



“Whilst the Mist Lingers”

A sojourn through the
Book of James

By

IAN WELLS

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Foreword.

This book has been produced as a result of much prodding and encouragement.

Encouragement from friends and family and much prodding from “The Great Prodder” have brought me to my keyboard and my knees.

Like Jonah who had been prodded also, I responded in pretty much the same way, I “did a runner.”

- It’s amazing the things we will do to avoid doing what we have been called to do.

There lies the heart of why this book is based upon the Book of James.

James tells it as it is, he never misses the mark and he describes beautifully the struggles faced by most Christians. Truthfully, James is a much neglected book because it prompts a response.

You cannot read James and remain tepid or indifferent in your faith. James prompts action.

Procrastination is the enemy of a living faith and so, putting fingers to key-board seemed the only way of being obedient.

I have tried putting off writing this book for several reasons.

The first reason to put it off was the fact that there are several very good books already available and the old Scottish adage of “who do you think you are?” seemed to echo from my past. - I’ve been delivered of that bondage.

Also, this book is not meant as a commentary of the text, more of an exposition on a life/lives seeking to live the text.

The second reason was the time element required to prepare and complete the book, it seemed impossible to be able to be a husband, father, and minister and still enable time to author a book. To be given

time to set the project up made a huge difference to my ability to see a way ahead.

A third reason relates to memories of the period in my life where the truth of the text of James was demonstrated very fully.

It left wounds, two actually, two wounds where the surgeon's drill penetrated my skull to save my life. - I had just preached on these verses: "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, *"If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."* James 4:14-15.

Things had been going very well at that point in my life. I had indeed been making plans for a ministry that would "make a big difference". Within a few days of delivering that sermon, I was undergoing emergency brain surgery. Big plans were put on hold.

- The Grace of God is more important than the paltry plans we conceive.

- I have since learned not to despise "the day of small things"¹

At the time of the surgery, I was blessed to be under the guidance of Victor Laidlaw, then Minister of St Catherine's Argyle in Edinburgh. The events surrounding my surgery and the subsequent period of recovery enabled the great blessing of discovering Victor to be a superb brother. He and his wife Sheila have been a source of inspiration and support to "my Sheila" and our family. He is however, pedantic when it comes to written detail and lovingly honest, not to mention excellent at picking up on any theological faux pas. I am indebted to Victor's superior eye for detail and his greatly encouraging editorial comments. I am greatly indebted to Victor for his encouragement to publish this work.

It is my desire that this book be a source of realistic encouragement to persevere in your walk with the Lord who loves you with a passion. All proceeds from sales will be invested into the work of the Kingdom.

- See something really good has happened already!

You cannot read James and remain impassive, it demands a response and I suspect my past experiences of looking in depth at the text had dissuaded me from undertaking this enterprise until now. I'm confident that by the time you have finished reading this book you will have had a few laughs and will have resolved to put into practice some of what you have gleaned from James as we look at it together.

James majors on the temporary nature of our lives and right priorities, it seemed appropriate to award this book the title, "Whilst the Mist Lingers."

INTRODUCTION

James is a book which is frequently overlooked.

- Possibly because it is full of commands, commands that appear to be very direct in their delivery.

Throughout the letter the words "should, ought, do and do not" appear with quite an emphasis upon the need to comply.

Also....

Some have said that the Letter does not have a great emphasis upon spiritual matters²

But.....

The Letter of James is full of practical advice for Christians throughout the ages.

From the content of the Letter we can deduce many of the problems that were faced by the earliest Christians.

We can also discover that the problems faced by those early Christians were not too far removed from many of the problems and challenges facing the Church today.

James addresses everyday problems for the Christian and he does it by plain speaking. James does not "mince his words."

Although there has been some debate about "who James was" it is accepted that the James who wrote this letter was Jesus' younger brother. - "James the Just"

The Letter of James appears to be a written sermon designed to help the earliest Christians deal with the realities of day to day living.

James did not write his letter to address a particular part of the early Church, his letter is addressed to the "*Twelve Tribes scattered among the Nations.*"

James' letter is in effect a sermon written to all the Christians in the Early Church regardless of where they were. The fact that

James addresses the Tribes of Israel is a firm indicator that the church he was addressing was in fact Jews that had come to accept that Jesus was the Messiah.

From the lack of reference to the great debate between Paul and Jerusalem regarding circumcision and gentile believers we can also deduce that this debate had yet to take place. That means the book of James was probably written before Paul wrote a thing.

The letter was written to all the Christians of the Early Church and as God does not change, the message of James is just as relevant today.

James wrote his letter to address the everyday problems of the first believers.

While the society, the geography and the people were different, the problems facing the early Christians were just the same as the problems we have to contend with.

The letter of James is possibly the earliest manual for Christian living.

James had come to realise that many of the first believers had begun to struggle after the initial euphoria of their conversion had started to fade.

The excitement and the anticipation of a new life with Christ, who by the power of the Holy Spirit now lived within them, when this BUZZ began to fade, doubts began to creep in.

They knew Jesus would return, and yet, around 15 years since he ascended into heaven, he had not yet returned.

While we know that James was addressing the first believers, I am sure you can see already, that believers in today's world are faced with exactly the same challenges. We too are waiting in anticipation of the Lord's return and, if we are honest with ourselves, our anticipation is probably nowhere near as enthusiastic as it once was. We wait and wait and as we do, we

are afforded greater opportunities to introduce others to the Lord through our life witness and our words.

If you are in the happy position of still being in the euphoric period after receiving Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, this book may assist you in avoiding many of the pitfalls that can arise.

If you are in the position of having already stumbled or fallen a few times, I pray that the following chapters will encourage and make you smile.

- You are not alone!

One of the main emphasise in James is the call to persevere when the going gets tough.

Billy Ocean and West-life sang, "When the goin gets tough, the tough get goin!"

Easy to sing but, hard to do.

Often it's more likely to be the case "when the going get tough, just forget it, and try something else!" Or, when temptation comes, "Give in" it's so much easier!

Many in their Christian infancy are shocked to discover that they do just that! - and begin to beat themselves up for doing so.

In truth, sin continues to pervade our lives but, knowing that the consequences of sin have been dealt with, we are better equipped to persevere in defeating sin in the most damaging areas of our lives.

The sooner we grasp the fact that we will only be perfect when we go to be with our Lord, the sooner we can address self absorbing defeatism that causes many Christians to backslide in their faith and away from the Lord.

We expect too much of ourselves and expect not enough from

our Lord. We rely too much upon our human resourcefulness and we do not trust the unlimited resources of our Heavenly Father. We pray with a “faith limiter” in operation and instead of praying “big” prayers, we pray small.

We need to remind ourselves that the Lord is unlimited in all that he can do.

We need to trust Him more and ourselves less.

We can't do it on our own or in our own strength.

We need Him.

Like the guy who had been married to a faithful Christian wife for years. After a particular “free flowing marital discussion” he sat on the couch alone and declared, “I am who I am, I can't change!”

Suddenly, hit in a Damascus Road type light, Jesus spoke to his heart and said, “I can Help” and he let him in to his life for ever.

The joy of *becoming* a Christian lasted a few months but, the Joy of *being* a Christian is something I've had to work at!

“Nobody said it would be easy” - The Christian life is not easy and it would be foolish to suggest that it is but, Joy is a much missed feature of the Christian life that counters so many of the spoiling tactics of our enemy. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit of God within that never seems to percolate up to the face of many Christians. We need to express our joy more.

This book is an attempt to emphasise the practical and real issues that surround living the Christian Faith.

It is based upon the Book of James and follows the verses in an exposition of text and relates experiences common to many.

As I have said, James as a book of the Bible is not held in high regard by many theologians. It lacks the major theological debates of previous ages but, it does keep the reader focussed

upon the practical issue of what it means to be a Christian.

Start on the Right Footing

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:Greetings.”

The first verse of James is so easy to skip by but, James from the outset declares where he stands spiritually. He is a servant of God and of Jesus Christ.

From the place of servant, James seeks to be obedient to the wishes of the Lord.

James was the younger brother of Jesus so to refer to him being a servant of his big brother is a major thing.

Most younger brothers and sisters today, will often seek to assert that they are not the servant of the older child and seek to remind that they are on a par as far relationships with God are concerned.

The humility of the servant James seems to shine through so much of the text.

Sometime after Jesus' resurrection, James his brother, had become a believer. Over the next few years we learn, from Acts and other books, James became the leader of the early church in Jerusalem.

James must have had some sort of conversion experience because we know that at one point Jesus' brothers tried to rescue him from himself. - They thought Jesus had flipped³!

James had changed his view completely, now he believed. James knew that his brother was Lord and Christ. He did not, like so many would have, make a big deal of who his “big brother” was, instead, in humility he deferred to Jesus as his Lord.

That is something we need to do from the outset, decide whether you are really His or not, if you are, work at being the best disciple you can be. You'll make mistakes like so many before you but, be assured that His grace covers all of your

mistakes and sins, past, present and future.

That being the case, do not be afraid to “have a go,” try not to fall but if you do, He is the lifter of your head.⁴ He will spiritually place a gentle spiritual finger under your chin to lift you up, so that he can gaze at your face and that you may behold him as your greatest fan.

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

When the going gets tough, how do you react?
Do you panic and run around trying to find help?
Do you sit down and have good think about how plan a way through the problems you face?
Or, do you pray and ask the Lord to guide and help?

Most of us will turn to prayer as a last resort.
When we’ve exhausted our own resources, tried the resources of friends and exhausted ourselves in the process, generally we will finally ask the Lord for help.

Surely this is bizarre behaviour for a people who have entrusted their eternal destiny to Jesus and yet, prayer is not an automatic response for so many Christians.

One of the benefits of prayer and reading the Scriptures is that we are reminded of who God is, of His limitless power and his ability to bless. When we focus upon the Majesty of God and his love for us, our “problems” are seen in their proper light.

When we remember whose we are and of His infinite care for us, our perspective on the “woes of the world” pale in

comparison to his wonderful riches. - We rejoice in Him and in the truth that we are His.

James calls the Church to have a sense of joy when trials come along.

Relax.....James is not saying that we must have a fixed smile or that we should just laugh about our difficulties. That would be ridiculous.

James is exhorting each one of us to remember that our Lord has already assured us of our future, our inheritance through Jesus is guaranteed. - "Retain your Joy," James insists.

But, you might say, "we have to pass through this life first."
By remembering our future is assured, we will have a deep joy that will sustain us through all the difficult times we encounter.

The *"Joy of the Lord is your strength"* said Nehemiah.⁵

James knows that it is this joy that is lasting, it does not fade away as days pass by.

Joy in the Lord lasts, but, it can be forgotten when we allow our focus to shift from what God has done and what God can do, to focusing upon ourselves and the perceived difficulties we face.

We really do have problems if we forget God and what he has done for us. When we focus upon ourselves and not upon Him we become **self**-reliant.

Such self-reliance today is often extolled as a virtue. The ability to be independent, to take care of oneself, is seen as a good thing. So it is but, only if it does not lead to the cult of individualism and the idol of "personal autonomy."

Such an attitude of self-reliance within a Christian is a big mistake.

The church is made up of individuals, using their gifts for the common good.⁶

We are made for relationships which are God reliant.
From Adam and Eve to Jesus and His Bride, the church, we are meant to complement or be complete in our oneness.
He wants us to “know” Him as intimately as the most passionate husband and wife you can imagine.
The joy of physical ecstasy in the God ordained union between a husband and wife is meant to remind us of the intimacy that God wants us to have with Him.

God blesses us with a great diversity of gifts and talents which help us in our lives and our Christian walk. BUT....when the emphasis shifts to the Gifts and what we can do with them, the emphasis has shifted from glorifying God to Glorifying self.
Or simply self-idolatry.
Instead of thanking God, we begin to congratulate ourselves on what we have achieved!

As we face the trials of life and those that would seek to undermine our faith, we discover that as we trust God or as we pray about our trials, we do indeed pass through the times of trial.
We discover that God is faithful and that he strengthens us each time. As we discover our trust in Him has enabled the trial to be passed, our faith in Him increases.
This only works if we actually trust Him with major things in our lives.

Do you trust Him?
Do you trust Him with your family, future job prospects, home?
You need to. If He is not Lord over all in your life, you will have a constant struggle “letting go” or allowing him to reign.

Whilst it is easy and sensible to choose to allow Him to reign in your life, it is another thing when we get down to the practicalities.

We say “yes” to Jesus and we mean it, but, it is not long before we find saying “yes” and “living” yes are quite different.

So often we seize back control as our faith takes a wobbly.

Each time we do, we need to re-commit and persevere.

We learn that perseverance through faith enables us to surrender more and more of our desire to be independent. As this desire for independence, or self-determination, is surrendered we find ourselves more able to pray and accept, *"Thy Will Be Done."*

As we persevere we, by the help of the Holy Spirit, discover just how flawed we really are. We discover reactions and sins in our hearts that once we would refuse to acknowledge.

But,... as we increase in our faith, as we persevere, we find that we can discover that even the hidden sins in our lives can be brought before God, can be confessed, repented of and forgiven by God.

It never ceases to amaze that we assume that our personal hidden sins are so awful, that we must be worse than any other Christian.

We know it is wrong to judge others and yet we fail to apply that truth to ourselves, we must not judge ourselves.

Instead, acknowledge, confess your sin, receive forgiveness and seek not to have a “next time.”

I believe that this is what James is referring to when he speaks of *"maturity stemming from perseverance"* – It's a *growing* holiness in our lives.

It sounds fairly straight forward and simple but, we all know it is more difficult than how I have portrayed it.

Getting older does not really help us conquer sin any easier.

A young man struggling with lust in his heart, spoke in confidence to an elderly, much respected Christian. "At what age does lust cease to be a problem?" he asked. "I don't know" replied the elder, "I'm 84, I guess it has to be some time after that!"

When we are faced with trials, which is really temptation to sin, whether it is temptation to do something, reacting the wrong way to a problem, saying something or even thinking something which we know to be wrong. We have the choice to go God's way or our own way.

Because of our human nature, we find this a struggle.⁷

Often, in difficult or sudden situations, we react as we did before we came to faith but, frequently we are genuinely stunned by how easily we stumble in our attempts to follow the way of Jesus.

What surprises many is the way in which, after maturing a little in our faith, it is then that we fall for the temptations that come.

Often this stems from a false assumption that we have defeated an area of sin in our lives.

Truthfully, victories are only won through accepting Jesus victory over these situations not ours. It is Jesus at work within us, working to the extent that we are prepared to surrender self that makes the difference.

James points out, as we struggle, each time we do go God's way, we are not disappointed and our faith grows.

As our faith grows, so we learn to persevere because, we discover as we persevere, the trials that come our way become less of a struggle.

Temptations to sin that would have caused us a real struggle in our early days as a believer, are no longer a trial, because we have trusted God and He has enabled us, through Jesus to change.

The process is one which continues right through this life, as we deal with each situation, we find, as James points out, we mature.

An elderly lady whom many regarded as fine an example of a Christian as you would meet, once told me that the older she got, the more wretched she discovered she was.

As the pride of youth and middle-age dissipates, we see ourselves as we really are, we have fewer pretensions, we find it harder to “put on a face.”

Spiritual Maturity develops as our relationship with the Lord deepens and as we allow Him to transform and reign within.

The desire to grow in our faith is essential, the desire to know Him deeper causes us to surrender self.

A young Christian of just a few years, can be much more mature in their faith than the Christian who confessed Jesus as Lord and then refused to deepen their relationship with Him.

Two years of being in love with Jesus is better than 40 years of merely being acquainted!

As we overcome the trials we face, we are being completed or transformed more and more into His likeness.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask 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, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a doubleminded man, unstable in all he does.” James 1:5-8

If we find ourselves stuck or in a quandary, about what to do, Verse 5 of chapter 1 of James tells us we should ask God, or, Pray for Guidance.

And when we do ask, we must believe God will answer and that we will trust his answer and guidance.

IF WE DO NOT....we will find ourselves doubting God.

Often the struggle intensifies to a point where we examine all the options and so often we prefer our solution to God's. We tend to go for the "easy option" but, we usually find that our solution is anything but easy.

- we have this distorted notion that we know best!

When we behave this way we are like the waves tossed to and fro by the wind. We try to be selective about what parts of God's advice we want to follow and we wrongly assume we can manage the rest in our own strength.

It will not work that way, God will not be thwarted or mocked!!

When called to ministry, I tried to avoid responding to God's call by applying for a job that would enable me to look after the welfare of fellow employees. I reasoned with God, "It's a ministry!" "I'll be helping people and I can do it as a Christian in the workplace." - I was assured by colleagues, that it would be a "shoe-in."

However, praying before the start of the interview for the post, I realised that I was in the wrong place physically and spiritually, that I was being disobedient to God.

There was no way around it, I would have to leave a "safe/well paid job" to answer my calling.

Up until that point I had endured 18 months of spiritual buffeting by the waves.

I was fearful, I lacked faith in God to provide the finances required to maintain a home and to start a family.

As soon as I had prayed and said YES to His call on my life, doors “flew open,” a place at university without the usual entry requirements, acceptance as a candidate in training for the Church and there was also a sudden blessing of finance that would ensure 4 years of study and the resources to start a family.

(Sheila, my wife, had also been blessed with many gifts to ensure that our family was always well cared for and God’s hand/provision blessed us mightily through her.)

We will discover that we frequently make mistakes and we find ourselves committing sins we thought we had dealt with, remember those verses in Romans 7?

"Why is it? the things we don't want to do are the very things we keep on doing?"

When we mess-up, when we make proper hash of things, do we decide it's no good and say, "I'll never make it?"

Do we give up on ourselves or give up on those who have caused us hurt?

The Word of God tells us that he never gives up on us, he loves those that hurt us as well.

God hates the way we hurt each other but **He** and **WE** know that the solution to this behaviour can only be found in the love of Jesus.

James tells us that the answer is not to give up, we are to persevere, that way we learn to trust God more and more.

When we mess up, when we sin, often hurting others in the process, we need to confess, repent of our sin and the forgiving grace of our Father wipes the slate clean once more.

As we believe and receive His forgiveness, we are enabled to carry on, chastened certainly but, with a stronger faith and a

resolve to resist the temptations next time they arise.

We sometimes forget to do this or we hope God will ignore our sins, He does not!

It is only after we have taken them to our Father in Jesus Name that our sins, our failures can be forgiven. It is only in the name of Jesus that WE can forgive those that have sinned against us. Even though we may find this to be difficult, if we pray for faith and strength he will not disappoint us.

Sometimes it's not just faith to forgive we need, sometimes we need to pray for the willingness to want to forgive.

If we have been particularly injured by another, we may struggle to want to forgive. Sometimes we may feel that if we forgive them for hurting us, they will in effect be "let off the hook."

We must trust God to deal with them justly.

Truthfully, praying that God will help us to be willing to forgive will often see US as the ones that begin to sense being freed. Anger and bitterness within our hearts, make us captive to a period of time when we were hurt.

Finding a quiet spot, where you know you will not be overheard, and then letting the Lord know exactly what the issue is, (I mean really let Him "have it!") and you will be surprised at how your view of things alters.

- The Lord knows how you feel about what happened to you and He wants you to be able to express that anger and hurt to Him, so that he will be allowed to come in and heal or clean up those wounds.

If you feel you were treated unfairly, tell Him but, be open to hearing the truth about what you need to do to be at rest with the situation too!

We have to trust Him.

If we profess our faith in The Lord Jesus and Worship God and then demonstrate by our behaviour that we do not trust God, what double-mindedness, says James.

Our resolve to trust in the Lord regardless of our situation, regardless of how hopeless the situation may appear to be, it is part of the process of refining our lives. Only when we are faced with life's challenges, are we faced with our own frailties which enables us to recognise our total dependence upon the grace and the love of God.

It is only when we recognise our dependence upon God for all things that we discover humility. Humility is a pre-requisite for Christians, to recognise that our ways are not His ways⁸ and that His ways are so much better for us.

As we focus upon the truth of John 3:16, that God gave His only begotten Son, so that we would not perish, we are indeed humbled by the depth of God's love for us.

James tells us we are to rejoice in our humility because it enables us to be raised to the highest possible position. Through Jesus we are seated at the right hand of God the Father⁹.

Whereas those that consider themselves to have everything they need as a result of their own efforts alone, those that are proud at their own achievements, we learn that such people should enjoy it while it lasts because such riches are short lived.

Placing hope in material possessions, placing hope in oneself to provide all the answers to the questions of life is idolatry.

Such, so-called, riches are transient, they will decay or be destroyed.

In comparison with the eternal riches we have through Jesus, earthly riches and human wisdom, fade to nothing.

According to James they are like a small plant in bloom, which fades rapidly because it is no match for the power of the heat in the Sun.

James tells us we need to remember to persevere.

In fact, in words that mirror Jesus words in the Sermon on the Mount and the beatitudes, he 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."*

We are to persevere through all our trials then, we are told, we will be called "blessed".

Imagine, BLESSED for persevering!

Pleased note, it does not say we will be blessed for succeeding, no, you will be blessed for persevering, for not giving up!

But, the perseverance referred to is not a grudging acceptance of our situation, where we grit our teeth and just long for it to be all over.

It's accepting the challenge of bringing glory to God through the way in which we handle any given situation.

It is a test of our endurance and of our faithfulness to God.

We are blessed because of the fact that blessing God through our actions and our perseverance indicates our heart for Him.

We are blessed as we bless Him.

When we have stood the test and remained faithful to our God, we will receive the crown of life that God promises to those who love Him. We are blessed with a crown. James is referring of course, to the crown of everlasting life.

The "Crown of Life" it sounds wonderful, it's hard to imagine.

The thought of having a crown tends to make me cringe, not being worthy etc.. It causes an unwarranted angst. Angst is unwarranted because it is His worthiness that counts not ours. We are “clothed in Christ” therefore it should not be too surprising that we are also to receive a crown, won for us by Jesus. - The book of Revelation speaks also of this crown. You will have a crown if you are His.¹⁰

When precious gold and silver have been purified sufficiently, when it has been through fire and all the imperfections and dross have been removed, something happens to each piece of refined metal.

Each piece receives a hall-mark.

- A stamp, a seal of approval, a sign of purity and value.

In this country (the UK) the primary mark is a CROWN.

I find this imagery helpful, I hope you do too as you face your next trial.

Regardless of what trials you face, you face them with the Lord our God at your side, the Holy Spirit within you and you also have His stamp of approval upon your life, you are regarded as precious in his sight.

You need to rejoice that it is so when faced with trials of many kinds and perhaps, knowing that your crown most certainly awaits, your trials may not seem quite so arduous.

The Source of Temptation

“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. When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.”

For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.

Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fullgrown, gives birth to death.” James 1:12-15

If you are anything like me, you will hate to be blamed for anything.

When things go wrong and someone blames us, we just don't like it.

Often, even when it's plainly our fault, we will try to wriggle out of it or at least claim mitigating circumstances, perhaps blaming others for our mistakes.

We lambast politicians for “passing the buck” but, we tend to do it more frequently than we realise or would want to admit.

Acceptance of our responsibility for our own action has always been a problem. Even in the Garden of Eden, when God spoke to Adam about disobeying Him, Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the Serpent and as everyone knows, the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on!

In the second half of the 1st chapter of James, the first item on James's agenda and on God's, is the need for each one of us to accept responsibility for our own actions.

So often we are quick to claim credit for successes but, it's a different matter when it comes to our mistakes. We go to extraordinary lengths to try and claim mitigating circumstances.

When we are tempted, **we are not** to say "God is tempting me" because that view of God is a false one. When we think that way, we declare that God can be corrupted by sin which is *clearly* a nonsense.

But, such are the lengths we will go to avoid accepting our faults and wrongdoings as part of our lives.

We know from our Scriptures that another name for Satan is "the Tempter."

We know that Satan's job is to try and persuade us to turn our back on God and reject the saving work of Jesus.

We also know that, we will not be presented with temptations that cannot be withstood. For if we are presented with something we **cannot** resist, that is not temptation.

The word "temptation" by its very nature, implies that we have a choice.

Interestingly, James does not concern himself with the wiles of the Evil One or Tempter.

You see,

The problem does not lie in who is tempting us.

The problem lies **within us** as our desires for what is wrong and contrary to God's will for our lives, come into conflict with what we know to be true and right.

We are tempted when we allow our own evil, sinful desires to lure us away from God's path.

God has given each one of us a free will.

It is our decision whether or not to sin, **it is our decision** whether to turn our back on the one who laid down his life for us, **it is our decision** to treat his sacrifice as *secondary* to our *primary concern* of taking care of **number one**.

It was the decision of the Prodigal to leave home, it was his

decisions that got him into a deep mess and a pretty deep pigsty!¹¹

Only a realisation of the mess we have made, an admission that we were wrong and a decision to return home and confess to our Heavenly Father will enable us to recover and enable a fresh start.

How we get on with those around us is up to us too!

Too often we are tempted to judge another, we decide that they are awkward to deal with or, we decide that they are a source of our problems and we choose to get angry or to get even instead of addressing what really is at the core of the problem.

All too often our issues with other people are more easily dealt with when we take time to work out WHY someone else's behaviour has caused us to react the way in which we have.

We find that we say things like, "see him, he makes me angry" or, "see her, she really gets on my nerves!"

Truthfully, the issue is with our tolerance levels, perhaps, stress in our own lives and yes quite definitely, when we get angry, when someone is "getting on our nerves," we are the ones who are committing a sin and so, we need to search our hearts. (or more accurately, ask the Holy Spirit to search our hearts for the source of what is going on with us.)

We need to acknowledge that sometimes we might need a little help with these issues from a trusted brother or sister in the Lord.

We also need to be able to be good listeners to encourage one another too.

God is Holy and he calls us through Jesus to be Holy also. He wants us to keep out of the muck and the mire that so many, wallow in.

We have the Holy Spirit to help us, to guide us, to help us resist temptation when it comes.

But so frequently, we fail and we do so because we have an overestimated opinion of how much temptation we can handle before we "give in" to sin.

So often, we have the notion that we can resist up to a point and then be able to step away. - We have an over-inflated opinion of our ability to cope on our own.

It would be best to avoid areas where we know we are likely to fall otherwise, by the time we recognise that we are in a fix, it's often too late when we pray.

Instead of praying for strength to resist temptations we find ourselves having to confess our committed sins and seeking his forgiveness.

e.g. recovering alcoholics are best to stay out of pubs and the drinks aisle in supermarkets.

It's important once we identify our own weaknesses that we take action to help us stay on the right path.

But, unless we pray about our weaknesses, unless we surrender these areas of our lives to the Lord, we will continue to stumble along feeling defeated instead of walking in victory.

We have the Holy Spirit of God residing within us, let's remember to allow Him to reign in our lives.

"Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. 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 1:16-17

At some point we may become conscious of someone that attracts us or annoys us, or, perhaps we see something that we want for ourselves. It could be the thought of our neighbour's new car, the thought of what to do if you were rich, wrong

programs on the TV or computer, it could be impure thoughts about someone you find attractive....the list is seemingly endless.

The list **is** endless, and each wrong thought is heading in the one direction. Into sin and away from God.

Once these seeds or thoughts have been placed in the mind, at some point the opportunity to follow through on one of them is presented. So, when given the opportunity, you have very little chance of resisting the temptation because you have played with the thoughts or, toyed with the idea for so long in your mind that before you give it another thought, **the deed is done**. The obvious example in this area we have talking about is sexual immorality.

Other examples are just as serious.

...Waiting to get revenge for some past hurt.

...Having a "juicy piece of gossip" to spread.

...Or trying to undermine those with whom you disagree.

There are lots of examples, but, one thing is certain, all these sins are on the road away from our Heavenly Father towards spiritual death.

This is why Paul in his SECOND letter to the Corinthians said we are to take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.¹²

- The Only solution.

It is in the mind that our sins are conceived, BUT, **if** we have Jesus firmly rooted in our lives and our thoughts, we can resist temptation.

If we recognise our sinful thoughts and immediately take them captive and make them obedient to Christ, then temptation is defeated.

We **have** to learn how to resist temptation because of the calling God has placed upon each of our lives.

It seems crazy, but it is true, sin that ruins marriages, cripples self-esteem, destroys friendships and many other wonderful aspects of our lives, that sin could be resisted. It doesn't take long to resist temptation.

Rob Parsons of the Care for the Family¹³ organisation, estimates that 10 seconds is all the time we've got to resist temptation.

I believe his estimate is about right.

10 seconds in which to make your mind up, **my** way or **God's** way?

But in those ten seconds you have time to think about the Cross of Christ, you have time to think "What would Jesus Do?

- How Jesus would react to what you're thinking of doing?

In those ten seconds you can discover how to resist temptation.

10 seconds that could save an awful lot of pain!

BUT, you must be **awake** enough to recognise "temptation" when *it so frequently sneaks up on you.*

James calls us **all** "not to be deceived."

Our Father, the one who put all the stars, the moon and the sun in their places, the eternal unchanging God who showers us with good gifts. How could HE try and deceive us?

Let' s not try and blame God when we sin or struggle with temptation, that "Buck" stops with ourselves.

-Its our responsibility!

"He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." James 1:18

Through Jesus, God has called us.

- Spiritually we have been re-birthed.

Because we have been blessed with the saving knowledge of Jesus' sacrifice for our lives, WE, are to be like the first fruits of God's creation.

The First Fruits of the Harvest, we know from the Old Testament, were to be presented to God as a sacrifice. The first fruits are always the best.

Out of all the people of his creation, we are seen by God as the pick of the crop, the "first fruits".

BUT we need to remember, our being the choicest fruits has nothing whatsoever to do with how we are or how we have been.

When we are in Christ, it is Jesus that is seen by God the Father, not us. **We**, through our faith in Jesus, are **accepted** by the *Grace* of God as the First Fruits of his creation.

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” James 1:19-20

Remembering our favoured and privileged position, **in Christ**, we have to conduct our lives in such a way as brings Glory to Jesus.

As ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, our behaviour must be consistent with the message we proclaim.

If we pay particular attention to **listening** we will be able to understand better the things we have to face, **BEFORE** we open our mouths and react in anger.

So often we find ourselves reacting in anger to situations, whereas we need to listen more and we need to listen for God's guidance.

Can any of us really say we can listen well when we are “blowing our top” or throwing a tantrum?

When we react in anger, **we react with violence in our**

hearts, and God sees it!

God wants us to lead righteous lives.

But, if we retain malice or hatred in our hearts, our hearts are full already.

If our hearts are full of malice or hatred, what room can we give to God's Word?

In order that we can receive God's Word fully, we must be willing to reject the wrong things in our hearts. God will strengthen us in this struggle but, first we must be willing to do things His way.

James tells us **we are not just to sit and listen to the Word and try to understand it.**

We are commanded to listen to the Word **and do what it says.**

Our life and our actions must reflect the Word of God. So, we need to read and seek to understand the implications of God's Word in our lives. That takes will and personal commitment. It requires perseverance when we make a mess of things but, it is worth it.

The Challenge

“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.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it 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, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But 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.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

James 1:21-27

When we read our Bible we find that we recognise ourselves in many of the passages we read. - It is, afterall, the Living Word of God!

When we read about the struggle with trials and temptations, we recognise ourselves. If we are serious about following the Lord and serving Him throughout our lives, we know already that it isn't easy!

When we read that we are to guard against anger and moral filth, we know what James is talking about.

We are conscious of how we respond to the News and the conversations we have.

Because *we recognise these things in our lives, we recognise **ourselves*** as the recipients of James' letter.

In fact, when we read it carefully we find ourselves saying, “You'd think this was written specifically for me.”

Well, if that's what you think, YOU ARE RIGHT!

This book is a specific message for each individual, it is a truthful reflection on what Christians have to be to walk in holiness, to live as Christians.

How **do** we respond to the truth of the Word of God?

How do we **respond** to the love which is shown through Jesus **who is** the living Word?

As we read, once we have encountered ourselves in the Word, once we have recognised **our condition**, or as James puts it so well, ONCE we have seen our reflection in the Word of God. How do we react?

Do we accept, the evidence before our eyes, (i..e. in the Word of God) that we have many faults that need to be addressed?
Do we actively seek God's help to change?

Or, do we, once we have recognised ourselves, once we have felt God's conviction in our hearts, do we discreetly close our Bibles and let out a quiet sigh of relief?
Do we then carry on as before, as if nothing has happened?

Once we have seen our lives reflected in God's Word, what we do next is absolutely crucial.

If we ignore what we have seen, when we look at God's Word, James tells us that it is like looking into mirror for a moment and then, once we turn away, we forget what we look like.

This is like trying to deny who we are.

We may not particularly like what we see when we look into the mirror of God's Word but, when we are blessed with a glimpse of what we are really like, **we have been blessed with an opportunity to change.**

James tells us that how we **approach** the Word, how we

approach the **truth**, determines how we will react to it.

If we look into the Word, ***intently***, we start with the notion that we **want** to know the truth and that **we want** our lives to be in accordance with that truth.

If we are prepared to allow God to change our lives, as we do what we hear Him tell us, through His Word, *each time* we look into the mirror of God's Word we will find that *gradually we look less ugly!*

Unless we are prepared to look "intently" into God's Word, or God's perfect law, we are not taking God's Word seriously. Unless we look with the intention of ***responding*** to what we see about God and ourselves, *we are wasting our time.*

Most of us will look into the Bathroom Mirror at least once a day.

Faces get washed, hairbrushes are used, razors are applied to men's faces, make-up is applied to ladies faces.

Why do we do these things?

We look into the bathroom mirror and we know we could look better, we don't like what we see, so, we make a bit of an effort.

We want to look our best for those around us.

Personally, I must confess, I ***detest*** having to shave. I dislike scraping my face with a dangerous implement, I certainly dislike cutting myself and the associated pain.

But, the alternative for me is much worse.

If I don't shave, I know my children will find Dad's cuddles to be "scratchy" and they will try to push me away. *"Scratchy cuddles are not nice!"*

- Rejection by ones children, no matter how trivial it may seem, is not a pleasant experience.

Yet, that is exactly what each one of us do to HIM when we look into the Mirror of God's Word and refuse to address our faults.

God lovingly shows us through Jesus, what we are like and we reject his guidance, we reject Him. - How he must be saddened!

James tells that we must see ourselves as we really are, *we must listen* to what God is telling us about ourselves and **we must DO what God tells us to do through His Word.**

By DOING what the Word tells us, we are not somehow advocating that we can be saved by our own actions.

By doing what the Word tells us, we are **responding** to the love and the **loving discipline** of our Heavenly Father.

We know that we will be blessed by God each time we respond to His will for us

If we find ourselves wondering how we are progressing in our response to God's Word, James suggests that we examine what words come from our mouths.

At a very basic level, when you last hit your thumb with a hammer, the last time someone “cut you off” at a set of lights, the last time you thought someone was being unpleasant to you, how did you react?

Did you swear?

Did you try to get your own back?

Or, did you surprise yourself by responding better than you would have done a while back? – If that is the case you are growing spiritually and you can be encouraged.

But, If we find ourselves thinking that we are maturing in our faith, if we think we are open to God and the work of the Holy

Spirit *and yet* we cannot keep a tight reign on our tongue,
we are "kidding ourselves on."

For the words of our mouths betray the content of our hearts.

When our hearts are right with God and with others, then the words that we speak will, *only then*, reflect Glory upon Jesus.

To pay lip service to the Word and God's guidance means our faith is a sham.

Whereas, when we bless others through our encouragement and exercise grace when they make mistakes, we will not only bless those around us but, we will bless the Lord who guides us.

It is when we speak that we reveal what we have in our hearts. Another good way of establishing what our faith really means to each of us, is how we react to those who have no-one to help them.

How do we react to those who are poor or, those who have no-one to supply their needs?

James calls these people the "orphans and the widows," people with no means of support.

Widows and orphans had to fend for themselves, often they became beggars.

Deuteronomy 10:16-17 tells us that God is the helper of the helpless.

With *Christ in us*, **we too** are to be helpers of the helpless.

We have received so much from God, through His Word, through the Holy Spirit and especially through his Son.

We have received so much, we are able to share what we have with others.

This means we are not to respond as the rest of the world responds in selfish ambition, greed and competition, we are to

resist this type of pollution. - If we allow ourselves, and our faith, to be polluted, we declare through our lives that our faith has become worthless.

This type of pollution is particularly hard to resist, especially if we watch much T.V.

We find, as we watch the oblong idol that sits in the corner, we are **bombarded** by all sorts of information that encourages us to strive for the type of lives depicted in the glamour of the T.V. or film set.

We are also encouraged to accept that promiscuity is O.K. *as long as we are responsible about it.*

Homosexuality is meant to be an accepted norm of society.

News Broadcasts frequently bring horrendous news of disasters that have happened in other parts of the world.

The temptation to "normalise" the unacceptable becomes greater the more we are exposed to the concept.

It is good to be informed BUT, as we watch and comfort ourselves that we were not personally involved, do we not find ourselves saying "Really things here are not that bad?"

In short, we become complacent about our own situation?

We are told to be independent and self-reliant, to be anything else, we are to be considered weak and almost certainly a case for the social services.

In the UK, we have a good system of Social Security, we know there are many problems with the system but, generally it does provide for those who need it.

But,

Is it possible that, while we recognise the needs of others, we have become more selfish and less caring for those around us? Do we too often assume that the Social Services will meet the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves?

Do we use the Social Services as a "Cop Out" or as an excuse

for not being involved in helping those around who may appreciate an expression of self-less love?

- Who could have envisaged, in the second decade of the 21st century, that the church would be at the forefront once again providing food-banks for the less fortunate in the UK?

There is a frequently mis-used saying that states, "God helps those that help themselves." This type of saying is used to justify selfishness and neglect of those who dearly need assistance.

When we say these things to ourselves, we are allowing our minds to be polluted by the deceptions of this world.

We allow ourselves to be duped into denying the basis of our faith.

James tells us that if we allow ourselves to be polluted by the world we cannot walk in holiness.

For our Faith to be meaningful to us **and to God** we have to allow ourselves to be transformed into the image of Jesus.

We are not to allow ourselves (the Church) to be conformed into society's image.

Instead we are to reject aggressive competitiveness; we are to reject personal ambition; we are to reject selfish accumulation and consumerism; we are to reject the sexualisation of young people and any perversion of God's good plan for human sexual relationships within marriage.

We are to reject them because such things are evidence of a lack of care for others and they so frequently form the basis for much conflict, they are not of God.

We must fight the temptation to succumb to being conformed to

the world. Our lives must reflect the faith we have and the Gospel we proclaim with our lips and we must proclaim our faith through our actions.

As we face the trials of life and those that would seek to undermine our faith, we discover that as we trust God or, as we pray about our trials, we do indeed pass through the time of trial.

We discover that God is faithful and that he strengthens us each time. As we discover our trust in Him has enabled the trial to be passed, our faith in Him increases all the more.

WE learn that perseverance through faith enables us to surrender more and more of our desire to be independent. As this desire for independence, or self-determination, is surrendered we find ourselves more able to pray and accept, *"Thy Will Be Done"*¹⁴.

As we persevere we, by the help of the Holy Spirit, discover just how flawed we really are. We discover reactions and sins in our hearts that once we would refuse to acknowledge.

But,... as we increase in our faith, as we persevere, we find that we can discover that even the hidden sins in our lives can be brought before God, can be confessed, repented of and forgiven by God.

I believe that this is what James is referring to when he speaks of "maturity stemming from perseverance."

– It's a growing holiness in our lives.

It sounds fairly straight forward and simple but, we all know it is more difficult than how I have portrayed it.

When we are faced with trials, which are mainly temptations to

sin, whether it is temptation to do something, say something or even think something which we know to be wrong, we have the choice to go God's way or our own way.

Because of our human nature, we find this a battle but, as James points out, as we battle, each time we **do** go God's way, we are not disappointed and our faith grows.

As our faith grows, so we learn to persevere, because, we discover, as we persevere, the trials that come our way become less of a struggle.

Temptations to sin that would have caused us a real struggle in our early days as a believer, are no longer such a trial.

- Because we have trusted God and He has enabled us, through Jesus to change.

The process is one which continues right through this life, as we deal with each situation, we find, as James points out, we mature.

As we overcome the trials we face, we are being completed or transformed more and more into His likeness.¹⁵

If we find ourselves stuck or in a quandary, about what to do, Verse 5 of Chapter 1 tells us we should ask God, or, Pray for Guidance.

And when we do ask, we must believe God will answer and that we will trust his answer and guidance.

IF WE DO NOT....we will find ourselves doubting God.

Often the struggle intensifies to a point where we prefer our own solution to God's, we have this distorted notion that we know best!

When we behave this way we are like the waves tossed to and fro by the wind. We try to be selective about what parts of God's advice we want to follow and we wrongly assume we can

manage the rest in our own strength.
It does not work that way!!

We have to make up our minds about whether we want to follow the teaching of Jesus and His example or not.

When we ask for his Guidance, he gives it!

When we ask for strength he supplies it!

He never lets us down.

He always hears our prayers and our cries for help.

We tend to run into difficulties when we expect God's answers to meet with our preconceived notions of what we *think* we actually need.

We have to let God be God, we have to believe He will always act in our best interests.

Jesus said *"If you then though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*¹⁶

James tells us that we must trust God completely, "Not to be blown and tossed about like the waves."

We are not to pick and choose when we are to respond to God, we can't select all the bits that we like and disregard those things that we don't like.

I once heard this type of double-mindedness being compared to someone trying to decide whether or not to get into a boat.

The boat is about to set sail and you are trying to decide whether you have the stomach for the trip. With one foot on the boat and one foot firmly on the Quay-side you stand trying to make up your mind. The boat is going to sail on time you have to decide whether you get onboard or get off.

You know it is a very uncomfortable feeling to have one foot on the shore and one foot on a boat and the boat begins to move away. You have to jump one way or the other, the alternative is

to get soaked!

Once we have committed ourselves to the Lord, we know he will never let us down because he is totally committed to us, he loves us unconditionally.

Our commitment to the Lord is a commitment to seek to follow His ways each day of our lives. We find that we frequently make mistakes and we find ourselves committing sins we thought we had dealt with, Remember those verses in Romans 7?

"Why is it? the things we don't want to do are the very things we keep on doing?"

When we mess-up, when we make proper hash of things, do we decide it's no good and say, "I'll never make it?"

Do we give up on ourselves or give up on those who have caused us hurt?

The Word of God tells us that he never gives up on us and he loves those that hurt us as well. God hates the way we hurt each other but **He** and **WE** know that the solution to this behaviour can only be found in the love of Jesus.

James tells us that the answer is not to give up, we are to persevere, and that way we learn to trust God more and more. When we mess up, when we sin, often hurting others in the process, we need to confess and repent of our sin and the forgiving grace of our Father wipes the slate clean once more.

As we believe and receive His forgiveness, we are enabled to carry on, chastened but with a stronger faith and a resolve to resist the temptations next time they arise.

We sometimes forget to do this or we hope God will ignore our

sins, He does not!

It is only after we have taken them to our Father in Jesus Name that our sins, our failures can be forgiven. It is only in the name of Jesus that WE can forgive those that have sinned against us. Even though we find this to be difficult, if we pray for faith and strength he will not disappoint us.

We must trust God.

“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” James 1:26:27

If we profess our faith in The Lord Jesus and Worship God and then demonstrate that we do not trust God, what double-mindedness, says James.

Our resolve to trust in the Lord regardless of our situation, regardless of how hopeless the situation may appear to be, is part of the process of refining our lives. Only when we are faced with life's challenges, are we faced with our own frailties which enables us to recognise our dependence upon the grace of God.

It is only when we recognise our dependence upon God for all things that we discover humility. Humility is a pre-requisite for Christians, to recognise that our ways are not His ways and that His ways are so much better for us.

As we focus upon the truth of John 3:16, that God gave His only begotten Son, so that we would not perish, we are indeed humbled by the depth of God's love for us. We are encouraged

to be faithful as He is faithful towards us.

James tells us we are to rejoice in our humility because it enables us to be raised to the highest possible position. Through Jesus we are seated at the right hand of God the Father.

Whereas those that consider themselves to have everything they need as a result of their own efforts alone, those that are proud at their own achievements, we learn that such people should enjoy it while it lasts because such riches are short lived.

Placing hope in material possessions, placing hope in oneself to provide all the answers to the questions of life is idolatry. Such, so-called, riches are transient, they will decay or be destroyed.

In comparison with the eternal riches we have through Jesus, earthly riches and human wisdom, fade to nothing.

According to James it is like a small plant in bloom, which fades rapidly because it is no match for the power of the heat in the Sun.

James tells us we need to remember to persevere.

We are to persevere through all our trials and we are told we will be called "blessed".

The perseverance referred to is not a grudging acceptance of our situation, where we grit our teeth and just long for it to be all over.

It is a test of our endurance and of our faithfulness to God.

It's a lifelong struggle against our sinful nature.

Thankfully, the Lord only deals with our sin "a bit at a time" if we were faced with all of our sins at once, we would be

overwhelmed by the immense nature of the task.

God is gracious, by His Spirit within, He convicts our hearts of those sins he knows we need to deal with right now.

God is specific as is the conviction we experience.

The tempter is the one who seeks make us feel “generally guilty.”

Learn to reject such guilt as it seeks to undermine the good work the Lord has done in and through you and remember, *“there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.”¹⁷*

You are free from guilt! - Regardless of what satan would have you believe.

The 1st chapter of James closes, with James reminding us not to be polluted by the world.

Faith that God sees as pure and faultless, is a faith that cares for others and makes a VISIBLE difference to the lives of those who profess Jesus as Lord.

So, we must be different, our lives must be distinct from the ways of the world.

What we say and what we do, must match the truth to be found in the Gospel and in the life of Jesus our Saviour.

When you behave that way, then you truly do live a life that proclaims the Gospel.

May God grant you his continued strength to complete the work he has already begun.

May you remember always, when you mess up, you are a work in progress.

Remember the Poor

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring 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’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” James 2:1-4

The start of 2nd chapter of James may seem a strange passage for Christians to read today. *“As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favouritism.”*

We may react by responding that as Christians, we are to love everyone equally and therefore, “fairness” has to be a given in the church!

So, why make an issue of it?

We read the text and we quite rightly find ourselves thinking how different our world is from how it was in the Early Church. I suppose many of us will think "thank goodness we no longer have to face those types of situations.

The world seems like a different place now, well at least for us!

Perhaps we find it difficult to relate to what James is addressing in this passage.

Initially, at least, the whole topic seems a bit obscure.

What James is addressing is our attitudes toward fellow believers, we are not to show favouritism within the church.

It's helpful to know specifically, what James was addressing.

He was addressing a tendency in the Early Church that gave special recognition to the rich.

This is an issue that has re-occurred at various times throughout the history of the church. History, literature and film

are littered with examples of Christians, often clergy, seeking to pander to rich parishioners, with a view to furthering their own agendas. - Often portraying selfish ambition and disregarding the very real concerns of people in need.

At the same time, where faith has dwindled in the face of greed the church has, on occasions, diluted the message of the gospel so as not to “upset” its benefactors.

It seems likely, from what we have at the start of the second chapter of James, there were some in the church that were fawning over those with money and status.

We do not know what their specific motives were but, they were wrong.

When it comes to helping those for whom we have a great love, it is amazing the lengths we will go to to bless or assist them in their situation.

Likewise, when we are tempted by the selfish side of our human nature to pander to the rich and wealthy, hoping for some “reward” for our attention to their “needs,” it is amazing the compromises that we are prepared to make in our faith to further our own interests.

Yes, sadly, folk are frequently tempted to put aside their Christian faith to further their selfish ambitions, it's pathetic really but, so easy to fall into the trap!

In a similar way, those that are wealthy, as individuals and as wealthy or “well-heeled” churches, they have a responsibility to use their resources, not only to be good stewards of what they have received but, like all Christians, they need to follow the practice of the early Church and give to anyone in need.

One of the problems faced by many churches, including my own, is a shortage of financial resources.

Truthfully though, if we are honest about what the Bible says on these things, it is impossible for the church to have a “financial” problem!

If there is a lack of cash, then the problem can only be spiritual. It is impossible for the church to have a money problem if it is spiritually on track.

By the same measure, just as it is an indicator of a church being spiritually out of tune with the Lord and the Gospel when it has a shortage of money, a church with a huge bank balance has just as many spiritual difficulties.

To those who have been given much, much is expected by the Lord.

As is apparent from Paul’s letters, those “who have” must assist those “who have not”.

A large bank balance can make congregations lazy, complacent and too comfortable.

The message is clear, if we see a need that we can meet then we must seek to meet that need. To ignore the need is to sin.

James as the leader of the Early Church would have known, better than anyone else, the poverty of most believers.

(Particularly in Jerusalem)

Many Jews who became Christians would not have had much in the way of wealth. - Jesus ministered predominantly among the poor, so it follows that most of the earliest believers would be poor. It is still the case that the majority of Christians in the world today live in a situation of poverty. The Gospel is Good News particularly for the poor.

“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven”¹⁸

Also, when you consider what James was emphasising in the last verse of the previous chapter it becomes obvious!

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look

after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

Plainly, the truth and often uncomfortable truth is this, the Church is meant to be geared towards helping the poor and the vulnerable and doing all it can bring the Good News of Jesus to their lives.

At the same time, resisting the temptations and opportunities to seek comfort as opposed to offering it!

Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable.¹⁹

Sharing: A constant solution to a constant problem

“Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”

James 2:5-7

It was not an easy thing to lead the Church in Jerusalem. As the leader, all news, all problems were brought to James from all the surrounding countries. He knew too, the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” and the constant needs to be met, supporting the poor of the Church.

In Acts Ch6, initially, the distribution of resources had been affected by favouritism, *“Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”*

Steps were taken to ensure that fairness was “seen to be done” Grecian believers were entrusted with the task of ensuring fairness in how food was given out.

Trust was shown in that they could, just as easily, have chosen

to show favouritism towards the Grecians but, in effect, the trust shown through making their own vulnerable, indicated an expectation of fairness to all.

A few years after this letter, the Apostle Paul was involved in collecting money and encouraging the other fledgling churches to do the same so that the Church in Jerusalem could support those with little or no means of assistance.

What they had they shared!

Whether they had little or whether they had abundance, they shared whatever they had.

The cost of becoming a Christian meant for many, loss of property rights, being cut off from relatives and many were forced to be homeless. Indeed, as is often the case in the Middle East today, their very lives could be under threat.

In many respects it is quite natural for us all to seek to “look after our own”.

We are raised in families where we tend to make sure each family member is well protected, looked after and we endeavour to put family needs before the needs of neighbours and friends.

BUT, what we see in the early Church was quite simply people having to adjust to the notion that as brothers and sisters in Christ, Christians are a new family and as family, we have to “look after our own” as if they were our own kin.

James is keen to point out even though the material needs of the Church are more adequately met when rich people come to join the church.(- that is because they have more to contribute), that in itself is no reason to treat them any differently from anyone else.

By such behaviour, by favouring such a person, the poor or the

less well off were/are treated as less important or less worthy and that is wrong and it is divisive.

When we behave that way we have become judgmental and our thoughts have turned towards self-interest. – “If I keep in with this well off character I'll be alright.”

"If I become friends with an important person, I'll be seen as important too!" or, “I might be able to persuade them to contribute to the needs of the church.”

We are not meant to be manipulative, we are asked to love our neighbour and allow God to speak to the hearts of His people.

When we allow selfish and judgmental thoughts into our minds and in our lives, we have effectively declared that we do not trust God to meet our needs.

Or perhaps the effects of pandering to the wealthy among the ranks of the believers can have an even greater detrimental effect.

History is littered with examples of how the Church has managed to make terrible mistakes in this area.

Just a few years later, Paul found himself having to speak firmly about exactly the same thing. When the fellowship meal was being shared, it was not being equally shared. There were those and such as those! - “Enough!” cried Paul.

It's a recurring theme because we tend to be very “I” orientated, or simply selfish.

It did not take many years before the Church had bishops. Initially it was fine but, it did not take long before those with some semblance of authority began to wield that authority as power.

– Somehow bishops always seemed to be very well off!

When the leaders of the Church become corrupt, the message is also corrupted. Would it make sense to preach about not showing favouritism whilst pandering to one's Bishop?

While we know these distortions of the Truth and the Church have been allowed to happen, we also know that at some point, God has always intervened.

Martin Luther and others initiated the Great Reformation of the Church just after the pope came up with another money raising scam.

The money to build St Peter's in Rome was borrowed from a bank. To repay the money the church decided to sell "indulgences." These were bits of paper that the pope said would guarantee that dead relatives could be rescued from purgatory and effectively, given a ticket to heaven.

It was claimed that the Church could fix it for great uncle Bob to make it to heaven for a price! (Purgatory does not exist!)

- the richer you were, the more of your relatives you could rescue and get into heaven.

The deceptions were many and because of the lack of access to the Bible for ordinary people, they had no choice but to accept what they were being told by a corrupt and deceptive Church Hierarchy. Emotional blackmail was used to extract cash from the pre-literate society they were supposed to be ministering to in the Name of Jesus Christ.

Only when the inequalities within the church were rectified through the provision of Scriptures in the native languages of Europe and literacy was made available to the masses, only then, was there a possibility of brothers and sisters in Christ being equal in one another's eyes. - The Reformation caused much angst and bloodshed as the Church struggled with the sins and errors that had crept in via unbiblical methodologies and teaching.

There will always be such difficulties when people read into the text what they selfishly wish it said instead of taking the meaning of the text and adjusting their lives to follow what the Word of God actually says.

The subject of slavery was another similar dark stain on the church for centuries.

Some churches argued for, others against.

Only the recognition of the truth of equality in Christ made the difference.

The crucial point came as Christians realised the hypocrisy of treating fellow believers in the Lord as different. How could it be right for a slave and his master to worship God together as brothers and then return to the role of oppressor and the oppressed. - Rich and the Poor.

It was the truth of the Gospel that made the crucial difference in seeing the abolition of slavery.

The Church in Scotland (England too!) used to entertain patronage. Often this meant that the local land-owner would own the Church ground so they would also choose who the Minister would be. Sadly the message preached from the pulpit was often influenced by the landowner. - "He who paid the piper picked the tunes."

It is also suggested that "the work ethic" was particularly emphasised to the benefit of the land-owners who also happened to be the main employers in those days.

Again wealth and influence had tempted believers to deny the truth of the Gospel and favouritism was shown at the expense of those less well off.

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”

James 2:8-10

In every case where favouritism is, and has been, shown to the wealthy, the poor have always suffered.

James recognised this fact as he wrote his letter.

The majority of the first believers were very poor.

They were the ones Jesus had come to minister to.

Many of the poor would, as today, have to borrow money in order that they may survive. Extortion and exorbitant rates of interest applied, particularly if the money-lender did not like the look of you.

In many ways, it was reminiscent of the “Pay Day Loans” that are offered in our present age, with huge interest rates and merciless collection from defaulters.

- There are always those who seek to capitalise on the misfortune of others.

It was similar in the 1st Century church, if repayments were not made on time they were immediately taken to court. Often it was the synagogue that acted as the court.

It seems that there were many poor people being taken to court by those with money and influence.

It would be hard to imagine that the earliest Christians received anything other than rough justice. James tell us that those who were dragging them to court, and often that's what happened, they were literally grabbed in the street and dragged into court, those that dragged these poor believers into court were slandering the name of Jesus.

Believers had little or no chance of a fair hearing, what judge

could possibly accept the word of a Christian before the word of wealthy Jewish citizens?

These poor believers were being persecuted and the Lord's name was being ridiculed, by the very people that some wished to show favouritism towards.

James reminds us of the "Royal Law" and that if we Love our neighbours as we love ourselves, we are keeping the Lord's commands. Favouritism breaks the 11th Commandment, so we need to be alert to remain fair and evenhanded in our dealings with both rich and poor. - Be aware of your motives!

That all addresses material poverty and wealth, what about spiritually?

Jesus, when he taught the Beatitudes, put the "poor in spirit" at the top of his list.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Christians recognise their spiritual poverty and their need for a Saviour.

Christians recognise their poverty regardless of their material situation.

Likewise Christians are also Rich because they recognise the riches they have in their relationship with Jesus and the knowledge that all the resources of Heaven are within reach through prayer.

That is why Christians even in the direst situations of poverty can be the happiest people you meet. Materially they have nothing but, spiritually they have all they could ever dream of, including peace and contentment.

Possessions and material wealth can become distractions or, idols in the lives of many.

Hence Jesus, saying that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the

Kingdom of Heaven²⁰.

A good test to see if an item has become an idol for you is to give it away!

If you cannot give something away, you don't own it, it owns you and you really need to be able to let it go.

Whether it is wealth or fame, it is wrong to show favouritism. We are all one in Christ, seen by God as in Christ and as such His sons and daughters.

Paul says in Galatians... *"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*²¹

We are equal in the sight of God but, we may have been given different gifts and tasks to perform.

So, do not envy, do not judge, do not put others on pedestals or afford them special treatment otherwise pride may creep in and you may contribute towards causing a brother or sister to fall along with yourself.

What James is addressing, as he calls us not to show favouritism, reminds us, in humility, just how we are all spiritually poverty struck.

If we consider ourselves to be more spiritual than others, then we are claiming we are RICH. As soon as we adopt such a thought, we believe, whether consciously or not, we are to be favoured by God.

Remember, our righteousness is as filthy rags to Him!²²

Instead of behaving in divisive ways, we are to think in terms of us all being of equal worth to the Eternal God. How dare we

assume that we are better than anyone else when scripture reminds us that we are all equal.

James helpfully recalls the Royal Law, "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" and he tells us when we obey this law, we do right.

The determining factor within the church, is of course, how we regard the Word of God. Is the Bible the inspired Word of God or, is it a moral concoction from varied advisors from a by-gone age?

I hold to the view that it is the inspired Word of God and it follows that, as such, it spells out the acceptable pattern of behaviour for individuals and society.

Our sin is the reason Jesus endured all that He did. Sin and sinful behaviour are identified for us in so many clear ways within the Bible, that it is obvious, even to the casual reader, that the Church is to set about transforming society.

We are a counter culture.

The world focuses on seeking the exception to the rule to enable continued rebellion against God, which is sin. Like all lawyers, devil's advocates seek to create precedents for changing the way in which God's Laws are interpreted. Escape clauses are sought and where Courts are swayed by emotive arguments and do not hold fast the heart of the whole law, God's Law is mocked.

The church of the Lord Jesus focuses upon the truth of Scripture and showing favouritism within the church is clearly wrong.

We are not to think ourselves better or more spiritual than our brothers and sisters in Christ because we are all equal in the eyes of God.

But, we must be prepared to speak up when a brother or sister

is in error, we are told that, for the sake of the church, we are to correct or rebuke them so that they can make amends before God.

It is also true, that we are not to put others upon pedestals for we are all frail human beings. There are no “super-Christians”, we may admire the spirituality of some but, maturity will also come to us if we deepen our relationship with the Lord.

The key determinant is "Do we believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life?"

If we do, then there will be ample evidence from our lives that "spiritually" we are one with each other. We are a body of equals.

If we decide that some are more equal than others then we have broken the Royal Law of Scripture. - Failing to love one another as ourselves.

This, says James, is a sin, which makes us Law Breakers.

He points out that if you break one law, you become a law breaker.

This means when we show favouritism or discriminate between our brothers and sisters we are as guilty as the murderer or the adulterer. - We sin against God and our fellow believers.

If we are all prepared, and I'm sure that we are, to accept God's loving mercy, we must also be prepared to allow God to be the one who passes judgement on people's lives. When we show favouritism or discriminate between believers, James tells us we are wrong.

The book of James addresses very real issues for believers. James identifies, perhaps more directly than we would comfortably like, the areas where we are perhaps weakest.

We do not like it when God points out those parts of our lives that need attention, spiritual pride can, and frequently does, get in the way.

The problems identified in James do not require great theological debates to discover appropriate answers.

The answers are perhaps quite obvious but, they are also very practical.

Paul spoke of the need to share what we have to enable us to demonstrate our acceptance of equality among believers²³.

Our response to the Word, our response to His conviction which comes via the Holy Spirit, OUR RESPONSE serves as an indicator to God and to OURSELVES just how much we want to obey Him and just how much we want Him in our Lives.

James tells us and Jesus showed us by his life that we are not to have favourites or to discriminate among ourselves. He didn't!

He had some friends who were closer than others, Peter, James and John (who described himself as "the disciple Jesus loved") but, Jesus did not show favouritism towards them.

The night Jesus was betrayed, he knew what Judas was about to do.

Jesus did not discriminate even against Judas, he loved him and shared his last meal with him, he even washed his feet.

Faith is Practical

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

You foolish man, 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? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

James 2: 14 - 26.

Here is a story about a man who went to the Motor Show.

Whilst looking around at the vast array of vehicles on display, he found himself being impressed by the plush interiors of the luxury cars and the power of the sports cars but, the car that most grabbed his attention, was the high tech design of one central display.

He was impressed by the car’s efficient, sleek, aerodynamic shape but, he was even more impressed when he read the details of what the car could do.

It could do 0-60 m.p.h. in 8 seconds, it would automatically switch from using gas to solar energy whenever there was sufficient sunshine, maintenance or service mileages were every 30 thousand miles, it was 95% re-cyclable and there were literally dozens of similar advantages and benefits of owning the car.

While he was looking at the car, one of the salesmen from the stand began to speak to him about it.

"Do you like the car?" he was asked.

"It's absolutely amazing!" he replied.

"Can this car actually do all that you claim it can?" he asked.

At this the salesman laughed.

"I'm sorry sir, this PARTICULAR car does nothing, you see it is a CONCEPT car. It's our idea of how cars should be and perhaps will be in the future. This is just a model which does not operate."

The car that the man had been looking at looked good and all the blurb that was written about it sounded convincing enough to make him believe that the car was a reality, that it could do what appeared to be the model specifications. It was in fact a fancy shell, with a nice interior and nothing at all under the bonnet except wishful thinking!

In a similar way, the 2nd half of Chapter 2 of James draws our attention to our model of Faith.

Is our Faith fully operational and actively at work or, does our faith work merely at the level of a CONCEPT which bears little relation to the reality of our lives?

James is determined that those who believe, should have no doubt that, faith is vibrant, it is active and it is caring. Unlike the totally *impractical* nature of the Concept Car, *Christian faith* is meant to be extremely practical.

Just as the Concept Car is no more than a Concept *of* a car in

the designers mind, Faith that has no practical outworking is no more than a concept in the mind of the one who professes that faith.

James asks us to consider how we respond to the suggestion that as long as we have faith we are saved.

- Surely, as long as we believe, that's all that we need?.

James says that is true, but, he is asking us to examine the difference between believing and **really** believing.

How valid is our faith?

How do we know that what we believe has a saving affect upon our lives?

How do we know that what we believe is more than just a concept of God that exists only in our heads or in our wishful thinking?

James identifies, real faith in Jesus, as having a practical outworking, it has an affect that is evident to others, as well as to ourselves. We need to identify whether our Faith is real and whether it makes a difference to our lives and to the lives of those around us.

So, James suggests we examine how we respond to those in need.

If we meet someone in need, how do we react?

Do we find ourselves saying "may God bless you, may your needs be met". Or perhaps we find ourselves praying for them. That, in itself is fine and highly commendable BUT, it cannot be commendable if we are actually in a position to offer assistance and withhold it.

If someone needs a coat, why ask God to provide a coat if we know we have spare ones at home?

Afterall, how many coats can you wear at one time?

Besides, if God shows us a need and we respond to that need, then God has met that need but, has chosen to so through us. - His is the Glory.

If we see a need, are able to help and do not, then, we sin. Once you are aware of a need, it is important you ensure that you do what you can to help. This is not always appealing or convenient but, it is always the right thing to do.

I remember Jackie Pullinger speaking about times when she was worn out and weary from helping folks in Hong Kong and being honest about the times when she tried to look away when another anticipated requirement for help was needed.

“But” she said, “once you have seen the need, you must respond”. She cited 1John 3:17-18 which says, *“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? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”*

I found her refreshingly honest, speaking about times of exhaustion and longing for no more problems for a while. The temptation to retreat on occasions must have been tremendous. However, her determination to serve the Lord and those she encountered on his behalf, is not as common as it needs to be for the church to reach out to the lost.

Not knowing how best to respond, is no excuse for doing nothing. Invariably, something can be done and if we believe that the Lord shows us things for a reason, (and He does!) we need to examine what we ourselves can do.

Very rarely does He only show us something to pray about, when we pray, he tends to show us things that require action of some sort.

How we respond gives us a firm indicator of what level of faith we have. Does our faith operate at the level of fine concepts and wishful thinking or has it penetrated to our hearts and our hands? (To our pockets too!)

With Jesus as part of our lives, we have to respond when we are met with a need that we are capable of meeting. To do otherwise is a sin.

James specifically draws our attention to those around us who need food and clothing. When James wrote this letter, these were very definite needs. Although he wrote at a time when famine was common and clothing was expensive we have to ask of ourselves, "are things that different today?"

We can look at our newspapers and our televisions and see the poverty that exists in the world, we can see that starvation and famine has a devastating affect upon whole nations, we can see that the Governments of these countries do not always lend themselves to popular support or, even appreciate help from other nations.

It is easy for us to observe these things and understand how awful each situation is, and yet...

We can feel unable to help because we are so distant from the situation.

So, we find ourselves as individuals praying and talking about the problems that occur in other parts of the world. We feel helpless in the situation yet we long for someone to do something.

In almost every case, we **can** actually do something.

There are agencies that can and do provide assistance to those nations that require help.

No matter how difficult the situation appears there is always a way of making a difference. All it requires is a bit of commitment and effort on our part to seek out those agencies, those avenues through which practical assistance can be offered.

"Tear Fund" and "Compassion" are superb examples of how we can demonstrate that our faith and our Christian commitment exist at more than a mere concept.

Through Christian Charitable organisations we can make a practical difference on the other side of the world and at the same time express the love of our Lord Jesus to those who need to know Him.

Tear Fund and Compassion are but two of many such avenues through which we can "Do something!" - We have been entrusted with the Love of God, it is selfless, we must convey this love in a selfish world to demonstrate there is an alternative, that there is genuine hope.

If we can make a difference in the lives of countless thousands overseas, what can we do for those that live round about us?

In recent years, churches have provided food-banks to assist those in poverty or struggling to meet the demands of providing for a family.

What about people that have no homes, those that live on the streets, do we wish them well and ignore them?

Or do we, as Christians, make the effort to offer our time and/or our cash to give the homeless a prospect of a home of their own.

There are countless ways in which we, the body of Christ can be involved in providing practical assistance and hope for those that so desperately need it.

"Fresh Start", Edinburgh City Mission and Bethany Trust are good examples of how the Church in Edinburgh, where I live, makes a difference to the plight of the homeless, the poor and the oppressed.

- Most major UK cities have similar projects

How do we respond?

Do we think that by buying our copy of the "Big Issue" we have

done our bit?

Or, do we make a concerted effort to give of our time and talents and even our belongings to make life more tolerable for those less fortunate than ourselves?

If our faith does not translate itself into our responses to those around us, it is no faith at all.

Or, as James so simply puts it, "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead". Such "faith" is as much use as the concept car, it will take us nowhere!

So what about the other extreme?

Instead of the "heady" concept of faith we have been talking about, what about those that are content to believe they can earn their salvation.

Whether they, consciously or not, know the consequences of their way of thinking, there are some who have convinced themselves that they can persuade God that they **deserve** to be let into Heaven because of all the good work they have done!

It is amazing!

Yet, it is so sad at the same time that they should think that way.

It is by the Grace of God that salvation is found through faith in the One whom He sent.

Jesus would not have needed to be born, crucified and resurrected if heaven could be attained through any other means!

Jesus says that He is the way the Truth and the Life, no-one comes the Father except through Him.

Apart from faith in Jesus, everyone else has to rely on the

mercy of God and the Judgement of Jesus the Perfect Judge.

In Matthew 25 Jesus speaks about the separation of the sheep from the goats. *"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."*

It is interesting to note that the "righteous" that were being addressed by the Lord had to ask when they had seen him hungry, needing clothes, sick or in need of a visit in prison.

The implication is that they had done these things because it was the right thing to do and they had not thought of any reward for their actions.

They did the right thing as a response to what they knew was right and in accordance with the heart of God's Law.

- To Love your neighbour as yourself.

Faith in Jesus, faith that is real, is expressed in practical out-workings, by deeds.

Deeds born out of anything other than a genuine response to the love of God and the presence of Jesus in our lives, always have a human motive behind them.

Deeds without faith in Jesus are not selfless, they are selfish.

Such deeds have, at their root, a selfish desire. It could be a need to feel needed or prove self-worth, it could be a cry for someone to love and appreciate them.

It could even be a desire to "please God" or, to make a guilt feeling lessen.

Pure philanthropic motivation is rare.

Invariably, such deeds are not deeds that bring sole Glory to the Son of the living God.

Now it is true that on occasions it is a good idea for believers to

stop doing things and to have a rest. Jesus himself withdrew from the crowds to pray and revive his human body. Such times were times of Spiritual and Physical Refreshing for Jesus.

It does us all good to spend some time being refreshed but....

We must ask ourselves to examine realistically, whether we actually need to be refreshed in this way. Sometimes we can fool ourselves into thinking we need to be refreshed when the truth of the matter is just the opposite.

Doing nothing or being idle, can feel as much of a drain on our bodies and spirits as working hard for the Kingdom.

Ask anyone who has been made redundant from their work, if they have been out of work for a while they can feel quite exhausted.

What Jesus did, after he had withdrawn from the crowds and been refreshed, he launched himself back into his ministry among the sick, the poor, the needy and the sinners.

What his Father gave him during the times of refreshing, Jesus gave away to those in need. He showed in practical ways, the Father's love for those whom he encountered.

If Jesus is truly our model for how we wish to conduct our lives then we must respond by making our faith evident through our actions.

Words alone are no good says James. *"Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do,"* he proclaims.

To those in need, actions speak louder than words and all those that have yet to discover Jesus as their Saviour, are in need.

It's no good simply saying I believe in the One true God, that's not enough James says.

"Even the demons believe that!"

In other words, James is telling the church (i.e. all believers) unless we demonstrate our faith by some form of action we are

worse than the demons.

For the demons at least react or shudder in response to their knowledge of God.

If we fail to react to our knowledge of the saving grace of God through Jesus His Son, then the demons are more responsive to God than we are!

Faith that is real is evident in the outworking of that faith by deeds that bring Glory to God.
Only believers can do this!

If we are still not convinced that our Faith must have some practical outworking to make it real, James asks us to remember Abraham and Rahab.

Abraham was and is the most revered ancestor of the Jewish people. It was to Abraham and through Abraham, to his descendants, that God made his promise to make them his chosen people.²⁴

Christians are the inheritors of that promise through the Blood of Jesus, a descendant greater than Abraham himself.

"Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness", says James.

Abraham believed God and expressed his faith at every turn. Whenever the occasion arose he expressed his faith.

In Genesis Ch14 Abraham refused to be rewarded or accept riches from the king of Sodom after he had rescued Lot and all the captives from Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham refused reward because he did not want it said that the king of Sodom made him rich, he preferred to rely upon God to supply all his needs. Abraham did not want to be beholden to man, he wanted to live owing his life to God alone.

Abraham also showed kindness and hospitality to those who came to his home. Why?

He wanted to show others just how much God had blessed him and he could do this by sharing with others.

Abraham trusted God, he believed God was concerned to protect and guide him in everything Abraham did.

Even when God asked him to sacrifice his only son, Abraham trusted God, he knew, even then, that he could trust in God.

God had promised²⁵ that Abraham's offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and yet he was prepared to trust God with the life of his son, his only son and heir.

His faith, James reminds us, was credited to him as righteousness. His faith and his actions worked together. Abraham did not just say he believed in the one God, he did not just talk about his faith, he lived it!

Abraham trusted God to the extent that he was prepared to sacrifice his own son at God's request. Abraham was willing to trust God and act and because he did, his son Isaac was spared.

In the same way that Abraham was prepared to perform this great act of obedience, giving back to God the son he and his wife had longed for, we come to realise that our appropriate response to God is one of sacrificial giving.

To be justified in faith before God our faith has to be real.

If our faith is "real" faith, it will make a difference to how we conduct our lives and it ought to make a difference to the lives around us.

James makes a reasoned argument that faith and works are part of the one thing.

Verse 24 of Chapter 2 has caused a great deal of argument in the church over the years, because many believe it contradicts Paul's teaching that we are saved or justified by faith alone. Paul in his teaching was keen to emphasise the fact that we can do nothing to earn God's approval, that we can do nothing to earn our Salvation. Paul says we are saved by faith alone. So when James says in verse 24 *"you see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone"* some believe Paul and James conflict with one another.

But, when this verse from James is seen in context, as we have seen it, James is pointing out that good works are a fruit of Faith, they are an open expression of the faith that lies within. If we truly believe, then we cannot resist the impulse to do works that will bring glory, not to us but, to him who first loved us!

After James reminds us of the great Patriarch of the Jews and a spiritual forefather of all Christians, after we have been reminded of this great man of faith, his obedience and kindness, after we have been reminded of the one who was referred to as the "friend of God", James reminds us someone of a different character altogether.

James reminds us of Rahab the prostitute.

What a contrast!

The Patriarch and the prostitute!

The hero and the whore!!

James is keen that we realise that it is not how great we are in terms of status or even in historic importance that matters.

If we believe God, if we believe that through Jesus, we have been rescued, it does not matter how we ourselves are regarded by the world.

We could be a spiritual "super-star" as Abraham was regarded or we could be like Rahab.

Rahab was regarded, because of her profession, to be about as low in human terms as you could get!

Yet, Rahab, James reminds us, had faith. Rahab had a faith in God that prompted her to risk her own life to protect the two spies sent to Jericho²⁶.

Even a “lowly” prostitute could demonstrate the depth of her faith by risking her life for others.

The great and the small of the faith, in the history of believers, all have demonstrated their faith by actions that brought honour and Glory to God.

There is no way around it!

“Faith without deeds is dead.”

Fergus McDonald, formerly of the Scottish Bible Society, loved to remind people of this truth in James. Where there were a number of learned academic Bible scholars around he emphasised the key verse in this passage by saying, “Faith without deeds is dead, and for those who are interested in how the original Greek text is translated, it reads, “Faith without deeds IS dead.””

I began this section by referring to the example of a “Concept Car” that looked good but had nothing at all under the bonnet/hood, it could do nothing.

James concludes chapter 2 of his letter contemplating the example of the human body.

We know that God created each one of us, we know that as God blew his spirit or life into Adam, so too we know that God has given each one of us life.

That life we have is evident in the things we do, as we breathe, we can move, we can work, we can demonstrate our feelings and emotions. It's by what we do, even if it is just breathing, we demonstrate that we are "physically" alive.

In the same way as God's breath within us enables us to show that we are physically alive, when we have faith in God, when Jesus by his Holy Spirit inhabits our lives, we are enabled to show that we are ***spiritually alive*** by our deeds.

Our deeds are to be done in ***response*** to the love of God for us.

In the same way as a corpse is noticeably devoid of life, so too is faith when it is devoid of deeds.

The Church is the Body of Christ in this world.

We know that Jesus resides within us.

We know that he wants us to encourage others to invite Him in.

We can only do this if we are prepared to demonstrate that we are alive.

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

The Body Of Christ is Alive and Active in the World, ask yourself, "Are You?"

Learning to bite Your Tongue

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 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. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”

James 3: 1-12

The subject at the beginning of the 3rd Chapter of James tends to be quite contentious. It provokes as much as it convicts. Plain speaking from James hits the mark every time.

What we say can have a great impact, for good or for ill! Even something seemingly pleasant or complimentary can be transformed by the addition of just a couple of words.

There was a young boy being bathed by his mother.

- Quite an intimate situation.

The boy looked up lovingly at his mother and said "Mum your face is just like the moon".

His mother was understandably touched by her son's remark,

she beamed a radiant smile, until he added "It's covered in wee craters".

- How I ever managed to survive into adulthood I will never know!

Children have an uncanny knack of saying things at the most embarrassing moments, they tell it how they see it!

Why is that woman so fat?

Where is that man's hair?

They have no comprehension of the possible sensitivities attached to the subject matter, they just speak the truth as they see it.

As we grow up, we are meant to learn what it is appropriate to say, and when to say it!

As we grow we are meant to learn all about self-control. -

Which is also a fruit of the Spirit.

We are also meant to think about what we are going to say and be prepared to listen, in order that those who know what they are talking about can teach and guide us.

James had a problem in the early church.

Because so many of the early believers were poor, they had not been educated and lacked literary skills. These early believers tended to rely upon those with reading and oratory skills to read Scriptures, to read letters and to teach the message of the Gospel.

It also follows that those with the necessary skills could find themselves in demand. Often, if someone could read, just because they could read, they assumed that they should be teachers.

But James warns that would be teachers need to be cautious. Those who teach will be judged more strictly, James says.

Teachers have a great responsibility, they have the task of imparting a message which must be true to its intended meaning. Unless teachers have a desire to be true to the message, they stand the likelihood of distorting the message. Their information must be accurate, therefore there is a compulsion to examine all the available pieces of information in order that the message, the Gospel of truth can be correctly communicated.

They must pray, they must read, they must ask questions, they must ask if God wants them to be a teacher at all!
They must KNOW the call of God to teach.

James says we must not presume to be teachers, because it is a hard calling. Teachers will be more strictly judged. They will undoubtedly be called to account by God if they mislead his people.

But, perhaps the fact that teachers lives are open to be assessed by those who have heard their teaching is a second type of judgement.

Do their lives match what their teaching espouses?

Those that teach the truth of the Gospel must live according to that truth, or, the credibility of the Gospel itself can be adversely affected.

The Gospel, God's Word is not to be treated lightly, those who teach must try to make the Word, God's truth, part of their lives, that their lives may contribute to the confirmation that God's Word is good and wholesome and in trustworthy hands.

Imagine what would happen otherwise.

I am sure that most of us can think of examples of teachers of God's Word that have fallen foul of not living the message they have taught or have abused the trust of their congregations.

It is truly tragic when one clearly called to minister in the Name of the Lord succumbs to the temptations of the evil one. Invariably, their fall occurs at a time of particular vulnerability but, with repentance, forgiveness and grace, those who fall can be restored to serve in ministry again.

Worst still, those who choose to omit parts of the Bible that they do not like because they conflict with their “lifestyle.” So they mislead those entrusted to their care with wrong and heretical teachings.

James says teachers will be judged more strictly, he is right, because those that bring the Word of God into disrepute aid Satan’s cause.

Teachers of the Gospel must match their “talk with their walk” which must reflect the truth of God’s Word.

Not, that teachers are going to be perfect, says James, we all make mistakes, and as such, we need to be gracious towards our teachers.

But, teachers have a special responsibility to try to make their lives compatible with the message they preach which in turn must reflect the whole of Scripture.

They must exercise a high degree of self-control. - Denial of “self”

A good test for whether a person is going to make a good teacher is if they have a sense of God calling them to do it. If they have been called by God to teach, the sense of God's calling has a fear attached. Reluctance to answer God's call is often a signal that it really is God calling.

An acute sense of the responsibility, a sense of inadequacy for the task is a sure sign that someone is not volunteering just for the kudos of being the front person.

If someone presumes to be a teacher, James says, think again, let God decide.

Teachers by their calling have to communicate by words. How words are used can and do, have great affect on all of us. Our mouths can be a source of great blessing or the source of great trouble. Somehow, says James, we must learn to control our tongues.

He says, "Look at the mighty horse", the largest animal the people of the day would have encountered, if you put a bit into a horses mouth you can turn it and lead it anywhere you like.
- Control the mouth, control the beast!

Another example says James, is a sailing ship. Great rigged sailing ships, one of the largest structures many of his readers would have seen. These ships sailed the unpredictable seas, they were blown along by the might of the unseen winds, these structures, that were able to harness the wind and the waves, were controlled by a small tongue shaped rudder. The well-handled rudder could defy the elements and bring the ship safely home. The helmsman could shift this great man-made object by a slight movement of the arm. A bit in a horses mouth and a rudder on a sailing ship, both comparatively small things able to control something much larger.

By controlling the use of the tongue, James is saying we can control the rest of our body and our lives.

In the same way that a horse with no bit is hard to control, in the same way that a ship without a rudder is in serious danger of being blown onto the rocks, if a tongue is given free reign then the consequences can be equally disastrous.

Uncontrolled use of the tongue can be very dangerous, it can give the impression that someone is just a "blether", or it can reveal a lack of confidence, a lack of love, a lack of maturity.

Rarely will such a person be regarded as a trustworthy confidant, they may well be quite a gossip!

How often do we open our mouths and almost immediately regret it?

It is so easy to put our foot in it!

And it is just as serious with Facebook and emails, twitter and faxes.

Once words have been said, or sent, they cannot be unsaid or unsent. So much damage is done through uncontrolled use of the tongue or key-pad.(which seems to substitute for many conversations today!)

With thought and consideration, we find that we are able to control our tongues and we are more able to control our actions.

When we talk in a controlled way we are more likely to sound meaningful, our words may be more respected and because people will listen more attentively, our words will be more effective.

When are we most likely to speak in an uncontrolled way?

When we are hurt, when we are angry, when we have had some alcohol and our self-control has been compromised, we lose control of what we say and how we say it.

When we have been hurt, when we are angry, these are the times when we are most likely to let go any control we may have had. It is in these situations that we have the potential to wreck or seriously damage prospects of healing relationships or recovering situations.

How many times do we find ourselves being annoyed at ourselves for saying hurtful things to someone we care about?

How many times do we find ourselves saying if only I had remained calm, if only I had controlled (bit) my tongue?

I wrote earlier about how small children just express their thoughts as they think them. The older they get, there appears to be more thought before they open their mouths.

Even so, as most parents will confirm, the infamous two-year old tantrum stage passes as children learn to communicate and so they become less frustrated, as adults begin to understand what it is that they want.

Instead of throwing a tantrum of frustration children eventually learn that temper tantrums are unacceptable and that they must express their temper in more appropriate ways.

A question we must ask ourselves is, do we ever fully outgrow the tantrum stage?

Often when we express anger, we are declaring our hurt, we are declaring that we are having difficulty communicating with one another.

Things are not how we want them so we have an adult tantrum! Instead of throwing a thirty, fifty or seventy year-old tantrum, instead of shouting and verbally abusing one another, there is another way.

- Do you know, after such a verbal outpouring, the one on the receiving end often only remembers the expression of anger, the reasons for the argument are lost as defences go up to protect against the perceived attack. Such tirades are self-defeating.

James advocates controlled use of our tongues because of the affect it has on the rest of our lives. - It also can have a profound affect upon the lives of others.

Think about how just one small spark can set a whole forest ablaze, not only is there a raging fire which is hard to control but, after the fire has passed, there is nothing left, it has all been destroyed!

In the same way as a forest fire can destroy something good that has taken many years to grow, so too, can a wild tongue destroy relationships that have taken just as long to develop. The tongue is a major source of corruption for our whole body. James tells us that the fire in our tongues comes from Hell. Think about how many sins, how many corruptions of the body and spirit could be prevented by controlled use of the tongue. Would it be possible to have a drink problem without asking for a drink?

Would it be possible for adultery to be committed without the seductive talk beforehand?

Would it be possible to tell lies with our lips sealed?

Jesus taught that we must be careful in our thought life.

And Paul tells us in 2Cor. *"That we must take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ."*

If we take captive every thought before we open our mouth, then we have the basis for self-controlled, Christ-centred speech.

If we allow our mouths to speak without exercising self-control, or without spirit controlled responses, then we run the risk of propelling ourselves into sin.

James says, "isn't it amazing, we can, and have subdued every creature on Earth," just as God commanded in Chapter 1 of Genesis.

We can do all that but, can we tame our tongues?

Can we keep our mouth shut when it's needed?

The tongue says James is like an untameable beast, it is a restless evil, full of poison.

We can use our mouths to praise God, our Lord and Father, and within a short while we can use it too, to curse our brothers and sisters.

How awful such words are, our brothers and sisters, like us,

have been made in the image of the one whom we Worship and Praise. As we curse our brothers and sisters we are in effect cursing God because we are all made in His image.
- No wonder we grieve Him.

We have a responsibility to ourselves and to those around us to mind what we say. If we have no regard for what or how we speak, we are being irresponsible.

To use James's example, what sort of sailor would put to sea if he knew he couldn't control the ship's rudder?
In the same way we need to be aware of why we want to speak, we need to be in control of the words we utter because, like the teachers we spoke about earlier, we are all accountable for our own actions and words.

James asks us "Why is it, we can be praising God one moment and be cursing our brothers the next?".
If what is within us is good then what comes out of us needs to be good also.

It is evident that as sinful people we are going to struggle with this whole area. But, we can't afford to ignore it!

The words that issue from our mouths are powerful, they can either build or destroy.

James mentions that we praise God with our lips.

O.K. let's think about how long we could sit on our own and praise God in prayer, not asking for anything, just praising God for who he is and what he has done!

I suggest most of us would struggle to praise God in this way for more than 5-10 minutes.

Now, how long could you sit and praise someone else, a

brother or sister in Christ, that you dearly love. I suspect you would find it very difficult to praise someone for very long at all! Now, I am certain if you were asked to sit and talk about all the faults and errors that your brothers and sisters have and have made, you would be at it all day and you'd never finish reading this book!

Our sinful nature makes us judgemental of others and sometimes Christians can be more judgemental than anyone else.

We must keep our thoughts to ourselves unless we are convinced that it is right to speak.

As Christians we ought to know better than others the power of words. Words can and do affect peoples lives in major ways.

There is a saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones but, words will never hurt me."

What rubbish!

Bones can heal, but wounds inflicted by incautious use of our tongues or, keypads, can permanently wound a person.

Words penetrate our inner defences, we are vulnerable to the power of the word. - On-line "Trolls" abuse this truth and sadly can even cause vulnerable people to commit suicide.

In the same way as we can respond to the Truth of the Gospel with joy and belief, we can respond to the lies of the evil one which are hidden in cruel words with pain and with equal belief.

There are many children who have been ravaged by the thoughtless words of a parent. - Sadly, sometimes deliberately said to harm.

Tell a child he is stupid enough times and he will come to believe it!

Tell a child she is bad enough times and she will always believe she is bad!

Tell a child he is useless enough times and he will cease to keep trying!

What we learn as children we take into adulthood and all too often I encounter people in their old age, still hampered and in bondage to these curses upon their lives.

There are countless ways in which thoughtless words can destroy or severely wound lives.

A saying, which Walt Disney advocated in many of his films was, to quote Bambi's friend Thumper, "If you can't say something nice, Don't say nothing at all."

Control your tongue!

As we grow we are meant to mature, we are meant to become more spiritually aware, we are meant to become more like Christ. - It is a lifelong process.

I began this part of the book by speaking about the things children say. How they say what they think, how they can throw temper tantrums and scream and shout, how they can say the most cruel things without any understanding of just how much their words can hurt.

It needs to be different when we grow up, remember Paul saying, *"When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man I put away childish things."*

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By Jesus' example we know how a person should be, how a person should speak and how a spiritually mature person should act.

If we allow ourselves to be internally transformed more and

more into his likeness, then we will indeed be able to say we have put away childish things.

Spiritually, what is inside us is revealed by what comes out of our mouths.

As James says.....

“Fresh water cannot flow from a salt spring.”

His Way Not Ours

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peaceloving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”

JAMES 3:13-18

After speaking about the need to be careful in what we say, James sets about providing us with a means of establishing whether what *is* said is from God or from man's own desires.

He asks us to consider the difference between God's wisdom and man's wisdom.

James is determined that those who lead the Church astray will be exposed as false teachers. He is determined that those who provoke dis-unity are seen for what or who they are, emissaries from Satan, not from God.

James addresses the problems not by singling them out and arguing against every point of dispute between himself and them. Instead James is content to ask Questions and to make a few basic statements about what is right or wrong behaviour for believers.

By asking a few questions and pointing towards appropriate behaviour and motives, James hoped that those receiving his words would determine for themselves whether those who were causing the problems were godly teachers or not!

By addressing the problem in the Church in this way James

enables the believers to open their eyes and see for themselves just how they had been hoodwinked by these troublemakers.

It was a case of highlighting man's wisdom versus God's Wisdom.

The search for Wisdom among humans is a peculiar thing. Wisdom is knowledge, knowledge is power and power is often used to benefit the individual at the expense of the many.

Teachers of Wisdom are sought after, they are given places of honour, and are afforded respect.

The whole of that part of the Eastern Mediterranean, since the time of Alexander the Great, had been pre-occupied with Greek philosophy. The search for wisdom, the search for truth, led to different philosophical understandings of wisdom and truth.

- Remember in Acts, Paul went and spoke to the philosophers or teachers of *wisdom* in Athens and spoke to them about their "unknown God"²⁸.

Even today, there are tendencies for people to gather round particular individuals because they consider that this "person" has real Wisdom!

But, how do you determine what Wisdom is?

Isn't wisdom just common sense?

Or, is wisdom reserved to those who are geniuses?

The attributing of wisdom to an individual can be a very haphazard thing.

There are very many "Wise sayings".

Look before you leap!

If you can't stand the heat, keep out of the kitchen!
Mony a mickle maks a muckle! - Scots.. Translation.. Take care of the pennies and the pounds will accumulate!

There are some who genuinely believe that these sayings are evidence of a profound sense of wisdom.
- There are others, hopefully like us, who see these as plain common sense.

Intelligence, or clever words are no guarantee of wisdom, says James. If you think someone is a wise person, check them out! If wise words are truly wisdom from a wise person, examine how that wisdom is evidenced in the life of that person. If their Wisdom is sound, it stands to reason that a wise person will want to follow their own wisdom in order that *their* life may be enhanced by it!

The Bible teaches that the beginning of Wisdom is fear of the Lord.

- Not fear as in terrified but, fear in the knowledge that all our actions are ultimately accountable to God.

Those who are truly wise will show it by doing things in humility. They will have little regard for themselves. Acts of kindness, of generosity will be done selflessly.

True wisdom is not some complicated system of understanding the intricacies of human life.

True wisdom is practical, it has an effect which benefits the recipients of the wise act. The one who has acted wisely has transformed a wise thought into an action which has had no benefit to themselves but, has blessed a neighbour and blessed the Lord.

Today's society struggles to comprehend such a concept of wisdom. Much of what is done today is based upon the notion that everyone must take care of themselves and so reduce the

needs to be cared for by others.

Jesus is the Wisdom of God. Jesus is the model for our lives. Jesus' life was self-less, never selfish, giving, never taking. He gave all to bless others even to death on the cross.

Wisdom is all about how you lead your life, the decisions you make, the relationships you make, (or avoid) true wisdom seeks to serve God and his purposes. Only a fool would oppose God and His Son.

There is a desire to be content, there is a desire to be happy in all of us.

But, there is a problem in all this!

Because we are all different, we all have different expectations about life, we have different notions about what it is that will make us content, that will enable us to be at peace with ourselves. Until we have (or have done) all that we feel compelled to do we will be restless, we will be discontented until we have reached a point where we can say, "I'm happy with my life now!"

As we aim for this state of contentment in our lives, how do we know we have reached it? How will we know when to stop?

Isn't there a tendency to keep searching for more and more as we see those around us, seemingly more content or comfortable with their life than we are?

James tells us that as we look at the world around us and aspire to the standards we believe our society sets for what might be loosely termed "reasonable living," we find ourselves being drawn into envy and ambition.

If we look to our neighbours, to our society, for an indication of what we should aspire to, we will be consumed with bitter envy. We are drawn into envy because we **assume** that what

someone else has could make a difference to our life.

We find that we are drawn into trying to obtain things that would not have even occurred to us had we not seen someone else with them first. As we strive to obtain, we find, instead of finding contentment, we find we are consumed by consumerism.

If it is not things or objects we long to have, we may find ourselves seeking instead, to be held in high esteem by our contemporaries.

In many ways we tend to think that it is good to be ambitious. It is good to set goals for our lives but, it is not good if these goals become our sole motivation for doing things.

There would be a tendency then, to seek to achieve these goals at any price!

Think about the way in which the “rat-race” became so prevalent in todays society.

For many companies the drive for profit, financial return for investors, became the sole determinant of how to conduct business.

This was and has been the acknowledged way for decades but, increases in competition have meant an ever spiralling sense of desperation.

Costs are kept down and wages are kept down, - except for those with decision making responsibilities. Jobs are “out-sourced” to overseas as companies seek to pay as little as possible to produce goods.

Inevitably, in the world of business there are always winners and losers.

We all have a competitive streak in us, whether it appears in business, at school, playing sports, board games, buying bigger houses, cars whatever.... we all like to think we have done better than others or, better than others thought we would do!

All these things, all these motives are wrong!

They all hinge upon ourselves. They reflect an intrinsic selfishness which is definitely not of God.

The calculation, the manoeuvring, the manipulation required to make it to the top as a rising star is often referred to as a great skill, a gift, or seen as being shrewd or "wise" in whatever field is involved.

Being **worldly** wise, is an asset in business, or indeed in any organisation which deals with business. But, worldly wisdom is a curse upon the Christian, it is a sign of double-mindedness.

- It creates double-standards.

Worldly wisdom invariably ensures the comfort and security of the "wise" at the expense of others.

As an ambitious person strives to get to the top in their particular field, they often take short-cuts. Others around them are often trampled upon as one person strives to make it to the top of the heap.

- There are often a lot of unseen casualties, sometimes it is colleagues who have been betrayed, sometimes it is the family of the person as success becomes more important than being around for the children as they grow up, husbands or wives can feel less important than their partner's work and relationships fall into chaos.

As we strive to achieve, we neglect the things that really matter in our desire to be better than our contemporaries.

When we do eventually make it to the top or, manage to buy whatever it is that may have driven our motivation, we are able to take pride in our accomplishments, we can say "*we have made it*", we are able to say the ends have justified their means.

Of course if we can say **we** have made it, the assumption is that the **others** perhaps **have not**!

- While the others have not yet made it, they will be trying to replace you at the top! - Creating a constant striving, based on fear and mistrust.

Worldly wisdom, is not good, it is unspiritual, it is from the pit of hell.

Worldly wisdom causes some to gain at the expense of the rest.

A result of this is constant disputes, James calls it disorder.

Because no-one can be satisfied as long as they experience envy and ambition, people will always argue among themselves, as they seek to arrive at the best possible deal for themselves as they strive to get what they want.

Desperate times often mean that some will resort to evil practices, as James calls them.

Dishonesty, blackmail, bribery, it's amazing the lengths people will go to, to get what they want!

It is not a pretty scenario, is it?

Recent revelations about the collapse of the world economy have shown the risks that a few have taken that have affected the many in such an adverse manner. Greed creates many casualties even catastrophe.

So what hope is there for Christians involved in business, or involved in day to day society?

Does our faith make a difference to how we react in the world of commerce or, politics or, in our dealings with colleagues or, with all our neighbours?

Well, says the Word of God, our faith ought to make a difference!

We know that we will all be held to account for our actions, surely this fact will give Christians the incentive to behave differently from non-believers!

Perhaps such an incentive would be effective but, **fear of being found out** or, being held to account for wrong actions *is not* a sound basis on which to proceed.

When Scripture tells us that the beginning of all wisdom is fear of God, we are meant to remember who God is, we are meant to have a healthy respect for God's Holiness.

We are not supposed to think of God as some ogre who is waiting for us to slip up and condemn us to hell.

Such a view of God is a false view, He loves us and we are supposed to love Him.

If we love God, we will want to do what is right in His eyes, not because of fear, but because we love Him.

If we have the idea that if we do something for God then he will reward us in some way, then our "wisdom" in doing the things God requires of us is not pure.

When we act we must do so out of response to the selfless loving act of God when he sent Jesus for us.

When we act because of God's love for us, James tells us that our Wisdom is the Wisdom that is sent down from heaven **and is pure**.

If we act out of response to God's love to us then we will endeavour to love those around us. We will know that we are all made in His image and we will do all that we can to be at peace with those around us.

There will be no back-biting, no shoving each other out of the way to grab the best for oneself. Instead, there will be consideration for others. There will be a desire to submit sooner than cause strife.

And when people wrong us there will be desire to forgive and re-build broken relationships, which is always a good thing in the workplace.

When we have confidence in His ways, it actually strengthens us.

When we act in God's love we are sincere about our care for others, we will express concern without any sense of judgmentalism.

Those we speak to will trust us because the fruit of our faith will be seen in our actions.

As we read James we discover that the right way for a Christian to exercise Godly Wisdom in the world as part of society, according to the Word of God, is to be "peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

Given the environment of the society we live in, it could sound as if the Christian has no chance of becoming successful in what is an unholy society. It could sound as if we are to be wimps in the world of strong selfish ambition.

-Nothing could be further from the truth!

When we are confident that we are honouring God through our actions, it brings a great strength to our commitment and to our convictions.

Where Christians hold fast to their faith and act according to the teaching of Scripture, instead of being treated as wimps they are often treated as a threat.

A Christian in the work place who behaves in a Christian way will often be persecuted **not** for what they are but, for **who they represent**.

Christ-like responses provoke fear in those who thrive on selfish ambition.

Christians are known to be conscientious and good team players, provided the team is playing fair.

Maintaining our Christian integrity in the workplace is not easy

but, it will ensure that we are respected and ultimately we will “progress” further, because integrity leads to being trusted.

Because Christians in the work place are more inclined to be honest, caring and concerned for the need for unity and peace, they frequently find that they can be trusted. They can be trusted as confidants, they can be trusted to do as they have been asked, they can be trusted not to behave in ways that would discredit their employer!

Let's face it, if we try not to discredit our Lord in the world, it is likely that others will notice and often Christians find themselves in very responsible positions of influence, often being promoted because of the dependable qualities of their Christian life.

Conversely, *some* workplaces can be very **unpleasant** places for a Christian to work. There are many places of employment who encourage the selfish ambition of individuals. Carrot and stick management techniques rely upon personal greed and desires to increase productivity.

Other team members often treat Christians badly because they feel convicted by a believer's principled stance.

Deep down beneath the competitiveness, the selfishness, the greed and the envy, most people know in their hearts that such behaviour is wrong.

By their actual presence, not necessarily because they have said anything, Christians just by being known as a Christian, remind others of how their own behaviour leaves much to be desired.

While such experiences for the believer are seldom pleasant, we need to remind ourselves that when we go into such situations, it is Christ Himself that goes with us, it is the Holy

Spirit in our lives that convicts the hearts of men and women.

If we find ourselves being persecuted for our faith, remember it is Jesus who is being persecuted.

When we live as we have been called to live, God's wisdom is seen, others cannot fail to notice because in a fallen world, God's wisdom becomes so apparent, it shines as a light in the darkness.

It is true that, in the rat race, only rats can win!

But, who wants to be King Rat for a day?

The prize for victory in the rat-race is very short lived.

Before long there is an excess of has-been King Rats!

Often those who have been successful in worldly ways find when their sense of importance, prestige or power is removed either by being replaced or retirement, they can never settle or relax because they feel driven to try and recapture something which has passed.

Often such individuals become mavericks, trying to prove that they are as "good as they ever were."

It is tragic to observe people so wrapped up in selfish desire, ambition and bitterness when they could have peace and contentment.

When we act as our faith demands, as a response to God's great love, we shun the wisdom of the world and embrace God's wisdom.

We know what is earthly will eventually pass away but, what is of God will remain. As believers we must choose the ways of God in order that our lives might serve the purposes of God in transforming the lives of the lost and have a lasting impact.

James tells us that *"peacemakers that sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."*

When we listen to the wisdom of God, when we resist the ways of the world in favour of the ways of Jesus, then our lives are seen by others in a different light.

We may all have to deal with the same problems but, believers will, because of our faith, our trust in God, we will be seen and heard as being different.

As others see how a believer responds, they will decide from our responses whether what we have is worth obtaining for themselves.

- A quiet confidence in the Lord, speaks louder than vocal words of self-promotion.

Humility always speaks louder than pride. As we trust in God, we humble ourselves to His will, we enable Him to lead and strengthen us.

We need to constantly remind ourselves that we need God's Wisdom, we need His direction in our lives.

God's wisdom is unfathomable for us to fully comprehend, but, we really need to seek God's wisdom and grasp as much as we possibly can. Doing so enables us to live more effectively in affecting those around us.

- We must continue to immerse ourselves in the Scriptures to allow the Word to transform and enlarge our view of God and so become more alert to the challenges that face us.

If ever we find ourselves thinking we have developed a wise course of action, a wisdom of our own, it would be good to remind ourselves that Scripture says "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom²⁹."

Isaiah tells us that *"God will destroy the wisdom of the wise ; the intelligence of the intelligent God will frustrate."*³⁰

Why?

Because our ways are not his ways and his ways are higher than ours.³¹

We must reject the wisdom of the world, and embrace

God's wisdom.

Paul tells us that JESUS, for the believer IS Wisdom from God. Jesus is our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption, HE is our Wisdom.³²

Someone who is wise will know that he can do nothing good without the help of God, this is evidence of God's wisdom at work.

To live, to work, to care in humility, to trust in Jesus, as we go about our family, public or professional concerns, as we do this, we become a vehicle for the Wisdom of God.

As we remind ourselves of his presence with us we cannot help but respond by wanting to honour the Lord with our lives.

The Word of God tells us when we live in Jesus, we **have** the wisdom of Heaven.

Why do you Fight?

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

*“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”*

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. Grieve, mourn and wail.

*Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.
Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

Brothers, do not slander one another. 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. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbour?

James 4:1-12.

Up to this point in his letter, James has been content to speak to "the wise" leaders and the peacemakers.

Ever practical, James now addresses the actual conflict in the Church.

He asks the very important question, "Why do you fight?"

The question is a good one because it forces us to examine why we feel angry, deprived, resentful, put-upon and vengeful. If we answer the question "why do you fight?" honestly, we are enabled as believers to see just how much or how little we have

surrendered ourselves to God.

Fights seem to go on for ages, they never seem to be resolved, when one person has a small victory, the other is determined to wipe out their advantage.

A few years back, wrestling used to be a major feature of U.K. Saturday afternoon television. Needless to say most of the wrestling was just play acting. Well rehearsed moves and falls making as much of a show as was possible. Each match was proceeded with the words of the referee...."Two falls, two submissions or a knock out to determine the winner."

But....

Occasionally, there would be a match in which you could sense that there was genuine dislike, there was a definite determination to cause physical hurt and harm. - These matches seemed to go on for ever.

Each opponent would try repeatedly to try to lure the other into a situation where they could pin them down. Or, worse, they would try to inflict so much pain upon their opponent that their opponent would cry out, "I submit".

The whole thing seemed quite pointless when you found that it was frequently the same wrestlers competing each week. Each week there was a "revenge match" and being professionals they went through the whole rigmarole once again.

The effort that wrestlers went through, the pain they endured was incredible, yet, they often appeared very sporting. Frequently a defeated wrestler would applaud the winner for the skill exercised in obtaining two winning falls. There was not much said after a knock out, the knock-out was quite clear cut, it happened and the loser just accepted it!

The worst way to be defeated it seemed, encouraged many to

endure pain and injury beyond what could be called fun or "family entertainment"(which it was supposed to be!) and that was to be forced to "submit."

They wrestled in great pain, they took a real pounding, often preferring to be knocked out or, pretending to be knocked out, they did everything possible to avoid saying "I submit".

Sooner than give in, they fought on even though they knew they would have to submit sooner or later, they still fought on.

- Stubborn Pride!

The situation being addressed at the beginning of Chapter 4 of the Book of James is not too dissimilar.

James is addressing those who know what they want and who are determined to have it, at any cost!

The battle within rages because of your desire, says James, your selfish desire to have your own way. - to win!

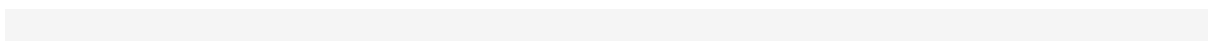
James is plainly determined to address these problems on no uncertain terms. He is also determined to remind them that what they were doing was wrong.

Instead of the Church being equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit and wrestling with the problems of the world, the Church was allowing the agendas of the ungodly to infiltrate the Church.

By allowing this conflict, individualism had crept in.

Not only was there conflict between individuals, there was also conflict within the individuals.

As James says, "Desires battle *within* you."



Isn't it amazing that even though we can hear and understand the truth that the Holy Spirit is within us, able to guide us and it seems almost inconceivable that such conflict could exist. But, as we know all too well we have to deal with as much conflict within the Church as outside.

This should not be!

James asks why it is, and the answer, he tells us, is that we have chosen it to be that way.

True, we are all sinful but, equally true is the fact that, as believers, we should know of our dependence upon Jesus and The Holy Spirit to transform us and have a *desire* to be changed!

Part of being a believer means acknowledging that the only good within us is that part which is dedicated and surrendered to God.

When we know this, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our decisions but, we must remember always, the choices we make are our own responsibility because we freely make our own decisions.

Evil desires are not part of our bodily human make-up. Evil desires lie ***within*** our bodies. Therefore there will be a constant tussle between the guidance of the Holy Spirit and our selfish desires.

If you really want something, why don't you pray about it? James asks.

You don't ask God because you know very well that in asking you are being selfish and you know that God does not approve. And if your desire has increased to such an extent that it has become a fixation in your mind, there is little chance that you are going to listen to anyone who disagrees with your desire.

In fact, anyone who seems to be opposing you having your way, becomes the object of slander and abuse, certainly wrong thoughts.

- James uses murder as a metaphor for this.

James is addressing the situation where individuals have recognised those things that they believe will make their life easier, more enjoyable, certainly more hassle free! - People striving after material objects, more wealth, more comfort, more power and greater pleasure.

The more you examine these verses, the more you recognise today's situation.

But, as James is quick to highlight, ***this is meant to be the Church!***

Those who trust the Lord, those that believe in Him, profess that **He** will provide for all their needs.

So, why is it that selfishness, greed, arguments and self-indulgence are to be found in the Church?

They are found there because, "you are an adulterous people," says James.

He tells us that, as the sinful desires of the world are allowed to infiltrate the Church, the Church as Christ's bride, is committing adultery with the world.

It's plain that the problems that existed then exist today as well but, it should not be!

When quarrels and fights break out, when people go to extraordinary lengths to obtain their desires it is plain that their motives are wrong.

The things that they long for, become more important than their faith in Christ, their desire becomes an idol, a false god instead

of the Living God. -This is plainly idolatry!

The Church can look at those *outside* the knowledge that Jesus is their Saviour and we can **see** that they are worshipping idols instead.

BUT.....What James is addressing in this passage refers not to the **un**believers of the world but, to those that have already professed Jesus as Lord.

This is why James calls them adulterous.

They say they trust God.

They say that they believe through Jesus they will have eternal life.

They say they are prepared to trust their eternal destiny to Jesus and have acknowledged that Christ is the Groom who will someday return to take his Bride.

But.. What will the Groom find upon his return?

James spells it out, the Groom will return to a Bride who has not been faithful.

The Bride has committed adultery.

To have been idolatrous could have been expected of non-believers.

BUT.....

For *believers* to express love for Jesus, to accept his gift of salvation, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and THEN by their actions announce that all this is not enough.....well!

- They still want the things of the world as much as they want Jesus.

For this to be able to happen, the believer clearly does not wholly trust God the Father.

When a believer behaves in this way, James is right when he says that the believer has shown hatred towards God and has

fallen in love with the world.

Either we trust God to provide for our needs or we trust in our own ability to scheme and plan to get what we THINK we need. Our thinking is flawed in that we think that we know our needs much better than God does!

If we genuinely seek God, and ask, not out of selfishness but, with clean motives, we know that God will hear and answer our prayers.

Much of our problem lies in our opinion of ourselves.

We think we know better than God what we want and we are often so determined, we will try to obtain things in our own strength.

Perhaps one of the compulsions to try to obtain things in our own strength is that deep down we know that we want things for the wrong reasons. Deep down we know we are doing wrong.

We are content to accept that we will be saved because of our faith in Jesus, that he died for our sins on the cross.

We trust Jesus with our *eternal* life.

But, what of this life?

Do we trust HIM for today?

When we put our wants and our desires before our relationship with Jesus, we announce by our behaviour that we do not want to accept the free gift of what he gives us.

No.. Instead we believe we can manage well enough on our own.

James remind us that this is pride running rampant through our lives.

Pride ; that stands between ourselves and God

- ; that says "who needs God when I can do it myself?"
- ; that proclaims that "I do not care if God is against me!"

For when we are proud, God is indeed against us.

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Who in their right mind would want to oppose God?

The answer to the problems within the Church and within each one of us, resides within us.

We must resist the temptations and the ways of the world and trust in God.

We must trust in the one he sent to save us.

It means that we must accept that; all we need, all that we will ever need is to be found in the acceptance of God's free gift to us.

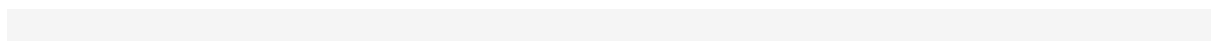
When we truly accept God's gift to us, we acknowledge that we have a **need** of that gift. By expressing our need, our dependency upon God becomes apparent to us and we rejoice in God's provision.

When we recognise our total dependency upon God, at that point we are humbled in the light of what God has done, what sacrifice he was prepared to make to bring us to Himself.

Since God has been and **is** gracious to each one of us, we need to repent of our adulterous affairs with the world and its ways.

We need, as James rightly says, "To submit" to God.

This means repentance for our worldly ways, repentance for trying to have our own way, repentance for ignoring God's commands and paying lip service to the teaching of Jesus.



In effect, James gives ten new commands in verses 7-10 of Chapter 4.

First, he says, "Submit to God," this is the most important command he gives, all others flow from this.

Make the Lord, "Lord" in every area of your life.

In humility accept that He really does know what's best for you and seek His will in all things.

- Deepen and extend your prayer-life, it'll transform you.

"Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

In the same way when Jesus was tempted and resisted, when we resist in Jesus name, the temptations of the Devil, he will flee from us. We have to learn to say unambiguously "NO" to temptation.

"Come near to God and he will come near to you."

God promises to come near to us when we draw near to him. We draw near to him when we truly worship him, when we worship with obedience in our hearts and we are united in our worship.

"Wash your hands you sinners"

By telling the church that they are sinners, James is not tempted to use nice, flowery language to describe what is wrong with them.

BEFORE they are fit for worship they must change their behaviour.

- Their differences, the fighting among themselves must cease because such behaviour is SIN.

"Purify your hearts, you double-minded."

James then addresses what we have already discussed as adultery with the ways of the world.

God does not want part of us, **he wants all of us**, he wants us to be as fully committed to him as he is to us. He is a jealous³³

God who loves us with a passion.

"Grieve, mourn and wail," we are told.

If we truly repent of our adultery with the ways of the world we will, according to the Word of God, "Grieve, mourn and wail."

If we fully appreciate the gravity of the sins we have committed then, this is the only appropriate response.

As the Church, (not as the world), we know how wonderful God is, therefore we need to cry out "what have I done" when we realise we have rebelled and treated God in such an appalling way.

"Change your laughter into mourning and your joy to gloom."

Unless you repent properly, the future looks bad says James.

When you consider how you have treated God, how you have rejected the teaching and ways of Jesus for your own selfish desires, ask yourself, "do you really have anything to smile about?"

True repentance brings a change in behaviour and heart attitude. True repentance, although painful, brings joy.

Jesus said *"Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted."*³⁴

Jesus also said, *"woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep."*³⁵

All these commands are plainly hard hitting. James does not give any opportunity for misplaced or false hope. James is determined that the church lives in Hope but, that "hope" must be seen in its true light.

"Humble yourself before God and he will lift you up."

James is telling the church that if it truly repents and rejects the ways of the world, then God will indeed lift them up.

At the point of being lifted up, I suspect, even James would

allow us to at least have a “wee” smile.

But, just as we find we might have a tentative smile at the thought of being lifted up, James immediately gives us another command.

"Brothers do not slander one another."

After we have addressed the need to repent and return to our One True Love, the one who loves us.

After we have recognised the need for deep repentance.

After we have asked for and received God's mercy, James seems to know exactly what we will do if things are still not right.

James knows our next step would be to look for someone to blame and it nearly always is, someone else!

I suppose many of us can relate to exactly that!

When we look at the way in which the Church of today exists in our nation, we look and we know all is not well.

BUT..... says James, even if we have arrived at a point of deep repentance before God and have accepted the need to put him first in our lives, we are not to speak against or judge those who have not yet done so!

Scripture tells us that we must love our neighbour as ourselves, this is God's command.

If we criticise others it is not love, nor is it the way we would wish ourselves to be treated

If we criticise others then plainly we are not keeping God's command, instead we are sitting in judgement of the Law, says James.

If we know the Law and we decide not to keep it, in effect, we declare by our actions that we want to reform the Law itself.

It is difficult, when we believe we can see what is wrong in a situation, it is frustrating, particularly within a church to think we can see why "things are not what they should be."

However, if we each content ourselves with addressing the areas in our own lives that are wrong, if we make the effort to affirm those things which are good in others within the Church, perhaps more good examples of content, gracious, loving and worshipping believers will provide others with a model for change.

I suppose if we were truly honest with ourselves we would find that we would always find someone to blame, someone to judge, when events do not turn out as we would hope.

God is the law-giver and we know that he also gave us Jesus. Jesus is our Saviour, and at the last day Jesus is the supreme judge.

So, if we accept Jesus as our Saviour, if we accept Jesus showed us how to live as God desires, if we accept he is our righteousness, how can we possibly argue with his teaching that we must not judge one another?

The only reason that we would want to judge another, given that we have already said we believe that it is God's role to judge, the only reason we could ever have for judging others is to set ourselves up as a superior court, behaving as if our judgement really mattered.

When we judge others, we declare by our actions and with our mouths that we know better than God.

Oooops!

When we think in this way we need, once again, to submit to God.

We need to acknowledge His rightful place.
We need to acknowledge our dependency upon Him.

So, resolve to address your own relationship with God.
Search your heart and resolve to repent of wrong, judgemental thoughts about others.
Rejoice that Perfect judgement lies with Jesus Christ who is our Saviour.
And finally..rejoice that He is wherever you are reading these words. He is within you and able to transform you into all that He designed you to be.
But, remember, we are all “a work in progress.”

‘Lord I ask that you would act not
according to the poverty of what I am,
or believe, but according to the greatness
of who you are and what you can do.’

Best Before..

“Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say,

“If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.”

James 4:13 - 5:6.

This next section of James put me in mind of my fridge and its contents.

What, (I can hear you wonder), has cooked ham and cheese got to do with the Book of James?

I don't know about you but, I do know that personally, I find it extremely annoying going to the fridge for something to eat, really looking forward to having something particularly tasty, only to find that it has “gone off.”

- This is a very rare occurrence in our household, usually it has just gone!

Mild annoyance turns to being extremely miffed when I discover that the food is still well within it's “sell-by” date!

It shouldn't happen but it does.

And because it's only a pack of ham or a block of cheese we rarely think of going back to the supplier to complain. Maybe I took too long to put it in the fridge in the first place, BUT....

Food should last until the "best before date" at least!

The “Best Before Date” is present as an aid to planning what you will eat and when. It provides a degree of assurance that food will be available to eat until..... BUT, only if we stick rigidly to the suppliers instructions can we be sure that the food will last.

Introduce a hungry teenager, an eating machine that leaves food out of the fridge for long periods of time, that has difficulty re-sealing packs the way they were designed and suddenly, food that should have lasted, never lasts anywhere near its best before date.

Growing teenagers can on occasions seem like “hoovers” where food is concerned, its never grudged by parents until, they leave unused food out of the fridge. Parents tend to be the ones who are most “cost conscious.”

Let's magnify this up a little, imagine **we** all had a best before date!

Yes, I know some may think we've already past it already BUT, just think for a moment how you would react, how you would behave and act if you had a best before date!

How would you feel as the date approached?

How would you behave, would you be any different?

The truth is, YOU DO have a best before date but, thankfully that date is not known to us. That date is only known to our Father in Heaven.

It's as if someones put the price label over our expiry date and we can't see it.

And, like the aforementioned fridge marauders, “stuff happens” in our lives that cannot be anticipated and before we know it, we hear diagnoses that sharpen our outlook on our remaining days or, tragedy overtakes our lives and our bodies.

Reflections upon our own mortality tend to concentrate our minds, don't they?

We can either roll along doing our own thing, taking each day and life for granted or, we can live knowing and breathing in the light of the truth that we exist by the generous Grace of God.

James beautifully describes life as but a mist.

- visible for a while then melted by the sun or blown away by the wind.

Life is a transitory thing, real, but almost illusory.

Describing death as a mist is a beautiful way of highlighting the temporary nature of life. A sudden gust of wind and the mist is gone, a short burst of sunlight and the hazy mist lifts and disappears forever.

No matter how hard we try to avoid death, it will happen. As a mist, our lives may dwell for awhile or for “three score years and ten”.

Life’s mist may simply be blown away without any warning or preparation at all. Whilst our “mist” lingers, we must make the most of it.

Having just preached on these verses, within a couple of days, I was rushed to a neurosurgical unit for brain surgery. A massive subdural-haematoma was compressing my brain into a space one third of its normal size.

All my body systems were shutting down and the Consultant told my wife I would be dead in a couple of hours without immediate surgery.

The operation was successful and as a result of all the prayers that were being offered by family and friends, I recovered “too quickly” for it to be “normal,” according to the neurosurgeon.

However, the first night after my operation, was far from normal, there was still a battle being fought.

In a dream/vision I was confronted with a very dark and foreboding valley with high crags and cliffs on both sides.

As I looked at the cliffs, gargoyle like demons came to life from the rocks with red piercing eyes. They closed in on me from above causing terror and a claustrophobic panic to ensue.

Suddenly, a bright, almost laser-like, light shone from behind my right shoulder, causing the demons to melt like wax and they became a glassy pavement for my feet. As I walked on the path, the red eyes of the demons were extinguished as I stepped on them.

Relief and Joy replaced the sense of fear as I awoke.

I slept again and exactly the same dream came to me. The terror and the fear were once again melted away by the bright light from over my right shoulder. Again, I awoke, happy and relieved.

The third time I had the dream, I was once again, faced with the dark valley and the red-eyed demons closing in BUT, this time, I experienced no fear!

Instead, I stood and looked over my right shoulder, calmly waiting, anticipating that the brilliant light would come and destroy the demons, which it did.

Truthfully, I believe there was a battle raging for my life and I came to understand that the Lord was intervening and that He would always be protecting me.

That series of visions/dreams have enabled me to trust the Lord more than ever. - Even more than the recovery from surgery.

It also highlighted the truth of James words that "life is but a mist."

I resolved that if it was a mist, "whilst the mist lingered," I would look for every opportunity to make the best use of each day.

- Seeking to bless the One who has saved and blessed me so wonderfully.

In the sixth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, it speaks of the Armour of God. If we are fully enclosed in the armour of God, if we are immersed in Jesus, then we are commanded to “stand” and see the deliverance that the Lord will bring.

“Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” Eph 6:13

STAND, it sounds simple enough but, standing on the truth of God’s Word, standing on the solid foundation of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, enables us to have no fear and be confident in the victory Jesus wrought over sin and death for us.

Yet, humanly, we know what the Psalmist says is true...

*“for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass,
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
But from everlasting to everlasting
the LORD’s love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children’s children.”³⁶*

When faced with our own mortality in this way, people often respond by looking at how productive, how useful or, how effective their lives have been and **often** people resolve to *change*.

However, it is our relationships that truly matter, more than anything else and it is the trauma of bereavement that cuts to the core of all of us. Relationships severed by death are the most painful to experience and the most dreaded to anticipate.

Only when we grasp the truth that our days are numbered and that we need to ensure our relationships are sound and loving and yes, that we have our priorities right, only then can we deal

with death's certainty and retain Hope.

If our life is a "mist" then we have to ensure that it is not "missed" or squandered by ignoring the importance of our relationships. We need right priorities for our lives.

Loving God and putting Him first and our relationship with Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, will enable us to set right priorities when it comes to our relationships. Our spiritual life enables us to deal with the mundane or ordinary and truthfully, there is nothing more "ordinary" than death.

I've never heard of anyone on their death-bed saying that they wished they had spent more time at the office!

For the sake of all those you love, you have a responsibility to ensure that you leave loved ones with as few regrets as possible and keeping right priorities enables that to happen.

It seems almost strange to be addressing this subject with professing believers.

Surely, just as the original recipients of James's letter, ***we know*** that we exist by God's grace, ***we know*** that we are called to be different, to meet together, to encourage one another and to share what we have.

So who is James now addressing?

We know he is addressing believers. Fine!

But, it appears he is specifically addressing Christians who are engaged in business, Christians who are engaged in trade work as merchants perhaps.

It is the work plans of the believer that James is addressing.

So, he is not talking to poor Christians or rich people at this point, he is talking to those who are engaged in the commerce of their day, he's addressing the middle-class believers of the first century.

Well thought of, certainly.

Many would be exemplary pillars of morality and decency, worshipping with all the other believers but.....

Their work, their business was being operated or driven by **secular** agendas and demands.

They were falling for the old trap of *compartmentalising their faith*.

Instead of *transforming* business practices through their faith in Jesus, they were tending to keep their faith **out** of their business.

It was business as usual, secular usual, greedy usual, selfish usual, **ambitious** usual.

It is right to excel in what you do, says James, but, you must do it with right motives.

By all means plan ahead but, remember to seek God's will for your business, he implores.

How could you make such an obvious mistake? he's asking them.

Well, we all know that the situation James was addressing, also exists in today's church.

As believers we know our total dependency upon God, so why do we ignore him in our work plans for the future.

- By behaving this way we risk becoming totally immersed in secular business practices and ways. - The temptations are great.

Our work, our business, occupies the greatest part of our active lives. If we behave as the secular world does when at work

then our witness, our Christian testimony, is restricted to our time-off or to the time between work and sleep.

- Where is the great value in that?

Our working years, our years in business are the years in which we operate at our peak levels of energy and enthusiasm.

Are we then, to withhold our witness or testimony from 30 to 50% of our day/life?

Are we to save it for Sundays and worship?

If we exclude God and our faith in Jesus from our work, or our work-plans, then we are effectively trying to create "no go" areas for God.

When we keep Him out of our work plans, we betray our lack of faith.

By implication, we are prepared to give our best efforts to our work or business to better ourselves, we exclude Jesus and then, to add insult to injury, we happily declare that we want to serve God.

Ask yourself, when you **do** remember Him and your need to witness to your faith in Jesus, does your Father in Heaven find **he** is being given just the crumbs from *your* table? - Or the loose change/coins from your pockets?

Have you got things round the wrong way?

Or, perhaps you think that because you tithe your earnings you are giving God enough!

Just because you give God "His cut" of your earnings, that does not mean that your offering is acceptable. If your heart is not right with Him if you are not including Him in your business plans and strategies, then your heart is far from Him and he is grieved.

It is our hearts³⁷ that the Lord desires more than anything else.

James reminds us that we must get our priorities right, we must see things from their proper perspective.

Putting God, putting Jesus and our faith first, means we **cannot** exclude God from our work. We must recognise that we are totally dependant upon him for a secure future.

Large bank balances do not represent a secure future. - Jesus told the parable of the Rich Fool³⁸ to demonstrate that!

If we exclude God from our work we delude ourselves into thinking that we can manage well enough without Him.

Success is a drug which *dulls* the awareness of God's presence. When our work has been valued, appreciated or rewarded, we need to give thanks to God. We must recognise without him nothing good is possible.

Many stumble over creating themselves a career path that only they know about. Striving for recognition and promotion for the sake of promotion, kudos and more cash is frequently the downfall of many Christians in the workplace.

Away from the eyes of their family and other church members, they assume that the occasional underhand deal, the undermining of the competition, the flirting to advance their opportunities and yes, even the lies, are all justified by their need to benefit their family.

Full-time commitment to work and career often leads to part-time commitment to the Lord.

It does not have to be that way though!

Often those most vulnerable to these temptations are those who are isolated from other Christians in the workplace and spiritually they feel alone. The suggestion of having a Christian friend to be accountable to is a great idea and a good help for many. It can occasionally test friendships but, when it works, this spiritual mentoring/accountability can be transforming.

Many ministers and pastors have such arrangements. If it is needed for them, it must be more needed for us who are more fully immersed in the world.

When we plan ahead we need to be sure that we want to honour God in our efforts.

When successes come, then they are victories for the Kingdom of God. If we recognise our utter dependency upon his grace for our very lives, (never mind how successful we are) then we will give God his rightful place in our lives.

When our Father in Heaven becomes our ***first*** consideration, we have our priorities right.

James was addressing those who were getting it all wrong.

They were behaving like Jekyll and Hyde!

They were doing and saying all the right things when they were in fellowship or at worship, their *home lives* were probably model examples of how we would all wish our families to be.

But, they had a spiritual blindness in the area of their work. Their spirituality did not extend beyond the safe boundaries of their home and social environment.

It seems as if they could trust God with their ***eternal*** future yet were unwilling to trust God for their provision for today.

Today is more important than tomorrow, James tells us, because we may not have a tomorrow.

Our response is to be one of grateful humility, to recognise that it is by God's grace that we can do anything.

When we ignore our dependency upon God and start to make great plans, great promises or great boasts about what we intend to do, when we do this, we overstep the mark which differentiates between good and responsible planning, into pride and arrogance.

Quite bluntly James tells us when we do this, WE SIN!
We must not fall into such sinful behaviour, lest we are consumed by secular greed.

As believers we have to remind ourselves to keep things in due proportion.

We have to recognise that to proclaim Jesus as Lord means "Lord" over ALL of our life, including our work and how we conduct ourselves in our workplace.

And even when we do remember God's place in our work, we have to be alert to our wrong attitudes. It's not enough to say "Please bless what I do today," which is asking God to rubber-stamp **our** decisions.

We also need to beware the attitude which says, "I hope God leaves me to get on with this today!"

Instead, we need to be seeking his *guidance*, his *confirmation* that what we are *about* to do **is** in his will. To be able to say to ourselves and others, "I really believe God wants me to do this!"

By seeking God in our work we retain a sense of true proportion, we recognise our dependency upon Him, dependant for our income yes, but, especially dependant upon him for our very lives.

Any rewards received when we apply ourselves to our work in this way, will be received with thanks and again with an openness over how any rewards or wages are to be used.

- Christian generosity stems from an understanding that any wealth we have, must be stewarded wisely because, what we have is entrusted to us by God.

Christians must beware the snares in secular business practices,

God honours those that honour Him before others!³⁹

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self indulgence.

*You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.
You have condemned and murdered innocent men,
who were not opposing you.”*

James 5:1-6

If James has used **strong** words to warn **Christians** to conduct business in the right way, he has a **hard prophetic warning** for the **wealthy, non-believing** businessman.

Rich people can start to weep and wail right now he says.
Their future is bleak!

"Now listen you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." - A dire warning of impending doom.

But, does this mean that having wealth is a crime against God?
Not necessarily!

The key to whether riches are acceptable in God's sight is seen in what prominence is given to them in the life of that person. James' warning is directed to those who have accumulated wealth **selfishly**.

Instead of putting the wealth to good use to the benefit of those less fortunate, there are many who had been hoarding their wealth. - saving up for a rainy day, just in case it was needed later or, just in case somebody else got their hands on it!

Such selfish greed, self indulgence, self aggrandisement, ultimately turns into self inflicted eternal death.

Everything that the rich person gathers around them, the things they believe will cushion them against the threats of this life, all these things count for nothing.

In fact, instead of being a cushion against harm, they become the very reason they may endure an eternal hell.

Riches poorly used in this life can be an indication of someone journeying to hell in the next.

If someone hoards wealth and riches, by implication those riches are worthless. They are worthless as long as they are hoarded.

If you have an abundance of food, more than you personally need, and you hoard it, it'll go past its sell-by date and become useless.

Far better to give it away than to see it decay unused.

But, the selfish person would say, "I didn't get where I am today by just **giving** my surplus away!"

"Because you **didn't** give it away today," says James, "I know where you'll be tomorrow!"

Surplus stocks, wardrobes full of hardly worn clothes and all your heaps of money stand as monuments to selfishness and a complete disregard for the poor and needy.

Everything the rich person places their hope in, their security, is in earthly things. - Nothing of any eternal worth!

James tells the selfish rich that, to God, their wealth counts against them, its value is wiped out as if their stock had crumbled, their clothes in their wardrobes had rotted away and even their money had corroded or rusted away to worthless dross.

When James talks about their silver and gold corroding it seems so ridiculous because, gold and silver are two of the most stable precious metals, it takes a long time for gold to tarnish even a little.

But, James says gold or silver, it doesn't matter, if the wealth is not used properly it might as well have been iron. In the final analysis, when God calls us to account, heaps of wealth count against us.

This sort of wealth is obscene and the implication is that in gathering this level of wealth, others have suffered as a consequence. James implies that such a person has no regard for God and certainly no regard for God's desire for us to care for the needy.

By hoarding wealth the rich person betrays a total lack of understanding in God's command to be stewards of his creation. By hoarding, the rich person announces a lack of faith or trust in God to meet their needs.

A lack of faith in "The Provider God" in this life, condemns them in the next.

Remember, God taught the Jews this vital lesson when he fed them in the desert during their Exodus from Egypt.

God provided Manna in the desert every day, they were not allowed to hoard it because hoarding declared a lack of faith in God to provide for his people. And just for good measure, God ensured that any hoarded manna rotted over-night!⁴⁰

This way the Jews were intended to discover that God would never let them down, he would always provide.
- He gave them their daily bread.

When we place our hope in our bank balances or our wealth we create idols for ourselves, we proclaim God is redundant.
By storing wealth we declare we can provide for our own needs and that we can do so whenever we want.
Idolatry, selfishness, impatience and worst of all, in God's sight, is the injustice done to those who have been unfortunate enough to have been adversely affected by the Rich persons greedy accumulation of wealth.

If we remember that the Lord says that a tenth of our income is the right amount to return to Him by way of giving to the Kingdom, we can effectively say that we can use 90% of all we earn on whatever we want!

Of course, with 90% we can ensure that we support others as well as ourselves. Our family commitments first but, The Lord will also show us ways in which we can give gifts to bless the lives of others. Whether it is to support the work of Bible Societies, sponsoring children overseas or disaster appeals, we must always remember that all we have is His anyway.
Strangely, many discover that when they budget their resources and respond to the Spirit's prompting to give to the needs of others, somehow, there always seems to be "enough."

Those whom the Lord can trust with a little, he will entrust with a lot.⁴¹

It seem bizarre but, the only way we can demonstrate that something actually belongs to us is to give it away!
If we cannot give something away, we don't own it, it owns us!!!

The same principle applies not only to individuals but, also to churches. The 13th century Roman Catholic theologian, John

Duns Scotus was being shown the Vatican treasury and was told, “no longer can the church say, silver and gold have I none.”

“True, was his reply, “but, neither can it say, in the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”⁴²

The accumulation of wealth by a church is not a healthy sign, it is a sign of a lack of faith in God to provide our daily bread.

I suspect one of the reasons that many churches do not flourish spiritually is because of its tendency to hoard resources or plough them into unnecessary building projects as opposed to stewarding them wisely and using them to build the kingdom in people’s lives.

If a church regards itself materially “self-sufficient” I suspect the Lord’s blessing is withheld until it once again re-discovers its need of God.

It cannot be a co-incidence that miracles and healings are experienced most in areas of material poverty. When people acknowledge their need of God, their utter dependence upon Him, they will pray fervently in faith and the Lord responds to those who are poor in spirit.

“Godonomics”

James uses a little bit of humour to describe the rich persons situation. - It's not *that* funny but, by James' standards its funny enough.

He tells them that they are “thick” or, “dumb.”

He likens them to animals that are busy stuffing themselves on their way to be slaughtered.

They are so engrossed in their wealth and the accumulation of more wealth that they are oblivious to the fact that they are about to die and be held to account for their behaviour and mis-treatment of others.

When wealth has been gathered to the extent described, it is

unlikely that there would have been no casualties.

Those who are rich are often very wary about parting with their money or, paying others. By delaying payment of bills or wages the rich can make additional money from interest or short term investments. They can also learn to **enjoy** having power over people's lives as they make them wait for payment.

While the rich man enjoys making people wait for their money, the poor man may starve to death or "go bust" before he receives his payment.

- There is ample evidence in the media to confirm this!

Late payment of bills or non-payment of bills by rich people can cause havoc in the lives of those who rely upon being paid promptly, the poor.

Even though the poor wished the rich man well in his venture, even though he worked hard and supplied all that was asked of him, "is it right", asks James "to take advantage of his poor state?"

Or, as he says in the text, *"You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you."*

James has contrasted the Christian businessman with the secular Rich person.

He started by telling those Christians in business that they must include God in their work, they must remember their faith and act accordingly. He tells **them** and **us**, we must appreciate all that God has done for us, all that he gives us and that we must seek his will for today.

We are to be humble in our work, acknowledging that it is only by God's grace that we have even our own lives. We are not to be drawn into the secular ways of the world.

Instead we are to be led in His ways, caring for others as well as our own needs.

Our business practices are to be as much a testimony of our faith as our attendance at church, obviously expressed in appropriate ways.

James tells us that, because we are Christians, we know the things Jesus would have us do, if we resist obeying the internal compulsion to do these right things, then, we have sinned.

God wants those believers who are in business or employment of whatever kind, to concentrate on the needs of today, to ensure that they keep a proper perspective upon their lives, to appreciate daily God's blessing of life and to do what God wants us to do.

Proverbs tells us that we must *"do **good** today, not tomorrow."*⁴³

In contrast James tells the Christians what it will be like for those who are not believers in our Lord Jesus.

By depicting the rich as oppressors, we are reminded that God is always on the side of the oppressed.

By highlighting their idolatry he shows the true folly of planning too far ahead. Their great plans for all their wealth all turn to dust when they are brought before the perfect Judgement of the living Christ. What good are earthly riches, when you should be storing up treasure in heaven?⁴⁴

God's view of gold is so different from ours, God treats gold as we treat asphalt!⁴⁵ (In heaven, it is used as road material!)

By presenting this contrast, James is warning not only the rich of their impending fate but, he is also showing Christians involved in work how "close to the line" they are.

James is telling us, "By succumbing to secular business practices you dice with death, spiritual death."

The allure of the power, the kudos, the money, is a great temptation which must be resisted.

It must be resisted because God will not be mocked.⁴⁶
God promises that Justice will prevail.

By presenting this contrast James is trying to encourage Christians to hold to their faith and resist the temptation to convert back to worldly ways.

We all seem to have an inbuilt concern for what is happening with others. James has previously addressed the problems of judgmentalism and envy.

We have to remember, says James, God has it all in hand, let's concern ourselves with keeping **ourselves** right with God.

The plans you have for your work, the plans you have for your work **today or tomorrow morning**, have you included God?
Will Jesus be honoured?
Have you got your priorities right?

As a help, on the way to your place of employment, instead of “mumping and moaning” about the traffic, the weather and so on...

Use the journey to pray, to bring your days work before the Lord. Ask Him to show you his priorities and make them yours. Ask for guidance in how to resolve conflicts between co-workers and colleagues and dedicate your mouth and your words to his glory.

Try it and you will be amazed to discover that as you honour the Lord in your work, you will have a greater sense of purpose in what you do. Don't worry about the possibility of making mistakes, you will but, they can be fixed and avoided the following day.

By being gracious towards others, you will know a deeper sense of God's grace in your own life, it'll help you keep things

in perspective and you'll notice that you actually succeed more than otherwise would have been the case.
God honours and blesses those that honour Him.

Patience - A Lesson.

“Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged.

The Judge is standing at the door!”

James 5:7-9

When James wrote his letter he knew that many Christians were being persecuted because of their faith and he also appreciated how temptation could easily cause them to fall away through anxiety.

Our Heavenly Father tells us through James that we must be patient and stand firm as we suffer or endure trials.

As an encouragement or, as an incentive to persevere and be patient in suffering, James reminds us of our certain hope. He reminds us that we must keep our faith strong in the Lord until He returns.

The certainty of Jesus return is undeniable. - It will happen.

But, only the Father knows when that will be.⁴⁷

We are to have a joyous expectancy of this great event and live accordingly so that we will be prepared whenever Jesus returns.

James gives us a superb example of how to prepare, he tells us.... *"See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm."*

In a society where we have been indoctrinated to expect INSTANT results, in a society where the “I want it now culture” has seen the largest debt crises of all time, it is good to remind ourselves that patience is often the right way.

Having to wait, patiently, enables value to be appreciated and patience also causes us to slow down. It also enables us to reflect upon those things we seek to achieve or desire and to establish what our priorities really need to be.

So, James calls us to regard the example of the farmer. The farmer has had to carefully prepare the ground, the seed has needed to be sown. But, once sown, the farmer has to wait and trust that God will bring the Autumn rains to germinate the seed and that He will bring the spring rains to make the crops grow and produce a plentiful harvest.

The farmer sows his seed in faith that the rains will come.

Once sown, the farmer has no influence in HOW the crop will develop or IF it will develop. He is dependent upon conditions out of his control. He has to WAIT.

The farmer knows all he can do is rely upon God to bring the rain and provide the weather for a good harvest next Summer.

It is difficult to appreciate how good an example of faith and patience the farmer in this passage actually is.

The farmer had to grow enough to provide for all his family. At Harvest time, he had to decide how much of his crop could be sold to buy other goods and he had to decide how much of his crop would have to be kept to provide food for his family over the next year.

BUT... Before he did anything else at Harvest time, he had to decide how much of his crop would need to be kept for seed for next year's crop.

There was no surplus, nothing was held back, all that was not needed for food was re-sown in the hope that God would bring the rains and that there would be a harvest next year. A poor

crop one year, meant hardship sometimes starvation before the following years crop was ready for harvest. BUT, seed had to be planted or starvation was guaranteed!

In the same way, we are to hold nothing back from God, all that we are, all that we have, is His. We have to “sow” what we have to enable a harvest for the Lord.

The gradual “demise” of churches in the west seems to coincide with increased personal wealth.

Christians who are truly alert will seek to ensure that they hold “earthly wealth” lightly and invest in the Kingdom of God.

The church cannot expect a harvest when it has not sown seed.

Where the seed of the Gospel has been sown, we are to trust the Lord to bring forth a harvest and we are to exercise patience in the sure hope that Jesus will return and take his harvest home.

Do not allow doubt to undermine all that has been achieved in your life. Do not waver in your faith in God, do not be tempted to compromise the TRUTH for the sake of a more comfortable wait!

We see this as parts of the church waive the truth with respect to gambling, legalisation of cannabis and of course, same sex relationships. The desire to accommodate changes in societal tolerance stems from a fear of being seen to be intolerant and unloving.

Whereas, by expressing love through encouraging the Christian pattern of marriage, for example, will help to keep a fallen world from falling even further.

Popularity is not important when it comes to standing firm on the Truth. - Generally, the Church is respected more when it is

seen to stand firm on teaching that it has “traditionally” supported.

“Un-Christian” teachings and pronouncements from “the Church” tend to please a few and disappoint and dismay the many.

The majority of people still have an idea that the church believes sex outside of marriage is wrong and that gambling is wrong also.

When the church chooses to exercise double standards by accepting lottery cash and condoning same sex relationships, there follows a natural cynicism from all and a dramatic loss of respect.

Generally, people respect, even if they don’t agree with, a church that stands up for what it has always believed.

The church has set the base-line for society’s morality.

When that “base-line” shifts people feel threatened and suspicious.

It is little wonder that those churches that seem to grow are those that stick to the Message but, conveys it in relevant terms.

Forget popularity, don’t worry about persecution or rejection, the Lord’s coming is near, says James, be patient and your patience will be rewarded.

The reward will be more Joy than we can ever imagine

- To be forever in the actual presence of our God and Saviour.

We have so much to look forward to, that it makes the sufferings of this life pale by comparison.

Suffering however, is real, it is painful but, that is one of the main reasons we can make such a difference to one another. We are called to minister to one another’s needs, to love one

another.

We are called to help those who are in affliction by showing the love of Jesus to those that God brings to our attention.

God chooses to work through his people, so we must constantly be alert to his call to minister to the needs of others. Faith leads to action.

Blessings come in un-expected places.

Surely, ministering to the needs of the homeless is seen as one of the most worthwhile acts of Christian love.

The rewards are so numerous. Every time a word of thanks is given by a grateful tramp/hobo or, runaway, the “servant” of Christ praises God and smiles as their efforts feel appreciated.

So often we miss more than we receive.

I had been involved in such a ministry for several years and yes, I felt good about making a difference in the lives of those less fortunate than myself. (Alarm bells should have been ringing but, pride is so deceptive!)

One bitter January night, I came across an old man sheltering from the biting cold wind, deep inside a tipped over industrial refuse bin.

I asked if he would like some soup and bread and when he said “yes,” I realised that it was not advisable for him to “come and get it.” So, I crawled in beside him.

The stink of the bin and his urine soaked clothes made me want to gag but, I couldn’t.

The Lord helped me react as if such a place for a picnic was normal.

We chatted whilst he ate the bread and soup and he spoke of where he had come from, how he had fallen from grace and lost all respect for himself and from his family.

Years before he had been an elder/deacon in his local church but, stress in his marriage caused him to turn to alcohol and he

lost everything.

As he finished his story I offered to pray with him.

I was so pleased when he said he would like that!

- Rarely did we have the opportunity to pray WITH people we encountered, we always prayed FOR them.

After praying for his well-being, his safety, forgiveness and for the Lord to bless him with peace, as I turned to leave the bin, I thought to myself, what a privilege it had been to minister in such a situation but, imagine having to crawl through such muck to pray with this man!

No sooner had these thoughts passed through my mind when, from the depths of this refuse bin, came an offer to pray for me! I was humbled immediately.

The prayers of this “down and out” convicted me of pride that had erstwhile gone undetected.

His prayers were simply for a blessing upon me and my ministry from the Lord. His actual words were lost in the overwhelming sense of the Presence of the Lord in that place, my tears flowed without any attempt to hide.

I had gone to minister and had been ministered to and yet, is that not the way our Heavenly Father works?

He uses the ordinary and the mundane to speak to those who have the ears to hear and the eyes to see.

Even when he rebukes us, he does so with love and with the determination to bless.

Patience is the right response to testing and suffering - a response we must all seek.

As we exercise our Christian patience, as we are being tested, we are told not to grumble against one another. - We must not criticise each other.

When we feel under pressure, we have a tendency to feel anxious and vulnerable. Often there is a temptation to lash out

at those around us, (even those whom we love!) or, we become envious of the apparently easy life of others and we begin to resent them.

WHY do we do this? We know it's wrong but so often we find we've done it before we have realised.

Within the Church such reactions are the source of major problems!

Flashes of anger, outpourings of bitterness and resentment all serve to destroy the spiritual unity of a Church.

The Lord commands unity, this is not something to take lightly, we will each be held to account for every act of divisiveness.

James has encouraged us to live expectantly of the Lord's return in order that we can have patience in our trials and sufferings.

Now we are reminded of the consequences of ignoring the Lord's impending return.

If we have not been patient, if we have grumbled against our fellow believers, the Lord's return will bring us Judgement.

The Judge is Standing at the Door. - When he returns, it will be too late to prepare ourselves, we need to be ready at anytime.

It is easy to understand why the Lord will judge those who work towards division and not unity.

Remember Jesus himself said, "If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand."⁴⁸

So we must guard our lips and ensure unity, for Holy Scripture also tells us that where there is unity God commands a blessing.⁴⁹

Judgement or Blessing? - The choice belongs to each one of us.

So much of what James addresses in his letter is interlinked. We have been called to exercise patience and resist the temptation to cause division. But how do we do that?

When the pressure is getting to us we should pray.

The temptation is to moan or, to resent those who apparently are doing better than we are.

Instead of moaning about how some of our brothers and sisters seem to handle the temptations of this world better than us, we should praise God for their faithfulness, we should praise God for blessing their lives.

Another temptation when we are being tested or when we are suffering, is to assume that because we are having a hard time, we deserve a lot of attention.

It is very easy to fall into the PLM trap. ("poor little me!")

Such behaviour means we have effectively declared that God can't help us and we have forgotten our faith.

It means we have forgotten to look towards what the Lord has promised believers upon His return.

When we have our own "pity parties" we turn away from Jesus.

Sometimes this type of behaviour causes divisions within a church.

How often have you heard or thought, "see him he's a right moaner" or "see her, she's always complaining"?

Of course such thoughts are judgemental and they often reflect a heart that is more of a moan than the person they are complaining about!

Being "me" centred, displaces the Lord from his rightful place in our lives. In other words, when we put ourselves at the centre

of our world, we make an idol of ourself.

- Self idolatry is so prevalent in our self-sufficient, consumeristic western world.

God hates this because we deprive ourselves of the knowledge of his love and provision in our lives and because we also miss out on a loving relationship with Him.

Remember, James has already taught us that we must guard what we say and how we say it.

The words we use can be very effective at strengthening unity or destroying it!

The words we use can be the same but, the heart behind the words can transform their meaning from one of an expression of care, e.g. "Whats *wrong* with you?", to one of of detached intolerance, "**Whats** wrong with **you**". - Exactly the same words from 2 different hearts!

We need to be sensitive to others. The Lord can guide our speech if we seek him before we open our mouths.

We have all come to learn that suffering happens.

We must expect suffering, particularly for our faith in Jesus.

We also experience suffering as we, or those around us, encounter serious illness or bereavement.

We know millions suffer from starvation.

These are very real examples of suffering.

Yet, there are some who would say they are suffering because of the recession and they can only afford one foreign holiday per year.

Or, they might say they are suffering because the income from their investments has reduced.

Surely this is not what suffering is about, moaning that what God has generously provided is not enough?!

Suffering is dying of thirst and crying out for water, it is not crying out over “spilt champagne.”⁵⁰

Whinging, in the above manner, merely serves to provoke others to sin at our insensitive and selfish words and it betrays a heart that has no ability to relate to the concerns of the “suffering poor.”

This type of insensitivity hurts terribly and can leave the hurt feeling isolated and resentful.

Thank God for what you have and express gratitude for His daily blessing.

Persevere When it is Tough

“Brothers, 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 consider 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.

Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else.

Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned.

James 5:10-12

James now draws our attention to the prophets and how they suffered for their faithfulness to God's Word.

He says *“Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord”*.

James is talking only about the prophets who spoke in the Name of the Lord. False prophets suffered too but, for quite different reasons.

The true prophet was rock solid, unwavering in their desire to hold onto the truth. Yes, occasionally they “threw a wobbly”, like

when Elijah did a runner from Jezebel⁵¹, or even Jonah.

BUT...

Once they had been reminded of God's promises and remembered that God was with them, they were prepared, once more, to make themselves wholly available to God's service, and yes, available once more to suffer in that service.

Their example serves to remind us that it is possible to persevere under trial, or suffering, and still remain faithful.

Yes, it requires effort and endurance but, surely our Lord deserves that level of commitment from us. - Doesn't he?

The true prophet persevered in doing what God had called them to do, even though it meant suffering at the hands of others. Scripture reminds us that those who suffer for His sake shall be blessed.

Likewise, when we persevere under trial or, in our suffering, we too are blessed, our lives become a testimony to the love that is in Jesus and our faith.

How long then, do we have to suffer?

How long do we need to endure all that we do?

James reminds us of Job and how he persevered in the midst of horrendous suffering at the hands of "the tempter" who tried everything he could to make Job desert his faith in God.

Job persevered, was eventually vindicated and all he had suffered was restored by God.

In the same way as God made things right for Job, when we persevere, when we endure suffering and remain faithful to our Lord, we can be assured that we will be blessed before God's throne of Grace on that great day.

It is amazing what we will put up with if something matters enough to us.

Do you find yourself being victimised at work because of your faith?

Do you find acquaintances mock you for your Christian moral stance on important issues?

Be encouraged, you are in good company.

Scripture tells us, you number among the saints and you too will be vindicated for your suffering.

The Lord cannot look at our suffering and remain indifferent, he sees and he knows the pains we endure.

His promise to us is sure and irrevocable, he will return and we will be with Him.

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

James wants us to know that in all that we go through, the Lord is unimaginably concerned for each of us.

He cares, so we must care for one another and those who need to know of his love.

The Lord has shown his love for us in what he did through the cross.

Or, another way of putting it might be, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the Eternal Judge, the one who will return in Glory, HE, is really committed to you.

The Lord has shown his commitment to us.

The prophets of old were told by God that he would send a Saviour and he did!

If God says it will happen, it does.

Having been reminded us of His commitment to us, James

concludes this little section by calling us to be committed to God.

Not just when we choose to remember but, every time we open our mouths.

If we have proclaimed our love for God, if we announce our commitment to the Lord Jesus, we must be wholly committed to making our faith central in all that we do and say.

James also repeats Jesus message from Matthew, he tells us not to swear *"not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned."*⁵²

This is a warning against making or taking oaths.

If prompted to make an oath the implication is that you have made a promise that you intend to keep.

So, what about all the other things you said you would do?

Presumably, if not backed up by an oath there is no obligation to do what you have said you would do!

In short, we are to have no double-standards in our speech or our lives.

Those that have said "YES" to JESUS, must say "YES" to JESUS 24 Hours a day.

As believers in the one and only Lord and Saviour, the Way, the Truth and the Life, we must reflect that truth in what we say.

So what we say must be clear and consistent.

Let our YES be YES and our NO, NO.

We must also speak through actions and behaviour.

If we think we can say yes to Jesus and then deny him as we find the temptations of the flesh begin to appeal, then we are on very shaky ground indeed.

If we think we can say Yes to Jesus in our life and then modify

our Yes, to "maybe in the right circumstances," or, "except when..." then we have a major spiritual problem.

Commitment to Jesus is a conscious decision which entails all of our being, when we make that decision it is meant be giving our all for Jesus.

When temptations to waver from our faith are sprung upon us, in illness, persecution or suffering of any kind, we can focus our minds and hearts upon the Cross of our Lord Jesus and remember the strength of His unwavering commitment to each of us.

Likewise when tempted, sorely tempted even, I have found that if I can picture in my mind's eye, the cross of Jesus, I can resist pretty much most things. However, discipline in acting positively to resist the temptation means we have to at least pause and act as opposed to RE-acting to the temptation before us.

Focusing on the Cross in this way makes resistance to temptation stronger.

- We have caused him such pain already, every time we deliberately sin, it's almost like piling another punishment upon Him.

Thinking this way we can be strengthened to withstand temptations, persevere and hold firm to our faith, remaining true in our witness to those who have yet to discover the Joy of His Love.

Keep the Cross firmly in your thoughts and allow His love to win all of your heart.

Prayer is Practical

“Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 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. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so 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 would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”

James 5:13-20

When James began his letter, he spoke of the trials and temptations that we each have to face in this life.

We have been encouraged to persevere, for when we have persevered to the end we have been assured of eternal salvation.

James has warned us of the need to make our faith practical, our faith must be seen in our acts as well as known in our hearts.

We have been offered practical advice on how to ensure unity among us. - We are to have no favourites; we are to be mindful of the potential division caused by shooting our mouth off.

We are to actively seek to be peacemakers and defenders of truth.

James has also reminded us that we are to be humble.

- We are told how we can practically achieve this, we are to submit to God, we are to remember his sovereignty.

When we find that we are getting a bit carried away with

ourselves, thinking that we have "made it" or start to boast about our achievements, we must remember that it is only by God's grace that we have even our lives. - We must keep things in due proportion.

At the other end of the spectrum when things are not going well, we are told not to envy or moan about the success of others, instead we are told to persevere and rejoice for those who appear to be having a better time of it than we are!

James is a book all about the practical response to the trials and temptations of this life. - A mini manual of how to last the race.

It is quite evident that the many areas that James addresses are common problems within the Church. His desire was to present an exhortation to persevere and to provide the practical advice we have all received.

The last passage of James is no less practical than the rest of the book.

"Is any one of you in trouble?" James asks.

What a question, *"is any one of you in trouble?"*

What sort of a week did you have?

Was it all plain sailing? I doubt it!

Is any one of you struggling with your faith?

Is any one of you being victimised because of your faith?

Is any one of you in trouble because you feel unable to share your faith with others?

As far as the Word of God is concerned all these situations spell trouble and we know from the rest of his letter, James has already supplied us with many practical solutions to the trials or the problems that we each will face.

As his letter begins to come to an end, James gives us the most practical advice of all.

Regardless of what the problem is, we should pray.

First things first says James, PRAY.

There are some who may think it strange to suggest that Prayer is *Practical*.

For those that pray regularly, you will already know that prayer is very practical and very hard work indeed.

The trouble James is talking about is the sort of trouble that we, ourselves, feel unable resolve.

Yes, James has told us how we can persevere in times of trouble, how we can address wrong thought and behaviour patterns in our own lives and how we can ensure unity within the body of the Church.

But.... James is now addressing external problems, problems from outside.

- The constant battle against wickedness and personal attacks against us.

A Measure

If we truly believe that we are in Jesus and that through him, God is for us, we will pray in the certain hope of our prayers being answered.

But *if* we find ourselves lacking Faith in God to answer our prayers, *what do we do then?*

Quite simply, we must Pray.

We can Pray for more faith. God loves to amaze us and he will grant us as much Faith as we earnestly seek.

Our level of faith is often reflected in our prayers.

Do you pray for the big things, or do you restrict your prayers to the small things in the hope that you won't be too disappointed if you have got it wrong?

We have no reason to doubt that our relationship with God, through Jesus his Son, can be anything less than wonderful. The key term here is the word, "relationship".

For us to have a relationship with God we must have dialogue between us.

If we seek his will, we must *listen* for his response.

Inevitably his response to our prayers will require us to respond to his reply.

We may be asked to do something for Him. - We must be prepared to do it!

We may see Him respond by working through others. - We must thank Him.

But sometimes, we may not see our prayers answered. - what do we do then?

There are several possibilities:-

Possibly, we have got it wrong and prayed for the wrong thing or, misunderstood what we have really asked for.

Or, our prayers have indeed been answered but, perhaps in ways in which we had not envisaged when we prayed them and we have missed seeing how God has actually answered our prayer.

Or, God has yet to answer our prayer. - We have to remember that his timing is perfect. (Unlike our own!)

Prayer is not always about asking but, it tends to be what we do.

The following helpful reflection includes intercession and thanksgiving which becomes understanding.

“Devotion” - Anonymous author.

“I asked God for strength that I might achieve.

I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things.

I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy.
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.”

Prayer enables the developing of our relationship with the Lord along with all the rewards of that relationship. - Joy, Peace etc...

All this makes prayer a pleasure as well as being important and a privilege.

As we pray more and more, as we speak to him and remember to *listen* to him, we find that we are drawn into *deeper communion* with God. We discover through that deeper communion with him we encounter an *understanding* of his will for our lives and for the lives of others and we develop a love for his ways.

You may have recognised this for yourself, those who meet regularly with God in prayer have a Joy, a peace, a sense of the Presence of God around them.

As we pray, we find ourselves being drawn deeper into communion with the Lord.

- Our faith is being deepened and our lives are being changed, enriched by a sense of God's presence and power.

James knows what we're like, he knows that when we pray it is usually because we want something, we either want it for

ourselves, for others or even for the Glory of God's kingdom. We know, because Jesus has told us, if we ask in Jesus' Name our Heavenly Father will hold nothing back from us.⁵³ Isn't that great news?

But, James also knows just how ungrateful we are, how thoughtless we can be. So often we can behave like spoiled children and take all that God has done for us and all that he has provided for us, we can take it all and forget to express our thanks and our love for Him.

Jesus too encountered this when he healed 10 lepers, only one remembered that the source of his joy was Jesus. Only one came back to thank Jesus and, Jesus reaction?
*"were there not ten of you?"*⁵⁴

This indicates that Jesus was astounded at how self absorbed and "now" focused the men were. They took the miracle from the hands of Jesus and still did not recognise Him as Lord. Otherwise they would all have come to thank Jesus.

Has something good happened to you lately?
 "Is anyone happy?" - James asks, then "Let him sing songs of praise."
 When we acknowledge what God has done, what he is doing in our lives, we need to be praising God.

Think on it, *the One* who put the stars in their places, *the One* who sent Jesus to take our *deserved* punishment for our sins, God the Holy One is *intimately concerned in the affairs of your life* and he really wants to bless you.

Isn't that something to rejoice about, don't you just want to sing your praises to God?

But...As we grow, we discover that joy and sorrow, laughter

and pain are often so close to one another.

Ever real, ever *practical*, James draws our attention to the fact that things are not always easy to deal with and that illness is a source of much pain and sorrow for us.

There are times when we are ill or those that we care about are ill, when, to be quite honest with ourselves, we don't feel much like praising God.

There are also times when we feel *unable* to pray with faith because of the burden of pain associated with the sickness or disease that confronts us.

There is still something very practical we can do says James.

"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 we know we are not up to it, if we feel our faith has taken a battering, we are to call for reinforcements.

There is to be no sense of defeat about this, there are and there will be occasions when we need to be prepared to say *"Help!"*

Yes, it would be wonderful if we had an unshakeable faith every minute of our lives but, we *are* weak and we must remember that Our Father knows the depth of our faith.

He knows how fragile and delicate we can be, so he has provided us with brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a church family that knows the Lord and a Family that the Lord has commanded to love one another.

When we are ill or spiritually frozen to the spot by what is happening to those closest to us, we must not let pride stand in the way of finding help.

The Lord has raised up spiritual leaders who are called to pray over us when we are ill.

When we are faced with the fact that we feel almost *paralysed* to pray for a situation, it is amazing just how often we are shown men and women who can stand *with us* during these times.

God is faithful, he will answer the prayers of others, even for our own lives.

Many of us can testify to times when events have almost spiritually paralysed us.

We need only to be honest with ourselves, reject pride and ask our leaders to offer their spiritual gifts and spiritual authority to assist us in our hour of need.

Leaders have been raised up to lead, they are there to give counsel, they are to guide us when we feel at a loss.

This passage about prayer also touches on one of the areas that can really make my blood pressure rise.

How often have you heard of sick people being prayed for and not being miraculously healed and the one doing the praying has blamed the sick person for not having enough faith to receive the healing? - I hope you get angry too! (Righteous anger is Okay!)

James quite plainly puts the responsibility of having sufficient faith, not on the one who is being prayed for, that responsibility lies with the one who is doing the praying!

However, the decision to heal or, how to heal, that lies entirely with the Lord. It is *His* sovereign will that determines how a healing is to be effected. Remember too, a healing may even mean that person being called home to be with Him!

Spiritual Leaders, the Eldership of the Church, have been entrusted with the spiritual and pastoral oversight of the body. Which is why James says we are to call upon the elders when

we are sick, the elders have spiritual authority and a responsibility of care for each of us.

It is what they have been called to do!!!

James continues....

"If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

If there is unconfessed sin in your life, it must be confessed and repented of.

- Sin is a barrier between us and our Heavenly Father.
- It stops Christians receiving all that The Lord has for them!

Our consciousness of our sin will mean feelings of guilt and of being ashamed. When we are like that we try to erect barriers between ourselves and God.

When we become conscious of our sin we need to confess it and repent of it otherwise, we can drift away from God through feelings of guilt and unworthiness.

If we allow our faith to drift for such reasons, we deny that God could forgive us, we act as though *our* sin is worse than anyone else's and beyond God's forgiveness.

Yet, Scripture tells us that even an adulterous, murderer such as David, the "greatest King" they had, his sin was awful and yet, his prayers were answered.

Repentance and the receipt of forgiveness makes a huge difference.

We are all sinners, we are all guilty but, we can be forgiven.

God's Grace has no limit!

God's capacity to forgive, far exceeds our capacity to make a mess of things!

I believe one of the reasons that James says we are to confess to the elders our sins, is to enable us to say aloud what our sins have been.

When we speak them out and repent of them we know that they are out in the open, we discover that we feel honest and real about our life and our faith.

- the sense of cover-up is removed and we re-discover freedom and openness once more.
- No more pretend, no more lies.

A word of caution though, the Word of God is not telling us to call a press conference.

James is not advocating open confession of sin in church or group gatherings. (It's not Sinners Anonymous!)

He has specifically referred to the role of the elders. We are to be able to speak to our elders, our spiritual leaders with openness and we are to trust their spiritual authority and their confidentiality.

As an aside...

Of course, if we have broken the criminal law, we must accept that our spiritual leader will encourage us to go and confess our guilt and we can expect them to report to the police whatever crime we have committed.

(They are called to obey the civil law too!)

Love and trust are inextricably interlinked. For us to be able to confess our sins to one another there must be a bond of trust based on the knowledge that we are genuinely loved by each other.

We have all been commanded to love one another, so we need to examine our own hearts and ask whether we love one another enough.

Enough to be open about our problems, open enough to confess our sins, open enough to be honest and say, "Actually, I'm not doing well at all!".

If anyone comes seeking your help or your counsel, rejoice that this person values and trusts your relationship with them AND trusts your relationship with the Lord..

Rejoice that Jesus is being seen in your life and serve the Lord well.

Give glory to God for any good that comes from the encounter and praise God so as not to slide into the sin of pride.

Confession of our sin enables us to live and to pray minus self-made barriers between ourselves and God. With these barriers removed, we feel free'er to pray. We know we have been forgiven, we feel unhindered to ask for anything.

- And we are confident that we will be heard.

"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" we are told.

*"Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."*⁵⁵

James reminds us of the great prophet Elijah and he tells us, *Elijah was no superman*, Elijah was like us.

After his encounter with the prophets of Baal, Elijah ran away and had his own self-pity party.

But, he "wised up," sought the Lord's forgiveness and was able to be used mightily once more.⁵⁶

When we have confessed our sins and repented of them in Jesus' name we are forgiven. We need to receive that forgiveness, we need to acknowledge to ourselves that as far as God is concerned, it is as if those sins had never happened. If God has forgiven us our sin, we need to forgive ourselves also, learn the lesson and persevere.

One of the ways to think of it is a bit like the struggles I have with deleting files from my computer!

I delete them and they end up in the "trash" or "recycle bin".

However, I discovered recently, the “trash” needs to be emptied regularly.

Which is quite like what we do when we confess our sins to the Lord. Seeking his forgiveness, remembering the price Jesus has paid on our behalf, we know the Lord forgives us and bible tells us that He remembers our sins no more. (as far as the east is from the west, he remembers our sins no more.)

Unless, that is, we act as a flash drive and retain back-up copies of the sins we have committed!

Which is pretty much what we do to ourselves when we do not forgive ourselves after we know the Lord has forgiven us.

When we genuinely ask for forgiveness, it is given.

Unless we also forgive ourselves we effectively say that God was wrong to forgive us.

– We declare that we know better than God and tie ourselves in chains of endless regret that cripple our effectiveness in our witness to God’s power to set us free.

If God deletes his record of our sin, we need to ensure that we delete our copy also. Otherwise, we continue to allow the virus of self-condemnation to immobilise our effectiveness.

There is no condemnation for those that are in Christ.⁵⁷

Due to the amazing work of Jesus upon the Cross, due to his unrelenting love for us we have access through Him to God the Father of all Creation.

When we grasp this truth as fully as we can, we begin to realise that we are asking The Almighty, the Creator of the Universe, to listen to us and answer our prayers.

If we grasp this properly, our prayers can only be made in humility as we comprehend how small we are in comparison to him.

BUT.... even *in humility* we can be bold enough to ask our Father for even miraculous answers to prayer. For whatever we ask for is to be asked in the Name of Jesus, our Lord, God's own Son.

No father would refuse his Son anything that is good, provided it was possible to provide it!

And we *know* that for God, nothing is impossible.

When we pray in Jesus name it is as if Jesus is praying, that's how attentive God is to *our* prayers.

All the more reason for us to try and emulate Jesus life in our own.

By rejecting sin in our lives and truly searching our hearts for love to show to others, we can kneel before our Father in humility and trust that our Father in Heaven, hears and responds to his children.

Regardless of how wonderful all this sounds, there are many for whom the cost, the discipline, the commitment seems just too much.

And there are many others who are duped into believing once they have confessed their faith in Jesus they can relax. They begin to take their salvation for granted.

Soon temptation comes along and they are tempted from the narrow path into a downward spiral of sin, guilt and remorse.

Shame, embarrassment and pride, then often become a barrier to them finding their way back to a close relationship with the Lord.

Isn't it hard to watch someone who was once on fire for Jesus, just drift away into sin and separation from the rest of the body? What can we do?

Do we ignore what is happening and hope that they will

eventually come to their senses, a bit like the Prodigal Son.
Or, do we try to help?
Can we find some way of extending a hand to help someone who is finding their Christian walk a bit of a struggle?

"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back," James says, "remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

Plainly then, it is a requirement on the part of the body of believers to try and rescue someone from the slippery slope of sin.

- A requirement to go and find the lost sheep.

Sometimes the *subtle* approach will work, gently searching to find the root of any pain or sense of rejection or whatever.

- These things can be dealt with and the person can be brought back into the fold.

Others though, just have to go through the pain of experiencing life minus the most important relationship of all.

The prodigals, as they are often referred to, often have to go through very unpleasant times before they arrive at a point of being prepared to return to a closer walk with the Lord.

It is crucial that the church, the ones that have stayed close to the Lord or, more accurately, the ones who have made similar mistakes and have learned from them, need to make sure that we react the right way to the erring or the returning brother or sister.

If we are serious about emulating the example of Jesus, we need to exercise Grace at all times.

When an individual Christian becomes a prodigal, it is difficult for them to return to a relationship with God once more. They may cut themselves off from the church but, they are always a son or a daughter of the living God.

Their salvation remains assured. Sadly, this truth eludes the individual concerned and instead of living with all the riches of heaven in their hearts and lives, they choose to live impoverished.

However, often they leave church for good reasons!

Who in their right mind would stay where they feel unloved, superfluous or even rejected?

Conflict with churches is more common than we might think and it causes division. Division is a tool of the enemy to disrupt the progress of the church in enlarging the kingdom of God.

True too, some of us are “harder to love” than others but, we must always exercise grace.

We must also entrust those that seem to ignore all attempts to encourage them back into the fold, into God’s care.

He knows the reasons for the sense of rejection experienced, He knows why the outbursts of temper, of tears and of words have occurred. He knows the pains and the sorrows that each one has experienced and He is sad at their turning away from Him and from the wellspring of comfort He could provide within an instant.

Like the popular TV program that seeks to track down heirs to the unclaimed estates of deceased relatives, we too are to seek the heirs to the Kingdom of God who have left no forwarding

address, so to speak.

The Lord wants the prodigals home, not because he misses them, (not a moment of their lives is missed by him) but, simply because He knows they are missing out on so much of Him and the inheritance to which they are entitled.

That is why the church is meant to be a place where people can be loved and spiritually “patched up” again after encountering injury.

The sins of those that wander from their relationship with the Lord, those sins were washed away completely at the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, they live spiritually defeated instead of facing the issues within.

Equally sadly, so often people are allowed to “wander off” without anyone trying to keep them right with the Lord. Often it needs someone to remind the “wanderer” of what they have, as opposed to what they think they need.

Someone once said, “the grass may look greener on the other side but, it still needs mowing.”

In other words, the excitement of the new...whatever it is... soon wears off and the daily business of each day still needs to be done. Sadly, it often takes a trip to the “ash heap” or the “pig pen” for many to come to the realisation of what they have lost and that they too are lost.

The Lord’s promise is that once we have been adopted by Him, we become heirs to the Kingdom of God and all the resources

of Heaven become our inheritance.

A reminder of the simple but, amazing truth, of being His child is often enough to see the wanderer return, chastened but, determined to stay close to Him in the future.

Unlike our limited capacities, the Lords capacity to forgive far exceeds our ability to make a mess of things.

His grace is more than sufficient for all.

Prayer always makes the difference, if we but humble ourselves and turn to Him.

The Purpose of it All - Saving the Lost

James concludes his letter with a direct challenge to each one of us to call sin for what it is.

SIN.

Unless people come to understand what sin is, they will never comprehend why it is wrong.

Likewise, unless we make known an *alternative* to sinful living, what possibility is there for someone to see the folly of their own ways.

Unless the Church can provide an alternative way of living that is consistent with the Gospel it preaches, those outside have no encouragement to make enquiries about Christianity much less commit themselves to the Lord Jesus.

We have the Words of eternal life, we have the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, we have Jesus interceding at God's right hand on our behalf, *we have so much*.

We have so much that it is obscene to keep it to ourselves.

WE must share what we have with others, that they too may receive all the riches of God's kingdom.

All the practical advice on how to persevere in our faith, how to endure the trials, the temptations and the attacks, all this advice has been to strengthen us and to equip us for one great major undertaking.

Jesus said to go and make disciples of the nations and to teach them to obey everything he commanded his disciples to do.⁵⁸

The Lord's brother James, reminds us that.....

"Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

The greatest service we can do for Jesus, in response to his

sacrificial love for us, is to live as he taught us and to reach out to tell others of his love for them.

We are to be about the business of saving souls from eternal death and about bringing newness of life to those who are as good as dead.

If we do not tell others of God's great love for them it will be because we have put our own needs before the needs of others and before the needs of the Kingdom of God.

Prayer and the Holy Spirit provide us with all that we will ever need for this great undertaking, let us not shirk God's call to evangelise.

As you approach the last few pages of this book, ask yourself, how much do you actually love your family and neighbours? Do you want them to spend eternity in heaven with you?

Then, why concern yourself about a little awkwardness in a conversation about the most wonderful relationship you know?

Happy Endings

Whilst there is breath within the body, there is hope!
No case is so far gone that the Lord cannot rescue.⁵⁹

Jesus is the Lord of Life. He is the one that specialises in bringing back to life those that we assume are dead. Indeed, the long awaited revival of the church can only happen when it is at the point of needing to be revived. It is possible that the church in the west will need to die some more before we recognise that clever schemes, programs and re-organising do not work. Only when we are on our knees, crying out for Him to intervene, calling out for more of Him in our lives will we see the promised revival we seek.

We have grown so used to being self-reliant, it is a hard lesson to unlearn.

*“Trust in the Lord with all of your heart.....
Lean not on your own understanding....
In all your ways acknowledge Him...⁶⁰”*

Remember, *“consider it pure Joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”*

You have persevered with me in our sojourn through James. I pray that any blessings that come of your time reading these words will enable you to draw closer to Him and to be less

harsh upon yourself.

- We can be our own worst critics at times.

Christians have joy in the Presence of God and we are told that He is always with us.

So, take encouragement from this truth and let the Joy of the Lord be your strength.

Persevere, your life is “a mist” but, you’re His mist.

So... whilst the mist lingers, enjoy being His!

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- ¹ Zechariah 4:10
 - ² Martin Luther called James "an epistle of straw."
 - ³ Mark 3:21
 - ⁴ Psalm 3:3
 - ⁵ Nehemiah 8:10
 - ⁶ 1Corinthians 12
 - ⁷ Romans 7
 - ⁸ Isaiah 55:8
 - ⁹ Ephesians 2:6
 - ¹⁰ Revelation 2:10 & 3:11
 - ¹¹ Luke 15
 - ¹² 2Corinthians 10:5
 - ¹³ Marriage Matters Course
 - ¹⁴ Matthew 6:10
 - ¹⁵ 2Corinthians 3:18
 - ¹⁶ Matthew 7:11
 - ¹⁷ Romans 8:1
 - ¹⁸ Matthew 5 - Sermon on the Mount
 - ¹⁹ Attributed to Rev George McLeod - Iona Community
 - ²⁰ Matthew 19:24
 - ²¹ Galatians 3:26-29
 - ²² Isaiah 64:6
 - ²³ 2Corinthians 8
 - ²⁴ Genesis 15
 - ²⁵ Genesis 22
 - ²⁶ Joshua 2
 - ²⁷ 1Corinthians 13:11
 - ²⁸ Acts 17:16-34
 - ²⁹ 1Corinthians 1:21
 - ³⁰ Isaiah 29:14 & 1Corinthians 1:19
 - ³¹ Isaiah 55:8
 - ³² 1Corinthians 1:30
 - ³³ Exodus 20:5
 - ³⁴ Matthew 5:4
 - ³⁵ Luke 6:25
 - ³⁶ Psalm 103:14-17
 - ³⁷ Isaiah 29:13
 - ³⁸ Luke 12:13-21
 - ³⁹ Matthew 10:32
 - ⁴⁰ Exodus 16:1-20
 - ⁴¹ Luke 16:10
 - ⁴² From Nelson's Complete Book of Stories and Quotes Page 120
 - ⁴³ Proverbs 3:27-28
 - ⁴⁴ Matthew 6:19-21
 - ⁴⁵ Revelation 21:21
 - ⁴⁶ Galatians 6:7
 - ⁴⁷ Mark 13:32-37
 - ⁴⁸ Mark 3:25

⁴⁹ Psalm 133

⁵⁰ "Spilt Champagne" a phrase used by Max Lucado in "Six Hours One Friday"

⁵¹ 1Kings 19:3

⁵² Matthew 5:37

⁵³ John 14:13-14

⁵⁴ Luke 17:11-19

⁵⁵ 1Kings 18

⁵⁶ 1Kings 19

⁵⁷ Romans 8

⁵⁸ Matthew 28:16-20

⁵⁹ Luke 23:43

⁶⁰ Proverbs 3:5-6