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James 1:1-4

First Message

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THE MAKING OF A SAINT

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

We begin a new series of studies in the book of James this morning. The theme of this New Testament letter is that life is difficult. Every day brings pressures and stresses. Typically, we are at a loss as to why painful trials come our way. And almost invariably, we respond by trying to avoid or eliminate them from our lives.

My wife brought home a dog when we were first married. We lived in an apartment then, and we quickly discovered we could not leave the dog alone. Whenever we left, she would tear up the couch. I'd get angry and threaten to take her back to the pound, but my wife would plead the dog's case, and I'd relent. We moved into a house, but the dog began to tear up the yard. On the Fourth of July, she would try to hide from the noise of fireworks going off by attempting to dig a hole in the house. Every time an incident like this occurred, I'd threaten to get rid of her, thinking that if I did, I would eliminate a major problem in my life. Finally, Tucker got old and arthritic, and we had to put her to sleep. I knew I would miss her, but I looked forward to being relieved of all the chores and the problems which she created.

I will never forget leaving the vet's office that day. I was so sad, I couldn't talk for four days. That dog had been with us for over ten years. She had shared some of our most enjoyable family times. I noticed her absence everywhere. I was overwhelmed by the thought of not seeing her waiting for me on the front porch. I couldn't believe how much I missed her, how much a part of our family and daily life she had become.

I learned an important lesson that day. When I was finally rid of what I perceived to be a problem in my life, I eliminated a part of life, too. There was a connection between the hassles that the dog caused and the life she brought to our home. Eventually, we got another dog.

The pressures we face in life are much more trying than the problems that come with having a dog, of course. David Roper identifies some of those pressures in these words:

We lose our jobs, we lose our health, we lose our children, one way or another. The wheels fall off our programs, our dreams go belly up, our best laid schemes, "gang aft a-gley." We labor long hours with only fragmentary results. We're disregarded and ignored, slandered and maligned; we get trampled on by insensitive people. Some days we fall flat on our faces; our best efforts are a disaster, our best foot forward becomes a bitter embarrassment.

It is a natural response to try to escape the difficult circumstances that befall us. But, if we persevere in the midst of our problems, we discover the very life of God embedded at the root of our difficulties. The challenge of the Christian walk is to know this and beware the temptation to flee unpleasant circumstances. What we should do instead is seek to respond to the pressures in a godly way, and thereby find eternal life. This type of response takes a lot of practice in practical wisdom and spiritual living, and this is where the book of James

comes to the Christian's aid. This letter is given to help us learn how to live life in the trenches.

For our first study, we will take the opening four verses of chapter 1.

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings. Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:1-4 NASB)

The New Testament makes mention of several men named James, but the author of this letter is undoubtedly the brother of Jesus. At first, James rejected Jesus as Messiah, but he was converted in a special appearance of Jesus (1 Cor 15). Later, James became a prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem. About A.D. 62, he was martyred.

The book of James is to the New Testament what the book of Proverbs is to the Old. The letter is pithy, very Jewish, and it has many references to the teachings of Jesus. It is written in the same style as the words of Jesus spoken in the Sermon on the Mount. Its message is challenging and bold. Fifty-four different commands are given in its 108 verses.

In verse 1 we learn that James based his authority on his being a "servant of God." This is the same term that was applied to Moses and Joshua. James adds to this OT reference to allegiance the NT declaration of his submission to the Lord Jesus, who was none other than his brother.

The letter is addressed to the twelve tribes who were dispersed abroad, literally, the Diaspora ("that which is sown"). At the time it was written, the church consisted primarily of Jewish Christians (the gospel proclamation to the Gentiles was not yet in full swing). Thus the letter was not written to the church in Jerusalem, but to the entire church, the Israel of God, scattered throughout the world. They were facing great economic oppression under wealthy landlords, a circumstance that is important in understanding the truth of the letter. The writer's greeting to his readers is but a single word: "Rejoice."

So the letter of James centers on the fact that life is filled with suffering and pain. I want to begin our studies by talking about four aspects of suffering: its nature, its purpose, the major obstacle it presents, and our response to it.

The nature of suffering assures us of its inevitability in our lives. No matter who we are or where we live, we will encounter suffering. A trial is any circumstance that produces pressure so that our natural response is to seek relief from it. But we cannot avoid it. James does not say "if" we encounter trials, but "when" we encounter them. It is a given that we will have trials.

The Bible identifies three sources of suffering. First, suffering is one result of the consequences of sin. Many people refer to this kind of suffering as trials, but clearly this is not what James is talking about. Second, the Bible says that suffering is a result of persecution. While this kind of suffering might be in view here, in the New Testament, a different word is used to describe it. And third, suffering comes because God designed life that way. He allows suffering. At times, we will face suffering because we are Christians; at other times suffering will be our lot because we are part of the human family. As we have seen, the people to whom James was writing were suffering because they were being oppressed by wealthy landowners.

The nature of various trials is further defined by situations that have the effect of “testing” our faith. The word means to prove, to try out; it was used of the process of refining metals to test their purity. Webster defines “test” as “an experiment to test the quality, value, or usefulness” of something. Trials become tests which will have the effect of showing ourselves, and God, what is inside of us.

This was the very thing that God was doing with the nation of Israel in their wilderness wanderings, as we see in the book of Deuteronomy, “You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” (Deut 8:2). God tested Abraham when he asked him to sacrifice Isaac. He allowed Satan to test his servant Job. God even allowed Satan to test Jesus in the wilderness. In each instance, the test revealed what was in the heart of the one being tested.

The last-minute touchdown drive tests the footballer’s ability. The final examination tests the student’s knowledge. The difficult surgery tests the doctor’s brilliance. Trials, however, do not test our abilities, talents, intelligence or social skills. Trials test our faith. And there is a deep connection between trials and faith. The question that we as Christian must answer is not whether we will succeed or even if we will live, but will we trust? Will we believe God and obey him? Our answers will be apparent by the way we respond to trials.

The second issue raised by our text is the purpose behind suffering. Trials and suffering are not dictated by caprice. Everything comes from the hand of God. Nothing is left to chance. Each suffering we experience is uniquely designed to change us and mold us into the likeness of God. James says that trials work out endurance, and that endurance works out maturity, perfect and complete, so that we may not lack anything. It is a two-stage process. The formula is: a yields b, and b yields c.

According to James, suffering produces endurance, which is the ability to take the heat, to remain under the pressure and refuse to quit. This is not mere resignation, a determination to tough it out to the end, but rather, persistence and steadfastness, the quality of being able to remain under the pressure. It is doing God’s will in the face of counter-influences; forgiving slights and unkindnesses for the four hundredth and ninetieth time; remaining in a difficult marriage, struggling against enslaving habits; choosing purity of mind and body in the face of lonely days and long nights; keeping one’s word despite the pain, and obeying when life is hard. Just as an athlete must train rigorously to become strong and conditioned so that he may stay the course, so it is with the trials that test our faith. God is building up our endurance. If that quality is lacking, it will become evident in time.

I had an early lesson in learning endurance. When I was thirteen years old, I went to the Omaha golf and country club to become a caddie. The caddie master told me to take a seat, and that is where I remained all the first day; my name was never called. The same thing happened the second day. But I decided to try it one more time. The third day, close to six in the evening, the caddie master finally called my name and gave me my first job. He wanted to test my endurance, to see whether I would stick it out or quit.

Then, James says, endurance builds maturity. When we face difficult situations that place us under pressure and stress, we become changed, tested people. Suffering makes us into what George Fox called “established men.” We become stable, dependable, durable and strong. Trials leave a lasting mark on us. They have the ability, if we allow them, to mold and shape our character into something which is perfect, something God-like.

Ultimately, God is the process of making us like himself. We don’t know what that will be but, according to the apostle Paul, when we see God face to face, we will be like him. We are being transformed from one image of glory to another, from the glory of man to the glory of God.

But this process of becoming mature and godly is a long and painful one. That is because there is no other way to grow. We don’t grow while we are sitting in the classroom. We are hard rock cases, Mount Rushmore-like projects. God has to take hammer and chisel to our hard hearts. He strikes us, breaks us, chips away at us and hurts us in order that he might make us into the image of himself. Then he puts us under intense heat so that all the impurities will be burned off. What is left will be pure and precious, godly and holy—“perfect and complete, lacking in nothing,” in James’ words. Tom Landry, the former coach of the Dallas Cowboys, used to tell his players, “I make you do what you do not want to do, in order to make you become what you want to be.”

Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because his own character had grown through many years of trials and testings. Joshua was an able leader, fit to enter the Promised Land after forty years of trials and testing in the wilderness. Job, at last, had to confess to God, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee.” Jesus, faithful under the testing of his Father’s hand, qualified to be the unblemished Lamb. Henri Nouwen puts it this way: “What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. What seemed rejection becomes a way to a deeper communion.”

Hurt and pain are part of the process of becoming saints.

The major obstacle that suffering presents is learning how to overcome the sense of homelessness we feel when we are undergoing trials. Every day, especially at Christmas time, we see homeless people on our streets. They are vulnerable, naked and exposed to the elements. We look at them sympathetically, but often we pass them by, grateful we are not like them. And yet, inside, we may well be just as homeless as they are.

The recipients of James’ letter were the Diaspora. Aliens and exiles, they were thrown out of their homes to live under the tyranny and whims of wealthy landlords. As Christians, according to Scripture, we are aliens living in this world. We are in the world, but not of it. We may try to create a home, a place that is safe and secure and trial-free, but God will not allow us to do that.

Now the major obstacle we face when we encounter a trial is this very sense of homelessness. Pressure and suffering strip away our false sense of security. The facades that we have built so diligently to save ourselves from sadness, things like careers, fine houses, nice friends and family, are taken away. When the pressure comes, these things that we had looked to for security and protection fail us. It is not that they are lacking in themselves; they just do not endure the test of trials. Things like clothes, degrees, money, country clubs and travel cannot mask the aches and pains, the longings of the human heart. We are uncomfortable, unsatisfied, exposed and naked. We are frightened and lonely. We cry out for the safety of home.

When Israel was in the wilderness and facing testing by God, they wanted to go back to Egypt. They wanted to go home, no matter how miserable and enslaving that was. Ironically, the very thing that God was planning for them was a home, a land flowing with milk and honey. Only one thing was required to enter that place, and that was faith.

Personally, I find that this is the hardest struggle I face when I am suffering. But this is the tension that James says we must live with as Christians. We can't go back to the world for our sense of place and rest. We must move forward, even though we hurt. Our home is in heaven, a building from God, "a house not made with hands." This is what our hearts long for. We prefer, as Paul preferred, to be "absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." In this body we groan, because we feel naked and exposed.

How should we respond to suffering? How should we live in the face of trials? Our text suggests two responses that are absolutely contrary to our natural feelings. The first is, let trials work on perfecting and molding character. Don't fight them. Don't run from your job, your marriage, your family struggle, the pain of losing someone. Let the refiner's fire work out the impurities. Ultimately, God intends good things to come from the trial. Our first step should not be to move away from the pain, but toward it. This is not masochism; it is submission to God. As the Creator, he has the right to do with us as he wills. If we do not let him do his work, we will grow to be angry, resentful and bitter.

But this is not our natural response, is it? Personally, I try everything I can to avoid and eliminate the things that cause pain in my life. I find myself trying to anticipate everything that might go wrong and trying to protect myself from it. I hate the feelings of homelessness, of being naked and exposed. I don't like pain.

We feel this even more keenly with respect to our children. We don't want them to be disappointed and hurt, so we redouble our efforts to protect them from pain. How do we arrive at to such faulty conclusions? If we must let God shape us through trials, then we must allow him to do the same with our children.

David Roper has this to say about our faulty reasoning:

Unfortunately, our concept of God's goodness is based on the faulty assumption that personal happiness is the highest good. True happiness, however, is something more profound than staying in the comfort zone. There are things to be done about our character that can only be done by suffering. To shield us from this suffering would not be good; it would, in fact, rob us of the highest possible good...the Lord permits suffering in order to mold us. Pain puts us on notice that we cannot do without God and pushes us closer to him; it shatters the illusion that we're ad-

equate in ourselves. It draws us close to God and in Him we find the resources to face life and its demands.

James gives a second response: that we "consider it all joy" when we encounter various trials. This response, too, is contrary to our normal feelings. We do not equate pain with joy. But James urges Christians to consider trials as a source of joy for what they produce in our lives, if we allow them. This is not speaking of mindless mirth, a pretend smile, a make-believe joy. Christian joy is a supernatural reaction to trials, one that indicates contentment, despite the pain.

And notice that James says to consider it all joy. He does not say consider some things joy, some things good, some bad, some blessed and some cursed. He indicates that all of life is blessed for the Christian, because everything comes from the hand of God, therefore it is all good and we can be fully joyful for it. We should not look at life as a series of blessings and curses, with our circumstances falling into one column or the other. God sees all our circumstances as a source of joy. He has only one column.

The joy that James is referring to becomes manifest in what the trials accomplish in our relationship with God. Christians who have come through intense pressures and trials will tell you that they did not enjoy what they had to endure, but they would not have traded it because of what they experienced in their relationship with God through it. Pain opens our hearts and reveals our hunger. Pain teaches us that we cannot do without God. Jesus endured the cross, the deepest pain and the deepest testing, for the joy that was set before him. He said to his disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."

Henri Nouwen said this about suffering:

The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become instead, the means to it... True joy can be experienced in the midst of great suffering. It is the joy of being disciplined, purified and pruned. Just as athletes who experience great pain as they run the race can, at the same time, taste the joy of knowing that they are coming closer to their goal, so also can the Beloved experience suffering as a way to the deeper communion for which they yearn. Here joy and sorrow are no longer each other's opposites, but have become the two sides of the same desire to grow to the fullness of the Beloved.

Suffering is an inevitable fact of life. Although trials make us feel like aliens, they are a necessary part of God's work to mold us into what he wants us to become. His call to us is to learn to let trials do their work, to consider all of life, even the wounds that we suffer in the process, to be joy.

I want to conclude this morning by quoting a poem which was a favorite of Ray Stedman's, and which is very appropriate to our study on suffering:

When God wants to drill and skill a man;
 When he wants to mold a man to play the noblest part.
 When he yearns with all his heart to create so great and bold a
 man that all the world will be amazed.
 How he ruthlessly perfects whom he royally selects.
 How he hammers him and hurts him and with mighty blows
 converts him into trial shapes of clay which only God can un-
 derstand.
 How he bends but never breaks when his good he undertakes.

How he uses whom he chooses and with every purpose fuses
him;
by every act induces him to try his power out.
God knows what he's about!

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James 1:5-8

Second Message

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SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey recalls an incident he witnessed while he was riding the New York City subway. It was early Sunday morning, and the few passengers aboard were reading newspapers or dozing. During a quiet ride through the bowels of the city, Covey was engrossed in reading. At a stop, a man accompanied by several small children boarded the train. In less than a minute, bedlam erupted. The children began run up and down the aisle, shouting and screaming and wrestling on the floor. The father made no attempt to intervene. A couple of elderly passengers became nervous. Soon, stress gave way to distress. Covey waited patiently. Surely the father would do something to restore order: a gentle word of correction, a stern command, an expression of paternal authority. But none was forthcoming. After an unduly generous pause, Covey turned to the father and said, in a kindly voice, "Sir, perhaps you could restore order by telling your children to sit down." "I know I should do something," the man replied. "We just came from the hospital. Their mother died an hour ago. I just don't know what to do."

Sudden trials have a way of pulling us up short. An unexpected crisis shocks us, and we feel utterly inadequate to respond. Like the father in the subway, we don't know what to do. Desperate for answers, knowing we should do something, we don't even know where to begin.

Last week, in our opening study of the book of James, we saw that suffering is the theme of this New Testament letter. James does not mince words. Quickly warming to his subject, following a one-verse opening salutation, the writer opens his discourse by saying, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various kinds of trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Trials are unavoidable circumstances that God uses to test our faith and develop our character. But, if we allow them to run their course, they have the ability to change us and mold us into the likeness of God. In his opening command, James tells how we should respond to trials: "Consider it all joy." We must remain under the heat and let the trials do their work.

In our text today, James will say that the most important thing we can do when we are desperately searching for answers to the trials that befall us, is to pray. This is where we must begin. Verse 5 of chapter 1:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8 NASB)

Trials tend to make us confused. When someone close to us dies, when we are abandoned by our spouse, oppressed at work, slander is directed at us, financial difficulties hound us, our natural reaction is panic, fear and feelings of insecurity. We are uncertain as to how to respond. But the antidote that James gives is clear: "If any one of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God." Prayer is not the most natural response when we are under stress, but it is by far the most helpful. A more immediate response that comes to mind is to turn our energies to solving, eliminating, alleviating or escaping the trial, even to seek revenge. The energy and effort we extend, however, would be put to better use by simply praying.

In these verses, James gives three very helpful suggestions concerning prayer: what we should ask for when we pray, the basis for asking, and the one qualification that is necessary.

First, what to ask for. When we are under pressure, according to James, the request we should make to God is for wisdom. The writer is not speaking of the kind of wisdom required to make career decisions, the type of house to buy, or whom we should marry. The wisdom he is referring to has to do with character, the kind that he defines in these words from chapter 3: "The wisdom from above is first, pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy."

Wisdom has much more to do with being something than doing something. If he were writing this text today, James would probably say something along these lines: "If anyone lacks the depth of character and integrity to be able to deal with a situation, let him ask of God; if anyone doesn't know how to be inside his heart, let him ask of God." Eventually, we will have to make choices. But the first thing we must do is become aware of what is going on in our hearts, so that when we do act, when we must make choices, we will do so with the right kind of heart and the right kind of character.

Supposing someone close to you hurt you deeply, without justification, and you responded by feeling angry and hurt. You felt sick inside. You either wanted to hurt your friend in turn, or ignore him for the rest of your life. James would say that you lacked wisdom. The most important thing is your own heart condition, your own sense of peace and purity; not what to do in response to the hurt done to you, but how to respond in a godly way.

Recently, I found myself in just such a situation. I felt confused and hurt, and at a loss to know what to do. I called a friend and asked for advice, and he told me that he would pray. A few days later, while studying the book of Joshua, I read that God told Joshua that he would always be with him, that he would not "fail him or abandon him." I looked up the word "fail" and found that it means, "to not drop or let go." I had my answer. I had the wisdom I needed. If God is so committed to me that he would never let me go, no matter what I do or how much I hurt him, then I must act the same way toward others. I called the one who had hurt me and told him

that I had been very angry, but that I would always love him and I would never let go.

Wisdom is the most important requirement we need to face the pressures and sufferings of life. Solomon regarded wisdom as being more valuable than health or wealth. Moses prayed in Psalm 90: “So teach us to number our days, that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom” (verse 12). This kind of wisdom, this kind of character, can only come from God, through prayer.

The second thing that James refers to concerning prayer is the basis upon which we can ask. Why we can come to God so boldly and confidently to claim this wisdom that we desperately need? We approach God on the basis of his character, not our own. At times we have a problem with asking God for anything, let alone wisdom. Usually this is due to our own pride and stubbornness. Another reason is our faulty view of God and the basis of our relationship with him. We may even think that God is angry with us, that he is too busy for us or that he doesn't want to bother with us. The result is that we are reluctant, timid and unsure. But James says that we can come to God because he gives not just to some men, but to all men “generously and without reproach.”

God is a generous giver. He is a loving Father who wants to grace his children abundantly. Remember the words of Jesus: “Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:11-13).

God is a generous Father.

And God is an approachable Father. As his children, we can come to him in the midst of pressure and suffering and he will not reproach us or accuse us. He never turns us away or scolds us for asking trivial questions. He does not call us ignorant or stupid for not knowing the right answers. Remember the promise of Jesus to his disciples, “If you ask Me anything in my Name, I will do it” (John 14:14).

James writes these things so that we will know how simple a thing it is to come to God and ask for wisdom when we lack it. God is a generous and approachable Father. If we would come to him in times of trial, then it is imperative that we see him for who he is.

I love my children very dearly. I want to do things for them, especially when they have a problem. Even when they step outside the boundaries that their mother and I have put in place, I have limitless love for them. However, it took a long time for me to learn that God feels the same way about me as I do about my children, to know him as a generous and approachable Heavenly Father. I knew this intellectually, but my experience of this truth was lacking. I saw how generous and approachable God was toward others, but I felt I did not have that kind of relationship with him.

Eventually, the trials of life forced me to return home like the prodigal son and sit at my Father's feet. I heard his voice call me his beloved son; I felt his hand touch me. It was then that I learned just how generous and approachable my God really is. Now, when I feel pressured, I know that I can come to him and can ask him anything. He doesn't get mad at me. He doesn't put me on hold. He doesn't have call waiting. He loves me and wants to help me.

When we face pressure and suffering, we can come to God based on who he is, not who we are.

Now the third point. James includes one qualification on our asking God for wisdom: He says that we must ask in faith. Notice once again the importance of having faith in the midst of trials. Not only are trials circumstances that test or prove out our faith, they call upon us to pray in faith.

Faith demands that when we come to God, and when we hear his voice, we are completely sold out to the answer we receive from him. We must believe it and obey it, even if it means we have to give up our rights, even if we don't get the answer we were seeking. The opposite of faith is doubting, being at odds with ourselves, wavering, listening to what others tell us to do, trying to figure things out after we have already heard from God.

The result of living in doubt rather than faith is that we will not receive wisdom. We will not receive from God the kind of character we need to endure the storms of life. Rather, when we doubt, we become like the surf of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind. Our soul is anchorless in the midst of the deep. When the storm approaches and the wind blows, we find ourselves adrift, tossed to and fro, carried away with the currents. We become restless, fickle, unsettled. Our souls are divided. A civil war wages within us. We vacillate. We lose our sense of peace and rest. Internal division is one of the sure signs that we are not listening to God, because God's answers will give us peace. The enemy, on the other hand, is always trying to create disorder in our hearts and minds.

I find myself doubting God's answers at times. Years ago, I did a stint in law school. I quit after a time because of various pressures I was experiencing. For several months, I wondered if I had made the right decision. I wavered back and forth. I was being tossed to and fro; I was unstable. It was because I had not asked in faith. I was not living in faith, and thus I did not have the sense of wisdom and peace that I wanted so badly.

But James says we are to ask in faith. If we do, the promise is that we will receive wisdom. James does not say that the circumstances will change, that the pain and sorrow will subside, that life will become rosy. What he does say is that we will know how to respond. Our hearts will be whole, our character will be deepened, our relationship with God will be changed and our souls will be at peace in the midst of pressure. We will be decisive, not changeable, confident, not tentative. We will know that God is in control, not ourselves. We will initiate God's actions instead of letting others determine what we do. These are the results of the prayer of faith.

This is what Jesus himself promised his disciples: “Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive” (Matt 21:21-22). Writing about Abraham, the apostle Paul said, “with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom 4:20).

Hannah is a great Old Testament example of a woman of faith. Hannah's barrenness was a severe trial which tested her faith. It greatly distressed and depressed her. Her husband could not comfort her. His other wife, Hannah's rival, needled her incessantly for her inability to conceive. Then Hannah went up to the temple in Shiloh to pray. Eli, the priest, unaccustomed to seeing someone in prayer, thought she was drunk. When she went out from the temple, her face was no longer sad. She had prayed the prayer of faith. Her heart had already been changed, even though her circumstances had not;

she had to wait for that. But she received the wisdom she had been seeking.

Life presents us with all kinds of difficult situations. We should not be surprised when we encounter trials, or confused as to how to respond to them. Oftentimes, it is in our brokenness that we are healed. As someone has said, “Often, breakdowns lead to breakthroughs.” These are the times when we learn how to pray, and we encounter the living God.

Life is not about getting perfect grades, being successful, having perfect children. Life is not about solving, but believing. Life is not about us; it is about God and us, in communion, “deep calling to deep.” It is through suffering, pain and trials that we are forced to our knees. James himself was very familiar with prayer. Legend has it that his nickname was “Old Camel Knees.”

Praying is hard work. We need discipline if we are to move from praying on the run to committing quality time to come before the Father in silence. Lately, I have been impressed by the writings of men who make it a habit to take silent retreats where they devote considerable time to praying.

I do a number of things with my children and for them, but what I treasure most are the times when we listen to one another, those occasions when there is real dialogue and sharing between us. This is what God wants with us—communion and oneness. Prayer in the midst of suffering is not just talking at God and telling him what we want him to do for us. True prayer is listening to God and hearing what we need to hear.

A number of years ago, we were involved in a dispute that ended up in court. On the day of the hearing, my son’s elementary school teacher asked the class if anyone had anything to share. My son raised his hand and said, “I would like prayer for my mom and dad who are in court today.” The teacher was referring to a time of “show and tell,” but my son thought she was asking for prayer requests. He imagined being in school was like being in church, and any talk about sharing led naturally to prayer.

Would that we were so bold as to think that every sphere of life is an occasion for talking with God, every occasion, even suffering, an opportunity for sharing with him, every breath a possibility for prayer.

At the end of the Civil War, this prayer, written by an unknown Confederate soldier, was found in house in South Carolina:

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 that I had hoped for.
 Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
 I am among all men, most richly blessed.

May God grant that when we pray, we may do as James directs, asking “in faith, without any doubting.”

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Catalog No. 1047

James 1:9-18

Third Message

John Hanneman

January 14, 1996

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

I saw a cartoon strip once in which a teacher said to a little girl in her class: "If you cheat in school, isn't it likely that you'll cheat when you get out in the world? The little girl responded: "Only if the world pulls those surprise tests!"

Life has a way of surprising us with unexpected tests. My wife has a recurring dream in which she is at school, facing a quiz she has not prepared for. The tests that life throws at us, however, have little to do intelligence or knowledge. Difficult circumstances put our faith to the test. James, the brother of the Lord and the writer of the letter which we are studying in this series, refers to these situations as trials. These tests come from unexpected sources—a phone call, a visit to the doctor, a summons from a supervisor. Suddenly, life changes radically. The question is, how will we respond? Will we be prepared? Or will we try to cheat our way through the crisis?

As we have already seen, trials are circumstances in life which produce pressure and suffering. They may arise from persecution for our faith in Jesus, or they may come simply because God has designed them for us so that our character might be purified and perfected. Even though trials are designed for our good, however, it is probably safe to say that no one looks forward to them. When the surprise test comes, our response typically is lacking.

So trials may have the effect of discouraging us. Nevertheless, James says that when we encounter trials, we are to "consider it all joy," because trials produce Christian maturity. God has designed everything in life for our good. Rather than trying to avoid suffering, James says we should allow it do its work, to let the pressure mold and change us. Oftentimes we become confused when we are buffeted by the storms of life, but James says we should pray, asking God for wisdom, in faith, so that we will not be tossed to and fro.

This book then is about dealing with the pressures of life, understanding trials and suffering so that we can respond in a godly way, without cheating.

In our study today we will look at two of the more common problems we encounter when we face trials. The first problem is dealt with in verses 9-12:

But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; and let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him. (James 1:9-12 NASB)

When we face trials, we have a problem with embarrassment. That is because trials have a way of exposing us. They make us feel naked and vulnerable. Suffering strips us physically, of possessions, and emotionally, of security. We feel alone, scared, and uncomfort-

able. We compare ourselves with others, and we worry about our image.

What makes a trial really hard to swallow is seeing others prospering. If everyone was laid low, we wouldn't feel so bad. If we could live like those who seem to have everything, then we would be convinced that God is good to us. And we all want to be blessed, don't we? The purveyors of what is called "prosperity religion" would seek to persuade us that prosperity is a divine right. Even if we don't believe this, still we try to accumulate money and possessions so that we can hide our nakedness, escape our pain, and pretend that we are secure. The Jews of the Diaspora, to whom James wrote this letter, were exiles and aliens. Scattered and poor, they were treated unjustly by wealthy landlords. They thought if they had the money and the status of their rich overseers, then life would be sweet.

When my wife and I were married, back in the 1970's, housing was very expensive in the Bay Area. Prices were escalating at a frightening rate. We found this very frustrating. We felt cheated. Every time we felt pressured by some circumstance or other, the fact that we did not own a home somehow seemed to make things worse. We felt that if we had a home of our own, at least we would have a place of comfort and security from the storms of life. (Now that I have experienced some of the problems that come with having a home, I wonder why was I so anxious about owning one.)

The sentiments of Psalm 73 articulate the feelings of many who are facing trials:

**I was envious of the arrogant,
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For there are no pains in their death;
And their body is fat,
They are not in trouble as other men;
Nor are they plagued like mankind...
Behold, these are the wicked;
And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. (Ps 73:3-5, 12)**

The wealthy always seem to live comfortably and trouble-free. James gives us two things to think about when we are tempted to believe this. First, he says, our evaluation of prosperity is wrong. Life is paradoxical. We should not judge the book by the cover. We should not evaluate blessing by the address of the house or the label on the clothing. Things are very different from what they appear to be on the surface.

James compares a poor brother and a rich man (who is not a brother). The former is undistinguished. He is of no account, lowly, humble and broken. This was how Jesus was regarded in his day. The rich man has abundance, and seems secure from the storms of life. On the surface one would think that the rich man was blessed, that he had achieved a high station and could boast of his accomplishments and acquisitions. But it is the contrary that is true. The poor

brother can glory in his high position, because he will be exalted. The rich man, in contrast, should actually boast in his low position, because he will end up being humbled.

James uses an analogy to prove his point. The rich man is like the “flowering grass,” he says. When the rain falls, the flowering grasses of the fields are beautiful to behold. But when the “sun rises with the scorching wind,” the flower falls off, its beauty destroyed. We can see this for ourselves right here in the Bay Area. Following the winter rains, the hills become alive with color. But it doesn’t last. In summer, the green grass turns brown, the wild flowers wither. James says this is the fate of the rich man. Like the flowering grass, his beauty and the glamour are temporary. The security of riches is a false security.

The Lord revealed this truth to Asaph, in Psalm 73:

When I pondered to understand this, [i.e. the prosperity of the rich]

It was troublesome in my sight

Until I came into the sanctuary of God;

Then I perceived their end.

Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places;

Thou dost cast them down to destruction.

How they are destroyed in a moment!

They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!

Like a dream when one awakes,

O Lord when aroused, Thou wilt despise their form. (Ps 73:16-20)

We see this great paradox revealed in the lives of many in the Old Testament. Joseph was humbled and broken in prison, but in the end he was exalted. Nebuchadnezzar was cast down from his lofty throne. History records the stories of many who rose to the pinnacle of success only to die penniless and friendless. Later, in chapter 4, James will say that God is “opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

A second thing that will help us see behind the fallacy that the wealthy seem to live trouble-free lives is recognizing that our time-frame is too short. We want to be blessed immediately, but there is more to life than the here and now. The fact is, we will be blessed if we faithfully endure and remain under the trial. We will be approved and we will receive the “crown of life” (a symbol for eternal life, future exaltation). Revelation 2 uses this same phrase: “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)...Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

The stakes are extremely high: the trophy is the crown of life. Trials expose those who appear to have faith, who in the heat of the battle give up on God, fold under the pressure and go their own way. The exhortation here is to endure the test so that in the end we will have the blessing we so desire. Any portion of genuine faith, however small, will be demonstrated and perfected.

Consider the life of Abraham. The Old Testament patriarch was not always a man of faith. He failed to obey God on occasion, just as we fail. But Abraham believed God and grew in faith. When God asked him to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the seed which had been promised and was so long in coming, Abraham obeyed God. His faith was proven. Afterwards, God said to him, “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” And Abraham was blessed. God promised him, “Because

you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you...And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

So we should not be embarrassed when we encounter trials, when we are humbled and brought low under the pressure of suffering. Life is a paradox. Things are not as they seem. Our evaluation is faulty. We should strive to look to the end and see our high position—the glory that is in store for those who love God. This is what Jesus promised in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth.”

The second problem we encounter when we are undergoing trials is identified in verses 13-18:

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures. (1:13-18)

The problem here is blaming God when we succumb to temptation and fall into sin. Trials produce pressure. At times we become discouraged, at other times we try to escape the pressure by running away. But occasionally we are tempted to sin, and we sell out. We seek to satisfy our sensual desires as a way of alleviating the anguish of the despair we feel.

There is an interesting word play here. The word “tempted” is the verb form of the word “trial.” “Trial” is the state or the condition; “tempt” is the action evoked. Trials are not the results of sin; they are circumstances that bring about temptations to sin. God uses trials to test our faith and perfect our character; but Satan uses them to tempt us into sin and disobedience.

For example, when we are wronged, instead of enduring, we are tempted toward anger and revenge. When we are slandered by the words of a friend, we are tempted to gossip about him. The pressures we face in business arouse our ambition and we respond by destroying a peer’s credibility. A difficult marriage tempts us to sexual immorality. A family member hurts us and we respond by refusing to talk to him. The difficulty of getting into college arouses the temptation to cheat and become obsessed with perfection. The desire for our children to make the team or be selected for the starring role makes us manipulate situations to exalt our children at the expense of others.

The danger we face in the midst of suffering is to not persevere, and thus lose sight of the crown of life. Frustration gives way to bitterness, and bitterness to sin. We blame God for what we deem unfair circumstances. We justify our sin, evil that is manifested in anger, blue moods, drinking and gossip. It was God made us do it, we say. Since God dealt us such a bad hand, we have no recourse but to cheat. God does not care for our needs, we feel, so we have to look out for ourselves. It’s all God’s fault.

James offers a three-part response to this mind-set. To begin with, we need to accept responsibility for our actions. James says we can-

not blame God. God does not tempt us. God is not tempted by evil. Trials and suffering cannot be put forth as justification for committing sin. No matter how much we hurt, we must take responsibility for our actions. When we sin, the problem is not with God, our boss, our parents or our friends, the problem is ours alone. For example, as parents we may go away for a weekend and entrust to our children the responsibility of running the house. We give them the opportunity to succeed or fail. But if they choose to have a party while we are away and wreck the house, they can't blame their parents for their irresponsibility.

The pressure of trials never provides us with an excuse to sin.

Second, we need to understand the process of temptation and sin so that we will recognize patterns and habits we are prone to fall into, and take steps to counteract them.

As we have seen, trials create pressure. In the process, our desires, our lusts are stimulated by these external circumstances, and we are tempted. Of course, temptation in and of itself is not wrong. Jesus was tempted, but he did not sin. So we cannot eliminate temptation. It is our response to it that is critical.

This is the process: We are carried away and enticed by our lusts. "Lust" in this instance, is general in nature. This is not referring merely to physical lust, but to all our normal desires and cravings—for love, security, acceptance, etc. When we face temptation, these desires become twisted.

James uses two insightful words to help us understand the process of temptation and how Satan gets us on the path of sin. "Carried away" is the term used in Judges 20:31 of the sons of Benjamin who rebelled against the sons of Israel. The sons of Israel dragged the Benjaminites out of their city, away from protection. Once outside the city, the sons of Benjamin were then drawn into an ambush. The word "enticed" means to lure, to bait. The word was used to describe the actions of a hunter; it was also used to describe the enticements of a harlot. When we are undergoing trials, lust is aroused. Our desires draw us away from what our response should be. Lust draws us to the bait, and we are ambushed. In the Garden of Eden, Satan got Eve fixated on the one thing she could not have. When I visit a certain store, although I may be feeling perfectly content, on occasion I will see something I didn't know I wanted. When that happens, I have fallen for the bait. Next thing I know, I'm fishing for my credit card.

After our lust has enticed us and we fix our attention on the bait, lust "conceives" and "gives birth" to sin. The words describe the process of bearing children. Once lust conceives, a seed is planted, and that seed will grow and give birth to a sinful act. Sin then gives birth to death, which is manifested in the lack of joy, peace and fellowship with God.

The chain of progression is: Lust→Sin→Death. Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a destiny.

When things are going smoothly, of course, we think we can handle anger, lust and greed. But when the pressure comes, there is a different story to tell. Most people have predictable response mechanisms for dealing with stress and suffering. If we understand how this process works, then we can begin to deal with it at the point of conception, before matters get beyond our control. The challenge is to oppose temptation early on, to nip it in the bud, even as our Lord did when Satan tempted him in the wilderness.

The third part of the solution to the temptation to blame God for our problems is understanding God's nature and character. Instead of blaming God for our suffering, and the sins that we commit as a result, we need to see him as he really is. James says we must not be deceived. Sometimes we project upon God our own attitudes and feeling towards ourselves. It was Blaise Pascal who said, "God made man in his own image, and man returned the compliment." We think God gives to us when we are good and takes away from us when we are bad. When he gives we feel blessed; when he takes away we feel rejected. We imagine God is fickle and unpredictable. We think he remembers our sin and pays us back; he builds us up to let us down. But nothing could be further from the truth.

The text says that God gives good and perfect gifts: "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above." We may think we are missing out on a blessing because of the trials that we face, but we must remember that all of life is a gift from God; everything that he gives to us is perfect and good. God is not stingy. He does not shop at thrift stores. He does not want to make us miserable. The blessings that will be ours both now and in the future will be beyond anything we can possibly think or imagine.

God is a generous Father.

And James says that God does not change. He is the "Father of lights," the source of perfect light and perfect truth, and "with Him there is no variation or shifting shadows." These terms refer to the movements of the planets and the sun. The solar system rotates: at times there is darkness, at times there is light. But it is not so with God. "God is light and in him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5). God is the source of perfect light, and we always live in this light. The fact that we suffer does not mean that we are in darkness, that God has turned away from us. His loyal love is not conditional. Not even our sin causes him to change towards us. He is constant and steady, dependable and trustworthy.

And James tells us that God gives life. It was by his desire, by his word, that he caused us to be born again so that we might be the "first fruits" among his creatures. The word refers to the best of the harvest, that which is set aside for the Lord. Notice the contrast to the process of sin and temptation. The process of sin is: lust, sin, death. James says that this does not come from God. The process is, God by his desire (i.e. by his choice), through his word of truth, gives birth to a new creation, and we have life. God is the life-giver who initiates life. He gave us the best gift of all—life in his Son Jesus. Without his life we would suffer without hope and despair without comfort.

Looking back over the years, I recognize many times when I tried to bless myself, when I scratched and clawed and manipulated to get things to work out for me. But all I experienced was a feeling of emptiness. When I look at what God has given to me, however, the special friendships, the special times of joy, none of these has anything to do with possessions or materialism. All of these things came from God; nothing derived from me.

God is a generous Father who does not change.

Christianity seems to go against the grain much of the time, doesn't it? Christians go against the grain by refusing to envy the rich and pursuing wealth. We go against the grain by glorying in our brokenness, by refusing to give into sin and blaming God. As we live this way we see God for who he really is—a generous, unchanging Father, loyal and faithful, who is the very source of life. Because of his goodness toward us, even in the midst of trials, we can say, with

Job, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee."

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James 1:19-27

Fourth Message

John Hanneman

January 21, 1996

A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

As we begin our study in the book of James this morning, I want you to consider the following scenarios and ask how would you respond if these things happened to you:

A large limb from your neighbor's tree breaks off during a storm and lands on your gas grill.

You are stopped at a traffic light and an uninsured motorist rear-ends your car.

It's Friday afternoon, you are finishing work and getting ready to go home, and your boss tells you that you will have to work through the weekend.

Your spouse tells you that she has made dinner plans with your in-laws for the third weekend in a row. (You were planning to watch a football game on television.)

You are getting ready to leave on vacation and your shower drain backs up. You spend five hours trying to fix it yourself. Finally, at ten o'clock, you call a plumber. Night-time rates are in effect, of course.

Your family is gathering at your brother's house for Christmas. On Christmas Eve, your parents are loading their car and your dad, who has cancer, passes out. As a result, he has to stay home and you miss having Christmas with him. It is his last Christmas. How would you respond?

I have experienced every one of these things, and I have to say that I responded by getting angry on every occasion.

As we have seen in our opening studies, the theme of the book of James, the New Testament letter written by the brother of Jesus to Jewish Christians who were aliens and exiles of the Diaspora, centers around how Christians should respond to the suffering that is brought on by trials. Trials are designed for us by God to test our faith and mold our character. Typically, however, when we face suffering, our response is counter-productive to God's plan.

In chapter 1, we looked at some of our typical responses to trials. We get discouraged, but James says the proper Christian response is to "consider it all joy." We try to escape the pain of trials, but we should let them do their work. When we are confused about how to handle a stressful situation, according to James, our response should be to pray. We feel embarrassed when we compare ourselves to the rich in this life, but James says we are blessed with the "unfading crown of life." We are tempted to give way to sin, and blame God, but James says that sin is a choice that we make that leads to death. God's choice for us, in contrast, is life and liberty in the Spirit.

Today, we come to a discussion of anger, an emotion that quite often is our first reaction when we are confronted with suffering and trials. In this text, we will analyze James' inspired word on what our response should be. James 1:19-22:

This you know, my beloved brethren. But let every one be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man

does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. (James 1:19-22 NASB)

James begins this section with the command, "know, my beloved brethren." While he could be referring to what he is about to say, it is more likely that he is summing up what he has already said. James reminds his fellow Christians, for whom he has great affection, that they "know" the things of which he has written. In particular, they know that God has caused them to be born again to a new life. That having been accomplished, they now must make certain choices that will affect their actions. Part of being a Christian involves making decisions, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to become "doers" of what we know, not just "hearers only." To borrow Eugene Peterson's phrase, God asks his followers for a "long obedience in the same direction."

The problem James addresses is anger. In classical Greek, the word for anger comes from a verb meaning "to be puffed up, to swell, to be excited." In the Old Testament, one Hebrew word for anger is the same term as the word for nose. We can get the picture; we have all seen it: the flaring nostrils, trembling and snorting with anger. At times, anger surfaces in what we call an "explosion" of anger; at other times it comes out indirectly, in the form of criticism, argument, or sarcasm.

In the context of this letter, James suggests that his readers, the Jews of the Diaspora, were angry over the injustice they were suffering at the hands of the rich. They felt life was not fair. We, too, become angry when we feel we are being treated unjustly and taken advantage of. We think life should be just and fair. It is interesting to note that in classical times, the word anger was applied to the actions of a judge in bringing about justice. In the Old Testament, God is often referred to as such a judge. He is a "jealous and angry God." We want to act like God, but we are too selfish and subjective.

If we were merely to look at life, and certainly life as it is portrayed in the movies, we would be inclined to think that anger works. People seem to get what they want when they let their anger explode. Anger seems to work in the department store when you want your money back. It seems to work at business meetings to win a point or put down an opponent. So from the world's perspective, anger seems to work.

But James says, "The anger of man does not work (accomplish) the righteousness of God." Our anger may help us get what we want, but it does not work out God's plans. God's way of bringing about righteousness and justice was through the death of his Son on a cross. Even for Jesus, life was not fair, and yet he accomplished God's righteousness.

The Scripture says that not only does anger not achieve the righteousness of God, it leads to evil and strife. It fuels the fire, making matters worse in our homes and communities. Consider these verses from the Old Testament:

**Cease from anger and forsake wrath;
Fret not yourself, it leads only to evil doing. (Ps 37:8)**

**For the churning of milk produces butter,
And pressing the nose brings forth blood;
So the churning of anger produces strife. (Prov 30:33)**

Anger is frequently our natural response to a crisis. But we become angry over insignificant things, too, to our surprise. I get angry when someone cuts me off on the freeway. I get angry when I have problems with the plumbing in my home. (Once, my son suggested that when I had a plumbing problem, instead of getting angry, I should just call a plumber. He has also reminded me that I play better golf when I don't get angry.) I get angry when I am disappointed. I became angry over missing that last Christmas with my father.

Now in these verses, James shares four practical steps to help us deal with this problem of anger. The first is found in the words of verse 19: We should be “quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.” When we begin to churn inside and anger bubbles up, the best thing to do is, shut up and listen. Don't say a thing. Count to ten. When we feel under pressure, the way to avoid making damaging statements is be quiet and say nothing. I am not suggesting that we stuff our anger, only that we do not explode or respond quickly while we are out of control emotionally.

The writer of these proverbs offers the same advice:

**A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,
But the slow to anger pacifies contention. (Prov 15:18)**

**Scorners set a city aflame,
But wise men turn away anger. (Prov 29:8)**

The second step is, put aside the garbage. James says, “putting aside all filthiness (vulgarity, moral uncleanness) and abundance of wickedness.” Our anger, demonstrated in our jealous, greedy, self-promoting, vulgar first response to a situation, is contaminated with filth. We need to run this stuff through the garbage disposal. We need to filter out the evil and screen the wickedness. If we don't, then that is what will come out when we open our mouth—filth and evil.

The third step is, “receive the word implanted.” We must listen to another voice that will cue our response. We are to “receive the word implanted,” in humility. Is this referring to something already inside us or something we are to put inside? Here, “implanted” is used as an adjective. The word has already been planted. It is internal to our life, having been implanted in our hearts when we believed in Jesus. This is the life of the indwelling Christ, the word that “became flesh,” planted like a seed in our hearts, one which grows and fills itself out in our lives. The word is not the Scriptures, but the Scriptures feed this seed and cause it to grow.

A seed contains all the genetic information it needs to germinate and grow and mature as a plant. In the same way, the seed that is implanted in us has all the information we need to know who we are and how we should act, especially when we are under pressure. The process of “receiving the word implanted” involves listening to the word of God that is already part of us. We are to receive it and allow it to penetrate deeply, to “hear” what we know, in effect. This is not a mystical experience. We do not operate apart from the Scripture.

On the contrary, the Scripture feeds and confirms the implanted word. When we are in a crisis, we are simply to listen to the word of the Lord: his life, his still small voice. There is a difference between merely reading the Bible and meditating on its truth. If we carved out more time for solitude and listening to God, we would have less of a problem with anger. We rarely take time to listen, because our mouths and our minds are too busy.

Brennan Manning has a word to say about this:

Silence is not simply the absence of noise or the shutdown of communication with the outside world, but rather a process of coming to stillness. Silent solitude forges true speech. I'm not speaking of physical isolation; solitude here means being alone with the Alone, experiencing the transcendent Other and growing in awareness of one's identity as the beloved... In a poem, T. S. Eliot wrote, “It's bad tonight, my nerves are shattered. Just talk to me. I'll make it through the night.” In solitary silence we listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls us the beloved. God speaks to the deepest strata of our souls, into our self-hatred and shame, our narcissism, and takes us through the night into the daylight of His truth.

Mother Teresa wrote this excellent word on the benefits of silence:

We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grow in silence; see the stars, the moon and sun, how they move in silence... the more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within—words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness.

According to James, the attitude required in order to hear the word of God is humility. We must bring ourselves low to hear what God wants to say to us, even if we do not like it, instead of listening to what we want to hear.

If we do this, the result is powerful: this word is able to save our souls and give us eternal life. “Receiving the word implanted” saves us from death and frustration in a time of crisis, and informs us how to respond when life seems unfair.

The fourth step is found in verse 22: “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” Once we have heard the word, the decision we must make is whether we are going to obey it or not. Are we going to act upon what we hear? In Hebrew, the notion behind the word “hear” is obedience. We must choose to give up our initial emotional response, which is anger, and obey the word implanted. This is what Christ did. He listened to the voice of his Father in the midst of injustice and became obedient, even to the point of death on a cross. If we are “hearers” only, not “doers,” we are deceiving ourselves. Merely going to church or Bible study with the idea that hearing will make us whole is not enough. Our ears might well be open, but our hearts are frozen.

Our goal should not be to look or talk or act like Christians, but to be Christ-like, to not just tell the story but to be the story. As David Roper says:

It's disconcerting to find so many Christians who are educated well beyond their obedience. I think it comes from our tendency to confuse the means with the end. Many falsely assume that the

purpose of Bible study is mere instruction—the production of biblically literate and articulate Christians—a fallacy particularly characteristic of those of us who take our Bible straight.

The solution to anger then is, be quiet, put aside the filth, receive the word, and obey.

In the next verses, James gives a marvelous analogy that contrasts the hearer and the doer.

For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does. (1:23-25)

According to James, a “hearer” is like a man who looks at his natural face in the mirror, and on going away, immediately forgets what kind of person he is. Have you noticed that no matter how long you gaze at yourself in a mirror, it is hard to maintain a mental picture of what you look like? In this analogy, James is making a statement about the spiritual life. The mirror is the word of God. The hearer looks in the mirror and sees in the person of Jesus Christ a reflection of who he should be like; but then he goes away and forgets what he has seen. His actions are not affected by what he has seen or heard.

Here is how this works out in practice. We hear a word about serving others, but then we go to work with a self-serving attitude. We hear a word about loving, and then we walk by someone who has a need. We hear a word about being patient, and then we get angry at our spouse. These are the responses of the “hearer of the word.”

In verse 25, James contrasts the “hearer” with the “doer” of the word. The doer of the word is one who looks deeply and intently into the Scriptures; when he goes out, he does not forget who he is. The mirror is the “perfect law, the law of liberty.” What an odd juxtaposition of words this is. The law, in the classic sense of the word, would not appear to be freeing or liberating. But James is referring not to the law of Moses, but to the law of Christ, the law of the Spirit, the truth that sets people free from the law of sin and death. When we look deeply into the Scriptures and see what we should be like, and then depend upon the Spirit to allow us to live that way, we actually become free from the habits and patterns that entangle our lives with frustration and death. The law of liberty saves our souls, our emotions, minds, and wills. In a very profound sense, obedience leads to freedom.

The contrast between the hearer and the doer illustrates an interesting phenomenon: We become what we see and fix our attention on. We are so influenced by the images that fill our minds, in the end, we become the image of what we see.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous short story “The Face on the Mountain,” a young boy stares at a face carved in granite and asks tourists if they know the identity of the face on the mountain. But no one does. Through manhood, mid-life, and old age, the man continues to gaze on the face at every opportunity. One day a tourist passing through exclaims to the once-young boy who is now a weather-beaten old man, “You are the face on the mountain.” The man had become what he had fixed his attention on.

If we fix our eyes on the world, then we will become like the world. But if we fix our eyes on Jesus, if we look intently at the mirror of the word of God, we will become like him, being transformed

into his image. This is what the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord the Spirit.”

If we desire to become a doer of the word, we must look intently at the life of Jesus. And we must remain there. It is not enough merely to look quickly, or hear cursorily. We must abide in the truth and make the small, moment by moment choices to be obedient and faithful to what we see. If we do not, we will be deceived into becoming forgetful hearers. Brennan Manning writes: “Contemplation is gazing at the unveiled glory of God in the risen glorified Christ.” Another author writes: “Contemplative prayer is, above all else, looking at the person of Jesus.”

This is why we read and re-read the gospels—to look intently at Jesus. How did he live? How did he respond to difficult situations? We do not re-read the gospels because we don’t know the stories; rather, we read them so that we might become the story; we are transformed by the story.

The result is that the doer of the word will be “blessed in what he does.” This is not necessarily referring to a physical blessing. Doers of the word will gain the wisdom to respond to the struggles of life as Christ responded. They will have joy, peace, and love that cannot be taken away by the trials of life. Obedience, no matter how difficult, always carries with it freedom, wholeness, and eventual blessing. This is what Jesus promised in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell and great was its fall.” (Matt 7:24-27)

Finally, in verses 26-27, the hearer and the doer are compared:

If any one thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (1:26-27)

The religion of the hearer is a dead religion. None of his religious activities has any value. They merely convince him that he is doing good things for God. He talks a lot about what he believes, yet his lifestyle does not reflect what he says. Specifically, this one cannot “bridle” his tongue. The word is used for the piece of tackle that controls a horse. The “hearer” cannot control his speech, i.e. his anger. He is slow to listen and quick to speak. Our speech is a reflection of our spirituality. If you want to learn where a man is spiritually, watch him when he is under stress and listen to what he says. The hearer is deceived. What he thinks is fantasy, not reality. This type of religion is worthless, empty and fruitless. This is not a life being transformed into the image of Christ.

The doer, in contrast, does not talk about what he should be doing, he does it. True worship, true religion, demands obedience. And, according to James, there are two characteristics of true religion: compassion and purity. The doer is compassionate. He looks

out for orphans and widows and cares for them. When he sees the poor and the needy, the oppressed and disadvantaged, his heart is moved. Rather than being concerned about his own distress, he is concerned about theirs. Brennan Manning says, “The essence of the divine nature is compassion, and the heart of God is defined by tenderness.” The doer of the word, the one who is being transformed by looking intently at Christ, demonstrates the nature of Christ and the heart of God.

And second, the doer of the word keeps himself pure and holy, unstained and unblemished by the world. He does not fall prey to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the boastful pride of life. He isn't entangled in unhealthy relationships. He maintains integrity in his dealings, no matter what the cost. In his private finances, he is debt-free. He holds material things loosely and values what is truly valuable.

Notice the balance here. Doers of the word care both for others and for themselves. True religion isn't centered solely on the social gospel. One can be concerned for social action to the neglect of the spiritual life. Nor is true religion centered merely on pietism, which can lead to a feeling that we are too good to associate with anyone else. True religion involves looking so intently at Christ that we become like him.

I think these words by David Roper are an excellent summation of our text today:

And so our purpose is clear. Bible teaching (as well as everything else we do—programs, buildings, choirs, et al) is subservient to this greater purpose—to produce living reminders of Christ. This is the purpose for which all other purposes exist. To the extent that we work toward that goal our activity is valid; to the extent that it does not, church and church-going is a monumental waste of time and money—a conclusion to which a lot of sensible people have already come.

If we would be like Christ, God is calling us to a “long obedience in the same direction.” Trials and suffering may tempt us to respond with anger at what we deem to be an unfair world, but they can be the means by which we are transformed. If we keep looking, listening, and doing, God will give us the grace to follow him and become like him.

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Catalog No. 1049

James 2:1-13

Fifth Message

John Hanneman

January 28, 1996

THE RIGHT KIND OF FRIENDS

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

As I studied for this message last week, I thought of the country and western song, *Lifestyles of the Not So Rich and Famous*:

They're gonna put us on
Lifestyles of the not so rich and famous.
They wanna see us go hog wild
Over beans and barbeque.
They wanna see my Fairlane up on blocks,
The holes in all our socks.
Talkin 'bout lifestyles of the not so rich and famous.
Tell 'em bout your mama and the bowling league,
Tell 'em bout junior and his baseball team,
I'll show 'em my nine point buck on the wall,
I'll blow a few times on my new duck call,
Let 'em see ol' blue how he sleeps all day,
We'll bring out the Elvis TV trays.

We don't get excited about the lifestyles of the not so rich and famous. (Pat Harrison, our junior high pastor, calls them the lifestyles of the shy and nervous). We are more enamored with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. That is why we watch the tabloid TV shows and the Barbara Walters interviews with movie stars. That is why we read *People* magazine. We get goose bumps when we find ourselves close to a famous person.

This attraction to the rich and famous is a significant issue in the church. The book of James challenges us to live Christianly amidst the pressure of trials, and we have already seen how to should respond to discouragement, confusion, embarrassment, sin and anger. Today we come to pressures relating to the kind of people we devote ourselves to and the friendships we develop. James has already compared the rich and poor, in chapter 1. As we begin chapter 2 today, he expands on his comparison. Verses 1-4:

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man dressed in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? (James 2:1-4 NASB)

The issue here is personal favoritism, or partiality. Partiality means "to lift the face." If someone were to bow before you and you extended your hand to lift up his face, you would be bestowing special honor upon him. In the New Testament, Paul uses this word in Romans 2:11 to say that "there is no partiality with God." God does not favor one person or one race over another. James exhorts Christian brethren to relate to people in the same manner, "not to hold their faith...with favoritism." Obviously, this was what was going on in the community to whom he wrote this letter.

James illustrates his point by describing two men who enter the assembly and the different reactions they receive. One is dressed to the hilt. He is wearing a gold ring and beautifully tailored clothes. The other man is poor. He is attired in dirty clothes, in hand-me-downs. It is clothes that make the difference here. Mark Twain would agree. He observed: "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." So the brethren in the assembly pay special attention to the rich man. Literally, they look upon him very intently. He catches their eye. They say to him, "sit here in a good place." But the poor man in dirty clothes is told to "stand in the corner, or sit on the floor." A judgment is made, and care is extended to the rich man. He is favored and honored.

Many of us do the same, either consciously or unconsciously. We are attracted to people who have status—the "beautiful people," as they are called. But we neglect the homely, the unpopular; they drain us emotionally. At a dinner party we survey the crowd to see if we can sit with attractive people. We ask who will be attending social events to determine if it's worth our while going. In church, we look around for people we want to associate with. While we are talking to one person, our eyes are scanning the room, looking for other contacts.

In one episode of the television sitcom, *All In the Family*, Edith and Archie Bunker are attending Edith's high school class reunion. Edith encounters an old classmate, Buck, who has become very obese. They have a delightful conversation about old times and, remarkably, Edith doesn't seem to notice how much overweight Buck has become. Later, she says to Archie, "Ain't Buck a beautiful person?" Archie replies, "Edith, I'll never figure you out. You and I can look at the same guy. You see a beautiful person, and I see a blimp." Edith says, "Yeah, ain't that too bad?"

Why do we do favor the rich and beautiful? There are probably many reasons, but let us keep in mind the context of this letter of James. This book is about suffering and trials. It teaches us how to face situations that make us feel vulnerable, uncomfortable, needy and insecure. The brethren to whom the letter was first addressed were the oppressed aliens and exiles of the Diaspora. Associating with people who make us feel better and more secure about ourselves is one way we respond to trials. It might help us in a financial crisis. The poor, on the other hand, do not do much to enhance our life; they take up too much valuable time, we feel. We are seeking upward mobility, so we neglect and dishonor the dull and boring in favor of the rich and famous.

The problem with this, according to James, is that we are making judgments with evil motives. We are making distinctions based on the wrong criteria, for selfish reasons, about who is worthy and who is not. Depending on looks, wealth and personality, we favor one person over another. People who are valuable in God's eyes are neglected and devalued. We enter into relationships for what we will receive. We become users of people rather than lovers of people. We seek to gain from the rich instead of ministering to the orphans and

widows. We take the place of God by being a judge of people, rather than following in the steps of Jesus by being a servant of God. Anthony DeMello said, “If you are prejudiced, you will see a person from the eye of that prejudice. In other words, you will cease to see that person as a person.” Before his death, Carl Sandburg was asked, “What is the worst word in the English language?” Without hesitation, he replied, “Exclusivism.”

The solution to this problem of favoritism in the church is introduced in verse 5. James says, “Listen, my beloved brethren.” This phrase is similar in construction to his admonition in verse 1:19, to “know, my beloved brethren.” Both phrases speak of his affection for his readers, but they summon them to really hear the truth so that they might be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.” Verses 5-13:

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (2:5-13)

In these verses James suggests three things that will help us treat all people with equality and compassion. First, he points out God’s special relationship with the poor. Verse 5: “Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” James is speaking of the financially poor, the downtrodden, the emotionally bankrupt—those who lack the talents and gifts that win acclaim from the world. But we consider them unworthy of our time, so we ignore them or shuttle them along to someone else. If we do this, we are regarding the poor in the same manner that the world regarded Jesus, as we read in the prophecy of Isaiah:

**He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him.
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him
He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
Surely our griefs He Himself bore
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken
Smitten of God and afflicted. (Isa 53:2b-4)**

But God has a very different view of the poor. He looks upon them with a compassionate heart. What they lack in physical assets he makes up with spiritual wealth. The poor do not have a bank account or a new car in the garage, but God has chosen them to be wealthy in faith. This is what he said of his Suffering Servant:

**“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.” (Isa 42:1a)**

Poverty can actually be a blessing. The poor have no resources of their own, so they place their trust in God; therefore, they have a greater capacity for faith. Some day, because of their faith and love for God, he will lavish upon them the garlands of the kingdom. If God thinks so highly of the poor, shouldn’t we do the same? If we treat them with disdain and contempt, especially in the Body of Christ, we dishonor the very ones whom God has chosen for his kingdom. We are tempted to pay special attention to the rich man in order that we might be blessed, but the truth of the matter is that the poor person’s greater faith offers the richer blessing.

This has been our experience each year when we minister in the Yucatan peninsula, in Mexico. We look like rich people, and we think we will bless the poor in that place, but the reality is that the ones we minister to are rich in faith, and they bless us.

The second helpful point that James makes to his readers is, consider the ethics and spiritual life of the rich (6b-7). The rich people they were seeking to cultivate were the very ones who were oppressing them and taking them to court. The rich were using unethical means to make money, because money meant more to them than people. They did not care about people, and they did not care about God. They blasphemed the name Christian. They had no fear of God and no respect for people who did. They were anti-people and anti-God.

Why then do we favor the rich and pay special attention to people who don’t care about us or God? Peter G. van Breeman comments: “The irony...is that the opinions we fear most are not those of people we really respect, yet these same persons influence our lives more than we want to admit.”

In the gospels, Jesus related the story of Lazarus and the rich man. In life, Lazarus ate the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. In death, the rich man in his torment saw Lazarus “in the bosom of Abraham.” He asked God to send Lazarus to him to quench his thirst, and to send him to earth to warn his brothers to not act as he did. In eternity, it is the rich that end up poor.

I am not suggesting that wealth in itself is immoral, or that wealthy people are unworthy. Many people of wealth and prominence have the highest integrity and ethics. What is wrong is the means by which some wealth is garnered; and our propensity to pay high regard to the rich and popular over the poor. Nor am I suggesting that we should ignore the rich. We are to regard people honestly and purely, as God sees them. The truth of the matter is, we are all poor. There is no partiality with God; there should not be any with us, either.

Third, says James, we should consider the seriousness of showing favoritism (8-13). He calls on the witness of the law to bring conviction to the community of believers, appealing to the royal law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The full reading of Leviticus shows its applicability to this particular problem. Lev 19:15: “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.” Lev 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Rudyard Kipling in his poem *If*, said that one of the attributes of manhood is, “If you can walk with crowds and keep your virtue, or talk with kings nor lose the common touch.”

James says if we fulfill the royal law, the law of liberty, we are doing well, but if we are not following that law and are showing

partiality in our judgments of people, then we are committing sin. “Law of liberty” here is the same phrase used by James in chapter 1 in his appeal to his readers to become “doers of the word”—an action that manifests itself in caring for orphans and widows. James “ups the ante” a bit by then declaring that the one who shows favoritism is a transgressor of the law. He says that even if you keep the law but fail at one point, you have broken the whole law.

Favoritism is serious issue. Showing partiality is not a result of a “bad hair day” or getting out on the wrong side of bed, it is sin which disrupts the very foundation of the Christian faith and community. Brennan Manning wrote that he found God bringing him to just such a conviction:

One lonely night in the Colorado Rockies, I heard this message: “Brennan, you bring your full presence and attention to certain members of the community but offer a diminished presence to others. Those who have stature, wealth, and charisma, those you find interesting or charming or pretty or famous command your undivided attention, but people you consider plain or dowdy, those of lesser rank performing menial tasks, the unsung and uncelebrated are not treated with the same regard. This is not a minor matter to me, Brennan. The way you are with others every day, regardless of their status, is the true test of faith.”

James exhorts Christians to so speak and act as those who are about to be judged by the law of liberty, the law of love, found in the words, “love your neighbor as yourself.” If we show mercy and love to the poor, God will respond to us in like manner. But if we neglect to show mercy, then God’s judgment of us will be without mercy. Here, James’ words echo the words of Jesus: “For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt 6:14).

Mercy triumphs over judgment; love covers a multitude of sins. If we commit ourselves to mercy and love, we will receive mercy in return. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.” The point here is that God has already demonstrated love and mercy towards us. Our sin and selfishness do not affect God’s loyal love for us. If God shows such mercy towards us, then we should treat others the same way.

The solution to favoritism is discerning the truth about the poor and the rich, and regarding favoritism as sin.

A sense of community is a very important element in life. The television sitcom *Friends* portrays a group of friends who play together and offer one another support and encouragement. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that they are all attractive people, and each has a great sense of humor.

As the father of teenagers, I sense the importance of community in their lives. Teenagers spend a lot of time trying to find the right circle of people to share life with. If they don’t find this, life can be very difficult for them. A circle of supportive friends is a great source of encouragement and love. But this is not limited to teenagers. We all spend a great deal of time finding the right people to associate with.

But we have to be careful here. Our perspectives can become distorted and our motives selfish. In the process of finding friends we can become selective and exclusive. We may try to attach ourselves to the rich and famous, seeking to elevate our status to the

neglect of others, but James says this is sin. Oftentimes, the people we are avoiding, the poor who are standing right next to us, are the very friends and community that we are seeking, but we are blind to them. They can bless us and they can be blessed by us, but we send them to the corner of our hearts. If we ask, Who is a friend? we might be surprised by the answer. A friend is one with whom we share compassion, the very compassion of Christ.

I will never forget a young Christian woman whom God put in my life when I first moved to California. After a heavy dose of worldly living, I had just become a Christian. I met this woman at a Bible study. I probably would not have picked her out; she was quiet and shy. She lived in an apartment in the same building as me, and on Friday evenings, when I didn’t know what to do with myself, I would visit her. It was a place where I could hang out and talk instead of heading to where the popular people went. When I began to date my future wife, I was nervous about her meeting my friend. Liz was not yet a Christian, and I was afraid my friend might spill the beans and I would project an image to Liz that I didn’t want. One day Liz and I ran into my friend, and I discovered they knew each other from high school. They embraced like old friends. Liz, my non-Christian girlfriend, didn’t make distinctions like I did. When Liz came to Christ, the first person she called was my friend. I feel that this woman, this gift from God, saved my life. She was a true friend.

Jesus had a way of dealing with favoritism. When the disciples argued about who was the greatest among them, Jesus took a child and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me” (Matt 18:3).

Children are poor in that they are dependent on others. They can be seen as interruptions and distractions—they don’t have degrees or influence; they do not help us get ahead—but they have trusting, compassionate hearts. Jesus says we are to be like them. If we will love the not so rich and famous, we must become poor, remembering that we are really no different from them. If we see ourselves with God’s eyes, recognizing our weaknesses and sin, we will forsake favoritism and embrace everyone, rich and poor alike, in Christ.

Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche ministry to the handicapped, said, “Jesus always leads us to littleness. It is the place where misery and mercy meet. It is the place where we encounter God.”

James says we must so speak and so act. It isn’t that hard, really. Rather than examining whether we love our neighbor, C. S. Lewis says we should act as if we did. If we act lovingly toward them, we will presently come to love them. It is a matter of doing, not just hearing.

Speaking of Christians early in the first century, Aristides said to the Roman Emperor Hadrian:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don’t consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God.

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Catalog No. 1050

James 2:14-26

Sixth Message

John Hanneman

February 4, 1996

A FAITH THAT WORKS

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

There is a story told about a blind rabbit and a blind snake who met in a forest. Both are extremely curious as to what they look like and what they are. Due to their blindness, however, they cannot describe each other's appearance. The snake has an idea. He says to the rabbit, "If we feel each other, we can describe what it is we feel, and that may give us some indication as to what we are." The blind rabbit agrees, and asks the snake to go first. As the snake feels the rabbit, he says: "You are very furry, and you have rather large ears. Your back feet are very large, while your front feet are much smaller, and you have a small tuft of a tail." Even before the snake can finish his description, the rabbit exclaims: "I must be a rabbit!" He is quite excited at this new-found knowledge. Then the rabbit begins to feel the snake. He describes what he feels: "You are very long and slender, with hardly a hair on you. In fact, you are very scaly. And you have a very interesting tongue. Why, it's forked." "Oh, no," says the blind snake, as he realizes what this description means. "I'm a minister!"

No matter who we think we are, some would describe us much differently than we describe ourselves. Oftentimes our perception of ourselves is warped, especially when it comes to the Christian life. For example, if you were asked to describe your Christian faith, would what you say be consistent with the way you act?

In our studies in the letter of James we come now to one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament, both to understand and apply. This is the text that caused Martin Luther to throw out the book of James from the New Testament, because he had a difficult time finding this letter to be consistent with the book of Romans.

The theme of this book of James deals with how Christians should respond to the pressure of injustice and the heartache of suffering. Trials test our faith. They can evoke within us emotions to revenge, lust, greed, doubt and anger. But James calls Christians to purity instead of sin, joy instead of despair, prayer instead of confusion, quietness instead of anger. He exhorts us to actions that are consistent with our speech, to be "doers of the word."

Our text today summarizes what James has been talking about since the second half of chapter one. Chapter 2, verses 14-26:

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:14-26 NASB)

The issue raised by this text concerns the matter of hypocrisy in terms of faith and works. Our speech makes a statement about our faith, but our actions speak louder—and sometimes our speech and actions don't say the same thing.

Let us begin by asking the question, what is faith? The word comes from the noun form of the verb "to believe." Everyone has a faith, a system of belief which influences the way they live. Christians, for example, believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for their sin. If we accept the benefits of that death for ourselves, we are saved unto eternal life. We believe that God has done everything for us. There is nothing we can add to Christ's sacrifice on our behalf to earn salvation for us.

But faith goes beyond even this. If we are in Christ, we believe that we are sons and daughters of God, with free access to the Father. We believe that we are part of one family whom God has chosen and has been calling out from the beginning of time. In Christ, we believe that we will be glorified with him and that we will share the nature of the Father. We believe that though we might have to suffer, that all of life is a gift from the Father who will ultimately fulfill his promise in us.

And what are "works?" In the context of this letter, the word is not referring to obeying certain laws or rules so that one can earn salvation. "Works" here are deeds of love and compassion that spring forth and flow out of a genuine faith in God. The examples that James has already given include care for orphans and widows, equal treatment for both poor and rich, and giving food to the hungry and clothes to the naked. "Works" also includes acts of obedience to God's will, e.g., "keeping oneself unstained by the world." These actions do not produce salvation, they are the results of salvation. They are not what grant us entry into the family of God, they are the results of being in the family of God. Works are a natural by-product of our identity in Christ. They are like the fruit of the Spirit: they give evidence of genuine faith. As the apostle Paul writes in Eph 2:10: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

A problem arises, however, when the faith we profess and the deeds we perform are not consistent with one another. It is religious hypocrisy for one person to say, "I have faith, but no works," while another person claims, "I will show you my faith by my works." In the context of this letter, we have seen that when we come under pressure, we sometimes resort to living as if we had no relationship

with God. We forget our identity in Christ. We know the truth intellectually, but we panic when we come under pressure and start running our own lives again, apart from God. If this is true of us, we may say we have faith, but our actions do not demonstrate the evidence that validates our words.

James is asking whether this kind of faith is valid. Is it professed faith or demonstrated faith that is important? For example, say someone claims to be a football player but in actuality he is not. Does merely claiming to be a football player make him one? Or if someone claims to be a movie star, does the fact that he claims that make him a movie star? Say you plant what you think is an orange tree, but after a couple of years the tree produces lemons. What kind of tree is it, an orange tree or a lemon tree? What if someone says he has faith in Jesus and believes in God, but there is no evidence of that faith? Is it what he says or what he does that validates his Christianity?

This newspaper clipping about a recent religious survey is revealing:

A flurry of recent survey research has found that, contrary to the secularism of popular culture, Americans believe in God and identify themselves as strongly religious. But analysts who have studied the data say the spirituality of many Americans may be only skin-deep. One church historian comments: "Our biggest problem is not secular humanism, but interest in religion that doesn't turn into commitment in everyday life...only about half of that 86 per cent majority identifying with Christian denominations in the survey has any sort of ongoing participation in a body of believers. For the others, religion seems to be an ungraspable, utterly private and practically invisible thing in their lives...the faith of many Americans is a vague, oblong blur...no more than a warm tingle in the bathtub." Another historian comments: "This outward expression of belief is not to be mistaken for religious devotion. Americans by historical habit wear religion on their sleeve, almost as part of national patriotic ideal, to a greater extent than almost any other society."

The message of James certainly applies to American Christianity.

This brings us to James' question, in verse 14, "What good is this type of faith, a faith that lacks works?" To help us, he gives four characteristics of this kind of empty faith.

First, he says, it is no benefit (14). This kind of faith cannot save you. It cannot redeem your life; it cannot grant eternal life. This faith is simply intellectual lip-service. But God knows the heart. Not only does this type of faith bring no security for your eternal destiny, it is of no benefit to save you from the pressures of this life. It is powerless to change you or sustain you. It does not help you to be "quick to hear and slow to anger," to consider trials as "all joy," to love your neighbor as yourself.

Second, this kind of faith is no benefit to others (15-16). What use is it if a brother or sister comes to you and says they are without clothing or food, and you say, "Be warmed and be filled"? Furthermore, the one in need in the illustration is not just anyone, but a brother or sister in the family of God. What value is a faith that sees a simple need but does not meet it?

Third, this kind of faith cannot be demonstrated (18). Someone may say "I have faith," but he cannot say, "I will show you my faith by my works." A faith that does not work does not give evidence of something which is alive beneath the surface. A fruit tree produces

fruit, giving evidence that there is life in the invisible root structure underneath the ground. In the same way, good works demonstrate that there is genuine faith, that the life of God lives inside the heart of the one doing them.

Fourth, this kind of faith is no different from the faith of demons (19). The demons also believe that God is one. They know the truth about God. They even profess correct theological dogma. They recognize God as the sovereign Lord of the universe. They recognized Jesus when they encountered him on earth. They even shuddered before him. And yet they are not saved or transformed. They do not have an active, viable faith, the kind of faith that James is talking about.

Jesus had a few things to say about religious hypocrisy, as the following texts affirm: Matt 23:1:

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger." (Matt 23:1-4)

Matt 23:13:

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. ["Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you shall receive greater condemnation.]" (23:13-14)

Matt 23:23:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others." (23:23)

I read where Brennan Manning and his wife were walking down Bourbon Street in New Orleans one day, when a 21-year-old girl approached them and pinned a flower on their jackets. She asked if they would like to make a donation to support her mission. When Brennan inquired what her mission was, she replied, "The Unification Church." He said, "Your founder is Doctor Sun Myung Moon, so I guess that means you're a Moonie?" "Yes," she said. She had two strikes against her. First, she was a pagan who did not acknowledge Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior; and second, she was a mindless, witless, naive, vulnerable kid who had been brainwashed by a guru and mesmerized by a cult.

"You know something, Susan?" Brennan said. "I deeply admire your integrity and your fidelity to your conscience. You're out here tramping the streets, doing what you really believe in. You are a challenge to anyone who claims the name 'Christian.'" "Are you a Christian?" she asked. "Yes," he replied. She lowered her head, and her tears began falling on the sidewalk. A minute later, she said, "I've been on my mission here in the Quarter for eight days now. You're the first Christians who have been nice to me. The others have either looked at me with contempt or screamed and told me that I was possessed by a demon. One woman hit me with her Bible."

What would we have done? As Christians, we may know a lot of truth, but faith is useless if it does not result in good works.

Faith should make itself visible in the lives of those who profess to believe. Faith should benefit ourselves and others. To help us, James gives two examples from the Old Testament of people who demonstrated visible faith, a faith that worked.

The first example is Abraham, the man of faith. God promised Abraham that through him would come a seed (Christ) who would bless all the nations of the earth. And God promised Abraham that he would be a father of many nations, and that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars of the heavens. Genesis 15 gives Abraham's response to the promises of God: "Abraham believed God, and this was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Abraham did not always act in faith, but he grew in faith. But James says that Abraham's faith was genuine, for when he was asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, he obeyed. In Genesis 22 we see that Abraham's faith was demonstrated and perfected. This was the conclusion of his journey of faith. His works did not add to or merit his salvation, they were the result of it. This is the text that caused such problems for Martin Luther. But James' words here do not contradict Paul's words in Romans. Paul points to the faith of Abraham when he deals with justification and the problem of legalism; James points to the faith of Abraham when he deals with sanctification and the problem of cheap grace. James says that Abraham was justified by a faith that worked.

Rahab, James' second example of faith, had a completely different story. She was a harlot, living in Jericho before the city fell to the nation of Israel. Two Israelite spies who were sent into the city arrived at her house. She wondered why it had taken so long for Israel to come. The Canaanites knew that the God of Israel was powerful, and they were fearful of Israel. Rahab had more faith than the nation! Lack of faith was the reason Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness. Rahab believed that the God of Israel was the true God, and that he was with Israel, and she acted on her faith by hiding the spies and protecting them from the Canaanites. She obeyed God in the face of danger. Rahab had a faith that worked, and that is why she is listed in the "hall of fame" of faith in Hebrews 11.

I recently received a letter from a young woman who was part of our singles group. She now lives now in Caracas, Venezuela, where she teaches school. The living conditions are dangerous, food is very expensive, and corruption is widespread, but she believes that God has called her there and also that he wants her to teach a Bible study. She writes about this study:

I feel really privileged that the Lord has trusted me with this. Last week I was having a lot of doubts whether I wanted to continue with this, because it's somewhat far from my house, in a dangerous area. I don't have dependable transportation, it's on a Monday (reality day), and there were only three people who showed up last week. Then after prayer one day I felt like the Lord told me, "If I could die for you, you could inconvenience yourself a little for my sheep. I love them like I love you." I realized that even if it were only one person that came, it would be worth it to the Lord; so I committed myself to Him in respect to it. The next day there were twelve people there! That was my confirmation.

Here is a young woman who has a faith that works.

James' conclusion is quite clear. He repeats it four times, in verses 17, 20, 24, 26, using two words to describe it. First, faith without

works is useless, empty and unproductive. It has no purpose or goal. Second, faith without works is dead. It is not alive and growing. James likens this kind of faith to a body without a spirit. It is like a corpse, an empty shell, with no life. A living person is made up of a spirit combined with a body. In the same way, genuine spiritual life is a combination of faith and works. Both elements are necessary for life. You can't separate the two. It is not faith and works, nor is it faith or works, but a faith that works.

This is a difficult issue to grapple with. Our last three studies have given me pause as I thought about caring for orphans and widows, loving the poor, and having the kind of faith that makes a difference. As we come now to the application of this text for our lives, I think it would be better to simply reflect on what it means for us, both individually and as a body, to listen to the Spirit of God and what he has to say to us, rather than being heavy-handed.

As I meditated on this passage, the following things came to mind.

First, we should not respond to this text by trying to stockpile good works so as to avoid feelings of guilt. God does not want us to define who we are by religious performance, to fake a good appearance so that it will seem as if we have genuine faith. This kind of response leads to legalism and self-righteousness, and if we fall for that approach, we will act out of our own resources. Good works should be a natural outgrowth of our faith—the fruits of our life. They are the very works of God himself, and they should flow out of the relationship that we have with him as his beloved children.

Second, it should not surprise us to see people who appear strong in their profession of faith drift away from the church. The text assumes that there will be spiritually dead people within the community of believers. We should not be alarmed by this. The sower sows the seed of the word, yes, but some seeds do not take root and grow.

Third, we must accept that faith takes time to grow and mature. There are many stories in the Bible about faith finally being perfected in some very weak, selfish and timid people. This is the story of Abraham, Jacob, David, Peter, and Paul. These are the stories of people who gave up control of their lives to believe something which is invisible and intangible. These are stories of people who come to believe in the ways of God, who valued friendship with God as being more important than success or popularity.

But that does not happen overnight. We fail many times. We try to do things in our own strength and we make fools of ourselves. And so we don't have to check on whether our own faith or someone else's faith is growing. We should encourage and love and cultivate the life of God within ourselves and others. Let us not forget that even our faith is a gift of God, and that he is at work within us. Remember that before the apostle Peter became a pillar of the church, he sank while trying to walk on water.

Fourth, the things that will complete and perfect our faith are the things that we will hate the most. The seed of faith which God plants within our hearts is often entombed in a hard, crusty, stubborn shell of humanity. It takes crisis, tragedy and pain to crack open that shell so that the life of faith might grow and blossom. We suffer and hurt, but in the process we find a life that is not of ourselves. As the apostle said, "we carry around in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be manifest in our mortal flesh."

We must have faith or we will perish. Situations will arise that are too difficult for us to understand or handle, and we seek to avoid them at all costs, but these are the things that perfect and complete what God has begun in us. Let us remember James' opening words: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various kinds of trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect work that you might be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Abraham's faith was perfected, and he was called the friend of God.

Fifth, having said all of this, we need to be challenged by verse 20 to recognize that there is a purpose and goal to our faith. Faith without works could be likened to a symphony orchestra that is forever rehearsing and tuning up, but never performing. We can come to church week in and week out, preparing ourselves to do something, claiming that once we get it all squared away we will start doing, but never putting into practice what we have been preparing. There is nothing wrong with getting squared away inside, but there is a time to act. I am the first to admit that I don't have all this worked out in my own life yet. At times I have feelings of loneliness, doubts and fear. I work with a group of pastors and elders who would say the same thing of themselves. We fail, we make mistakes, but that should not stop us from doing. Faith demands we act in obedience to the voice of God, despite our feelings.

Brennan Manning has a good word for us here:

In the past twenty years both psychology and religion have laid a strong emphasis on the primacy of being over doing. We are often reminded by pastor, therapist, and next-door neighbor, "It is not what you do that matters, it is who you are."...But what we do may be far more decisive and far more expressive of the ultimate truth of who we are in Christ than anything else...The one who talks, especially if he talks to God, can affect a great deal, but the one who acts really means business and has more claims on our attention. If you want to know what a person really believes, don't just listen to what he says, watch what he does...When being is divorced from doing, pious thoughts become an adequate substitute for washing dirty feet.

Jesus always backed up his words with actions. He must be our model here. He broke all the rules of tradition and reached out to love prostitutes and publicans, the headstrong Peters, the doubting Thomases. Jesus took on the role of a slave: He washed feet, he carried his cross to die. At times we will not feel like doing. We will not feel like loving an enemy. We will not feel like staying in a difficult marriage. We will not feel like forgiving someone who has ripped open our heart. We will not feel like helping a stranger who is filthy. But faith demands that we will respond, because that is what Jesus did for us. He has called us to a life of compassion and purpose. If he has not called us for this, then, James is asking, what use is the faith that he has given to us?

These are tough words. May God give us the grace to respond out of love for him, because he first loved us. And we cannot know the breadth of that love until we walk by faith.

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James 3:1-12

Seventh Message

John Hanneman

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THE EVIL OF THE TONGUE

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

Our text today from the third chapter of the letter of James, verses which deal with the evil of the tongue, is one of the most convicting passages in the Bible. It seems controlling the tongue eludes even the most spiritual among us at times. An epitaph on a tombstone in an English country churchyard bears testimony to how difficult it is:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
Lies Arabelle Young,
Who, on the twenty-fourth of May,
Began to hold her tongue.

The tongue is a mere two-ounce slab of striped muscle fibers, covered with mucous membrane, yet it is one of the most important and prominent organs of the body. The tongue is the chief organ of taste, and an important aid in chewing and swallowing. As the organ of speech, it helps form both vowels and consonants.

Charles Swindoll wrote this about the tongue:

Without the tongue no mother could sing her baby to sleep to-night; no ambassador could adequately represent our nation; no teacher could stretch the minds of students; no officer could lead his fighting men in battle; no attorney could defend the truth in court; no pastor could comfort troubled souls; no complicated, controversial issue could ever be discussed or solved. Our entire world would be reduced to unintelligible grunts and shrugs. Seldom do we pause to realize just how valuable this strange muscle in our mouth really is.

But the tongue is as volatile as it is vital. Washington Irving said: "A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use." James calls the tongue a "restful evil." Proverbs 26:28 declares: "A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin." "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov 18:21).

Why is the tongue so difficult to control? And how can we learn to use it for good, not evil? As we begin chapter 3 of James' letter today, we find the issue of the tongue set in the larger context of another problem we face in dealing with trials. The text actually begins with a warning about becoming teachers. Verses 1-2:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If any one does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (James 3:1-2 NASB)

James begins this discussion of the tongue by referring to teachers within the Body of Christ, saying, "let not many become teachers." In this context, teaching was a position of great influence. The Jewish audience to whom James' words were addressed were well accustomed to the role of a rabbi. We remember that "Teacher" was the title given to Jesus himself. In the church, a teacher is the voice of final authority. As such, it is position that might seem desirable to some.

Here, James is identifying a problem that is key to this book and to the subject of trials. As we have already seen, this letter is all about how Christians should respond to the pressures of life. Trials are part of God's program for perfecting our faith. When the pressure is on, however, we may respond in a way that is counterproductive to what God wants to accomplish in us. We have already talked about some of our more typical responses when we are thrown into confusion: we seek wealth, we fall into sin, we blame God, we get angry, we favor the beautiful people at the expense of the poor, we forget who we are in Christ.

As we begin chapter 3, James highlights another typical response we may have to the pressures of life, and that is to seek prominence and influence. In order to rise above the confusion and turmoil of life we seek a position of status. This is how we act in the world, and this is how we act in the church. An influential position helps us feel better about ourselves when the circumstances of life make us frustrated, despairing and unimportant. We seek influence to bolster our self-esteem and self-worth. We even mask our desires by saying that we want to be influential for God, when our focus is actually on ourselves, our influence, our position.

So we all want to be influential, to live meaningful lives. This is a basic and God-given desire. But when we are confronted with the pressures of life that shake our security and make us uncomfortable, our desires often become selfish and wrongly motivated. Rather than seeking to influence mankind for the glory of God, we seek influence as a means of glorifying ourselves.

After I graduated from college I worked as an engineer for a couple of years. But I became dissatisfied, and I began to seek a job that might yield more status, influence and prominence. I decided to go to law school, because I thought being a lawyer would give me an elevated status. Now there is nothing wrong with being a lawyer, or pursuing other interests and desires, but soon it became clear to me that my motivation was wrongly directed. I was being driven by the desire to be important.

This desire to be influential is why believers sometimes want to be pastors, teachers or leaders in the body of Christ. We think we might gain in the church the prominence and significance that eludes us in the world. Oftentimes, this is what motivates people to Christian leadership.

This chapter of James is key because it deals with the issue of how we can become truly influential as men or women of God. This is clearly evident in the question James poses in verse 13: "who is wise and understanding among you?" The first 12 verses instruct us how not to seek influence; the second half of the chapter, which we will look at next week, instructs us how we truly become people of significance.

James gives two reasons why not many should become teachers. First, he says, "you will incur a harsher judgment." Being a teacher

many look glamorous, but there is greater accountability, discipline, and cost demanded. Furthermore, there is greater opposition from the enemy in terms of spiritual warfare. When I am preaching, a lot of strange things happen to me or around me. I have to make hard decisions to commit time to study and prepare.

Jesus illustrates the greater cost and accountability demanded of teachers in his comment about some who might lead children astray: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

Becoming a teacher of God’s word should not be taken lightly. It is not something we should do for selfish reasons, to be fulfilled, influential, or to gain self-importance. One should feel a clear calling from God first.

The second reason why few among the body are to be teachers is because a teacher must use his tongue. He influences people’s lives through his speech—and, of course, the tongue is a major stumbling block. James says that we all stumble in many ways. If we do not stumble in what we say, then we are perfect, able to bridle the whole body as well. Controlling the evil of the tongue, therefore, is the last level of maturity.

Now, not everyone is a teacher, but we all fall prey to thinking that we can influence others through our speech. We offer Biblical advice, telling people what they need to do. But unless we can “walk the talk,” we will not really have influence. Influence is not gained by a title or by words; it is gained through actions. Unless our lives back up what we have to say, we don’t really have anything to offer. This is where James is heading. If many people desire to be teachers, they have a wrong idea about what significance really is in terms of effective ministry. True influence is gained by what we do, not by what we say.

But first, James will describe the problems of the tongue. It doesn’t matter if we are a teacher or a president, a store clerk or a housewife, we must all deal with the tongue. It is a lethal weapon, and it is licensed to kill. Verses 3-10:

Now if we put the bits into horses’ mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the indication of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. (3:3-10a)

Here, James gives four characteristics of the tongue to show how powerful and evil it can be.

First, the tongue directs our path (3-5a). James uses two analogies. The tongue is like a bit in the mouth of a horse, or the rudder of a ship. A horse is a very strong and powerful animal. The strength of a horse is an image that is used often in the OT. And yet, even if

the horse is large and strong, such a small thing as a bit determines his direction and course. The same is a true of a rudder of a ship. Even on enormous sea-going vessels, their path and direction is determined by a tiny rudder.

The same thing is true about the tongue. It is a small member of the body, and yet it directs our path and determines our course. When we speak, oftentimes we say something that will determine our future actions. For example, if we tell a lie, we may have to spend great effort covering our tracks. If we say something inappropriate to a referee, we might get thrown out of a game. If we explode at our boss, we might get fired. If we say something hurtful, we might lose a friend.

I can see this truth at work in my relationship with my wife. If I say something that hurts her, then my course is set: I have to buy her candy or flowers, take her out to dinner, or go shopping. What we say to our wives can get very expensive at times.

On a larger scale, the teacher directs the course of the church by what he says. The rabbi is like the rudder on a ship, because he has the potential for directing the lives and ministries of others. He has the influence to determine the course of the congregation. This is one reason why multiple leadership in the church is healthy for the body. If an entire congregation is following an unhealthy or controlling rudder, the church can end up on the beach.

The second characteristic of the tongue is that words spread like fire. Our words can be very volatile and flammable. Something that appears insignificant at the outset can wreak great destruction. The fires that raged in Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks over the last few years give evidence of this.

Like a fire, our words can spread and quickly get out of control. Through repetition, they leap from one person to another, from one place to another, and eventually someone will get burned. When I was working as an engineer, I marveled at how quickly stories traveled from one building to another in our company. Words seemed to have the ability to leap over parking lots!

The lesson is clear: If we don’t want something repeated, we shouldn’t say it in the first place.

James refers to the tongue as a “fire, the very world of iniquity.” The fire we breath out of our mouths is one hundred percent garbage. Its source is hell itself. Its effect is that it stains or defiles the entire body, and we get burned all over. And the result of the fire is that it sets alight the course of our lives, leaving a trail of destruction. Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 15:18: “The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man.” The tongue is like the pilot light in the gas furnace. It seems insignificant, but when someone turns up the heat, the raw gas pours forth and the flames ignite. Proverbs 16:27 says: “A worthless man digs up evil while his words are as a scorching fire.” Proverbs 19:28 says: “The mouth of the wicked spreads iniquity.”

Third, the tongue is uncontrollable. It cannot be tamed. Man has trained every beast which God has created, the largest and the strongest, and yet he cannot train the tongue. One writer says:

We can tame Flipper and Trigger, Shamu and Lassie. We can train falcons to land on our wrists, pigeons to carry our messages, dogs to fetch the paper, elephants to stand on rolling balls, tigers to sit

on stools, and alligators to turn over and get their bellies rubbed. But the tongue? Impossible to train!

Why is that? It is because the tongue is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. It is restless in that it is unstable and volatile, ready to explode at any provocation, like nitroglycerin. And it is full of deadly poison in that it brings fatal results. It lunges out unexpectedly, like a rattlesnake, with fangs that sink deep and evoke a deadly poison which kills and destroys. “There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of the sword” (Prov 12:18). How often have you caught yourself saying, “I know I shouldn’t say this, but...,” or “Don’t tell anyone this, but...”? Spinoza said: “Surely human affairs would be far happier if the power in men to be silent were the same as that to speak. But experience more than sufficiently teaches that men govern nothing with more difficulty than their tongues.”

Finally, says James, the tongue is double-minded. “With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God.” The tongue has potential for both blessing and cursing, for good and evil.

We can bless God through worship, prayer, and praise. We can speak words that encourage and build up. When they are used wisely and with control, our words have the ability to restore, heal, and give life. Speech can turn away wrath, bring sweetness to the soul, and speak wisdom and truth. Speech can be pleasant and gracious. But then we can turn quickly to tear down and criticize someone made in God’s image. Like the Indians say, we speak with a “forked” tongue. We come to church and sing praises to God, but on the way home we can speak an angry word to our spouse, explode at our children, or curse someone who cuts us off on the freeway. Our speech can cause conflict and misery, stir up anger and strife, spread iniquity, destroy neighbors and separate intimate friends. Our words can be full of slander, lies and deceit.

So the tongue seems to be an uncontrollable, two-headed monster with a tremendous potential for blessing, but an even greater potential for evil. “A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit” (Prov 15:4). What a negative picture James paints. The condition looks hopeless.

But James offers a remedy, beginning in verse 10b:

My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh. (3:10b-12)

These things should not be so, according to James. The tongue should not be destructive, deadly, and demonic. It should not be an uncontrollable, fast-spreading fire.

Why does James say that? Once more, he helps us with some analogies, all of which come from nature. First, the analogy of a spring. If the source is fresh, the water will be fresh; if the source is bitter, the water will be bitter. A spring cannot be both fresh and bitter, unless there are two sources. The second analogy is that of a fig tree. A fig tree cannot produce olives. It is a fig tree through and through; that is its nature. In the same way, a vine cannot produce figs any more than a fig tree can produce olives. Finally, salt water cannot become fresh, because that is contrary to its basic nature.

What does James mean here? In the analogies, the kind of water is determined by its source, and the kind of fruit is determined by the nature of the plant or tree. A spring cannot produce two kinds of water. A tree cannot bear fruit that is contrary to its nature. James

is saying that when it comes to speech, the kind of words that come out depend on the source. What flows out of our mouths is based upon the nature of our hearts. This is what Jesus said in Matt 12:34: “The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” “He hath a heart as sound as a bell, and his tongue is the clapper; for what his heart thinks his tongue speaks” (Unknown).

Therefore, if we are Christians, these things should not be so, because we are new creations in Christ. We have a new nature, a new heart. We do not have two natures, even though it might seem that way at times. As Christians we have been reborn with the heart and nature of Christ, so we really have only one nature. Therefore, the words that flow from our lips should reflect the source. Our tongue then should not be a restless evil, but an instrument of righteousness to restore, redeem and bring healing.

There are two practical applications of this text that come to mind. First, we must take care of the source. If the source of our words is healthy, then our speech will reflect who we are in Christ. If the source is contaminated and poisoned, however, then our words will be destructive and deadly. The more care we give to the purity of our heart, the more will this purity be reflected in our speech. If we absorb our hearts with the words of Scripture and the thoughts of God, then that is what will come out when we are in need of words. Proverbs 4:23-24 agrees:

**Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you a deceitful mouth,
And put devious lips far from you. (Prov 4:23-24)**

And second, we must filter our thoughts and words. As James counseled, we need to be quick to hear and slow to speak. Before we speak we need to filter our words through our hearts and allow them to be cleansed by the Holy Spirit. We can taste the words that are forming in our mouths and think about the effect they will have before we say them. And if we don’t know what to say, we need to take the advice of Publius, the Greek sage, who said: “I have often regretted my speech, never my silence.” Psalm 39 says: “I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle.” The apostle Paul counsels: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph 4:29).

So the tongue is a very powerful member of the body, both for good and for evil. James says that if we control our tongues, then we will be perfect, i.e., we will be mature. If we want to have true significance, then we need to guard our tongues. Let us use speech to promote the kingdom of God on earth, not to promote ourselves, to manipulate or control others. Let us learn to use our words so that others may grow in their relationship with God.

Our model here, of course, must be Jesus. He was master of his tongue and his speech. Let him be our model for everything we say so that we may sustain the downtrodden and the broken. As the prophet Isaiah said:

**“The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples,
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.”
(Isa 50:4)**

Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes, put it this way: “The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd” (Eccl 12:11).

The words that we utter are extremely important. If we are careful to filter them through the source of our life, who is Christ, then God can use them to his glory for the growth of his kingdom on earth.

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Catalog No. 1052

James 3:13-18

Eighth Message

John Hanneman

February 18, 1996

WHO IS WISE AMONG YOU?

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

What are the symbols of importance in our culture today, the things that make us feel significant and leave a good impression? Most of us would say things like a good college degree, a significant title, a nice business card, a Rolex watch, a cellular phone, a vacation home, a shirt with a horse emblem, a new car, a lot of money.

This leads to a second question: Have you ever been influenced by, or have you influenced anyone as a direct result of possessing any of these things? Has the attainment of things, of prestige or prominence ever helped you to share the gospel, offer a meal to a hungry person, spend time with a child, have a meaningful conversation with your daughter, or helped you comfort someone dying of cancer? It is possible to spend a lifetime pursuing symbols, degrees and titles, but miss the whole point of life.

We all want to live meaningful lives, and I believe this desire is God-given. We all want to live significantly and leave a legacy that will survive us. If even one person at our funeral said we had made an impact for good in his life, we would feel we had made a significant contribution.

Today we come to a passage from the New Testament letter of James that helps us answer this question, How can we attain true significance in life? For Christians, this is one of the most important passages that helps us learn how God intends the church to function.

James begins by posing a question to his readers. Chapter 3, verse 13:

Who among you is wise and understanding? (James 3:13a NASB)

Remember that James was writing to the aliens of the Diaspora, exiled Jews who were suffering severe trials and afflictions. Trials have a way of stripping away our carefully built veneers, our well-planned facades. They leave us vulnerable and exposed, unsettled and confused, disappointed and despairing, angry and resentful. This book is about how to respond to the pressures of life. We have mentioned some of our more typical responses to trials. In our last study, we saw that one response we might be tempted to make is to seek importance and prominence, to try to hang around with the rich and famous in an effort to appear significant to our peers.

In the body of Christ, one symbol of success, and a title of significance, is being a teacher of the Scriptures. But James has a warning here: "Let not many of you become teachers" (3:1). Not many are to become teachers, says James, because they will incur a harsher judgment. Also, teachers must use speech—and the tongue, of course, is a major stumbling block for them, indeed for everyone. We might think that teachers are filled with wisdom and understanding, so we might strive to become teachers, but James warns that if we think we influence this world through our speech, then we are very wrong. Our speech can be powerful, and it can offer many benefits, but it can cause great destruction, too. Speech, therefore, is not the primary way to influence and significance.

If our primary means of gaining influence is not through words, then, James asks, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" The word "wisdom," used four times in these verses, is the key term in the text. James wants us to know that wisdom, not speech, is the key to significance.

Living a meaningful life is a desire that burns in the hearts of people in every generation. In the '60's and '70's, the youth of our nation flung off traditional values. In a search for truth, they became hippies and staged love-ins. This was the time when many of the so called "baby boomers" came to Christ. In the '80's, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. College graduates, who were to become known as "yuppies," flocked to corporate America, looking for significance in the start-up companies that offered the best stock options. In the '90's, young people are looking for meaning in community and authentic relationships. "Generation X" is looking for quality, not quantity.

No matter which generation we were raised in, however, we have to ask what kind of investment will bring the most meaning to our lives over the next ten, twenty, thirty, forty or fifty years. In the midst of the pressures that erode faith and promote self-exaltation, God wants us to be people who will have influence for his kingdom, to live lives that count for something. And God has some very definite plans for how we accomplish that. That is why James asks: "Who is wise and understanding among us?"

James answers his own question by saying (13b):

Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. (3:13b)

The person who is wise and understanding is the one whose faith is fleshed out by actions, the one whose deeds match his words, whose character backs up his title. James is saying, in effect, "Let not many become teachers, but let many do good works." This is the theme that keeps resurfacing in this book. In the midst of trials that can leave us confused, angry and vengeful, we are to become "doers" of the word rather than "hearers" only. We are to care for orphans and widows, remain unstained by the world, show love to the poor, and have a faith that works. We don't perform good works to gain salvation or earn approval; we do them because we are already the approved and beloved sons and daughters of our Father. If our actions do not back up what we have to say, if our lifestyles do not mesh with the image we have established, if our conduct does not match our titles, then our speech loses its power to influence others and robs us of the sense of significance we were meant to experience.

James gives two qualifiers that should describe our deeds and actions. First, they should be characterized by "good behavior." This would be better translated, "beautiful conduct." The word "good" here is not just referring to moral good, but to actions that are well done and beautiful to behold.

The second qualifier is “gentleness of wisdom.” “Wisdom” is the ability to live well; “gentleness” speaks of humility (it is one of the fruits of the Spirit). Jesus said that the gentle are blessed and will inherit the earth. “Gentleness of wisdom” is the ability to respond to pressure and conflict with grace and character, with strength under control. This is what Jesus modeled so well.

The person who is wise and understanding doesn’t just talk; he acts, and his actions are colored with gentleness and beauty.

People who demonstrate works with good behavior and wise gentleness are creative artists in the way they approach life. They do things that are attractive and beautiful, things that catch our attention. All of us are drawn to an act of compassion. We marvel when love is shown to an enemy. We are touched by a hug given to someone who is dying. We smile when we see someone playing with a child. We are awed by the actions of a saint, just as we are awed by the creative powers of a painter, or the beauty of a sunset. These are the deeds of people who are displaying the work of the Creator.

This design for significant living is not new; it has been around for a long time. It has always been the plan for how Israel, and the church, are to influence the world, as the words of Deuteronomy prove:

“See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’” (Deut 4:5-6)

When Christians live this way, people look at the church and say, “These people are different; they are beautiful, gentle and wise. How can I become like them?” And this is what allows believers to say, in response, “Now that you have seen my actions, let me tell you the story of Jesus.” This is what attracted me to Christ. A college friend who was a Christian talked to me about the Bible. But it wasn’t what he said that had the greatest influence over me; it was what he did as I watched him live day to day. When he was undergoing difficult times, I could not discount the reality that God was active in his life. He had something that I did not have, and I was drawn to his God.

An old lawyer once said of John Vianny: “An extraordinary thing happened to me today: I saw Christ in a man.” That is what it means to be wise and understanding.

Most of us agree with these sentiments, and we long to live that way, but it is difficult to put this into practice in our everyday lives. That is because this truth runs counter to the culture we live in. We fantasize about how we should look and act, and different voices tell us what to do and how to do it. We are deceived to think we can gain influence overnight. Then when we face a trial, we try we run from the pain, grasping for something that will be life-giving.

If we are to make this truth real in our lives, we must understand more deeply this notion of wise living.

Now James goes on now to say that there are two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom from below, and the wisdom from above. Verses 14-18:

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is

first pure, then peaceful, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (3:14-18)

The wisdom from below, says James, is characterized by “jealousy and selfish ambition.” These are the “deeds of darkness” that Paul talks about in Romans 13. Our jealousy leads us to compare ourselves with others; our “selfish ambition,” our self-exaltation, makes us want to rise above others. The word is used in contemporary literature of self-seeking political pursuit of an office by unfair means—a significant point on this, the eve of the New Hampshire primary.

Jealousy and selfish ambition are two aspects of pride, one of the deadliest of sins. Here is what C. S. Lewis had to say about pride:

Pride is essentially competitive...Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.

Through jealousy and selfish ambition we try to gain influence and significance. But these things lie against the truth. They speak louder than words, and therefore nullify anything we have to say, even if we speak God’s word.

According to James, this kind of wisdom is “earthly, natural, demonic.” It is from the earth, and therefore is neither true nor eternal. It is temporary, and it decays. It is natural, and therefore it does not satisfy spiritual hunger. It is demonic in nature. It will deceive you through its lies and will seek to take your life.

But this is the kind of wisdom that we hear on every side today, isn’t it? We see it on the television; the popular magazines are filled with it: “The end justifies the means.” “Sow your oats while you are young.” “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” “You deserve a break today.” “Come to Harrahs, come to life.” “Just do it.” “Master the possibilities.” “We are adults, nobody will get hurt.” This is the kind of wisdom that permeates our society. It is earthly, natural, and demonic. It is characterized by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And the results of this kind of wisdom are “disorder and every evil thing.” It leads to discontent, restlessness, division and turmoil. Essentially, the wisdom from below causes breakdown and division in the community. People are hurt, and relationships deteriorate.

Oscar Wilde describes in these words the effects of the wisdom from below in his own life:

The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease...Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the house-top. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.

The prophet Isaiah said: “Woe to those who are wise and clever in their own eyes.”

Next, James contrasts the wisdom from below with the wisdom from above. This is the kind of wisdom that will help us to be wise and understanding. James gives a list of adjectives to describe it. First, this wisdom is “pure,” or holy. Purity replaces “earthly, natural, demonic.” And a pure heart is a prerequisite to doing anything. This kind of wisdom then is:

- pure, restful (not confusing and disorderly)
- gentle, yielding (not brawling)
- obedient, compliant (not disobedient and defensive)
- full of mercy, compassion (not self-seeking)
- full of good fruit (not rotten fruit)
- unwavering (not doubting)
- genuine, real, sincere (not hypocritical).

The words of James describe a godly character, in stark contrast to one that demonstrates “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.” Notice that the majority of the words James uses to describe the wisdom from above relates to how people live and relate in community (the rest have to do with spiritual maturity). Godly character is the very definition of wisdom. The one who displays this kind of character is wise and understanding. It isn’t what you say, but who you are and what you do that speaks loudest.

The result of gaining real wisdom, the wisdom from above, is the fruit of righteousness, sown in community. Verse 18 is an amazing statement. Literally, it reads: “The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by the ones doing peace.” The ones who practice peace sow seeds that germinate and grow and bear the fruits of righteousness. Peace is in contrast to “disorder and every evil thing.” It speaks of healthy community and healthy relationships. If we want to have real significance, this is what God wants for us—the fruit of righteousness. It is godly character that has the greatest impact in life. James is saying let not many become teachers, but let many gain wisdom through the godly character that is demonstrated in what we do.

Character speaks louder than words. Our influence does not depend on the symbols that society holds dear. It doesn’t matter where we live, what kind of job we have or what kind of car we drive; whether we are the president of a company or a ditch digger; whether we are movie star or a housewife. It is godly character that counts, not title or position. As others observe how you respond to situations, they will wonder what it is about you that makes you different. They will consider you to be wise and understanding. The measure of a man or woman is the people we touch, not the trophies of our accomplishments.

An excellent illustration of this truth is the recent movie *Mr. Holland’s Opus*. It is story of a man who sought to leave a legacy. He wanted to compose and write music, but instead gave himself to being a teacher for thirty years. His dreams were always frustrated, but in the end he had an influence in people’s lives that went beyond his wildest dreams. His music became the lives that he touched.

I clipped this quote about the character of our first President, George Washington, from an issue of *Time* magazine:

Washington knew no foreign languages (Thomas Jefferson spoke or read five). Washington never traveled to Europe, while Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Jefferson all spent years there. He was not an accomplished public speaker. His military achieve-

ments were judged for their perseverance rather than their brilliance... Writers who journey through the accounts of his life almost always confess some bafflement about why he was such a great figure in his time and remains so in ours... Washington was a good man but not a saint, a competent soldier but not great, thoughtful but not brilliant like Alexander Hamilton. He was respectable administrator but certainly not a genius... The sum of his rather normal parts added up to an exceptional figure. George Washington had character... His heart and mind were shaped by his family, his land, his community and the small events that touched him every day. Those were the normal experiences. They were added to his natural endowments. Only one power can fully fathom such a formula—God.

How do we gain this kind of character and wisdom? It comes through brokenness. Trials produce character. Afflictions and sufferings produce diamonds, pearls and rubies. It is only through brokenness that God’s character is born and made visible in us. Brokenness allows us to be influential more than any degree or title. Brokenness makes us real. Our hearts are opened up, sometimes forced open, so that we might receive the grace of God. People will listen to us and they will hunger for the grace that God bestows upon us in our brokenness.

Second, character comes through investment. The way to influence is to drive a stake in the ground and look to the long haul. Start investing now, sowing seeds whose fruit is righteousness, both in your own life and in the lives of others. It doesn’t matter whether you have the perfect job, the perfect home or the perfect children, whether you are married or single, rich or poor. Plant yourself and make choices every day to influence a generation through the character that God is building in you. We will never have any influence over people if we dart here and there and never plant ourselves, or if we are waiting for everything to fall into place before we begin.

And third, let us not forget that this kind of wisdom, this kind of character comes from Jesus. It is not learned in the world or in the classroom. It comes from having our lives deeply touched by Jesus. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” said John. This is the Word that takes up residence in our hearts. We can’t learn this kind of wisdom from an audio tape or from memorizing a set of answers. It comes from God, who indwells people, and they become his wisdom.

Ray Stedman had more influence over Peninsula Bible Church than any other man. Ray was a wonderfully gifted and talented pastor and preacher. He taught God’s word in countries all over the world. He sat in the White House. He could have become king of any Christian circle. And yet he lived simply and purely. He became a spiritual father to many who are here this morning. In fact, most of the staffs at PBC North and South are part of Ray Stedman’s Opus.

Chuck Swindoll is one of many who came under Ray’s influence. A few years ago, Chuck arranged to fly up from Southern California, accompanied by several young men he was training, to have dinner with Ray. It one of the last times he ever talked to Ray. Later, Chuck would write of that evening:

In a day of tarnished leaders, fallen heroes, busy fathers, frantic coaches, arrogant authority figures, and eggheaded profs, we need mentors like never before. Such rare finds are guides, not gods. They are approachable and caring souls who help us negotiate our way through life’s labyrinth without shouting or dictating. Mentors know how to stretch us without insulting us, affirm us

without flattering us, make us think without requiring their answers in return, release us without abandoning us. They're always right there, even though they may be a thousand miles away. They become invisible partners, whispering hope and reproofs on the journey toward excellence. As we said good-bye to Ray, I walked a little slower. I thought about the things he had taught me without directly instructing me and about the courage he had given me without deliberately exhorting me. I wondered how it had happened. I wondered why I had been so privileged to have had my "face" reflected in his "water" or my "iron" sharpened by his "iron." A nostalgic knot formed in my throat...I found myself wanting to run back to his car and tell him again how much I love and admire him. But it was late, and after all I'm a 55-year-old man. A husband. A father. A grandfather. A pastor. To some, a leader, and perhaps to a few, maybe even a hero. But as I stood there alone in the cold night air, I suddenly realized what I wanted to be most when I grow up.

Who do you want to be when you grow up? What kind of wisdom do you want to be known for? Let us not forget that the kind of wisdom that results in godly character comes only from God, through Jesus.

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee, and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son,
Thou with me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

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Catalog No. 1058

James 4:1-6

Ninth Message

John Hanneman

December 29, 1996

THE REASON WE RAGE

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

The New Testament book of James was written by the brother of the Lord Jesus to the Jews of the Diaspora who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Life was extremely hard for these impoverished Jewish Christians as they were being oppressed and mistreated by wealthy landlords. They could hardly be blamed for feeling that life was unfair. On the one hand, they wanted the judgment of God to come quickly on the rich and wealthy; but on the other hand, they were being tempted to cater to their masters so that they might gain materially and thus live more comfortably.

James wrote his letter to inform these brethren about the purpose behind the trials and afflictions which they were suffering. His opening words have become familiar down through the centuries:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various kinds of trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4 NASB)

God uses trials to bring about spiritual maturity in Christians— but only if we will let them do their work. While we are in the midst of a trial we are tempted, not by God, but by our own sin, to escape, to seek to be in control, to be self-centered, to envy the prosperity of the rich and famous. The theme of this letter, therefore, is how to understand and respond to the pressures and stresses of life so that God can do his work in us.

According to James, the most essential ingredient to living under stress and affliction is acquiring what he describes as the “wisdom from above.” James is referring to godly character. This wisdom from above is the ingredient that will enable us to respond to pressures and difficulties with grace and purity. Wisdom will make us men and women of influence and significance, no matter the size of our checking account. Wisdom is what will allow us to care for the orphan and the widow, even while we are enduring hardship. Wisdom will allow us to become “doers of the word.” And if we lack wisdom or godly character, James says we must “ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach.” If we ask in faith, says James, wisdom will be given to us.

The trials that come our way, therefore, are given to test us in order to reveal what kind of people we really are on the inside.

If we are to be people of wisdom, however, the kind who will live life with the characteristics of purity, gentleness, mercy, and without hypocrisy, as James outlines in chapter 3, then we must deal with a highly explosive element that we are prone to succumb which can wreak destruction in our lives and our relationships at any time. The land mine that we are referring to is anger.

We live in a world characterized by violence and turmoil. Conflict is part of our everyday existence. On the international level, we only have to look at the strife in Bosnia or Northern Ireland; the hostage crisis in Peru; the conflict between Arabs and Jews in the

Middle East, and the civil war in Rwanda, to see that this is true. On the national level, we note the anger and strife that the abortion issue raises whenever it is discussed. During the recent Presidential campaign, we were embarrassed by the insults exchanged between the candidates. We are dismayed at the incivility of Congress. In our communities, we are continually facing crime and drug problems, strikes by teachers, senseless murders, parents abusing children, children abusing other children. In our homes, we see conflict between husband and wives, parents and children.

And our newspapers record the sad details of much of this. A couple of years ago, I clipped the following article from a newspaper:

Enumclaw, Washington. A man bulldozed his three bedroom, \$85,000 home after his wife filed for divorce, and the destruction apparently was legal because he first took the time to pick up a demolition permit, police said Sunday. . . . She filed for divorce last Monday. “I told him I wanted to keep the house. I guess he didn’t want me to have anything,” she said. “It took him 15 minutes. I had beautiful antiques.”

And from Newark, New Jersey:

A 65-year-old woman was convicted of reckless manslaughter for fatally shooting her husband during a fight over where their television remote control was. She and her husband had been drinking. When they couldn’t find the remote control, her husband demanded to know where it was and shoved her. She got a shotgun to frighten him, she said, and it fired accidentally.

What is the cause of all this conflict? And what can we do about it? In our text today from chapter 4 of James’ letter, we will see that people of wisdom and influence understand and control the rage that seethes up at times, resulting in many of the things we have referred to. Today, we will focus on why we rage. This might seem an unusual text to preach from during the Christmas holidays. Its truth is sobering and unsettling. But perhaps this is the very thing we need to hear as we deal with the family problems, conflicts, and disappointments raised by the holidays.

James begins in chapter 4 by asking the penetrating question:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? (4:1a)

Remember that he is addressing the members of the Body of Christ. Certain brethren within the church family were in conflict with one another; they were at each other’s throats. The truth that is set out here in these verses, however, applies to any relationship, whether at home, at work, or in the church.

James goes on to answer his own question:

Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive,

because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. (4:1b-3)

What is the source of conflict? It is our own pleasures. “Pleasures” is the key word in these opening verses. This word describes something that is pleasing to the taste, i.e. the pleasure of the senses. “Pleasures” are sensual desires and appetites that lead to evil, actions that are centered on pleasing self (oftentimes they are sexual in nature). The word “hedonism” comes from the Greek word for pleasures. In philosophy, hedonism is the doctrine which holds that pleasure is the principle good that should be the aim of action. In psychology, hedonism is the theory that a person’s actions always have pleasure as their purpose. Hedonism is pleasure-seeking as a way of life.

James says that these pleasures wage war in our bodies (literally, they do “military service”). We struggle within ourselves; our pleasures are in conflict with the Spirit of God; and the things we pursue are contrary to what is right and good and healthy.

Why are we prone to hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure? One reason is that our senses are aroused by living in a sensual world. We think that if we can taste, feel, touch, see and hear, that we will experience life and happiness. Of course, this is a great deception. The fact is, the pursuit of pleasure never satisfies the deep cravings of our souls. Hedonism can be entertaining and satisfying for awhile, there can be a temporary quenching of our thirst, but pursuing pleasure merely gives way to desires and longings that become more acute and perverse.

In the parable of the sower, it was pleasures that choked off the life of the good seed and caused it to die. In Titus 3:3, the apostle Paul says that pleasures enslave us. Here in James, the author says that pursuing pleasures is the source of conflict. We pursue them because we are deceived into thinking they will produce life and joy. But God says that the pursuit of pleasure will yield conflict, slavery, and death.

On another level, we pursue pleasure to numb the deep pain of our souls which is revealed through suffering. And remember that this is the context of the letter of James—how the Christian should respond to trials and afflictions. The difficult things of life unmask us; they expose our hurts and weaknesses, the feeling of not being loved, of not being accepted. In the midst of suffering, we reach out for life-preservers. We pursue pleasure to numb the pain, and we become addicted to sensual pleasures. We surround ourselves with possessions that carry the promise of security. We become dependent on people to meet our expectations. If they fail, of course, they become the objects of our wrath. We want to avoid the hard and painful lessons of affliction, trial, and suffering, and yet, ironically, James says that it is these very things that yield true joy and peace. It is trials that produce spiritual character.

The source of conflict and tension is our own insistence on satisfying the deep cravings of our souls. Conflicts arise when we cannot get what we want, when we are blocked from our pursuit.

James lays out some typical scenarios:

“You lust and do not have; so you commit murder.” “Murder” here is not literal. The word describes the intensity of our desires. We hate, so we wish that someone did not exist. We sabotage someone who won’t give us what we want.

“You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.” Other people seem to possess what we want—at least it looks that way. This

strikes us as unfair, so we become jealous. Soon, jealousy turns to hatred, and so we declare war on some unsuspecting person.

“You do not have because you do not ask.” We become self-absorbed and self-directed, and we forget about prayer. Our last resort when we desperately pursue our pleasures and desires is to talk to God. But if we do not want to involve God, God will not get involved.

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.” We lay out our agenda, and expect God to comply to our desires. We “pray,” asking things like, “God, give me a beautiful house and I will use it for your purposes.” But God will not answer these prayers because our motives are wrong. We want to acquire things for our own pleasure.

The pressures and trials of life strip us bare, exposing our needy hearts. Our sensual appetites and carnal cravings are aroused by things that promise to numb the pain of our struggles. These pleasures wage a war within us, and our appetite increases. We reach out for the pleasure that will drug us into enjoyment, but we find the way blocked. As a result, we become obsessed. We try harder, but we are never satisfied. We even pray, but we pray selfishly, hoping that God will grant our wish so that we will not be exposed. Finally, we explode in anger. At times, we manifest our anger in seemingly insignificant ways, like arguing. At other times, the explosion destroys everything in sight in a Mount St. Helen-like eruption.

The source of conflict and tension is our own desire for pleasure, our insistence on satisfying the deep cravings of our souls. When we are denied, we find ourselves conflicted and tense. The problem is not people. It is not our bosses, our parents, spouses, neighbors or children. The problem is ourselves, our desire to be pleased and satisfied, and our unwillingness to submit to what appears to be unjust affliction and suffering.

We learn early in life to respond in this way. Put a couple of children together in a room with one toy and watch how fast conflict will develop. When a child doesn’t get what he wants from his parents, he throws a tantrum. If the parent relents, then the child learns that this kind of behavior will yield results.

As we grow older, we become more sophisticated at this, but the same dynamics are involved. For example, during the Christmas season, we deeply desire the feeling of being loved. But we are disappointed. We feel let down, and we vow to not talk with a certain family member. How many of us are angry because we didn’t get what we wanted for Christmas? A husband has a difficult day at work and his sense of adequacy is at an all-time low. He comes home, seeking affection from his wife. He isn’t even aware of his motives, but his hope is that the love of his wife will numb the pain he feels. When she does not respond in the way he wants, an argument begins over something trivial. If it is not checked, soon there is all-out conflict.

We become filled with rage because life is not going the way we want. We get mad if we are stuck in traffic. We get mad at our children because they are messy and fail to do what they are told. We become enraged because we don’t get the promotion we feel we deserve. We carry rage for years, simply because something went wrong and we have never accepted it.

Some people become angry when they can’t impose order. I love to plan and schedule. When I can’t get order, I become frustrated. I remember once sitting in our back yard with my family, trying to plan our summer road trip to Colorado, but no one would pay attention. Rather than planning our trip, my wife and children wanted

to have a food fight. The more foolish they acted, the madder I got. Finally, I stomped off in a rage, trying to make them feel guilty. They didn't, of course.

The reason we fight, the reason we rage is because we are prevented from experiencing the self-seeking pleasures that promise, vainly, to give us joy and life or the necessary control that will eliminate confusion. Simply put, we just don't get what we want, whether it is material goods, love, acceptance, sex, or order. No matter what it is, we make war when we cannot satisfy our desires.

Next, James goes on to say that there is a deeper problem that is manifested by conflict, tension, and anger. And that deeper issue is really spiritual in nature: it is the problem of idolatry and pride. Verses 4-6:

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (4:4-6)

When we pursue our own pleasures we are choosing between God and the world, choosing friendship with the world rather than friendship with God, choosing to put ourselves, not God, at the center of everything. Paul makes this contrast in 2 Timothy 3 when he talks about men being "lovers of self, lovers of money, . . . lovers of pleasure [the same word, hedonism] rather than lovers of God."

The first term that James applies to this deeper problem is spiritual adultery. He refers to this group of believers as "adulteresses." The term is feminine, since it applies to the church. These believers were choosing to have an affair with the world. In the context of the letter, these struggling Christians were tempted to look upon the fatness of the rich and give them preferential treatment. They wanted to make friends with them, thinking that if they could have what the rich had, then they would be satisfied and protected from the harsh realities of life. But this only led to internal strife and contention within the church, so that Christians began to fight over honored positions such as "teacher."

When we are seeking our own desires we are choosing friendship with the world over friendship with God. When we pursue our pleasures as the source of joy and life we are trying to get the world to love us, to satisfy us, to fulfill us. James says that this is a spiritual problem: We are pushing God out of our hearts. The source of conflict is rooted in our own pride, our propensity to want to be the center of the universe, to become like God—to become our own god, to control our lives, to save ourselves from insecurity and mystery. When we see anger surface, like an iceberg, there is probably a much larger mass of pride lying hidden beneath the surface of revealed sin.

The result of our adultery and pride is that God opposes us. In fact, friendship with the world results in hostility toward God. There are only two camps; we are in one or the other. We can't maintain two lovers. When we seek our own pleasures, God becomes our enemy because he opposes the proud. And if God opposes us, then we will definitely not get what we want. This is a fact of life, isn't it? Have you ever found that the more you tried to get something or make something happen, the more obstacles you ran into and the more frustrated and angry you became? That is because it is God whom you are up against.

C. S. Lewis wrote:

Pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man but enmity to God. In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

The apostle John warned: "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

God becomes an enemy to us because he jealousy desires the Spirit that dwells in us. God is a jealous lover. This image is portrayed throughout Israel's history. God wants to be Lord of our lives. He wants an intimate, one-flesh, marriage relationship with us. He wants to bless us. But he cannot give to us as long as pride, arrogance and selfish desires stand in the way. Therefore, he must oppose us in order to break our pride and self-will.

The irony is that God gives the afflicted a much greater grace. He is "opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble." The quotation in verse 6 is from Proverbs 3:34: "Though He scoffs at the scoffers, yet He gives grace to the afflicted." The person who is humble is the one who is afflicted, who is brought low by trials and suffering. But, as James says in chapter 1, let the humble brother "glory in his high position," because it is to this one that God can pour out his grace.

This is a strange paradox. Everything that we desire, everything that we try to get from the world, only God alone can give to us. His grace is better than anything we can get on our own. He leads us beside quiet waters. He gives us rest in green pastures. He feeds our souls. He fills our cup with gladness. The psalmist said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Henri Nouwen writes: "The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become, instead, the means to it."

But pride works contrary to this process. Pride opposes affliction and humility. If we fight against our afflictions and seek the favor of the world, God opposes us. But if we humble ourselves, acknowledge our poverty, and seek God, then we can receive his grace. God opposes us only because he is jealous for us and longs to bless us. It is in our brokenness that we receive the greatest gifts.

This was the testimony of many who shared their poems of brokenness with us a couple of weeks ago. In the midst of their deepest trials they had found God and his grace. The very things they feared they would not possess in life were the things that God had in store for them all along. That is because "God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble."

Trials and afflictions open up our wounded hearts. In response, we grasp for pleasures to numb the pain, to hide the hurt, to gain the love and acceptance that we so desperately long for; then we become angry when our efforts are unsuccessful. The anger that we manifest only reveals to us the depth of our pain and the deep needs of our souls. The question to ask when someone explodes is not, "Why are you so mad?" but, "What hurts so badly?" The deeper problem is that we are seeking the answer to our hurts through our sensual desires. We are trying to find love, affection and approval by being

friends with the world. When this happens, we empower people and circumstances to destroy us. James says that this is spiritual adultery. And not only that, it is emotional suicide. As the Bride of Christ, we are leaving the One who wants to pour out his love upon us in an effort to find it somewhere else. Christ longs to be a husband to us. He longs to care for us. He is jealous for our affections.

The real issue, of course, is, do we believe this? Do we believe that God can bestow upon us a greater grace? Is he big enough to meet all our needs in Christ Jesus? If we do not believe that, we will continue to be angry people who explode when we do not get what we want. We will continue to try and befriend the world, and God will oppose us. We will go through life with a chip on our shoulder, a burr in our saddle, a scowl on our face. Let us humble ourselves before God so that his marvelous grace can fill our souls. Then we will be less contentious, less quarrelsome. We will be sweeter and easier to live with, and our concern will be for the needs of others, not our own selfish desires.

Humility is the spiritual answer to the conflicts and quarrels that arise among us as a result of our own pursuits.

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James 4:7-12

Tenth Message

John Hanneman

January 5, 1997

THE HARD WORK OF HUMILITY

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

Dave Karnes and I went to the same high school and we were fraternity brothers in college. Dave was a great swimmer; he went to college on a scholarship. He became fraternity president and was deeply involved in student government. He was good-looking and very popular. After college, he went on to law school. He did quite well, working for a big law office in Omaha. Later, he was appointed to a White House Fellowship. His wife worked for Barbara Bush when George Bush was Vice President. In 1988, when a senator from Nebraska died, Dave was appointed to the United States Senate. At 38, he became the youngest member of the Senate. Over the years, my mother would send me newspaper clippings that kept me abreast of the career of Dave Karnes.

Subconsciously, I was always comparing myself and my career path with Dave Karnes. After graduating from college, I moved here to the Bay Area and took a job as an engineer. I worked for a couple of years, but then I too wanted to go back to college and study law. I had grown discontent with my job. I was looking for a position that would give me more status, something that might make me look more like Dave Karnes. I hid my selfish desires by saying things like, "I want to be a Christian lawyer." There is nothing wrong with wanting to become a lawyer; what was wrong was my motive. Shortly after I began law school, however, I began to see that what I really wanted was to exalt myself, acquire a title and stake my claim in the world. I was miserable. I quit school and, somewhat chagrined, began working again as an engineer. The experience showed me how prideful I was and how painful it is to be humbled.

Humility is a wonderful quality. We are drawn to people who are humble. We say of someone who demonstrates humility, "I like him. He is a humble person." No one feels drawn to prideful and arrogant people. When we meet them, we say things like, "I can't stand that guy. He is arrogant and pompous." Or we say, "She is so filled with herself."

Humility is a wonderful quality. But it is a quality that one does not come by easily or quickly. Most people tend to try and exalt themselves. Ironically, when they do this they become like the people they are not attracted to. If we are convinced that we are humble, then we probably are not. On this point, C. S. Lewis wrote:

If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

Pride is the topic under discussion in our study this morning in chapter 4 of the New Testament book of James. Up to this point in his letter, James has had a lot to say about trials and suffering. According to the apostle, trials are events and circumstances that we encounter which produce suffering and hardship. Strictly speaking, trials are not the result of our sin, rather they are part of the maturing and perfecting process that God orchestrates for our lives. Trials

produce pressure, and we are tempted to sin in response, but this letter instructs us how to respond wisely to such pressures.

In our last study, we saw that anger is one of the ways we respond when we come under the pressure of trials. Suffering unmasks the deep needs of our hearts, and we try to satisfy those needs through acquiring possessions, by placing expectations on people around us, and by trying to make life go according to our agenda. We try to get the world to love us, and when we fail, we become angry, jealous and less dependent on God.

Our angry responses reveal the deeper issue of pride. We forget that "friendship with the world is hostility towards God," because God opposes the proud. Our efforts to get what we think we want are blocked by God. He is ready to give us life and joy and peace, but in order to have these things we must become humble. As James will say, "God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble." Humility, then, is the solution to the anger we sometimes feel because of the pride that lies beneath the surface.

Let's look now at humility from James' perspective, beginning in chapter 4, verse 7:

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (James 4:7-10 NASB)

James is commanding the action required based upon what he has said previously: "Therefore, since God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble, then submit, resist, draw near," and so on. I like the way Eugene Peterson puts this in his book, *The Message*:

So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet.

We don't understand humility, really. Being humble doesn't mean you have to be a doormat, that you can never win at anything or that people are free to take advantage of you. Being humble does not mean that you can't have opinions. It doesn't mean that you have to look like a bum. It doesn't mean that you can't aspire to be a lawyer.

The word "humble" means "to make low." Humility is the opposite of pride, which seeks to exalt itself by making comparisons with others. The essence of pride is seeking to put yourself above others and regarding yourself as superior. Humility, in contrast, eliminates comparisons and competition, because your identity and your feelings about yourself are not determined by such things as how you

look, how much money you have, what kind of job you hold, or how difficult your circumstances are in comparison to others.

This is the context of our study. In the midst of the trials which these brethren were suffering, pride was causing them to compare themselves with the rich and beautiful; their wanting to make friends with the world was causing tension among them.

The main thrust of these verses is summed up in verse 10: "humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord." All the other commands given describe what it means to be humble before God. These eight or so commands are gathered up around two basic ideas: one has to do with how we view God; the other with how we view ourselves.

The first three commands, submit, resist, draw near, deal with our relationship with God and whether or not he is in control of our lives. When we are proud and arrogant, we imagine that we ourselves are in control and that the results are up to us. We are unwilling to submit our lives to God, let alone to people. But if that is how we feel, we are deceiving ourselves. We were created to worship and to serve. If we do not worship God, then we will worship and serve everything that the devil places in our path. If we do not give God control of our lives, then we will abdicate that position to the devil, either directly or indirectly.

Humility demands that we are aware of this truth and that we stop trying to run our own lives. Humility involves giving God control. We must submit to him, sell out completely to him, and give him the right to do with us as he wills, not as we will. Becoming humble, therefore, involves a choice. We have to decide whose camp we are in. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. We can't straddle the fence and procrastinate. We must pick whom we will align ourselves with, who will receive our affections.

There are two aspects to this choice: resisting the devil, and drawing near to God, saying no and saying yes. First, humility involves resisting the devil and saying no to the pleasures that entice us, holding out the hope of satisfaction and fulfillment. This is hard work. On all sides we hear the world saying to us: "Touch me, love me, feel me. If you taste me, all the pain of your trials will be relieved. If you follow me, you will be exalted and lifted up." We must see that if we do not stand against evil, then evil will overrun us. We will be unable to withstand the subtle temptations and deceptive maneuvers of the devil, especially when we are under the pressure of a trial. If we are truly humble, we will not try to short-circuit what God is doing in our lives by reaching out for counterfeit promises. We will endure, trust, and wait for God.

James offers a wonderful promise here: If we resist the devil, the devil will flee from us. The opposite is true too, of course. If we do not resist him, he will not depart from us. But when we are willing to say no, then the devil will learn that we have chosen to let God have control of our lives. All too often our problem with sin and evil is that we haven't really decided to say an emphatic no to temptation. Instead, we say things like, "I wish the devil would leave me alone." This is why we struggle, because we haven't decided ahead of time to truly resist.

The second aspect of this choice is that we must draw near to God. This is the saying yes part. The trials of life can devastate us and drain us of all our resources. When that happens, our tendency at times is to blame God for our woes and seek our own solutions. But James commands us to draw near to God, to believe that he is in control no matter how hopeless things appear. At such times we must cling to God and place all our hopes in him. The kingdom of

God is drawing near to us, therefore we need to draw near to God. This promise is very real to James. If we give God control in the midst of our circumstances, he will keep us safe; he will be close to us. Even when times are difficult, the promise is that we can experience intimacy with God. "The nearness of God is my good," says the psalmist.

Jesus is our ultimate example of choosing, trusting, and resisting. He was "meek and humble in heart." He stood against the schemes of Satan. In the wilderness, the devil made a number of seemingly attractive offers to Jesus. He told him, in effect, that he could have everything he wanted, without any suffering. But Jesus said no to every offer of the devil. In the garden, our Lord was in agony to the point of sweating blood. He was tempted to flee, but he resisted. He submitted his life to the Father. He said yes to God, to his Father's will, even though that would cost him his life. Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:8: "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Humility demands that we follow in the steps of Jesus. We must let God call the shots, no matter the cost. We must choose to let God have control of our lives.

The second idea that James presents here is that we must have a realistic view of ourselves and the sin that is in our lives. We can't become humble unless we deal ruthlessly with the desires and pleasures that wage war within our members.

James calls us to purity. The simple truth is that we are sinners, we are double-minded. We try to both please God and indulge our sin at the same time. Pride has convinced us that we deserve good things, not the bad things that have happened to us

Humility demands that we see ourselves as who we are, not who we think we are; that instead of gloating over our achievements we should look at the depth of our depravity and weep. "Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom." We have to take the appropriate action, cleansing our hands and purifying our hearts. The reference to "hands" has to do with actions; the reference to "hearts" points to internal attitudes. The extent of purification here is severe. It is a serious issue. We must not pacify our selfish desires. "Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out."

Jesus illustrated this truth very well in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, from Luke 18:10:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (Luke 18:10-14)

Looking at our own depravity has the effect of correcting our wrong attitudes. When I became a Christian, I was on a downward spiral. It scares me when I reflect on where I would be without God. I might well have ended up in the gutter, holding a bottle in a brown bag. I cringe when I think about some of the things I did. When I

realize what I am capable of doing, I weep. When I see where I am today, by the grace of God, I am humbled. This is what forces me to my knees and draws me closer to God.

Why do we think that we deserve anything? Why do we think that we should come out on top? Why do we expect that life should go our way? The fact is, if God were to give us what we deserve, and deal justly with our sin, it would not be a pretty sight.

James is saying, “Stop worrying about what is happening to everyone else and purify your own heart. Get down on your knees and be cleansed, through the blood of Christ.” When we do this, God is faithful. His grace and mercy will wash over us, and the rage, resentment, envy and the desire for conflict will be flushed away. We will become grateful and content people, agents of grace towards others.

The choice in humility is letting God have control; the action of humility is purifying our hearts.

If we follow James’ words, if we humble ourselves before God, he will exalt us. Jesus refers to this same truth several times. Peter makes reference to it in his letter. It’s ironic to think that when we are controlled by our own pride and selfish interests, we try to lift ourselves up, but the result is that God will oppose us and humble us. But when we are willing to do the hard work of humility and making ourselves low, then it is God who will lift us up. God does it, not ourselves.

Now, this may not happen exactly according to our time frame or in the way we desire. We may have to wait a long time. But of this we can be certain: God will keep his word.

The proof of this is what God did for his own Son. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul, from the book of Philippians:

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:8-11)

The one who humbled himself the most has been exalted the most.

But then Paul informs us in Ephesians that we too will be exalted with Christ: “He made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.”

God will exalt those who believe in him, even as he exalted his own Son.

Isaiah 58:13-14 describes this promise very beautifully in these words:

**“If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot
From doing your own pleasure on My holy day,
And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable,
And shall honor it, desisting from your own ways,
From seeking your own pleasure,
And speaking your own word,
Then you will take delight in the LORD,
And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isa 58:13-14)**

God gives a greater grace. And even while we wait for this final and complete exaltation, he pours out his riches upon us in Christ Jesus. We can rest and wait upon him.

I can attest to this myself. When I quit law school, I was a broken young man. I started working and raising a family. I told the Lord that if he wanted me to be an engineer for the rest of my life, then that was fine with me. Gradually, I began to get more involved in ministry. In amazing ways, God provided people to help me learn how to study. He introduced me to people who taught me languages. I made seemingly bizarre choices to turn down promotions so that I could spend time in ministry. I loved teaching. But I knew my own heart. I had tried to make my own way once before. So I told the Lord, “If you want me go into ministry, then I will. But I am not going to try and make it happen.” Eventually, the call came, and I began a new career at Peninsula Bible Church. When I look back now, I’m glad I didn’t finish law school. I am so excited about what I am doing now. When I tried to get my own way, God blocked it. But then he gave me everything I desired. When I moved into ministry, I took a big cut in pay, but I have never lacked. I am amazed at the grace of God in my life.

The things that God does are the best things.

Finally, James addresses the practical application of humility in the body of Christ. Verses 11-12:

Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor? (4:11-12)

James commands that we not speak against each other and that we not judge our neighbor. This brings us back to the conflicts and quarrels mentioned in verse 1. It is pride that leads us into conflict. Pride makes us point out other people’s faults. Pride gets us involved in petty arguments. Pride wants to make people feel guilty and condemned.

The reason we are not to judge others is that if we do, we are regarding ourselves as outside the law. We become a judge of the law rather than doers of the law. But there is only one Judge and Lawgiver: God himself. It is our pride that makes us want to take his place. But we are not able to save or destroy; only God can do that. Therefore, we are called to not condemn others and pronounce sentence. We are called to judge sin, but not to judge people. We are to see ourselves as no better or no worse than anyone else. This does not mean that we are not to be involved in other people’s lives and hold one another accountable. What it means is that we must not try to act like judges and exalt ourselves at the expense of others; we recognize that we are sinners and that there is plenty of work to be done in cleansing our own hearts. There is one God; we are all brothers. If we are helping others deal with areas of sin, we must do so with grace and humility.

Truly humble people desire purity in their hearts. They do not try to control God, their own lives or the lives of others. They respond to trials with grace and do not become angry. They do not point out the faults of others, but rather lift them up and encourage them. They do not compare themselves with others and compete with them. They are content with who they are and what they have. They can befriend those who have much more than they and still not

feel that they lack anything. Humble people are grateful for the grace of God working in their lives.

Humility requires that we have a proper estimation of ourselves in the sight of God. We must see God for who he is, and ourselves for who we are. This is not a course for the fainthearted. We cannot do this in our own strength. But God promises that he will work with us. He wants to be God in all areas of our lives. That is why he humbles us, often through pain and disappointment, but only because he wants to give us a greater grace. He gives us what we don't think we want, but what in the end turns out to be everything we really desired.

One by one He took them from me
All the things I valued most;
'Til I was empty-handed,
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth's highways, grieving,
In my rags and poverty.
Until I heard His voice inviting,
"Lift those empty hands to Me!"

Then I turned my hands toward heaven,
And He filled them with a store
Of His own transcendent riches,
'Til they could contain no more.

And at last I comprehended
With my stupid mind, and dull,
That God cannot pour His riches
Into hands already full.

— Source Unknown

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Catalog No. 1060

James 4:13-17

Eleventh Message

John Hanneman

January 12, 1997

THE FOLLY OF THE SELF-MADE MAN

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

During my college days, I was part of the hippie generation. The theme of the day was the “search for truth.” Young people were tossing aside the traditions, values, and hypocrisy of their parents. The Vietnam War brought campus unrest, apathy, and a search for identity. Our favorite songs were “Freedom” and “Blowin’ in the Wind.” Lyrics like “Hello darkness, my old friend,” from the movie *The Graduate*, seemed to capture the spirit of the age.

In the 1980’s, the pendulum swung the other way. Transcendental meditation became transcendental acquisition. Money became the root of all good. Power and possessions were the twin themes of that decade when the yuppie generation came into their own. The American dream was said to be realized when you had your own business, preferably a start-up company. That generation was characterized by the hard charging, aggressive, dynamo who wanted to have it all, no matter what the cost.

The yuppie mentality may be somewhat out of fashion these days, but much of its philosophy still permeates society, especially here in Silicon Valley. We live in a high-powered, high-energy, ambitious, profit-seeking area, surrounded by people who are planning their future successes with all the confidence in the world. Their philosophy beckons us: “Take charge of your destiny.” “You can be the next CEO.” “Take our course in motivation and management skills and watch your star rise.”

Society exalts self-made men and women, holding them up as models to emulate. Christians face great temptation to follow this “spirit of the age” and strive for fame and recognition. Perhaps some of us are not happy about what God is doing with our investments. Everyone else seems to be getting ahead. Maybe it is time to change brokers and take back control of our lives.

How should Christians respond to this 1990’s philosophy of life? Is there hope for the not so rich and famous? The book of James is built around the theme of how to respond to the pressures of life in a godly and wise way, how Christians build spiritual character and maturity in the midst of suffering and hardship. The world confronts believers with many challenges. One of the most subtle of these is the notion that people who have power and money have a decided advantage in life. Thus we may be tempted to go along with the philosophy of the day that says if we have to suffer, we should do it in style.

James addresses this very issue in the text to which we come this morning from chapter 4 of his letter, beginning in verse 13 and continuing through chapter 5, verse 12. The literary structure of these verses is instructive. In 4:13 and in 5:1, James uses the formula, “Come now, you who say,” and “come now, you rich.” He is addressing two kinds of individuals, warning them of their wrong thinking and their impending doom. In verse 7 of chapter 5, he addresses the brethren, saying: “therefore, brethren, etc.” I rather think that the individuals addressed as “you who say” and “you rich” are not believers, since James makes a point to address “brethren” as such throughout his

letter. However, the truth set out here is for the benefit of believers too, to help them recognize the folly of the world and respond righteously to the fads of the day. The temptations that are exposed in this text are very real for all of us. These truths are given for our benefit, not for some friend or acquaintance we wish were here to learn from them.

We will look at this text in three lessons. This morning, we will talk about the folly of the self-made man, from verses 13-17 of chapter 4:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.” But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin. (James 4:13-17 NASB)

James is addressing the self-willed, independent, self-guided and proud, the driven, self-seeking men and women whose goal is to dignify and glorify themselves, the kind of people who say: “Here is what I am going to do. I will start a business, make a profit, and succeed in life.” This kind of person makes a plan and intends to implement it through self-effort, no matter what the cost. This attitude is characterized by a cartoon I saw once of an executive dictating a letter to his secretary. When he had finished, he told her: “Type that up, make ten thousand copies, and send them to all the important people in the world!”

Verse 16 has a phrase which describes this person: “you boast in your arrogance.” “Arrogance” here means “one who makes more of himself than reality justifies,” “one who promises more than he can perform.” This is the word that John uses to describe the boastful pride of life, in 1 John 2:16. “Boasting” here is self-glorification. In the Bible, this word describes the attitude of fools and the ungodly. To “boast” in something means to trust in it. The man in our text might well be labeled the “boastful man.” Because he boasts in his ability to plan and accomplish, he trusts in himself.

Once again we note the problem with pride, which James has been focusing on in this chapter. Pride seeks to exalt self. According to the apostle, pride is the root of anger. Now we learn that it is pride that makes us want to run our own lives, seek our own glory, and boast in our future plans. This is the philosophy that drives society here in the Bay Area. I sensed the same thing when I visited New York a couple of years ago. It is impossible not to feel the energy and drive of that city. I can see how they call New York “the city that never sleeps.”

Why are we tempted to be self-directed and self-made? One characteristic of pride is that it is always making comparisons with oth-

ers. It is pride that drives us to succeed, to climb to the top and become autonomous. On another level, we think we can handle life by trying to control everything that happens to us. We fear a lot of things—being hurt or poor or ordinary or lonely—and we try to counter these fears by seeking to control the direction our lives take. At times we don't even know we are doing this.

The Christian brethren who received this letter were poor and oppressed. They were tempted to seek control of their own destiny, to become like the world—and many Christians are no different today.

But James says that everything is not as it might appear on the surface. He lists three things that are wrong with this approach to life. First, life is unpredictable and uncontrollable: “you do not know.” We do not know what life will be like tomorrow. Of one thing we can be certain, and that is that life is very uncertain. There are no guarantees for what tomorrow will bring, no matter how well we plan or how talented we are. We cannot control what will happen. We may wake up tomorrow and find that our circumstances are completely changed and things will never be the same again. We may well be struck with illness or injury. An earthquake may destroy everything we had counted on. Our job may force us to move out of state. Think about all the unfortunate people who have been made homeless by the recent floods. Think about all the people whose lives were forever changed on December 7th, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day.

Charles Swindoll has a good word for us here:

Man's knowledge seems impressive—awesome. We can split atoms, we can build skyscrapers, transplant kidneys, program computers, explore and explain outer space, and even unknot the problems of ecology. But when it comes to tomorrow, our knowledge plunges to zero... Tomorrow may bring sickness, sorrow, or tragedy. It may announce an answer to your waiting prayer. It may introduce you to prosperity, the beginning of a friendship, a choice opportunity for sharing your Lord...or just another twenty-four hours of waiting, trusting, and claiming His presence. It may not even come! God may choose this very day to intervene and take you Home—either by death or by Rapture. We can speculate, we can dread, we can dream—but we do not know.

You have probably heard the story of the stock broker who was granted one wish by a genie. The man had a brilliant idea: he asked for the stock market returns one year in the future. The genie granted him his wish. As the man was scanning the stocks, figuring out how he was going to make a killing, he glanced at the opposite page, and there he saw his own name among the obituaries!

The Bible has many warnings about this kind of thinking. James says: “We do not know.” The Proverb says: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (27:1).

Secondly, James gives an appropriate metaphor: “you are like a vapor.” He compares man to a vapor, a gas that disappears into the air, invisible to the eye. Life is brief, temporary, and insubstantial. It lingers for just a short moment and then it disappears. One puff and it is gone.

The psalmist was well aware of this, as Psalm 39 demonstrates:

**Lord, make me to know my end,
And what is the extent of my days,
Let me know how transient I am.
Behold, Thou hast made my days as handbreadths,
And my lifetime as nothing in Thy sight,**

**Surely every man at his best is a mere breath.
Surely every man walks about as a phantom;
Surely they make an uproar for nothing;
He amasses riches, and does not know who will gather them.
(Ps 39:4-6)**

Listen to the words of Moses, from Psalm 90:

**For a thousand years in Thy sight
Are like yesterday when it passes by,
Or as a watch in the night...
As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years,
Or if due to strength, eighty years,
Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow;
For soon it is gone and we fly away. (Ps 90:4, 10)**

When I look at my children I can see how true this is. One is in college, and another will be leaving next year. I have just two more years with my youngest child. Twenty years seemed to disappear in a flash. Life is very short. My own body testifies to this. I have a bad knee, a bad back and a bad neck. I can't run anymore. I have retired three times from basketball. Every time I play, I think to myself, this could be my last game.

Life is fleeting. My father worked hard all his life to save up for retirement. His biggest fear was that when he retired, he would die. Shortly after he retired, he had triple-bypass surgery, and a few years later he died of cancer. What he feared most came to pass.

It is important to comprehend this truth and see ourselves from the right perspective. We think that life is going to go on forever, so we make plans, expending a lot of effort to try and make everything perfect. But then, like a puff of breath, life is over. The problem is, we take ourselves too seriously. But when we compare ourselves to God, history, and creation, when we compare our seventy or eighty years to eternity, we get a grip on reality. Surely every man, whether he be Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Caesar, Mickey Mantle or Joe Montana, every man even at his best is but a mere breath.

Thirdly, boasting is contrary to faith and trust. Life is unpredictable and uncontrollable. God intends it to be that way. He controls the universe. He orders the affairs of the world. He has designed life so that man will have a trusting relationship with him. We tend to boast in the things in which we trust. That is why, when we boast in ourselves, our plans and our abilities, we are declaring that we are trusting in ourselves. When we boast in God, however, that is a sign that we are trusting in him.

Self-glorification is wrong because it fails to acknowledge God as the giver of all good and instead tries to usurp his glory.

Boasting is contrary to faith and trust. According to Paul, when we acknowledge that our salvation comes by faith, all boasting is excluded. Abraham could not boast in his works before God. The Jew in the New Testament boasted falsely in the law, but Paul says that Christians are the “true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3:3). The boastful man says: “This is what I will do.” The man of faith says: “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” The man of faith is willing to acknowledge that God is in control, and he submits to God's will.

So that is the wrong thinking of the boastful man. Life is short, unpredictable and uncontrollable; thus, boasting is contrary to faith in God. Jesus told the story of the man who had an abundance of crops, so much so that he resolved to tear down all his storehouses

and build bigger ones. He thought his future was completely secure and certain, that he could eat, drink, and be merry. But he was so wrong, for God said to him: “You fool, you do not know that this very night your soul is required of you.”

Thus James delivers the bottom line, based on the evidence that he has set out. Boasting is not just foolish and futile, it is an anti-God way of living. James doesn't pull any punches. Boasting is evil and sinful. If you know the good thing to do and you don't do it, that is sin. If you know that God is in control and yet you do not live in submission to him and do not trust him, then you are sinning. If you know that you should not be seeking to exalt yourself but should be caring for the widow and orphan, that is sin. It isn't enough merely to know the truth; James challenges us to be “doers of the word.”

Boasting does another thing: it leads to emptiness. When we boast in what we will do, when we trust in ourselves, and even when we succeed in accomplishing our goals, we are left unsatisfied and unfulfilled. The prophet Habakkuk put it this way:

**Furthermore, wine betrays the haughty man,
So that he does not stay at home.
He enlarges his appetite like Sheol,
And he is like death, never satisfied. (Hab 2:5)**

We call this “destination sickness.” We boast, plan, control and achieve, and then we reach our goal. We are satisfied for a moment, but we find that this too leads to a feeling of emptiness; it is never enough. And so we make another boast and drive ourselves towards a higher goal. If we stop, we die.

Some Christians, too, are driven people. They can hardly think of anything except trying to accomplish the next goal. I remember one day complaining to my daughter about my feeling that I was not accomplishing much. “I can't relax,” I told her, “I feel I am wasting time.” Sara said: “You are not wasting God's time.”

A self-guided life is a misdirected existence because it depends on self, not on God. This philosophy of life denies some very basic principles. It is evil, it is sin, and it results in emptiness.

How then should we live? Let us reflect on two points. First, we are called to trust in God, not merely acknowledge him but trust him for our brief span of existence, even when we encounter various kinds of trials. The text does not say that we should never plan or attempt to accomplish things. We are free to make our plans, but then we must say, “If God wills, this is what I will do.” We make plans, but God guides our steps. We submit our plans to him, but he reserves the right to overrule and change the direction of our lives. The boastful man does not do any of these things of course, but we are called to a much wiser course of action.

We must be careful here, however, because we can err on both sides of this truth. Like the boastful man, we can take control, build our kingdom, and try to protect ourselves from hardship—at least, we can try to do these things. But we can err on the other extreme, too. We can refuse to do anything until we sense that circumstances are perfect. So we become paralyzed. We try to figure out everything and order life according to our liking. But by the time we get it all figured out, life is over. I see this tendency in myself, and I see it in the younger generation, too. This isn't trusting God, either. Pride is

at the root of this, too. James says it isn't just a matter of not doing the bad; if we know the good thing to do and don't do it, that is sin.

Many of us take life too seriously. We dwell so much on the temporary that we miss the eternal. Life will never be perfect. Every day brings its own risks. We are not called to be boastful, but neither are we called to play everything safe. We are called to live life fully, trusting in God as we go.

Secondly, we are called to boast, but not in ourselves. The Bible says there are things in which we can legitimately boast. Philippians 3:3 says we are to boast in Christ Jesus. Romans 5:11 says we are to boast in God. Romans 5:2 tells us to boast in the hope of the glory of God. Galatians 6:14 says: “But may it never be that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

But we are inclined to boast in our efforts to build permanency, to glorify ourselves. When we do this in the world, with the world's means, we are being foolish, because life is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and brief. Remember that God opposes the proud and the arrogant. If we are going to boast then, we should boast in that which is permanent and eternal. Let us boast in God, in Christ, and in the cross, in our hope of salvation and in the future hope of glory. These are the things that are predictable and everlasting.

But there is something else in which Christians can boast. James says that we are to boast in our low position, because God will exalt us. Paul says we are to boast in tribulations (Romans 5:3), because suffering and humility are the very things that produce an “eternal weight of glory.” We boast in our suffering because it is by means of suffering that God is transforming our souls and preparing us for our permanent place of glory.

James opens this letter with the words, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.” It seems absurd, but when you think about it, it makes all the sense in the world. The world boasts in its temporary accomplishments, but the Christian boasts in the eternal accomplishments of God. And part of the eternal working of God is the deep work that he does in us, if we so allow him, through disappointments, difficulties, and suffering. It is through these things that God transforms us into heavenly creatures.

The glory that we seek is a God-given desire.

Tennyson wrote:

Thou madest man, he knows not why.
He thinks he was not made to die.

God is preparing us for a glory that surpasses our wildest dreams. In life we work, build and achieve, but we should not boast in these things. Let us boast instead in that which is truly glorious: our God, our Lord, our salvation, our humiliation, and our tribulations. Should we boast in vapors that disappear in a breath, or in the God of all creation who is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory? The choice is obvious. God grant that we may, by faith, choose eternal life. Life is short, but God is forever.

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James 5:1-6

Twelfth Message

John Hanneman

January 19, 1997

THE FOLLY OF THE RICH MAN

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

It's probably safe to say that at one time or another, all of us can relate to the song of Tevya, "If I Were A Rich Man," from *Fiddler on the Roof*:

I'd build a big tall house with rooms by the dozen
right in the middle of the town,
A fine tin roof with real wooden floors below.
There would be one long staircase just going up,
and one even longer coming down,
and one more leading nowhere just for show.

I'd fill my yard with chicks and turkeys and geese
and ducks for the town to see and hear,
squawking just as noisily as they can.
And each loud quack and cluck and gobble and honk
will land like a trumpet in the ear,
As if to say here lives a wealthy man....

Lord who made the lion and lamb;
You decreed I should be what I am.
Would it spoil some vast eternal plan,
If I were a wealthy man?

Oh to be rich! How wonderful life would be! When the plumbing broke down, we could call a repair man and not spend Saturday fixing it ourselves. We could get a new car every year. We would never have to set foot in the repair shop and cringe when we heard how much repairs were going to cost. We wouldn't have to stay at Uncle Fred's during summer vacation to save the expense of a couple of nights in a hotel. We could call a travel agent and book two weeks in the Caribbean. When we needed new furniture, we could redecorate the whole house at the same time. If we didn't feel like cooking, we wouldn't have to think twice about going out for dinner.

A popular television show pays homage to the wealthy. We are allowed to tour their houses—but only on the screen. How pleasant life would be if we didn't have to worry about making ends meet. Some fantasize about winning the lottery. Others dream about a start-up business or going public with the business they have. Yet others dream about collecting royalties from a new invention or a best-selling novel.

The desire for riches and the pursuit of wealth are very tempting indeed.

Money and possessions become even more desirable when we are in tough circumstances. When life knocks us down and we feel overwhelmed, we want protection and security from the storms that beat against us. That is when we are tempted to grow envious and resentful, to be sarcastic and cynical toward those who seem to have everything.

In our studies in the letter of James we have been learning how Christians should respond to the pressures of life. The brother of the Lord wrote this epistle to some very poor Christians to instruct them how to deal with the temptations they were facing because of

their oppressive circumstances. One temptation that we continually face is having to deal with the thought that if we acquired wealth we could somehow escape the problems that life brings. But James says that nothing could be further from the truth.

In our last study, James exposed the foolishness of the boastful man, the self-made individual who thinks he can control his own destiny. Today we will look at the folly of the rich man. Chapter 5, verse 1.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure. Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you. (James 5:1-6 NASB)

I do not think the individual being addressed here is a believer. Notice that he is introduced in the same way as the boastful man, in 4:13: "Come now, you rich." We have already encountered this person. He is the one who actually should be boasting in his humiliation, his low position, because, like the flowering grass that wilts in the summer sun, he, too, will fade away. This is the one whom the brethren were being tempted to treat favorably. When he came into their midst, they offered him the seat of honor, while the poor brother was sent to sit in a corner, on the floor. They were favoring the rich man even though he was the one who was causing much of their distress; and they looked upon him with envy.

But now James deals with this man in full. The first thing he says to him is the terse instruction: "weep and howl for the miseries coming upon him." Years ago, I took my children to the supermarket one evening. We had just eaten dinner, and they were rather energized. Soon they began running up and down the aisles, laughing and giggling. You can let your children do that on an airplane, because then the stewardess will serve you first, but not in a grocery store! I told them they had to settle down, but to no avail. They thought they were safe because we were out in public. Finally, I grabbed them and calmly said that when we got home, they would get a spanking. Suddenly, all their laughter turned to gloom. They began to "weep and howl for the misery coming upon them."

That is what James is saying to get the attention of the rich man. The man is laughing and enjoying life, thinking that he is secure and protected. He has life figured out. There is nothing left for him to do except eat, drink, and be merry. But James flattens this fat cat. The

jig is up. Dire consequences are coming. Instead of laughing and living it up, the rich man should be weeping.

What has this man done to suffer such consequences? James takes his readers into the courtroom to present the evidence that convicts him. He begins by calling upon four witnesses to share their testimony.

The first witness is the false treasure in which the rich man has placed his trust. James shows what happens in the future to all the beautiful things that filled the rich man's closet and his jewelry box. James take us, not to a Neiman Marcus store, but to a junkyard. The man's riches are decayed. His garments are moth-eaten; his gold and silver have rusted.

The word here for "rotted" refers to fruit that has rotted. Have you ever picked up a tomato that had been lying on the ground for days? The part you can see is a beautiful red, but when you pick it up, the bottom is all black and decayed and infested with bugs. The fruit is repulsive to the eyes; it is worthless.

And so is everything in which the rich man had placed his hope: it is all decayed and rotten. It isn't beautiful. It doesn't shine. It isn't permanent. It doesn't matter now whether his possessions were purchased at Bloomingdales or at the Five and Dime. It is all worthless junk. This witness testifies that everything in which the rich man has placed his confidence is just so much decayed and rusted junk.

In the future, there will be no benefit to the money and possessions we acquire on earth. We can't take it with us. If we put our hope in earthly treasures, we will be sadly disappointed.

The book of Proverbs agrees:

**Do not weary yourself to gain wealth,
Cease from your consideration of it.
When you set your eyes on it, it is gone.
For wealth certainly makes itself wings,
Like an eagle that flies toward the heavens. (Prov 23:4-5)**

The second witness is the wages that have been withheld from the laborers in the rich man's field, and the cry of the workers who plowed and harvested to provide him a life of pleasure. Not only does the Lord of Hosts hear the cry of the workers, the wages themselves are personified: they raise their voice to testify on behalf of the oppressed workers.

"Lord of Hosts" is an exalted title for God in the Old Testament. God is a glorious King who rules over the entire universe. The word "Hosts" also means armies. God is a great King who commands an enormous army that brings victory and salvation. This is the King who has heard the cry of the oppressed—not good news for the rich man.

The point here is the rich man has prospered unethically, immorally, illegally, and unjustly. His gains are ill-gotten. He has taken advantage of defenseless people, using them so that he may live in comfort. But God has heard the cries of the witness.

It is tempting to cheat on taxes or fudge on expense reports. Everyone does it, we are assured. It is tempting to figure out angles in order to get a little more money from the insurance company; to not pay people what they are worth; to take advantage of the illegal immigrant. But God is not fooled. We are the ones who are fooled if we think that we can get away with acquiring money and possessions through fraud, deceit, and unethical behavior. The very coins themselves will testify against us on the day of reckoning.

The third witness testifies as to the rich man's lifestyle. He has lived luxuriously—a life of wanton pleasure. These terms refer to animals which are well-fed and content from grazing in rich pasture. Indeed, the rich man is in "fat city." He lives very well; he has neither care nor need. Everything he wants he has, and he has the best.

Some of you may be asking, what is wrong with living luxuriously? The point is that the rich man lives only for himself. His life is characterized by gluttony and greed. He has acquired wealth merely to satisfy and please himself.

An enormously rich man complained to a psychiatrist once that despite his great wealth which enabled him to have whatever he wanted, he still felt miserable. The psychiatrist took the man to the window overlooking the street and asked, "What do you see?" The man replied, "I see men, women, and children." The psychiatrist then took the man to stand in front of a mirror and asked, "Now what do you see?" The man said, "I see only myself." The psychiatrist then said, "In the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass, and when you look through the glass in the window, you see others, but when you look into the glass of the mirror you see only yourself. The reason for this," said the psychiatrist, "is that behind the glass in the mirror is a layer of silver. When silver is added, you cease to see others. You only see yourself."

The fourth witness is a surprise. The rich man has condemned and murdered the righteous man, who does not resist. In other words, the greed of the rich man has caused the death, either directly or indirectly, of those whom he has oppressed. They were defenseless; they could not resist. James does not call this manslaughter; he calls it murder. The cost of the rich man's luxury is the lives of others.

This abstract phrase could well describe the death and crucifixion of Jesus. He was the righteous man who did not resist his own death. He did not speak out, but was led like a sheep to slaughter. The point may well be that the rich man is guilty of the same crime, the same capital offense as those who crucified our Lord.

The principle here is that if we set our hearts on wealth we will stop at nothing to attain it. We will oppress others, either directly or indirectly. We won't stop even if it costs them their livelihood or their lives. Stealing may well lead to murder, as people become objects to use and destroy.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that today is Sanctity of Life Sunday. Abortion is one of the great tragedies of our time. Oftentimes, it is greed and self-indulgence that lie behind the taking of the lives of the unborn. An untimely, unwanted child might well be deemed to inhibit the pursuit of wealth, success, and possessions. Some people will stop at nothing in their pursuit of ease and luxury, even if it means taking the life of one who cannot resist.

The witnesses have testified; the evidence has been labeled and presented. The judge has declared the rich man guilty, and sentenced him to death. James details the mode of execution. The end of the rich man is marked by two things that are entirely appropriate punishment for his crimes. Not only do his treasures witness against him, they end up destroying him. The rust that accumulates on his gold and silver becomes a poison that eats away his flesh. Like a fire, it consumes him. His possessions demand his life.

This man is described in Proverbs:

**But they lie in wait for their own blood;
They ambush their own lives.
So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence;**

It takes away the life of its possessors. (Prov 1:18-19)

Setting our hearts on acquiring riches and possessions has a way of consuming and poisoning our lives. The more we have, the more time we must spend keeping everything running. Possessions demand all our energies. Our focus becomes earthly, separating us from eternal things. This is simply a foreshadowing of what will happen to the rich man in the future.

The second thing is this: The rich “fatten themselves for the day of slaughter.” We have already seen that the words for living luxuriously and living a life of wanton pleasure are used of animals that are well fed. The rich man has grazed in a lush pasture but, like a cow or a sheep, he has gorged himself for a day of slaughter.

In the 1950’s, Yussif the Turk, the European wrestling champion, came to the United States to fight Strangler Lewis for the world championship and \$5,000. Yussif won, and insisted that the \$5,000 be paid in gold, which he stuffed in his championship belt. The money meant so much to him that he refused to remove the belt until he reached home safely. Boarding the first available ship to Europe, he headed home. But halfway across the Atlantic, the ship floundered in a storm and began to sink. In a panic, Yussif tried to jump into a lifeboat, but he missed, and went straight to the bottom of the ocean. His golden belt had become a golden anchor.

Proverbs has dire warnings for those who oppress the poor:

**He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor
Will also cry himself and not be answered. (Prov 21:13)**

**He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself
Or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty. (22:16)**

The end for the rich man is decidedly unpleasant. He has stored up his treasure for the last days. The wealth that he thought would save him and protect him has become the agent of his judgment. He reaps what he sows. Pay no attention to what the bumper sticker says; the one who “dies with the most toys” does not win, he loses. How appropriate that James commands the rich man to weep and howl for the misery coming upon him.

How can we apply this text for ourselves? The problem with the rich man is not his wealth, it is the way he acquires wealth and the manner in which he lives. There are not many among us who oppress people to gain riches. We are not running sweat shops; we are not involved in other kinds of illegal operations. Yet this text raises difficult questions. The fact is, most of us are wealthy compared with the rest of the world. We spend a great deal of time and energy thinking about money, planning our future, and deciding what things we should own.

It would be easy to rail against the rich and gloat because they are going to get what is coming to them. However, this text was written for brethren to give them hope and to help them endure suffering by knowing, first, the end of their oppressors; and second, that they might humble themselves before the Lord. The word for “miseries” here is the same term that James uses in chapter 4 to command the brethren to “be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom...Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” If we would avoid these future miseries, then we would be better served by humbling ourselves before the Lord. Rather than pointing a cynical finger at others, we would be wise to cleanse our own hearts and respond rightly regarding our wealth and our possessions.

There is no set formula here, and I certainly don’t want to motivate by guilt. However, in contrast to the rich man, I would have us reflect on these thoughts.

First, do not worry about the rich, either now or in the future. We should not waste time envying or resenting them. And we don’t have to worry about what will happen to them. God will take care of everything in due time. If all they have done is store up earthly treasures, then they will have nothing left for the future. There is no real reason to envy or resent them. We should feel sorry for them. Anyone who has to face the consequences laid out in this text deserves our sympathy. Who could not but feel sympathy for the rich man in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man? In the end, the rich man was forced to endure the torment, while Lazarus reposed in the bosom of the Lord.

James is saying that the rich man is a fool, and we too would be foolish if we spend our time envying, resenting or pampering him.

Second, let us put our trust and hope in eternal riches, “laying up treasures in heaven.” The rich man puts all his hope in what he gathers here on earth; the wise man realizes that none of these things will help him in the hereafter. Listen to the advice of Jesus:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matt 6:19-21)

**Riches do not profit in the day of wrath.
But righteousness delivers from death. (Prov 11:4)**

I am not saying that we should not have any material possessions or that we should not plan for the future. The wise man in Proverbs saves little by little. And some who deprive themselves of material things have such rotten attitudes that they become reverse snobs.

The real issue is, where is our treasure? In what do we place our hope? The problem, as Paul points out in 1 Timothy, is the love of money, the uncertainty of wealth and the priority we place on riches:

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil . . . Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. (1 Tim 6:9-10, 17)

If we love money, we won’t love God. Jesus himself said that: We cannot love God and Mammon. If we love the things of this earth, we will become separated from God. We will place our hope in all the wrong things. We will enjoy a moment of luxury in the present, but endless misery in the future. We must hold our possessions loosely, knowing that at some point we will lose all our money and all our possessions.

When we get to heaven, it will not matter whether we had a three-car garage here on earth. It won’t matter whether we traveled in Europe, swam in the tropics and or in New York. When we get to heaven, God’s glory will so overshadow all these things that they will seem like nothing in comparison. What will matter is whether we have invested in eternal things, heavenly treasures that do not rot or decay: acts of kindness, times of worship and prayer, listening to someone pour out his heart, working at the Crisis Pregnancy Center.

These activities may not bring earthly gain, but the investment for the future is unparalleled. “[F]or where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Third, let us regard our money and possessions as the means to bless others. As Christians, we are called to be generous. Generosity will keep us from hoarding, from loving money and being absorbed in self-luxury. And it would be wise to remember that we can be greedy, self-indulgent people whether we make a lot of money or very little. This is what Paul means when he tells Timothy to instruct the rich “to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they many take hold of that which is life indeed” (1 Tim 6:18-19).

Rather than regarding money as a means to bless ourselves, we must see it as a means to bless others. Rather than taking another’s life, we are to increase and enhance their life. Rather than oppressing others, we are to use our resources to encourage them and lift them up. Our future treasures are not just times spent in prayer, they are good works which God has prepared beforehand for us.

One of the ways we are called to bless others is to the give to the poor. James says that “pure and undefiled religion is to visit orphans and widows in their distress.” We must remember, as James said, that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. Of course, we are confronted almost daily with opportunities to give to apparently worthy causes. Sometimes it is difficult to determine who are the poor. Is that person standing on the street corner who demands money from you really needy or is he merely trying to manipulate you by guilt? But, there are genuinely poor people all over this world. Let us prayerfully take time before the Lord to determine our response.

**He who gives to the poor will never want,
But he who shuts his eyes will have many curses. (Prov 28:27)**

Several years ago, a Texas gemologist spotted a egg-shaped violet-and-blue rock in a plastic bin at a gem and mineral bazaar. He bought it from an amateur for ten dollars. After months of appraisal, it was revealed that the treasure was a 1,905-carat star sapphire, with an estimated uncut value of \$2.28 million dollars. The man said, “I’m astounded that this one pebble out of God’s universe will take care of my children’s lives. That makes me feel very good.” But somewhere, a rock hound is crying.

We must learn the true value of our treasures. Many of the things we place such a high value on today will be worthless in the future, while some of the things we are tempted to neglect will be found to be absolutely priceless.

Let us learn from the folly of the rich man and store up “treasures in heaven, where neither rust nor moth destroy.”

I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold,
I’d rather be His than have riches untold.

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Catalog No. 1062

James 5:7-12

13th Message

John Hanneman

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THE WISDOM OF PAINFUL PATIENCE

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

There is something within us that cries out for justice and resolution. No matter how tired we are of hearing about the O.J. Simpson trial, we still would like to know the truth so that there could be a just closure. The mystery surrounding the death of the little six-year-old girl in Colorado troubles us. We want the truth out in the open; we want the guilty party to be dealt with appropriately. Bill Cosby has said that he wants an airtight case against the killer of his son. He doesn't want events to be shrouded in mystery or to have evidence questioned.

Life has too many mysteries for our liking, especially when it comes to unjust actions and undeserved suffering. Our hearts cry out for resolution. We want things to make sense, to follow logical patterns of cause and effect. If someone does good, he or she should be rewarded. If someone breaks the law, there should be swift and appropriate justice. Hollywood has conditioned us to think this way. The bad guys look like they have won the day, but then the superhero arrives and everything is resolved in a nice neat package.

But life is not that simple. We ponder the difficult questions: Why did that airplane crash? Why are so many people starving in Africa? Why did that act of fraud go unpunished? We reflect on the mysteries of our own lives: How did I end up with this particular family? Why did I lose my job? Why did I lose my child? We would like God to put everything in order and make things clear. Life presents us with many more questions than answers. One thing we can be sure of is that no one is exempt from trials and suffering.

Knowing this, how should we live in the midst of these tensions? Why do we have to? In our studies in the book of James, we have been looking at the pressures and temptations brought about by trials, unfair treatment, oppression and suffering. Recently we have been discussing how the world deals with these pressures and temptations. We have looked at anger, pride, and friendship with the world. In our last two studies we have discussed the boastful man and the rich man. Some people try to control the future through pride and boasting; others try to avoid the pains of life by striving to become wealthy, even at the expense of others. James has pointed out the extreme folly of these approaches to life. The boastful man is foolish to think that he can control the future through his own efforts; the rich man stores up a poison for his judgment in the last days.

So once again we are faced with the question: How should we counter our more natural reactions to trials and suffering? After addressing the boastful man and the rich man, in verse 7 of chapter 5 now, James turns to the brethren, to Christians. Remember the literary structure of the text. In verse 13 of chapter 4, James writes: "Come now, you who say." In verse 1 of chapter 5, he writes: "Come now, you rich." But here, in verse 7 of chapter 5, he begins by saying: "Now therefore, brethren." What follows are his instructions as to how brethren should live. Chapter 5, verse 7:

Be patient therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being

patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. (James 5:7-11 NASB)

James begins with a series of commands and exhortations. He sets out the motivation for Christians to live this way, giving us both vision and assurance in the process. We begin by noticing four very important words that stand out in our text.

The apostle's first exhortation is to be "patient." This key word occurs four times here. The Greek word is made up of two words, one meaning "wrath" or "anger," the other meaning "far away." To be patient means to "put anger far away." In the Old Testament, this word is translated "longsuffering" or "forbearance." Frequently, the term is used to describe God. God withholds or restrains his righteous wrath with a view toward men and women coming to repentance. The same theme is reiterated in the New Testament. The theme is not renunciation but postponement. God's longsuffering is not swayed by emotions, but it very purposeful. We know that patience describes is an attribute of love (1 Corinthians 13); and it is one of the fruits of the Spirit listed by Paul in Galatians 5.

Patience is commanded by James because we can become angry at others and at God because of the seeming unfairness of life. The wicked seem to prosper. Faith in God does not result in pleasant circumstances. There seems to be no correlation between obedience and God's protection from the harsh things that oppress us. So we tend to respond in one of two ways. We cry out to God to come quickly so that he can even the score. We regard God as a cosmic referee who will level the playing field and put things in a way we can understand. Or we can take matters into our own hands. If God won't do anything about our circumstances, then we think it is up to us to bring order and balance. We take God's position and hand out divine sentences that seem appropriate to us for injustice suffered.

But James says we are to be "patient until the coming of the Lord." For those of you who attended our men's retreat, this seems to contradict what we heard last weekend. At the retreat we learned about venting our frustrations to God, because he is big enough to handle them. And this is a good place to start. Being patient doesn't mean that we are passive or fatalistic. But this is only part of the process. At some point we have to stop talking and begin listening, even though God seems slow to respond and circumstances have not changed. James has already said that the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. Ultimately we are called to patience.

James gives two reasons why we should be patient. First, the Lord is coming, and he will bring justice. Don't take matters into your own hands. Listen to the words of Peter: "But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up" (2 Pet 3:8-10).

We have to watch out lest we become so frustrated with the slowness of God and the injustice of circumstances that we put ourselves in God's place and start administrating his divine wrath and judgment. There is a difference between expressing angry feelings and assuming God's wrath. We are to be patient, knowing that the Lord is coming and everything will be taken care of. On that day, those who thought they were getting away with something will find their worst nightmare coming true. One that day it will not matter whether O.J. Simpson was convicted of a crime here on earth. If he murdered these people, then he will face God's wrath—and that will be worse than anything he will face here on earth.

Things will not make complete sense until the Lord comes. And make no mistake about it, that day will come. In Psalm 73, Asaph, the psalmist, expresses his frustration and anger at the prosperity of the wicked, but that was before he saw their end:

**When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight
Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
Then I perceived their end.
Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places;
Thou dost cast them down to destruction.
How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! (Ps 73:16-19)**

The second reason we must be patient is that God is waiting for the fruit in our lives to grow to full maturity. Just like a farmer waits patiently for the early and late rains so that his crop can mature, so also we are waiting with God for the completion of what he has begun. In the Bible, oftentimes rain is used as a symbol for the work of the Spirit. In this case, God is the farmer and we are the soil. He has sowed his Word into our hearts, and he has supplied the early rain. The fruit that is growing is the fruit of the Spirit—spiritual character—or as James says in chapter 3, the "wisdom from above." But now God is waiting for the late rains for the full harvest. We are to understand this process and wait patiently with God for the fruit to become mature.

But we are more likely to wait anxiously for God because we are frustrated with injustice, oppression, and suffering. Have you ever thought about the fact that God is waiting for us? He is being very patient, waiting for the fruit of spiritual maturity to grow in our lives so that we will be fit and ready to spend eternity with him.

Consider a newly planted vineyard. A good wine cannot be made from the first year's harvest of grapes. Ten years may pass before the new vines can produce a good wine. But once the vines age, then they will produce excellent grapes for many years. In the same way, spiritual maturity takes time; and God is waiting for that fruit to grow in our lives.

The second word in our text is "strengthen." The idea here is to support, fix firmly, or establish. In the Hebrew, the idea is to "set one's face, to fix one's eyes." This is what Jesus did when he set his face to go up to Jerusalem. The opposite of strengthen, however, is to be unstable and weak, undecided, without direction.

In the context of this letter, Christians are to wait patiently in the midst of suffering for the Lord's coming. As we are waiting, we are to establish our resolve, to be firm in our understanding as to what is happening at the moment and what will happen in the future. The implication is that we wait actively, not passively. We are not to adopt a defensive position; we must take the offense, actively trusting that God is doing something much bigger than anything we can see. Life is unfair. Many people suffer unjustly. But we know that is part of God's plan for us to come to full maturity. We are committed to allowing him to use suffering to perfect us. We are resolved to not seek friendship with the world and not favor the rich as a way of dealing with our problems and struggles. If we do not strengthen our hearts in this way, and if we doubt what God is doing, then we will be "driven and tossed by the wind, unstable in all our ways." In 1 Thessalonians, Paul exhorts Christians to love, "so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus" (1 Thess 3:13).

The third command has to do with our relationships with others within the body of Christ. James instructs us: "do not complain." Since the command is given in the present tense, it could be rendered: "stop complaining." "Complain" means to sigh or groan. We groan because of oppression, which causes suffering, and we want to be free from that. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that in this body we groan because we long for our heavenly abode. In Romans, we learn that we groan along with creation, waiting for the new heavens and the new earth and the transformation of our bodies.

Here in this letter, the deep groanings of the brethren resulting from suffering were causing tension within the family of God. In chapter 4, we learned that this led to conflicts and quarrels. One consequence of suffering is that it causes family breakdown, both in the church and in the home. We become impatient and we take out our frustrations on others. We try to control them. We point out their weaknesses. We judge one another's motives. We get angry at someone who has more than us or who suffers less than us. We grow critical and condemning. We expect other people to solve our problems.

James commands us to stop this behavior. The fact that we are oppressed, mistreated and cheated is never an excuse to lash out and take matters in our own hands, to take the place of God in seeing that others pay for their crimes.

Again, the reason we must stop complaining is the fact that the Lord is coming to judge. Complaining is judging, and we are not to judge one another lest we ourselves be judged. The real Judge is coming, and if he finds us judging, then he will judge us on the same basis as we are judging others. Listen to the words of Paul: "And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Col 3:12-13).

There is another word in our text that bears consideration. Technically, it is not a command, like the command to be patient, to strengthen or stop complaining. However, this word "endurance"

(which is repeated five times in this letter) helps to fill out how we are to respond to suffering. The word literally means to “remain under,” “to stay behind.” It carries the idea of patient expectation, of waiting on God. The wicked abandon hope in God; the ones who endure to the end will be saved. According to James, trials produce the quality of endurance, and endurance produces perfect character. Paul makes the same point in Romans 5. The seed that is sown in good soil, “these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance” (Luke 8:15) with endurance. Our model is Jesus. He endured the cross, despising the shame.

But this is not our natural response to suffering. Instead, we run, we hide, we groan, we complain. We try to escape the pressure as quickly as possible. And yet the word of God continually exhorts us to stay under the pressure and allow suffering to do the work that God wants it to do so that our character will be made perfect. This is the ultimate purpose behind many things we encounter in life. Life doesn't seem fair, but God works on building character in us through the intense heat of trials and suffering.

This then is the word James gives to believers: Put wrath far away, strengthen your hearts, stop complaining, remain under the pressure. All of these things run counter to the way the world operates. Patience can be painful, but this is what God calls Christians to.

Our motivation for following these instructions, given three times in the text, is that the Lord is coming. For James, the return of the Lord is a much planned for, anticipated event. It is the next event, and it for this that he longs. In the same way that we look forward to things like skiing, spending a day at the beach, going to a birthday party, graduating, getting married, receiving a bonus check or reaching the end of a difficult season in life, James anticipates the coming of the Lord.

This hits me hard. It is not something that we reflect on very much in connection with trials. But James does. This forces us to ask ourselves: What are we here for? All too often we try to seek resolution, justice, satisfaction and fairness in this life. If we can't achieve these, then the least we will settle for is getting ahead of everyone else. But this is an extremely shortsighted approach. The reason we get so frustrated and angry with our circumstances is because we are trying to build our permanent home here on earth. Suffering keeps us from getting what we want. James is pointing out that anything less than living in and for the age to come will bring disappointment. This is the only thing that will profit as we try to decipher the mysteries of suffering and injustice.

I am reminded of the story of the elderly missionary couple who were coming home to the United States after many years of obscure service in Africa. They had no pension plan. Their health was broken. They were defeated and discouraged. When they boarded the ship to come home, they discovered they were on the same boat as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from a hunting expedition. As they boarded, no one paid any attention to them. However, when the President boarded, a band played and crowds gathered. The missionary said to his wife, “Something is wrong. Why should we give all those years in Africa and have no one care about us? And everyone makes such a fuss over this one man returning from a hunting expedition.” His wife told him that he shouldn't feel that way and that he shouldn't be bitter. But he said, “I just can't help it; it doesn't seem right. After all, if God is running this world, why does he permit such injustice?”

As the boat neared New York, the man grew more depressed. When the ship docked, a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor of the city and other leaders gathered to greet him. But no one noticed the missionary couple. They slipped off the ship quietly and found a cheap flat on the East side, hoping the next day to see what they could do about earning a living in the city. That night the man's spirit broke. He said to his wife, “I can't take this. God is not treating us fairly. We don't even know anyone to help us. If God is faithful, then why doesn't he meet our needs?” His wife replied, “Why don't you go into the bedroom and talk to Lord about it.” After a short time, he came out of the bedroom, but his face was completely different. His wife noticed immediately and asked what happened. “Well, the Lord settled it with me. I went in and knelt down beside the bed and poured everything out to him. I said, ‘Lord, it isn't fair.’ I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed the Lord put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, ‘But you're not home yet.’”

We are to be patient and endure, because this world is not our home. The thing that motivates us to respond to trials with patience is the fact that the Lord is coming to take us home.

James gives two examples of patience, one general, one specific, for our encouragement. The prophets had a special place in God's plans. They spoke in the name of the Lord, yet they suffered greatly. Jeremiah was hunted by the men of his home town because they wanted to stop him from speaking in the name of the Lord. Ezekiel suffered painful bereavement as the setting in which he delivered his message. If Daniel had not suffered deportation, we would never have heard of him or benefited from his ministry. Hosea's marriage breakdown was in itself the Lord's word to and through him. And yet we consider that such people were blessed. Even though they suffered greatly, we know that God's blessing rested on them.

James points to Job as an example of faithful endurance. Job suffered tremendously. He lost his family, his health, his friends and his livelihood. He had to endure the unjust rebukes and wrong theology of his friends while he sat in torment and cursed the day he was born. But we know that God allowed all of these things so as to bring about his divine purposes. In the end, of course, the Lord was compassionate and merciful towards Job, and he restored his fortunes.

But things don't always turn out the way we would like. An illness is not healed. A child dies. A deceptive partner steals the business. What is the blessing then?

The word “compassion” refers to our inward parts, our guts. The ancients thought that our guts are the seat of our feelings. To be compassionate means to be deeply moved in the innermost parts of your being. The good Samaritan had compassion on the stranger lying on the side of the road. The father of the prodigal was moved to compassion by the sight of his son returning home. The blessing in the midst of suffering is to know and feel the Lord's compassion, to know the heart of the Father. This was the blessing for the prophets, and this was the blessing for Job. After Job had complained to God, God met him, and Job was forced to confess: “I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee” (Job 42:5).

Jeremiah shook his fist at God and cursed the day of his birth, but in the end, he wrote in Lamentations:

**The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;**

Great is Thy faithfulness. (Lam 3:22)

For the Lord will not reject forever,

For if He causes grief,

Then He will have compassion

According to His abundant lovingkindness. (Lam 3:31-32)

When we are suffering, we tend to ask, "Why me?" We shake our fist at God, expressing our anger and hurt. This is the place to start. It is good to be honest, to let our emotions show. God knows our hurt, our anger, our tears. He has hid them in his bottle. Then, in the midst of our grief and suffering we can begin to feel the Lord's compassion for us. We will have intimacy with him. A sweetness will fill our souls like nothing we have ever tasted. This is the blessing. This is why someone who has suffered deeply can say, "It was the most difficult year of my life, but it was the best year, because I saw God." The greater the suffering, the greater our capacity for God. We consider people who have endured to be blessed by God.

James has one more command here, a rather obscure word, in verse 12. It is somewhat difficult to fit this verse into the flow of the letter, and it isn't easy to understand, but I do think it is connected. Above all, James says, don't take an oath. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. What does this mean? It means that patience and endurance work themselves out in our speech. In the midst of a trial we can speak loosely and rashly. Jesus said much the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. We are not to complain to one another, but neither are we to ascribe the name of the Lord to what may happen in the future or what we will do. At times we make promises to God in the midst of a trial. We say we will do certain things once the pressure is off. But when the trouble disappears, we forget about our oath. Another thing we are tempted to do is predict what God is doing through our trials. But if we do this, we end up misrepresenting the Lord; or we make misleading affirmations and promises to get our own way. We make pledges to other believers, but when we don't follow through, we have used the Lord's name falsely.

Our speech is very important. We must mean what we say. It is a matter of integrity and character. Our lips should speak truth, not lies. If we fail, the blessing of the Lord's compassion may be in jeopardy.

Suffering is a mystery, and we don't like mysteries. Suffering is painful, and we don't like pain. But we are called to be patient, to strengthen our hearts, and to endure in the midst of suffering. Let us allow God to hammer away and forge his character within us. We are called to wait for justice, because things will not be settled finally until the Lord comes. The greatest mystery is to know the Lord, to know his mercy and compassion. If we don't remain under the pressure, then we will not taste these wonderful blessings.

The boastful man takes control and plans his future arrogantly. The rich man stores up treasures on earth that decay and rot, leaving him with nothing that lasts. "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial, for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

Wait for the LORD;

Be strong, and let your heart take courage;

Yes, wait for the LORD. (Ps 27:14)

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Catalog No. 1063

James 5:13-20

14th Message

John Hanneman

February 9, 1997

PRAYING THROUGH THE PRESSURE

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

All Christians agree on the importance of prayer, yet there is a lot of confusion among believers on this subject. We could well agree with the words of Jacques Ellul: "Prayer is a word we hear often, but most of us don't do it very well."

Perhaps you have heard about the minister who called the children to the front of the church each Sunday to tell them a story. Once he brought a telephone to better illustrate the subject of prayer. "You talk to people on the telephone and don't see them on the other end of the line, right?" he began. The children nodded yes. "Well, talking to God is like talking on the telephone. He's on the other end, but you can't see him. He's listening, though." A little boy piped up and asked, "What's his number?"

It is true, we cannot see God, but most of us would like to have his telephone number, especially when we are facing a crisis. More often than not, however, we feel that when we call God, no one is home or we get a busy signal. We wonder why God doesn't have call waiting. Why he doesn't have a pager or at least a cellular phone?

This morning we come to our final study in the book of James. We have already seen that this letter, written by the brother of Jesus, helps us understand the purpose behind the pressures of life and how we should respond to them. According to the apostle, God uses trials and suffering to shape our character. God's goal for us is not that we have a problem-free existence, but that we come to have a Christ-like character. However, responding with the "wisdom from above," to use James' phrase, is hard for us, because we must respond by God's grace, which is contrary to our normal reactions.

We have examined some common responses to life's problems. We can become angry or we favor the rich; we are tempted to jealousy, pride, friendship with the world, self-exaltation, and attaining wealth. But the promise of this letter is clear: the one who endures under the burden of suffering will be blessed. He or she will develop spiritual character and enjoy intimacy with the Father—the sweetest thing that one can experience here on earth.

In our last study we talked about responding to trials with patience. Instead of being consumed with "divine" wrath we are to put wrath far from us. Rather than selling out to the world we are to strengthen our hearts. Rather than complaining against one another we are to wait until the coming of the Lord. Rather than seeking a way of escape we are to stay under the pressure and allow God to have his way.

This leads to the question: What do we do while we wait patiently for the Lord's return? Are we totally defenseless? Today we will examine the two great weapons of prayer and love. These are the elements that will help us persevere under the pressures and temptations that come from trials. These are what will encourage the body of Christ to endure together as a community, to remain pure and wait patiently for the Lord's return. So the answer to our question is, yes, there is

important work to be done while we wait patiently for the Lord's return.

First, we will look at James' call upon the brethren to pray, beginning in verse 13 of chapter 5:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit. (James 5:13-18 NASB)

Very simply, prayer is communication with God. And, like all good communication, prayer involves both speaking and listening. Good communication, especially in marriage, helps us to grow in intimacy with another person. When a couple takes time to talk and listen to each other without hurry or distractions, they learn to enjoy one another at a deeper level. In the same way, prayer is communication with God that causes us to grow in intimacy with him.

Eugene Peterson put it this way: "Praying is that act in the life of faith which consciously and deliberately enters into a speaking/listening attentiveness before God—his relationship with his creation and creatures and their relationship with him. Whenever we concentrate, focus, and attend, we pray. Prayer is the coming into awareness, the practicing of attention, the nurturing and development of personal intensity before God."

In the context of trials and suffering, James lists three occasions for prayer. The first two are general, the third specific. The first occasion for prayer is when someone is "suffering." The word means suffer misfortune or hardship; to be in a sorry situation; to be in trouble. The idea is "to experience something that comes from outside." This fits perfectly with the context of trying circumstances not directly caused by ourselves. On two occasions in 2 Timothy, Paul uses the word for circumstances in which hardship is associated with belief or faith in Christ. As is the case here in this letter, the apostle's exhortation is to endure the suffering. We have already noted that James' letter was written to exiled Jews who were being severely oppressed by their rich landlords; and the fact that they believed in Jesus didn't help.

Christians talk a lot about prayer, but do we actually pray? That is the question raised by this text. At times, when we are facing difficult circumstances the last thing on our minds is to spend time talking with and listening to God. It is much easier to become active

and seek remedies to our predicament. It is natural to seek release from pressure. If things don't improve, however, we start complaining about it to other people, enlisting their sympathy.

But James' word gives us a vision to enter into prayer as a means to persevere through the pressure rather than try to escape it. God wants to hear from us and he wants to speak to us. Instead of dwelling on the problem, therefore, we are to concentrate on God. When we accept that the suffering we are experiencing is designed by him to shape us and bless us, then we are much more likely to attend to him. If we need language to help us express our feeling and our fears, we can read and pray through the psalms. Many of the psalms are verses born out of suffering, especially the sufferings of David. These beautiful prayers can help us through the dark nights of the soul.

The second occasion for prayer is when anyone is "cheerful." Now here is a positive note. In this book that deals with the pressures caused by trials and temptations, there is the hint here that life is not always filled with pain and suffering. We are to regard these occasions as opportunities to sing praises to God. This is a form of prayer too—attending to God with thanksgiving and praise. So prayer is not reserved solely for times of stress and suffering.

Sadly, however, we are less prone to pray when things are going well than when we are in trouble. As the trouble dissipates we tend to forget about God altogether. The point that James is making is that we are to focus on God not only when we need to be delivered from evil, but also when we are appreciative of good circumstances. And again, if we don't know what to say to God, we can turn to the psalms for inspiration. Many of the psalms are exclamations of praise, delight and thanksgiving.

If the first two occasions for prayer are general in nature, the third is quite specific. James says: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him."

The word "sick" here refers to someone who is very ill, is disabled, has a terminal illness or a chronic condition of some kind. This verse is not directed to someone who has a bad cold. The one who is sick is instructed to call upon the elders to anoint him with oil and pray over him. Oil is a symbol of the healing power of the Holy Spirit. Beginning in A.D. 852, this verse was used in the church to institute the practice of giving the last rites. This seems to be inconsistent with the text, however. The last rites, which are initiated by a priest, prepare one for death. But according to the text, the prayer that is offered here is for life, and it is initiated by the believer.

The important questions that need to be asked are, what is the cause of the illness? and, how is the person healed? There are two possibilities as to the cause. The cause of the illness might be unknown, as in the case of Job. One of the trials that is common to mankind is severe physical illness, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis or disability of some kind. In these situations it is right to call upon the elders and have them pray.

However, there is another cause for the kind of sickness mentioned in our text. It may have been caused by unconfessed and unjudged sin. There seems to be a clear link between sin and sickness. James says: "And if he has committed sin, it will be forgiven." The word "if" here indicates a high probability that sin is the cause of the illness. That is the primary thought in James' mind. He is not talking

about a one-time sin or failing, but about sin that has been persisted in and not dealt with.

It is true, of course, that sin causes every illness. When Adam sinned, death entered the world. Sin is what causes our bodies to decay and die. But when we consciously allow personal sin to remain unchecked, severe physical problems can result. There is a strong correlation between our physical and spiritual health. A Jewish proverb says that no sick man recovers until his sins have been forgiven. Illness is one means by which God gets our attention. And when we are willing to confess our sin and repent, then we are to call on the elders and be anointed with oil. The result of praying in this way is that the sin is forgiven and healing occurs.

This leads to the question, how is the person healed? The promise is that if the elders pray, there will be healing. But, a problem arises when physical healing does not follow. What about that? God is perfectly capable of healing those whom he desires to heal. Job is our example here. The words "restore" and "raise up" can apply to physical healing. However, they can also imply spiritual restoration. The word "restore" means "to save"; it is associated with salvation; while "raise up" is associated with resurrection. So the elders' first concern is to pray that souls will be saved and bodies resurrected at the coming of the Lord.

Jesus did not heal everyone who came to him with physical ailments. He healed only to authenticate his ministry, so that people would understand his power to forgive. When he healed the paralytic in Mark 2:2-11, he said: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'arise and take up your pallet and walk?' But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." Jesus always offered spiritual healing in the present to everyone he came in contact with. That was his primary concern. And he always offered physical healing too, but not always in the present. All of us will be healed physically at last, but that is a matter of time. The journey of Joni Eareckson, described in her book *A Step Further*, is helpful in this regard. I especially like her picture of an empty wheelchair with a "for sale" sign.

One danger we must be alert to is the distortion of faith that can result from a physical healing. Healing may not be the best outcome in a given situation. People love the miraculous but, as we see in the gospels, even a sign or a miracle will not inspire them to believe in God. Years ago, our pastors were in Indonesia, and after a service one evening we were summoned to a home to pray for a woman who was desperately ill. We prayed for this woman, but the thought occurred to me that a healing in that spiritually dark place, which is under Islamic influence, could have caused great confusion. People would have been attracted to Christianity for all the wrong reasons.

So when someone is sick, we are called to prayer. But we must be careful. God may choose not to heal the person we have prayed for. Paul prayed to be healed from what he called a thorn in the flesh, but to no avail. God's response to him was: "My grace is sufficient for thee." Try as we might, we cannot stop the process of decay in our bodies. Eventually, this body will die. Why would there be so much Scripture written about enduring patiently under suffering if healing were always the outcome? God may be using the suffering to bring about a greater glory.

Our own Pat Patmor is an excellent illustration of this word from James about restoring the one who is sick. I have asked her to come and share her story with us this morning.

Pat Patmor:

On a December morning eighteen years ago, I sat down with a Bible and a concordance to do a word study on death. I needed to die. Physically, I couldn't go on any longer. Six years earlier, as a non-Christian living in a hard, abusive marriage, I was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic, crippling arthritic disease of the spine. Specialist after specialist used me as a guinea pig to try different new medicines. Finally, they settled on the least toxic: thirty-five to forty aspirin a day. Taking aspirin for the next six years allowed me to sleep for perhaps two hours each night.

Back to that morning eighteen years ago. A new friend in Christ, Joan, knocked on my door. She smiled, and asked me why the Spirit had led her to my house instead of the grocery store. I shared my word study with her. Her tender, prompt response was to direct me to James 5:13-14, and encourage me to go to the elders for anointing and healing.

A week later, my husband and I went to the elders' meeting. They made me feel very comfortable with their friendly chatter, at the same time they asked a lot of questions about my six-year journey with doctors and medications. Ray Stedman then me asked if I had anything to confess. At that moment I spoke publicly of what I had never realized before. My abusive first marriage had wedged a deep hatred in my heart for my first husband. That sin of hatred had made me ill. Tears flooded my soul, and a deeper cleansing was mine.

The elders and my husband gathered to lay hands on my spine. Just before Ray anointed me, he paused and asked who Jesus would be to me if I was not healed. My reply was quick that indeed, Jesus would still be my Lord and King. He would just go to "plan B", I said. Satisfied, Ray prayed for healing if that was the Lord's will for my life. I was instantly healed! I went home and slept for fifteen hours and have been "sleeping" ever since!

Last spring, I underwent a number of medical tests, one of which determined the bone density of my hip and spine. The numbers are supposed to come out the same on both, but mine did not. My spine was too good to be true! The doctors told me I must be "bionic," because they had never seen a spine as strong as mine. God had, of course. He wanted life for me, not death. Amen.

What a wonderful testimony to the inspired word of James.

These verses about healing the sick are a word to our elders as well, of course. Prayer for the flock is one of the most important tasks and one of the highest callings of an elder.

We could sum up these verses by saying that we are to "pray without ceasing." We should pray both when we are suffering and when we are rejoicing. And we are to call upon the elders when we are very sick and we realize that we have unconfessed and unresolved sin in our lives.

Verse 16 follows right on the heels of this: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

To prevent sin from going too far so that a sick person will have to call upon the elders for healing, we as believers are instructed to confess our sins and pray for one another so that we might be healed. Healing here may refer to physical healing, but it also applies to the wounds caused by sin. Sin can really damage us, externally and in-

ternally, but confession and prayer within the body restores us and keeps us healthy.

Most of us understand the notion of preventive maintenance. We take our cars to the repair shop because if we don't, they will fall apart. We maintain our homes for the same reason. If our body hurts, we go to the doctor. James says we maintain the purity of our souls through confession and prayer. In the Catholic church, beginning in A.D. 1215, confession was limited to priests. But here, it is clear that confession is the work of the entire body. We are to confess to one another and pray for one another.

We don't like the idea of exposing our deepest secrets, though. But the word "confession" is simply a legal term, a statement of fact. When we confess in this way, we share openly and honestly, without unnecessary guilt or fear of having to do penance. Actually, confession is praise. When David confessed his sin in the psalms, he experienced the joy of release and he praised the Lord as a result. Confession frees the soul and releases guilt and fear. Once our secrets are exposed, they lose their power over us. The light of the Lord brings healing on its wings when we open up the dark recesses of our souls, and we find that we are loved and accepted and prayed for.

This is why it is important to be involved in home fellowships or small discipleship groups where we can share together and hold one another accountable. When we go to the therapist's office or the pastor's office we divulge our deepest secrets. The idea here is that we are to be connected within the church so that this can take place within the body.

The healing power of forgiveness cannot be exaggerated. Listen to this word from John Claypool:

We all have shadows and skeletons in our backgrounds. But listen, there is something bigger in this world than we are and that something bigger is full of grace and mercy, patience and ingenuity. The moment the focus of your life shifts from your badness to his goodness and the question becomes not 'What have I done?' but 'What can he do?', release from remorse can happen. Miracle of miracles, you can forgive yourself because you are forgiven, accept yourself because you are accepted, and begin to start building up the very places you once tore down. There is grace to help in every time of trouble. That grace is the secret to being able to forgive ourselves. Trust it.

In verse 17, James gives a principle and an example that reveals the nature and power of prayer. When Elijah prayed, it didn't rain for three and a half years; then he prayed and the heavens opened up.

Here we see four things about prayer. First, prayer accomplishes much. Prayer changes circumstances. But even if the circumstances don't change, prayer can change us. Our hearts become still; we rest from anxiety and worry; we endure and persevere through trial.

Second, prayer energizes God. The word "effective" qualifies the verb "accomplishes," not the noun "prayer." Our prayer energizes or affects the working of God. At times God is waiting for us to get involved; he holds back until we pray. Remember James' word earlier: "You have not because you ask not."

Third, prayer demands faith. Notice, the prayer is not righteous, but the man who prays is. The one who is praying believes God is in control and that he is working out his plan in human affairs. James has already instructed: "If any man lacks wisdom let him ask of God...but let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the

one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

Fourth, prayer consists of asking for the will of God. The prayers of Elijah, a man of faith, accomplished much in that they energized God's working. But there is something we need to note here. It wasn't Elijah's idea that it would or would not rain; it was God's idea revealed to Elijah. What a wonderful clue as to what we are to pray for: we are to pray for the will of God, what he reveals to us, things like salvation, forgiveness, wisdom, maturity, peace. There are many matters to pray for other than changed circumstances.

Of one thing we can be certain, and that is that prayer is a tremendous weapon to help us persevere under trial. Listen to the words of Ray Stedman:

The greatest thing anyone can do for God and man is pray. It is not the only thing; but it is the chief thing. The great people of the earth today are the people who pray. I do not mean those who talk about prayer; nor those who say they believe in prayer; nor yet those who can explain about prayer; but I mean those people who take time to pray.

Finally, James issues a call to care. Love is another great weapon to help us persevere under the pressures of life. Verses 19-20:

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins. (5:19-20)

The purpose of love is to return one who has strayed from the truth. When we see someone wandering away from the fold and becoming entrenched in the grip of sin we are to have a heart that cares enough to go after that lost sheep.

The result of such love demonstrated is that we can save a soul from death. The word “save” here is the same word used in connection with prayer, in verse 15. Just as the prayer of faith saves one who is sick, so love demonstrated by a believer can save a soul from death, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Love allows sins to be covered and a life to be redeemed. The last phrase is a quote from Proverbs 10:12: “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.” Love draws a veil over sin.

In the body to which James was writing, suffering was causing internal strife and division resulting in anger, hatred, conflicts and quarrels. Believers were seeking to exalt themselves and they were judging one another. James calls upon the brethren to refrain from this and love each other instead.

When we see a brother or sister being dragged down by sin we are called to speak to them for the purpose of turning them from the error of their ways—not to chastise them, put them down or vent righteous anger toward them, but to return them to fellowship with God and redeem their life.

While we are waiting for heaven, while we are in the midst of suffering ourselves, there are important things for us to do. We are called to pray, to love, and help redeem souls. We share in the sufferings of Christ, yes, but we also share in his work of reconciling the world to the Father.

The common thread in both of these calls is sin and salvation. “Sin” is mentioned four times in the text, “save” twice. There is great temptation to sin in the midst of suffering and trials. The unfairness of it all makes us angry. At times we think that personal suffering affords us the opportunity to justify our sin; while oppression offers an excuse to condemn the sin of others. But James says we are to view sin as something that leads us to prayer and to acts of love. As he has already said, “pure and undefiled religion is to remain unstained, unblemished by the world.”

In our last study we referred to the mystery of suffering and the fact that even in the most stressful and unjust circumstances we can experience the compassion and mercies of God. But here, James unfolds another mystery. No matter what we have done, no matter what kind of sin we have committed, we can also experience God's wonderful faithfulness and love. What an amazing thing! I can understand God allowing someone who does all the right things to experience suffering so that he can reveal himself to him in deep ways, but God goes one step further. Someone who does all the wrong things can experience the same compassions of God if he will but turn to him. Every one of us can be part of that process if we will love and care for those who are caught in the entanglements of sin. A brother or sister can be experiencing famine, but when we pray, God pours forth the rain from heaven that refreshes the soul and allows the land to become fruitful.

Peter sums up James' final point in these words from his first letter: “The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:7-8).

So we come to the end of our studies in this most practical of letters. This is not the easiest letter to take into our hearts because it penetrates our souls and causes us to take a close look at how we are responding to the pressures and struggles of life. And yet, if we have ears to hear and if we have teachable spirits, James has set forth how God uses difficult circumstances to mold and shape our character. The things that we fear will come, but God actually uses them for our good. In the midst of everything, James calls upon us to endure, wait patiently, humble ourselves, love, pray, care for the orphans and widows, and become doers of the word.

This is no easy task. The road will be painful. We cannot make it in our own strength. But, as James has shown, the Lord is compassionate and merciful. And the rewards are glorious: The one who endures will be blessed with the crown of life. Amen.

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