. Nothing can stop His plans. Look at what the Psalmist tells us: *“The LORD’S plan stands firm forever. His thoughts stand firm in every generation.” Psalm 33:11 (GW)*

I heard this story of Phillip Brooks, a famous pastor of the last century. One day he was in his office pacing the floor. He was frustrated. Someone walked into his office and asked, “What is the matter pastor?” He responded, “I’m in a hurry and God isn’t.” Remember God is in control. God has a purpose for your life that is greater than any problem you are facing right now. God says, “Be patient because I’m working things out.” While I am waiting, God is working. You need to remember that! Your hands may be tied and the situation may be uncontrollable but it is not uncontrollable in God’s viewpoint.

Talk it over.

Think of the things in your life you have been trying to control. What has been the effect on you?

b. God rewards patience.

Look at of verse eleven with me: *“Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.” James 5:11 (NKJV)* It pays to be patient. There are all kinds of emotional and spiritual rewards for it. You are less stressed, your character grows, you get along with people better, you are happier. Look at what Matthew chapter five says: *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Matthew 5:10-12 (NKJV)*

When people put you down, when they criticize you, and when they say all kinds of things against you because you are following Jesus then be patient. It is our natural tendency one of the strongest desires in life that when you are hurt, you want to get even. You want to retaliate, get revenge and take matters into your own hands. When you get criticized, you want to criticize back. If you get insulted, you want to insult back. Revenge, retaliation is the natural thing but that is the opposite of patience. James says that the next time someone criticizes you, before you strike back think about this, is it worth giving up the reward I'm going to have in heaven? What really is your momentary frustration in light of eternity? God wants to bless us, but sometimes the pathway to blessing must come through pain. We see this was the case in Job. His pain produced something beautiful in his life; Job 42:5 "*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.*" The second half of Job's life was more blessed than the first half. God doubled everything he had. It pays to be patient. There are all kinds of rewards. Your character grows, you get along with people better, you are happier and you reach your goals. There are lots of benefits of being patient. God rewards it

Talk it over

What do you think it means to be rewarded by God?

III. HOW SHOULD I BE PATIENT?

a. Wait expectantly

Remember James just told us the illustration of the farmer. The farmer is to wait expecting a harvest. In life the harvest is inevitable. God's word says "You reap what you sow" What does the farmer do while he is waiting for the harvest? Does he just sit around his house watching TV? No! He gets his barns ready. He gets his combines ready. He prepares for the inevitable. Psalm says: "*I wait eagerly for the LORD's help, and in his word I trust.*" *Psalm 130:11 (GNB)*. This verse tells us that as we wait, we have to trust that God is going to do what He said He will do. God's word says, "He will never leave you or forsake you." Do you believe that? If you have given your life to God, He is going to take care of you. He has made you a promise. He may not take care of you in the way you think He should take care of you but He will take care of you nonetheless.

As you are waiting on Him, get your barns ready, get your harvesting equipment ready and prepare for the harvest because the harvest is inevitable. Wait expecting that God is watching over you because you are His child. A lot of times when you are waiting on God, He is really waiting on you. He is always ready to give the answer but you may not be ready. God is saying, "Grow up! Get some spiritual depth in your life. I want to bless your life but you can't handle the blessing I want to pour on you. It is so great and you are such a puny pip-squeak spiritually, you are not ready to handle this blessing. When you have some spiritual muscle in your life, I will bless you beyond what you can imagine." Waiting is a time to get ready. Prepare. After days at sea, the skipper of a fishing boat was bringing his craft back home. As the boat neared the shore, the men gazed eagerly toward the dock, where a group of their loved ones were waiting.

The kipper, looking through his glass, identified some of the women, saying, "I see Bill's Mary, and there is Tom's Margaret, and David's Anne." One man was very anxious because his wife was not there. He left the boat with a heavy heart and pressed his steps up the hill, where he saw a light in his cottage. As he opened the door, his wife ran to meet him, saying, "I have been waiting for you." He replied, "Yes, but the other men's wives were watching for them." Jesus waited thirty years before he began his ministry. Thirty years of preparation and he accomplished more in three years than we would in a lifetime.

Talk it over

What is one thing you are waiting God to do it for you and what are you doing to get ready for it? _____

b. Wait quietly.

James points out that we have a tendency to blame others for our problems. Look again at what James told us: *"Do not grumble against one another, brethren."* James 5:9. When problems come our way, we look for a scapegoat. We try to find someone to blame. If we don't start blaming, we usually start complaining. We are in real trouble when we are blaming and complaining at the same time. I heard about a lady who complained and griped to and about her husband all the time constantly complaining and constantly griping. The husband died in his old age so the wife put on his tombstone, "Rest in Peace". At the reading of the will she found out that her husband had left her only five dollars and had left the rest of his estate to a good friend of his. She went back and had the tombstone changed. Along with the words "Rest in Peace" she added "Till We Meet Again". What happens when you get uptight? What happens when you get frustrated and when things are just not going your way? How do you respond? James tells us that we are to wait expectantly, wait quietly and to:

Talk it over.

Why is waiting essential to your faith?

c. Wait With confidence

When Job experienced all of his problems, he asked two questions: *"Have I strength to go on waiting, or have I any end to be looking forward to?"* Job 6:11 (BBE) Job never lost his confidence in all that he did. It turns out that Job had both the strength "to go on waiting" and an "end to look forward to". With all the waiting not knowing how things were going to turn out, Job endured and in the end Job's confidence in God increased. He set an example for all of us to follow. "You have heard of the perseverance of Job..." Some of you right here right now may be thinking "I just can't make it through another month".

Then put your trust in God and make it through another week. You may say “I just can’t make it through another week” then I say, “Put your trust in God and you can make it through another day”. You may say “I just can’t make it through another day” then I say, “Put your trust in God and you can make it through another hour.” Because: Inch by inch life is a synch. Yard by yard life is hard. God is still in control because He is still on His throne. I have read the end of the book and I know that what began with God will end with God. I have put my trust in that fact. How about you? Wait expectantly, wait quietly, wait confidently and God will help you develop patience. When you have a problem that is unexplainable, a person who is unchangeable and a circumstance that is uncontrollable then wait confidently. God is working.

Talk it over.

How do you wait confidently? _____

CONCLUSION.

What do you do when you have these kinds of things? Remember what God has said in James. God is in control. It may be out of your control, but it is not out of God's control. Nothing is beyond his power and his purpose for your life is greater than the problem you are experiencing right now. God will reward your patience, if not in this life, He will in eternity. God is working behind the scenes for a purpose. In September 1999 a Pastor traveled to a remote Province in northern Cambodia. Throughout that isolated area, most villagers were followers of Buddhism or Spiritism. Christianity was virtually unheard of. But much to the pastor’s surprise, when he arrived in one small, rural village the people warmly embraced him and his message about Jesus. When he asked the villagers about their openness to the gospel, an old woman came forward, bowed, and took the pastor’s hand and said, "We have been waiting for you for more than twenty years." And then she told him this story;

In the 1970s the Khmer Rouge, took over Cambodia, destroying everything in its path. When the soldiers finally descended on this rural, northern village they immediately rounded up the villagers and forced them to start digging their own graves. After the villagers had finished digging, they prepared themselves to die. Some screamed to Buddha, others screamed to other spirits or to their ancestors. One of the women started to cry for help based on a childhood memory of a story her mother told her about a God who had hung on a cross. The woman prayed to that unknown God on a cross. Surely, if this God had known suffering, he would have compassion on their plight. Suddenly, her solitary cry became one great wail as the entire village started praying to the God who had suffered and hung on a cross. As they continued facing their own graves, the wailing slowly turned to a quiet crying. There was an eerie silence in the muggy jungle air. Slowly, as they dared to turn around and face their captors, they discovered that the soldiers were gone. As the old woman finished telling this story, she told the pastor that ever since that humid day from more than 20 years ago the villagers had been waiting, waiting for someone to come and share the rest of the story about the God who had hung on a cross.

Talk it over.

1. What can you do to slow things down in your life so that you learn patience and trust? ____

2. What is one thing you can change about your schedule or your expectations so that you are not tempted to rush God in this phase of your faith? _____

3. How do you tend to react when God has you in a waiting period? _____

4. In what ways does a small group help you become more like Jesus, especially in the waiting periods of life? _____

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. James 5:10-11

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Lord, I'm stuck in a place I don't want to be. It seems everyone else is speeding forward. Give me your patience to handle the big and small. Slow me down. Teach me how to be calm. I don't want to waste my life frazzled, exhausted, and weighted down. Thank you for offering me rest and for not making me to do life on my own.

HOW TO PRAY ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS

DEVELOPING A FAITH THAT WORKS - PART 15 OF 15

Read: James 5:13-20

INTRODUCTION.

Have you ever wondered if prayer really works? Maybe Satan has whispered to you, “Prayer is a waste of time. Forget it! Who do you think you are? What do you think you are doing? God isn’t even listening.” But here is the truth: Prayer works because God is in control. In fact, the basis of all miracles is God’s sovereignty. What does that mean? It means he is God Almighty, who has all power in Heaven and on Earth, so his purpose and his will prevail. We learn to trust his wisdom and his goodness. We learn about his loving nature and his generous character. And we mature in faith as we understand that God has a better view of our circumstances than we do, and that he knows what is best for us. He can see our future, and we can’t. The Bible says, *“But his plans endure forever; his purposes last eternally”* (Psalm 33:11 GNT). God’s unlimited resources are available to you. Twenty times in the New Testament it says, “Ask.” Isn’t it encouraging knowing that things out of our control are not out of God’s control? You may not be able to change a situation, but you can pray and God can change it.

V. 16 say "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." The word "prayer" is mentioned seven times in this passage. That is what it is about. James had a reputation for being a man of prayer. His nickname was James, the Camel Knees, because he had such big knots on his knees from spending hours and hours in prayer. There is tremendous power in prayer. Prayer is the greatest privilege of the Christian life, being able to talk to God, and it is the greatest power in the Christian life. What prayer can do is what God can do. Anything that God can do can be done through prayer. Jesus said, "The things that I do, you will do also even greater works." How do you do greater works than Jesus? Jesus said in the verse underneath that, "It is by prayer". Anything you ask, you pray for. It is our greatest responsibility. It is probably our greatest failure in the Christian life. We talk a lot about prayer, we study about prayer. A lot of us are not too satisfied with our prayer life. Today we are going to look at “When should I pray”, “What kind of person can I pray”, and “How can I pray more effectively.”

Talk It Over

If you have ever wondered if prayer really works, how did God show you that he was listening and that prayer does work?

WHEN SHOULD I PRAY?

James, in this passage, mentions there are three specific times when we really need to pray.

1. WHEN I AM HURTING EMOTIONALLY.

God is not some distant force. Nor is he callous. The Bible teaches that God enters into our pain. And he doesn't just care about your pain; he feels it, too. He shares your pain. The Bible says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed" (Psalm 34:18 NLT). God understands and shares your pain because he wired you. He is the one who gave you the ability to experience pleasure and pain. The Bible says it like this: "He who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do" (Psalm 33:15 NIV). He understands emotions because God is an emotional God. The only reason you have emotions is because you are made in God's image. If God didn't have emotions, you wouldn't have emotions. Remember Jesus understands your pain because he has been there. He suffered too. He was betrayed, abandoned, and fatigued just like you. He came to Earth and lived a fully human life. He experienced everything we experience in human form. The Bible says of Jesus, "This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testing we do" (Hebrews 4:15a NLT).

The Bible says when you are in pain, the Holy Spirit makes prayers for you out of wordless sighs and aching groans. He understands your pain. He knows what you are feeling. And he turns those feelings into prayers. If you are hurting, you don't have to go through it alone. God understands your pain because he created your emotions. Jesus knows your pain from firsthand experience. And the Holy Spirit is praying for you. V. 13 "Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray." The word in Greek literally means "to suffer misfortune, to be in distress" to be under stress, under tension. In Timothy it is translated "hardships." He is talking about internal distress caused by external circumstances. It may be a financial crisis, a relational crisis, something on the outside, your heart is breaking, tension is there at all time high, and when life gets hard. David said in Psalm 18:4 "In my distress I call unto the Lord." He is talking about this in light of what we just covered. v. 12 "Above all, my brothers, do not swear".

When you are under tension, you are tempted to swear. When you have distress in your life you have two alternatives; to swear or prayer. v. 13 or v. 12. You can pray about your problems. If it is a financial condition that is creating stress in your life, then pray about. Right underneath this he says, "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." Have you noticed that life is a series of alternations between high and low, feast to famine, problem to joy? The Bible says, "Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice". One of the job qualifications of being a pastor is that you have to be willing to shift gears pretty quickly. A lot of people are up and a lot of people are down. Recognize there is situations in life when you are down and when you are down you pray. When you are happy, live it to the hilt. Some people are afraid that if they really enjoy what God is doing then He is going to zap them with a bumper. If I think it is great, then the bottom is bound to fall out. It is too good! They are afraid to pray, they are afraid to rejoice! It is not uncommon for someone to come to our church, a first-time visitor, and they come out saying, "The joy is contagious here. You can really sense it." I think Christians ought to be contagious. I think it ought to be fun to go to church.

The Bible says, "I was glad when they said unto me; let us go into the house of the Lord." Not sad, mad or bummed out. So, when you are happy, you sing. On Sunday morning we never sing a song in a minor key. It is a celebration, a day of joy. James says it is valid to be happy. "Praise" is used 550 times in the Bible. It is to be the lifestyle of the Christian to be happy. If you want the secret of a rich, personal, devotional life nothing has done more for my own personal life than singing to the Lord. I sing a lot in my quiet time. I write a lot of songs, choruses.

Talk It Over

God never leaves you alone to deal with your pain. How do you respond to that?

2. WHEN I AM HURTING PHYSICALLY, I OUGHT TO PRAY.

V. 14-15 "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." The word "sick" in Greek, literally means "without strength". You are totally wasted, fatigued, bedridden, and unable to work. Not just acid indigestion or postnasal drip. This guy has a serious illness here that is keeping him from actually working. It is the word most frequently used for illness. It is the same word describing Lazarus. When Lazarus got sick, he died. And the same word to describe Dorcas, and she died. And the same word that describes the man at the pool of Bethesda who sat there for years and years and didn't have enough energy to get up and get into the pool. He is talking about a serious illness here. When you are beyond the help of a doctor, you pray. The elders of the church are to come and pray over him and anoint him with oil. The Scripture teaches that there are three different kinds of sickness. There is a lot of teaching going on today about healing. The Bible says that first there is the sickness for death. It is covered in 1 John 5:16 and John 11:4. That kind of sickness God allows to take us home to be with Him.

There are some sicknesses that you never recover from. There will be an illness someday that you will never recover from because God doesn't want you to live indefinitely. If every sickness could be healed by faith then anybody who had a lot of faith would never die. There is a sickness for the purpose of taking you on home. Then there is a sickness for discipline. The purpose for a sickness for discipline is covered in 1 Corinthians 11:28- 32 where they were abusing the Lord's Supper. Paul said, because they were abusing the Lord's Supper was the reason some of them were sick. The Lord is disciplining you because you are out of the will of God. When we sin, it does bring sickness into our lives. The third kind of sickness is sickness for the glory of God. The sickness for the glory of God is a sickness that God has allowed in your life simply because He wants to heal you of it and let it be a testimony to the world. John 11:4 a man came to Jesus who was ill and blind. The disciples said, "Lord, who sinned, him or his parents?" Jesus said, "Nobody sinned, this is a sickness for the glory of God." Then he healed the guy and it brought glory to God. There are three kinds of sickness: sickness for death, sickness for discipline and sickness for the glory of God. The last is the kind God wants to heal.

There are approximately five different attitudes toward healing. There are a lot of different divisions about healing.

- a. The sensationalist.** These are the guys you watch on TV. They come into town and hold giant meetings in large auditoriums and advertise miracles. There are a bright lights and TV cameras rolling. Often the healer is flamboyant. He shouts at the people, slaps them on the head. It is often a highly charged emotional atmosphere. The guy might say, "Do you feel warm?" and he is standing before 20,000 people, rolling TV cameras and spotlights! Of course, he would! There is psychological motivation in all of this. Be careful of this. Be discerning. I don't see Jesus doing this. He did the exact opposite in His healing. In all of Jesus' healing He took them aside from the crowd, where they are out of the glare of the public, talked with them on a one on one basis, healed them there and then it was reported to the crowd. Jesus never manipulated people and never used them for show. He always cared about their needs more than He did about making an impression on the crowds. He healed people quietly. By the way, just because something is a miracle doesn't mean it is from God. Remember when Moses laid down his stick and it became a serpent. What did those priests do? The exact same thing. Just because something is done in the name of the Lord doesn't mean it is of God. Jesus said in Matthew 7 "Many will come in that day and say, 'Lord, Lord didn't we do many miracles in your name?' Jesus will say, 'I didn't even know you.'"
- b. The confessionalists.** The confessionalists say that it is always God's will for everybody to be healed. This is the Name it and Claim It group. Sickness is a result of sin and all you need to do is claim your healing and God will heal. If you are not healed you lack faith. The result of that is if there is no healing there as an awful lot of guilt. "Maybe I just didn't believe enough." False doctrine always creates false guilt. Always. That is one of the problems with legalism. When you make up all of these rules and regulations, it takes the joy of knowing Jesus out of your life. The Bible says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." These confessionalists say it is just the way you talk, you will get it. I claim I have a Cadillac and I get a Cadillac. The problem with this is, it makes God a genie. All of a sudden God is serving me, my needs, my whims rather than me serving Him. What about the verse in I Peter 5:19 "Those who suffer according to the will of God?" Sometimes suffering is the will of God.
- c. Dispensationalists.** The dispensationalists are those who say the gifts of healing were only for New Testament times and they are no longer around anymore. Don't bother looking for those gifts. It was great back in those days but they are not here. I have a problem with that view because Hebrews 13:8 says "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever." I believe that He is.
- d. Rationalists.** These are the people who say it is just all in your mind. If you are ill it is because you think you are ill. Just deny it and you will be OK. This is the Christian Science cult among others. Just deny it is happening and it will go away.
- e. Realist.** This recognizes two facts. One, the fact that God still does heal. He does heal but not everybody gets healed. I think James would be a Realist.

That is also a fact of life. God does heal people today, but He doesn't heal everybody. I think life is an example of that. So, what does James say to do when you are sick? You should call the elders of the church. I Peter 5, Acts 20, Titus 2 tells of the structure of the church. James says you call the spiritual leaders of your church to pray for you. These guys aren't professional healers who go around holding healing meetings. An example of that in Scripture is Jesus. If anybody had the right to hold mass meetings, He could have. In the New Testament, healing was a private matter.

I find it strange that people who claim to have the gift of healing always insist that the sick people come to them, rather than them going to the sick. And it says "He should call the elders" Who is doing the calling? It is the sick person. James is talking about a house call. If you are so sick you can't get out of bed, you call the spiritual leaders to come to your house and you ask them to pray for you. This implies support for belonging to a local church. Every Christian needs to identify himself with a particular body of believers. Why? One good reason is that when you get sick, you know who to call on. In the New Testament there was no such thing as a free-floating Christian who would just float around, listen to Christian radio and TV, and bounce around from this church to that church. There was no such thing in the New Testament. Every person was a member of a specific local church. Because it says you are the body and each of you are members of it. The value of it is when you are in need there is somebody there to care for you.

The sick person takes the initiative. If you don't call the elders of the church, how will they know about it? The word "sick" is talking about a life-threatening illness. "Call for the elders of the church to pray over him..." The guy is probably in bed, so they are praying over him. He is seriously ill. "...and anoint him with oil". Oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, like many symbols in Scripture. When we baptize with water, water is a symbol of the burial. When we take communion, the juice is a symbol of blood. All through Scripture, oil is used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Some interpreters believe that this oil means the best modern medicines of the time were to be used. In New Testament times they did use oil to rub on to people, to massage, use as a salve. There was a medicinal value in that. Remember the Good Samaritan when he found the man at the side of the road. He took the man and applied oil and wine to his wounds (sounds more like a salad dressing!) and then bandaged him up. Oil was used for medicinal purposes. But I think the emphasis here is the anointing. It was of symbolic value of the Holy Spirit -- an aide to faith.

Remember when Jesus went to the blind man. He spit into the dirt and made mud cakes and put them on the man's eyes. Nobody believes that the mud had curative power. But it was simply an aide to faith for the guy who was going to believe. It was his faith that healed him. It was not the mudpacks on his eyes. The emphasis is on the power of prayer not the power of the oil. It was just a symbol to be used. "...in the name of the Lord..." God is the healer, not any person. The name represents the character of the Lord. All healing is based on God's character. The results: "... And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." We do this in our church, but it is a low-key ministry. We don't practice having healing wines with big emotional campaigns. We try to do what the Bible says. Many times, some of our people have called for the pastors, the elders, and we have gone to the person's home in a time of long-term illness. We have prayed for them and anointed them with oil. In the years we have been a church we have seen some real miracles.

On the other hand, sometimes we have prayed for people and the Lord's taken them on home. We humbly accept the will of the Lord in that matter. But it is scriptural. The Bible says when I'm hurting emotionally I ought to pray, when I'm hurting physically, when a major illness, I call for the spiritual leaders of the church to pray in a private ceremony. Why private? In private people can feel loved not used. They don't feel put on display. If you put someone on display in front of a bunch of other people, they think, "If I'm not healed it will make the pastors look bad". But it is not us anyway, it is the Lord. We are just praying.

Talk it over.

Do you know of any person who is sick today and you have been praying for? What action will you take after this study when it comes to praying for the sick?

3. WHEN I'M HURTING SPIRITUALLY.

"Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." In Jesus' day and in many places today it is taught that all sickness is a result of sin. If you are ill, then supposedly you had some hidden sin in your life. If you confessed and still were sick then you still had some other hidden sin. Jesus blew that idea out of the water in John 9 where he said to the man who had been born blind that nobody sinned. I think this is a very unfair concept. You think of babies being born with birth defects and obviously that baby has not sinned. We live in a fallen world and part of that problem is there are hurts and problems. On the other hand, Jesus did teach that a lot of the sickness we bring on our lives we do bring upon ourselves. If I don't follow God's principles, my body is going to find out about it. If I don't take care of my body, eat right, sleep right, exercise right, then all kinds of ailments will come upon me.

If I don't listen to God's word where it says "Don't be anxious about anything, but pray about everything" and I worry, fret, get anxious and I get an ulcer, then I'm to blame for it. If I allow resentment to build up in my life... doctors say it is not so much what you eat but what is eating you that makes the difference... resentment can take its toll in your life and it makes a big difference. If I don't trust God and I allow these things to come into my life there will be sin. "Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." Many years ago, I was invited to see a man who was paralyzed from the waist down and had not been in church for about nine months. I began to talk with him and he was a very bitter man, just filled with resentment. A cow had kicked him in the back and paralyzed him.

He was bitter against members who hadn't visited him, bitter against the insurance company for not paying off, bitter against the doctor for not figuring out how to make him walk, bitter against the cow, bitter against God. He was very resentful. I said, "God may want to heal you and restore you to full health, but He will not heal you until first you get rid of that resentment in your life." I remember him bowing his head and began to weep, almost uncontrollably, deep sobs, "God, I have been so bitter. Just flush all the anger and hate from me." He wept for about 10 minutes. I prayed with him and I left. The next day the man came to church, in a wheelchair, the first time to been in church in nine months.

At the end of the service I gave a "come forward" invitation to people who wanted to come and pray. The man got up out of his wheelchair and walked down to the front and recommitted his life to the Lord. What happened? There was a block in his life that was keeping God from doing what He wanted to do in his life. When he got his spiritual act together, the other fell into place. We are a whole physical, emotional, and spiritual. When the spiritual is out of kilter it affects your emotions. When your emotions are out of kilter it affects your body. We talk about psychosomatic illnesses. They are real but they come from within ourselves. Why isn't everybody healed? I don't know. God has the power but it isn't His purpose in different situations. It is always in God's power to heal but it is not always in God's purpose to heal. A clear example of this is Paul, in 1 Corinthians. It said Paul prayed three times for God to heal a problem in his life but three times God said "No, I have a better plan for you."

What is the condition for healing? Confess. We would rather conceal and camouflage our sins, than confess them. It is a liberating experience to confess your sins and get them out and share them, not just with the Lord but with each other. Revealing your feeling is the beginning of healing. Many people come to me in counseling and begin by saying, "I have never told this to anyone else in the world." Once they say that, I know that something great is going to happen. I know what a relief it is to not carry a burden anymore, to get it out and share it with somebody else so you can be loved and accepted for who you are without having to pretend you are perfect and wear a mask. "confess to each other" Does that mean I get up and confess to the whole church? There is a principle of the circle of confession. Only confess as widely as it involves other people. If I have a private sin, just between me and the Lord, then I ought to just confess it to the Lord. If it is a personal sin, between me and you, then I need to come to you. If it is a public sin, then I need to apologize to the whole church.

He says confess your sins, not broadcast them. If it involves somebody else you ought to go to somebody else. There ought to be at least one person; husband, wife, pastor, or friend you have that you can share everything with and know you will be loved and accepted unconditionally. A verse in Job says, "A man needs his friend most when he is doubting God." He needs somebody to stand and walk him through that time of doubt to that time of faith. One day I was speaking in a church of only a hundred or so people. It was Sunday night. I was preaching and all of a sudden I stopped and said, "Maybe there are some people here that need to get some things right with each other. I sense some coldness here. I may be wrong but I will bow my head and ask the pianist to play. If you have a grudge against some other person and you need to get it right, why don't you just get up and go to that person and tell them you are sorry?" I bowed my head and I heard this tremendous noise! The whole church was going to each other!

It was the most amazing thing I had ever seen in my life. It went on for about 45 minutes. A guy was walking along outside. He was not even a Christian and said, "What is happening in here?" Somebody led him to the Lord right there. When Christians really love each other, you have to lock the doors to keep people out. The Bible says, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love each other." That is what counts. In the New Testament the Christians confessed to each other. During the Dark Ages, they confessed to the priests, Freud said confess to the counselor, Protestants said, we are not going to confess to anybody. As a result, we have a lot of problems and hang-ups.

When should I pray? James says you can pray whenever you have a need; a physical need, an emotional need, or a material need. No matter what it is you ought to pray.

Talk it over

What pain have you dealt with where you had difficulty believing God was right there with you? Why?

WHO CAN PRAY?

Do you want to pray powerful prayers? Charles Spurgeon once said, "Prayer moves the arm that moves the world." In other words, there are things God is willing to do or he wants to do but he has chosen to do them only in response to prayer. Prayer, then, is like a great **joint venture** between the Creator and his creatures. In prayer, we join forces with the God of the universe to accomplish his will around us. He asks us to do the asking, and then he responds by answering. Jesus even gave us a model for prayer that included praying "*Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10 ESV). So, in prayer, God's will is accomplished around us in much the same way that his will is accomplished in the heavenly realm, where angels attend to his desires at all times. Some people think you have to be a spiritual giant to pray and get those kinds of answers. "I could never pray and see somebody healed" or "I could never pray and see a financial miracle". Many Christians feel inferior.

James uses Elijah as an illustration. "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain and it didn't rain on the land for three and a half years. He prayed again and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops." I Kings 19. This is after the big god contest on Mt. Carmel. He runs to the other side of the desert and goes through a fit of depression and prays, "God, kill me. I'm so depressed." He was not afraid of 400 prophets of Baal but he runs from a woman named Jezebel. In that passage, the first 10 verses Elijah demonstrated fear, resentment, guilt, anger, loneliness and worry. Now you know why it says, "Elijah was a man just like us." We have anger, fear, resentment, worry, and loneliness. The lesson of Elijah's life is you don't have to be perfect to pray. You don't have to be perfect to see answers to your prayers. It is for ordinary people. I Kings 18, Elijah got alone with God and humbled himself praying for rain. It says he prayed seven times. He was persistent. He would not give up. One day a little cloud formed in the sky and he said, "It is going to be a gusher!"

The rains came and flooded the place. God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things through prayer. When you are put in an impossible situation, your talent, logic and education won't solve your problem. Only God can. God told Jeremiah, who lived at the same time as Daniel: "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things which you do not know" (Jer. 33:3). The Bible says *we don't have* because *we don't ask*. So many times, we miss out on God's best simply because we never ask Him for it. That is why you need to pray and ask God for His supernatural help.

How can your prayers change, knowing that God is listening and that he will answer?

HOW CAN I PRAY EFFECTIVELY?

I want to review four conditions for praying effectively that James mentions in his book.

1. **Ask.** That sounds simple but in a lot of our prayers we never ask for anything. We say "Thank you for..." and "Bless..." and that is it. We never pray specifically. The more specific your prayers are the greater you are going to be blessed in the answer. When I was in college, I taped a huge sheet of butcher paper up on the wall. It had four columns: Date, Prayer Request, promise to base my prayers on, Answer and Date. That was a real faith building time in my life. I saw God answer in little things and I saw him answer in big things. I trust Him for great things. James 4:2 "You do not have because you do not ask." Be specific. Throw away all your clichés. I love to hear new Christians pray because they don't know all the language, and they are so honest. It is refreshing. I love hearing children when they pray. They say the most honest and genuine things that are really meaningful.

God is the source of everything. Everything you see in the world and everything you can't see in the world and in the universe, God made. He is the source of every good thing. There is nothing you need that God can't provide. You don't know what you are going to need the rest of this year. But whatever it is, God has the power to supply it. God wants to give you everything you need.

2. **Have the right motive.** "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." If you are going to ask in prayer, make sure your motives are right. Not for selfishness but for a genuine reason and that is for the glory of God. You have to start with the right motive. In God's eyes, *why* you do something is far more important than *what* you do. Come before God with anticipation and eagerness. Expect to have a good time of fellowship with him and receive a blessing from your time together. That was what David expected: "*You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you*" (Psalm 63:1).
3. **Clean life.** "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." James 5:16. If you are a Christian you are righteous. We are not talking about perfection. We are talking about righteousness. Righteousness is your standing before God when you became a believer. It has nothing to do with your perfection. If God only answered the prayers of perfect people, how many prayers would get answered? None. But God does want us to have a clean life. (Psalm 66:18) David said, "If I hide [regard, conceal] iniquity [sin] in my heart then the Lord will not hear." If I am willfully and knowingly doing something I know is displeasing to God and say, "God, I'm going to continue doing this but, by the way, help me out." It is like saying "Dad, will you loan me the keys to the car, but I'm never going to do a single thing you ask." We need to have a clean life before Him. Proverbs 28:9 "He that turneth his back from the hearing of the law, even his prayers are an abomination." Isaiah 59:2 "Your sins have separated you between you. Your God has hidden His face so He cannot hear."

4. **Ask in faith.** Expect an answer. James 1:6 "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt..." When you come to God, believe that He wants to answer your prayer. Trust Him. Don't doubt. Really believe. How important is your prayer life to you? I struggle with this more than any other area in my life.

It is this area of being consistent in prayer. I talk to the Lord all the time, but I don't really have the prayer life I want to have. I'm never satisfied with it. I want to know Him in a deeper way.

Talk it over.

How does knowing that God knows your every need for the rest of your life affect how you pray?

CONCLUSION.

Prayer is a conversation. The word "pray" simply means to ask, which is conversational by nature. But prayer is also more than a conversation. It has real power. And it has real power because God chooses to act in response to our asking. It is not that prayer is a secret formula or magic spell. It is that there is a real and living God who responds to our asking. He shows up. And when he shows up, supernatural things happen. Heavenly things happen on earth when we pray according to God's will, because God has simply chosen to work out his will in this way. You may think you are at a dead end in your life. "I will never be going to get out of debt!" "I'm never going to have a baby." "My dream is never going to come true." "How is it ever going to work out?" Right now, it may look dark and you may feel defeated and things may seem like a mystery to you. But one day you are going to see in the light of eternity how it all fits together in God's plan. Until then, there are three errors you need to avoid as you seek God's will in prayer and as you avoid these errors, you will develop deeper trust in God, even when you don't understand.

3. **Don't be fatalistic.** The idea of fatalism is the idea that everything is out of our control and we are powerless to do anything about it. This leads to self-pity. It causes us to blame God for everything bad in our lives rather than accepting responsibility when we cause problems. And fatalism leads to passivity. It makes us think, "I'm waiting on God to bring me a spouse" or "I'm waiting on God to get me a job." God is saying, "I gave you a brain! I gave you two feet! Get out and do something about it!"
4. **Don't be frustrated.** If you try to figure out everything in your life, you are going to be very frustrated. Sometimes you are going to do what you think is God's will, and it is going to fail. "I thought God was leading me to start this business, but it failed." What do you do when there are no answers?

You keep trusting God, knowing that he is working on your character through all of your circumstances and that he has good plans for you.

- 5. Don't be fearful.** What is behind the fear of God's will? The root problem is that you doubt God's love. The Bible says, "*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear*" (1 John 4:18 NASB). We always get into trouble when we doubt God's love, because when we don't trust him, we don't obey him. Psalm 37:23-24 says, "*The steps of a man are established by the Lord . . . When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong, because the Lord is the One who holds his hand*" (NASB).

God's will is an expression of his love. When you don't understand what God is doing, have patience. God knows what is best for you. You can't see the end result, but he can. God's path might be a path of pain, but all those delays and difficulties and problems are building character in your life. Never fight a battle without asking God first. If you don't ask God, you are on your own, good luck. Get the focus off the problem and you get the focus on God. Pray about everything. There is nothing too small to pray about, there is nothing too big to pray about. If it is worth worrying about, it is worth praying about. If it is worth worrying about, then it is worth praying about

Talk it over.

1. How have you seen prayer produce miracles in the lives of people you care about?

2. Why does God want you to pray in faith?

3. Share with your group members on how has God answered prayer in your life?

A VERSE TO REMEMBER.

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5:16

A PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Lord, thank you for your greatness. Thank you that when I am weak, you are strong. Lord, the Devil is scheming and I know he desires to keep me from spending time with you. Don't let him win! Give me a measure of your strength so that I might not give into discouragement, deception and doubt! Help me honor you in all my ways. In Jesus' Name