

# OpenTheo

## James: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## Transcript

There are four Jameses mentioned in the New Testament. James the son of Alphaeus, James the father of Judas, not Iscariot, James the son of Zebedee and the brother of John, who is martyred earlier on in chapter 12 of Acts, and James the brother of Jesus and leader in the early church. Most likely, the author of the book of James is the brother of Jesus.

The inclusion of the book in the canon and its authority likely depended upon the authority of the figure that it was associated with, and early testimony consistently points in the direction of the brother of Jesus. It's a very Jewish book. It's written in a Jewish context and seemingly to a Jewish audience.

When we read it, we should notice a lot of similarities with Jesus' own teaching. Even without explicit allusions, we should notice many parallels with the Sermon on the Mount, for instance. Chapter 1 opens with James, or rather Jacob, writing to the twelve tribes.

James is our anglicised form of the Hellenised form of the name Jacob. The twelve tribes didn't really exist in the same manner at this point. In many ways they had merged into each other, and they are referred to more generally as the Jews.

They are scattered among the nations, and he writes to them, presumably from Jerusalem. Are they scattered as those dwelling among the nations, as those who had left Israel and Judah through the exile? Are they scattered through persecution of the early church? Or are they scattered in a more general spiritual sense as aliens and strangers in the world? It's not entirely clear. I would lean towards seeing it as Jews that lived among the nations, with a special consideration to the Jewish Christians who had left Jerusalem and now lived in various places among the Gentiles.

After a brief but typical greeting, James moves into the content of his letter. James can play with words in moving his letter forward. Here, greetings is followed by a charge concerning joy, a related term.

He calls for them to show joy in trials, as such trials test faith in a way that leads to growth towards maturity. Trials have a purpose and a positive intended outcome by the Lord. They aren't meaningless.

James probably has in mind here more general trials, not just the explicit tribulation and trial that comes upon the church at the appointed time. A significant element of these forms of lack might be our need for wisdom. The book of James picks up a number of wisdom themes from the Old Testament and also in the New.

In scripture, wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. It involves insight into God's will for our lives and at its very heart is the practical skill in the art of living well. If we are to be complete and mature, we will need this sort of thing.

God is a generous giver to those who ask good gifts from him and wisdom is a primary example of such a gift. In Matthew 7, verses 7-11, Jesus speaks about God's giving. God does not just give generously, he also gives without reproach.

He is not a giver who constantly accuses the recipients of his gifts and makes them feel guilty about receiving them. He is glad to give and he does so freely. We should

consequently approach him confidently, knowing that he wants to give his good gifts to us.

God more specifically responds to requests given by confident faith. The danger here is of being fickle and lacking determination and confidence in our approach to God. In the Gospels, there are several examples of people having to persist in requests before they are given the healing or the exorcism or the deliverance that they are looking for.

Those without faith give up before they receive a positive answer. However he might seem to be discouraging at first, he wants to give healing, he wants to give deliverance. But faith has to break through.

The person who doubts is unstable and double-minded. He is a man who does not love the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He is fickle and unreliable.

It is the wholehearted pursuit of the Lord that is promised a blessing, not those who half-heartedly do so or those who hedge their bets. If we truly seek him, he will gladly be found by us. James calls for the lowly brother to boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation.

There is a sort of a transvaluation of values as some have called it here. Judgment is about to come and while they may seem fortunate to those around, those who are deeply invested in the riches of this age will suffer great loss. As Jesus argues in Luke chapter 6 verses 20-25 The reward of your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

There is a form of testing to occur that will come for some with poverty and oppression. With others it will involve the loss of formal wealth and status. And wealth can also produce a sort of double-mindedness which James has just warned about.

Matthew chapter 6 verses 19-21 Many people say that they want wisdom but they are not prepared to pay the potential cost of the loss of wealth and status. Learning to recognise what true riches are and the fleeting character of earthly wealth will enable believers to sit much more easily to material conditions, whether they are rich or poor. James is here alluding to the message of the gospel coming in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 5-8 The coming of the word of the Lord throws things into sharp relief.

We begin to see where true treasures lie, treasures that might cause us to sell everything that we have in order to obtain them, and where things we once most greatly valued are of little and only transitory value. Those who are steadfast are promised a reward from God, the crown of life itself. This is similar to what is promised in Revelation

chapter 2 verse 10.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. God's testing is given with the intent of proving us, so that we will stand the test and be strong and mature. God may bring us into situations of testing, but he always does so with the purpose of proving and strengthening our faith, not of causing us to fall into sin.

God himself is not susceptible to the desire to sin, and he does not encourage this in human beings. Rather sinful desires arise from our own fallen natures, and those sinful desires give birth to sin, which then matures into death. Evil desire giving birth to sin, which matures into death, is a comparison to a child being born and growing up.

James wants us to see the longer term outcomes of sin. Like the wisdom literature more generally, James wants us to see how sin first begins, and then how it grows and how it moves into maturity. God, far from being the source of temptation, is the unchanging fount of every good gift.

He is the Father of Lights, of the heavenly bodies. But even the heavenly bodies are changeable in ways that he is not. God is not fickle.

God is not changeable. He brought us forth as first fruits of his new creation in Christ by his word, and we can take confidence in this. If God does not change, then his purpose in calling us and bringing us to birth by his word has not changed.

The theme of guarding the tongue and one's spirit is very prominent in the wisdom literature, especially in the Book of Proverbs. Uncontrolled spirits that erupt in anger do not produce behaviour that is pleasing to God and characteristic of those in right relationship with him. God brought us into our renewed spiritual existence by his word.

We must put aside old filthy clothing, as it were, and receive the implanted word in its place. The word is the main spring of our new life, and we must receive it meekly. This is a continual process, it is not merely a once-off event.

The danger that James recognises is of hearing only and not being changed by the word that we have received. Jesus has warned against the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. The law is compared to a mirror.

It reveals our character so that we might amend our character and be transformed by it. The law of liberty is associated with the gospel, with the implanted word that can save our souls. However, it is also associated with the law, with the Torah.

The implanted word here might be the law written on the heart, no longer the external tablets of stone, but a word within that transforms the heart by the spirit. This leads to a transformed relationship with the word on the page. When we read the word of the law now, it should appear to us as liberating, not merely as something that is bringing us into

condemnation, judgment and bondage.

True religion of this kind is manifested in the person's mastery of their tongue and their spirit, their concern for the weak and the oppressed, of whom orphans and widows are particularly singled out, and their moral integrity and holiness, keeping themselves unstained from the world. The world is a place of moral pollution, and we must be careful how we engage with it. A question to consider.

How might we experience the law of God as the law of liberty that James speaks of here? The first half of James chapter 2 tackles the issue of partiality and the preferential treatment of people according to prevailing cultural standards of power, wealth and influence. This is judgment according to principles contrary to God's own judgment. Opposition to partiality and judgment is found in both Old and New Testaments.

In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verses 17-18, For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. In Leviticus chapter 19 verse 15, You shall do no injustice in court.

You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. In Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 17, You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike.

You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. The danger of such an attitude of partiality and favoritism in the church is immense. It directly undermines some of the central truths of the faith.

And such favoritism can be displayed in the ways that different people are welcomed into a congregation. When people see the rich man, they see the possibility of a beneficial association for them. The poor man, by contrast, offers no such beneficial association.

Jesus speaks to such attitudes in Luke chapter 14 verses 12-14 when he taught concerning invitations to feasts. When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

Partiality to the rich over the poor compromises judgment and the truth of God in order to please men. The assembly of the Lord's people is not a place where rich people should be receiving special attention and treatment over the poor, yet it seems that this is precisely what is happening in various situations. This is the faith of the Lord Jesus

Christ, the Lord of glory.

He should be the one exalted. Giving glory to other human beings in the presence of Christ is entirely inappropriate. And James makes his point by giving an illustration of the form that this can take.

Two people walk into an assembly. The assembly is described here using the language of a synagogue, perhaps suggesting a gathering of Jewish Christians. The rich man is treated with great honor and respect, he is given special attention, whereas the poor man is dishonored, treated as an inconvenience and an embarrassment.

Such different treatment of the visitors reveals the hearts of those showing such discrimination, and the hold that non-Christian values still have over them. They have become judges with evil thoughts. What James does here is recognize the deeper significance of what they are doing.

They are exhibiting the fundamental forms of injustice that are condemned in judges within the Old Testament law. By speaking of them as judges with evil thoughts, perhaps he wants to alert them that they are held to a higher standard as the people of Christ. A task of judgment has been committed to them, and it is imperative that they fulfill it justly.

Such standards of judgment are utterly opposed to God's own standards, as James now makes very clear. James' arguments here are reminiscent of Paul's points in 1 Corinthians 1, verses 26-31. God chose the wise according to worldly standards.

Not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. God's action in salvation challenges and overturns human values.

The Beatitudes is a good example of God's favouring of people dishonoured or marginalised in the world. However, the people that James is writing to here dishonour the poor while honouring the rich, the very people who dishonour Christ and his people. Behind this is the question of the true source of honour.

If you are looking merely to human appearances, it would seem that the rich and the powerful and the influential are the source of honour. But if you truly live by faith, you see that God is the true source of honour. And if we truly want to be honoured, we must act towards God rather than merely to get the glory of other human beings.

Christ is the patron of the poor. The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. Throughout the New Testament we see special concern given to the poor.

Partiality either to the rich or to the poor is condemned. But partiality to the rich is generally much more of an immediate problem. While people typically seek to associate with the rich, the powerful and the influential, this is much less likely to happen in the case of the poor.

However, God is a God who does associate with the weak and the poor and the despised. Christ came in the form of a servant, the one who was rich associated with us in our poverty so that we might become rich in him. As Christians we should be fulfilling the royal law of Christ.

The royal law is love your neighbour as yourself. This refers back to Leviticus 19, verse 18. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

I am the Lord. This is part of a section that also, in verse 15, condemns partiality. Partiality to the rich over the poor is a fundamental failure of love to neighbour.

It renders a person guilty as a transgressor. And it is a far more fundamental sin than many might think. The very golden rule, or royal law, of loving our neighbour as ourselves, tackles that partiality at his very heart, the way in which we naturally prefer ourselves and those associated with us over others.

If we truly love our neighbour as ourselves, partiality will be one of the first things to go. The royal law here is similar to what James has spoken of in chapter 1, verse 25, the perfect law or the law of liberty. Why is it called the royal law? Perhaps it is because it is the pre-eminent law.

It is the law that sums up and comes at the head of a great many other laws. It is a law that gives unity and focus to much of the body of the commandments. Perhaps it is also called the royal law as it is the law of Christ our King, a law that expresses his commandment that we love one another.

It is the law of the principle of love that should be operative within the life of the people of Christ. Jesus spoke of the importance of this law. In Matthew chapter 22, verses 35 to 40.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the

law and the prophets. While God may not be an egalitarian, he has formed people in many different stations in life, given them different abilities and skills and powers that will lead to very different outcomes, there is a concern for a sort of equality throughout the whole of the scripture.

This concern for equality is not about wealth per se. Inequality in possessions is not treated as an injustice as such. It is not necessarily a result of the fall or of sin that some people have more wealth than others, any more than some people being stronger, or more attractive, or more intelligent.

However, God is very concerned about the dignity that should be accorded to every human being. A dignity that is recognised in their standing before the law. A dignity that is seen in such things as the protection of their lives.

And a dignity that should be seen in societies honouring and protecting their part in its life. This is one of the places where we most see concern for the poor. The poor are those who are most commonly frozen out of society's life, not seen as having the same dignity as those who have wealth.

It is very easy to overlook the humanity of the poor, to deny them face in society, to deny them agency, and a standing and a part that is recognised and protected by their neighbours. God routinely speaks of himself as the patron of such persons, charging his people to be concerned for the stranger, for the widow, for the orphan, and for the person who is poor. Of all the people in the land, these are by far the most vulnerable.

God also challenges his people to see themselves in the shoes of such persons. While we all like to associate with the rich, there is in the condition of the poor something that is truer to our condition as human beings relative to God. As we as Christians recognise our spiritual affinity with the poor, we should be a lot more concerned for their material conditions, and a lot less awed by the rich.

We can't pick and choose commandments. God's will for his people is indivisible. This is one of the things that Jesus highlights in his teaching.

The law hangs together. One of the points of the royal law is that it sums up a larger body of the law. The entirety of the law ultimately comes from the one lawgiver, and our treatment of the law expresses our attitude towards that lawgiver.

If we're accepting certain things and neglecting others, we're treating the laws as if they were isolated from each other, and not ultimately related back to the one source. We will be judged under the law of liberty. Therefore we must take care with our own judgments.

We must measure with the measure that we would be measured by, and be wary of judgments that are according to standards that we would not be judged by. A question to consider. Why do you think that James so singles out this issue of partiality? James'



concern for pure religion continues into the second half of chapter 2. He is concerned here with the reduction of faith to bare profession.

Faith without works, he argues, is like a corpse. It's not a matter of adding works to faith, but rather of works being inseparable from true faith. Perhaps we might also see James continuing some of his concerns about partiality here.

The importance of ministering to needy people within the church sets up the discussion of faith and works. James' treatment of faith and works here is structured as a sort of diatribe against an opponent. James is setting up the voice of someone who holds a position opposed to his own, and dialoguing with that throughout.

His concern earlier had clearly been for works of mercy, for concern for the poor and those who are needy, on visiting widows and orphans, keeping oneself unspotted from the world, and receiving the poor with a proper welcome in their assemblies. Such concerns might be seen here as well. He begins with an example that shows that a bare expression of goodwill is utterly insufficient for performing the works of mercy.

If a person is poor, unclothed and hungry, they need something a lot more than simple expressions of goodwill and good luck. They need positive assistance, but mere words aren't going to give them that. While the moving of one's heart in concern towards the poor is clearly very important, as is a verbal commitment to their well-being, by themselves those things are not enough.

Rather, they must be expressed in a concrete, practical commitment to the well-being of the people in need. Anything short of that is completely futile. And this provides a good analogy for the situation of a faith without works.

Such a faith may be properly disposed, in some ways. Such a faith may express itself well in orthodox doctrinal commitments. But if it lacks works, it's completely ineffectual and dead.

In verse 18, his imagined interlocutor presents two different cases. Here's one person who says he has faith, and here's another person who says he has works. To which James responds, If you indeed have faith, show me that faith apart from any works, and my faith will be demonstrated by my works.

Works are absolutely inseparable from faith. The idea that you could have faith without works is nonsensical. There are those who will insist that they have faith because they can make the basic creedal commitments, such as the Shema, the statement that the Lord our God is one.

But making such a statement has no guarantee of right-standing with God. The demons themselves, God's sworn adversaries, can make that statement. And in their case, that statement, far from being assurance of their right-standing with God, is a cause of their

terror before him.

James drives his point home by two great examples from the Old Testament. Abraham and Rahab. Abraham is the paradigmatic Jew, he's the one who's the father of the people of Israel.

And Rahab is the paradigmatic Gentile, a once ungodly Canaanite prostitute who was brought into the people of God. James points to the events of Genesis chapter 22 as proof of Abraham's faith, and the perfection of his faith. Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac.

This was the last great test that Abraham faced. He had been called earlier on to leave his home, to leave behind his past, and in Genesis chapter 22 he was called to sacrifice his future, everything that Isaac represented. As he responded faithfully to this test, he was blessed by the Lord, and the promise was confirmed to him.

James effectively argues you can't read Genesis chapter 15 verse 6, where we are told that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness, without paying attention to this later part of the story, where he is blessed on account of his faithfulness. Abraham being called a friend of God, someone in good standing with God, is something that arises not merely from his faith, but also from such works. And the offering up of Isaac is a completion of Abraham's faith in works.

This is what it looks like when faith comes to its maturity. He appeals to Rahab as well. Rahab was someone who received the word concerning the people of Israel, and the way that the Lord was going to give them the land, and believed it.

And as a result, she received the messengers and sent them out by another way. While she believed the word of the report, she would not have enjoyed the standing that she enjoyed in the people of God, had she not transformed that into the practical action of acting as she did towards the spies. All of this goes to show, for James, that as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is like a lifeless corpse.

A true and active faith is always seen in its works. Apart from works it is lifeless and useless. Perhaps one of the most challenging things about this passage is how to relate it to the teaching that Paul has in his epistles.

James' interlocutor has an unsettling similarity to a bastardised Paul. There is a very sharp seeming contrast with Paul in some of the statements that he makes in passages such as Romans 3.28 Now compare that to verse 26 of this chapter. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Paul also uses the example of Abraham in chapter 4 of Romans, and particularly references Genesis chapter 15 verse 6 about Abraham believing God and it being accounted to him for righteousness. And so we are left to speculate about the

relationship between James and Paul's teaching. Is James directly attacking Paul or is he attacking some straw man of Paul? Both in Acts and in the book of Galatians we see tensions between people from James and people associated with Paul and his message.

Considering that by the admission of the apostle Peter and others, Paul's teaching was difficult to understand, and the fact that there are many teachers going around associated with people like James or Paul who seem to have a slightly garbled notion of what they were teaching, it might be most likely that James is responding to someone who has taken on some elements of Paul's teaching and has developed it in quite an erroneous direction. While Galatians chapter 2 and Acts chapter 15 might suggest that James and Paul resolved any initial distrust that might have been between them, it is likely that both face problems with members of the other person's camp. To understand how to relate the two, it's important to stand back and to consider how they are using their terms and the more specific concerns that they have.

When Paul talks about works, for instance, he is generally talking about works of the law, works that are associated with the Torah that separate Israel from the Gentiles, marking them out as the people of God. For instance, in Romans chapter 3 verse 28, the statement is that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. The words of the law there really matter as a qualification of what he means by works.

A further thing to consider is the way that Paul is particularly concerned about how one gets standing in the people of God, most particularly how Gentiles enter in the first place. In this context, where he focuses upon faith and rules out works, he is especially focusing upon the fact that Gentiles get into the people of God apart from circumcision, the dietary requirements, and other things that would mark out the Jews as Jews. Rather, they are accepted as Gentiles through faith on the basis of the achievement of Christ.

James, however, is concerned less with the question of first entry into the people of God and more with the way in which faith works itself out. Faith is perfected or completed by works. Faith, a wholehearted trust in God that does not express itself in transformed practice, is not really a faith at all.

One of the things that Paul is most concerned that we see is that the efficacy of faith for salvation is not situated in its own power to work so much as in its response to God's promise. It's grasping on to something outside of itself. However, James' concern is to show that faith in its proper nature will be expressed in works.

There's no such thing as a workless faith. As we look further in the teaching of Paul, it should be clear that he holds much the same thing as James. In passages such as Romans chapter 2, he speaks about a final judgment according to works, and he means it.

On the last day, we will be blessed or we will be condemned on the basis of our works.

The tension that people see between Paul and James is really a tension that can be seen in Paul's own teaching. A tension between our standing in the people of God being on the basis of faith and the fact that we will be judged according to works.

Of course, this tension is just an apparent one. The solution is found in the teaching of James here. The solution is that faith is active along with our works, and faith is completed by our works.

This is not a teaching that works are a different sort of thing that need to be added to faith to make faith effective. Rather, the point is that faith by its very nature will produce works, and that as faith grows to maturity, works will be an expression of that maturity. On the last day, when we are judged according to works, our works will be a manifestation and evidence of our faith.

Those works in and of themselves are not things that set us right with God. Rather, what makes those works effective is the fact that faith is active in them. Those works are the fruit of an active faith.

Recognising all of this then, we need see no irresolvable contradiction between Paul and James. Rather, they are making different sorts of points in contrasting yet compatible ways. A question to consider.

Reading the work of Paul, it seems that he is primarily focused on the question of entry and justification by faith as the fundamental declaration that we are members of the people of God. A declaration made not on the basis of works, whether works of the flesh or even works of an active faith. When we first come to God, we have nothing to show for ourselves.

However, James' attention seems to be later on in time. Not the initial entry, but what happens to true faith as we grow and mature. And how God's justification or vindication of us can be according to the practical faithfulness that is the unavoidable outworking of true faith.

How can reading James and Paul together give us a fuller understanding of what faith and justification mean? Concern for speech and the tongue is pervasive in the wisdom material in scripture and unsurprisingly for a book that works so much within that tradition, it is discussed by James at length in chapter 3. This concern for the tongue is already present in James chapter 1 verses 19-20. Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. And again in verse 26 of that chapter.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. He begins the chapter with a warning against desiring to become a teacher. The teacher is charged with a task of judgment that means that they

must open themselves up to a greater judgment.

As Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 7 verse 2 in the Sermon on the Mount. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. The person who is the teacher is charged to engage in acts of judgment and so they must assume this greater responsibility to be judged themselves.

Beyond this they also have a responsibility for the spiritual well-being of those committed to their charge. The teaching that they give will have an influence upon people's lives. We might here consider the way that Jesus particularly focuses upon the religious teachers of his time.

He challenges them for their unfaithfulness and the way that they lead others astray. The way that they bind heavy burdens upon people. The way that their pride, love of money and love of the praise of men leads them to adulterate the word of God, to substitute their traditions for the word of God.

And the way that their hypocrisy means that the judgment they mete out to others is not something that they apply to themselves. James is very much thinking along the same lines. The teacher works with his tongue, but the tongue is a treacherous tool.

The person who has mastered their tongue is a perfect and mature person. If you can master your tongue you can master every single part of your life. We might consider here the importance that the tongue has for the prophet.

When prophets are called in scripture often what is particularly focused upon is the preparation of their mouth for speech. The way in which halting mouths are equipped to speak. The way in which unclean lips are purified.

The way in which tongues are made glad and kindled with a spiritual fire. The bit in the mouth of the horse and the rudder on the ship both illustrate the power of a little thing to control bodies much greater than themselves. The images here are ones of control.

The person who controls their tongue can control their entire life or an entire body of people. Tongues can be controlled of course for good and for evil. Carefully chosen words can be things that move great nations and their outcomes.

We might think about the serpent's temptation of Eve. The way in which he cunningly insinuates that God is one who is withholding. We might also think of Hushai the Archite's counsel.

His brilliant and shrewd use of words to get Absalom to reject the counsel of Ahithophel and to buy David a window of time to regroup. The person who masters their words can work wonders. They can persuade people.

They can emotionally move people. They can instruct people in the truth. The tongue can legitimately boast of great things then.

It is a most powerful instrument indeed. However, the tongue is a cause of destruction. Now we turn from images of control to an image of a destructive power that is completely out of control.

The small spark that starts a forest fire. Such an image of the tongue as a flame is also found in places such as Proverbs 16.27. A worthless man plots evil and his speech is like a scorching fire. The tongue is a world of unrighteousness.

This is maybe similar to what Jesus teaches in Matthew 15.10-11 and 16-19. Out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

The tongue is a small piece of flesh and yet it stains the whole body. It inflames all of our existence. In Ephesians 4.29 Paul speaks of corrupting speech.

The tongue is something that can spread a sort of rottenness within us and within our communities. A connection between the tongue and fire is not restricted to the negative imagery of the tongue that brings destruction and death in the service of Satan. The tongue might also be set on fire from heaven.

The word of the Lord is spoken of as akin to fire in Jeremiah 23.29. In 2 Samuel 22.9 devouring fire is said to come forth from the Lord's mouth. In Isaiah 30.27 the Lord's tongue is compared to a consuming fire. And the incendiary character of the words of the prophet is a recurring theme in scripture.

The word of the Lord is as fire and fire proceeds from the Lord's mouth when he speaks. As organs of the Lord's speech the prophets also have their mouths empowered and purified by divine fire. The Lord tells the prophet Jeremiah that he has made his words on Jeremiah's mouth fire in Jeremiah 5.14. In Revelation 11.5 fire proceeds from the mouths of the prophetic witnesses.

The employment of the image of fire in order to describe the relationship between the prophet and the word and the spirit of God is quite appropriate. The prophet is animated by a power that originates outside of himself, exceeds his own strength as we see in Jeremiah 20.9 and is driven by a will to which his own will must be conformed. The prophet must also faithfully fulfil his duty lest his spirit given power be extinguished.

Recognising this we might see the tongue as something that will either bear the flames of hell, bring destruction and death or it will be kindled with the fire of heaven. In Isaiah 6.6-7 one of the seraphim touches the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a live coal purifying his lips for future witness. We see a similar thing in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost as tongues of flame come upon the heads of each of the disciples.

These tongues are connected with the tongues with which they speak. Their tongues are kindled so that they can bear the divine word. However in James the tongues are not set on fire from heaven but set on fire from hell.

Whether cursing, the spreading of rumours, angry outbursts, lies or other falsehoods and deceptions, flattery, boasting, coarse speech, blasphemy or any number of other things, the tongue spreads corruption and destruction. Men are unable to tame the tongue. The tongue is something that has a sort of a will of its own.

The fool is defined by his tongue in the book of Proverbs. His tongue and his mouth operate as if by their own accord. He breathes out lies.

He speaks lies not because he has planned or deliberated about them but just because he is ruled by lies. Lies just come forth naturally from him. His tongue is a rod for his own back.

He says things not knowing what he is saying and ends up suffering the consequences. His tongue brings death. His tongue is a fire that gives off sparks that ignite great conflagrations of conflict within communities and which burn up his own life.

James challenges inconsistency and doubleness throughout his epistle and the tongue is characterised by just this. The same tongues that bear God's name in worship can also bear foul language and hateful speech. The tongue is found at the opening of the mouth and it is at the mouth that that which is within proceeds forth.

It is at the mouth, the spring of the person, that the true character of what lies within is portrayed. Jesus teaches much the same. By their fruit you will know them.

Our mouths display the fruit of our hearts. One of the best ways to understand a person's character is to pay close attention to the way that they speak over a long period of time. In verse 13 James asks, Who is wise and understanding among you? It may seem as if he is turning to a very different subject here, but he is continuing many of the same themes, and I think the underlying theme is the same.

It relates to the question of discerning and displaying the presence of true wisdom. How can we discern and display this? James began the chapter by warning people against the desire to become teachers, and I think this is what marks people out as fitting teachers. Wisdom is manifested, James argues, in good works done in meekness.

What is this meekness? It's a lack of pride. It's placing others ahead of ourselves. It produces good works that are characteristic of faith also.

That's how you know what true wisdom is. James might be speaking to people aspiring to the office of teachers here. Jealousy and selfish ambition can so often drive such a quest.

People want a platform. They want the eyes of the masses to be upon them. They behave with the opposite of the meekness that is characteristic of true wisdom.

Some people like to boast about their wisdom in a way that is false to the truth. True wisdom, however, wisdom that comes from God, comes with humility. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Humility is integral to such fear. By contrast, earthly and demonic wisdom is distinctively marked by jealousy and pride, and these things produce social conflict and disorder and all sorts of sin. This is precisely not the sort of person that you want to become a teacher and a leader.

However, true wisdom is utterly different. It is characterized by purity, which is a key term for James' understanding and characterization of true religion. It is morally unstained.

It will not produce evil. This is its primary trait. It is a fresh water spring, as it were, that will not give forth brackish water.

James describes such wisdom in a manner that is reminiscent of Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, 22-23. It is peaceable. It is not given to conflict.

It is not always spoiling for a fight. It is gentle and kind. It is not harsh in its treatment of others.

It is open to reason. It is tractable to the truth. It is not pridefully bound up in its own opinions.

It is open to being proved wrong. It is full of mercy and good fruits. It is loving to the needy in speech and in act.

It is impartial. It judges according to true judgment, and not according to mere prejudice and appearance. It is sincere, genuine, and guileless.

Such wisdom is perhaps above all other things, distinguished by its peacefulness. It sows in peace, and it makes peace. The result is a harvest of righteousness, the whole range of practices that are pleasing to the Lord.

A question to consider. What are some of the different forms of control of tongue that the wise person can exhibit? James has previously spoken of the conflicts that arise in communities through jealousy and selfish ambition, and now in chapter 4 he develops this and other themes. Some communities are distinguished by factions and antagonisms, and James wants us to think about why this might be.

What is ultimately causing this? He traces it back to the passions that are at war within, and gaining control over his hearers. The statements in verse 2 can be understood in



different ways. Maybe they are separate statements of the kind, you desire and do not have, you murder and covet and cannot obtain, you fight and quarrel.

Or as the ESV puts it, which I think is right, you desire and do not have so you murder, you covet and cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel. What he is doing I think is describing the same thing as he does in chapter 1 verse 15, then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. The point that he is making is that this is the natural life cycle of desire.

Sinful desires and passions unarrested lead to quarrels and fights, and those when fully grown lead to murder. This is similar to the teaching that Jesus gives in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 26 in the Sermon on the Mount. You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, You fool, will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The point that Jesus is making here is similar to the point that James makes. Desire has a life cycle, and you need to arrest it before it grows. We might also think here of the way that God challenges Cain when his face falls and he is angry as a result of the fact that his sacrifice has been rejected, while his brother Abel's has been accepted.

Sin is crouching at the door, and unless he masters his anger and deals with that right away, it will become full grown, and it will become something that he cannot control. What underlies their frustrated desires? They fail to ask properly. Even when they are praying, they are driven by their passions.

Jesus has promised to answer requests in Matthew 7, verses 7-11. Once again, we should observe the importance of the Sermon on the Mount for reading James. God answers prayers, but he gives good gifts, not those things that merely feed our unruly desires.

However, because of people's wayward desires, they are experiencing frustration of those desires, which are then being aggravated into conflicts. James is a very perceptive observer of human nature, and he has a pastoral eye for such things. He challenges his hearers for their misplaced or divided affections.

They are adulterous, giving their hearts and favours to others, seemingly not

appreciating that this sets them at enmity with God. They are playing the harlot, as the Old Testament prophets describe Israel. By being friends of the world, being absorbed and preoccupied with earthly things, they are committing adultery against God.

God is a jealous God. The quotation in verse 5, the source of which is not entirely clear, could be read in a number of different ways. For instance, the spirit might be the human spirit, or it might be the Holy Spirit.

It might, as some have suggested, be a reference to the tendency of the human spirit that God has given to sinful jealousy, if it is not held back. The yearning may be that of the spirit, or it may be the yearning of God himself. I take this as a reference to the holy jealousy of God, spoken of in the Ten Commandments themselves.

God is a jealous God, and his jealousy is expressed in the Holy Spirit that he has given us, the means by which we are united to Christ as his bride. However, James argues, God gives more grace. He is a jealous God, but he gives the grace that we need.

While the proud face resistance and rejection, the humble receive grace from God to sustain them and to enable them to respond to God aright. Verses 7-10 speak of the posture that we should take towards God, recognising the waywardness, the fickleness and the dividedness of our hearts. We should humbly draw near to God, seeking the grace that we need.

We should mourn our sins, we should resist the devil, and place ourselves beneath God's instruction and his hand. We must seek God to purify our divided hearts, so that we will seek him alone. And as we humble ourselves and seek God, we may start to find that our prayers are being answered for our good, and our wayward desires that once so unsettled us are gradually being overcome by his grace.

Once again he gives a warning about speech and judgement in verses 11-12. This picks up themes of the beginning of chapter 3. It's almost reminiscent of some of Jesus' warnings about judgement in the Sermon on the Mount again. Speaking against, as James speaks about it here, could refer to a number of different things.

To slandering, to false accusations, to challenging of legitimate authority and other such things. He makes a peculiar and surprising claim. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

Similar issues were tackled by Jesus in Matthew 7-1-2. Judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. There are tasks of discernment which we are called to perform.

However, true judgement belongs to God alone, the one who assumes the status of a judge over his neighbour, in condemning him, usurps the place of the law and also of

God. In the process that person ends up placing themselves over the law and breaking the golden rule. True wisdom is very careful and humble in the task of discernment and judgement.

It recognises the place of God's judgement over it. It only judges as it stands under God as judge. James now moves to discuss the presumptuous arrogance of people who act without regard to God's providence.

Just as with judgement, there are clearly times when making plans is appropriate and necessary, but we must be entirely clear that we do so as frail creatures standing under the providence of God, without the control of or knowledge of the future that he possesses. We are like a mist or a puff of smoke. This might be similar to the points that Ecclesiastes makes as he speaks about hebel or vapour, a word often translated vanity.

The idea of mist or vapour captures something of the transitory character of life and the way that it eludes our control. We should register the fact of God's providence in our speech, recognising that we stand under it. And when we fail to do this, we are simply boasting in our arrogance in an evil manner.

In many ways this is the obverse of Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 6 verses 25 to 34, once again part of the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not of more value than they? And which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself, sufficient for the day is its own trouble. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents God's providence in response to the anxiety of the poor and the needy, who feel their lack of control over the future. In his Epistle, James presents God's providence in response to the arrogance of the rich and the self-confident, who feel very much that they are in control of the future.

Whether we are anxious or arrogant, we should realize the providence of God and the

way that it stands over all of our plans and concerns. Now that we as James' hearers know this to be the right thing, he wants us to know that if we fail to do it, we are sinning. Once again, he is concerned that hearing is transformed into doing, that words are metabolized into actions.

A question to consider. At the heart of much of James' teaching in this chapter is the importance of humbling ourselves before God. How would such humbling of ourselves relieve the conflicts, antagonisms and aggravations with which the chapter begins? James chapter 5 begins with a similar section to that which concluded chapter 4. It begins with come now, followed by a condemnation of the self-assured rich.

It leads into a consideration of approaching judgment, in which the unrighteous rich will be condemned and afflicted, and the righteous poor delivered and vindicated. The denunciation with which the chapter begins addresses non-Christians. This isn't because they would have been among the hearers, but rather to encourage the righteous that they will be vindicated.

This denunciation sounds like that of an Old Testament prophet. We might hear, for instance, the words of Isaiah chapter 13 verse 6. James is anticipating this coming day of the Lord. We should not assume that this is merely the final judgment, although it might have one eye towards that.

Rather devastating judgment on Jerusalem and on the Jewish persecutors of the early church is about to come. James is writing to Jews who have experienced persecution at the hands of their compatriots, at a time shortly before the bloody destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Again, this is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount.

In Matthew chapter 6 verses 19-21. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on 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 and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Again, it is similar to the woes that Jesus gives to the rich and to the unrighteous, and also to things such as the parable of the rich fool in Luke chapter 12 verses 16-21. And he told them a parable, saying, So, you have ample goods laid up for many years.

Relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, Fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. It is foolish to rely upon these treasures, but the rich have placed their hope in them, and the sand is draining now from the hourglass.

Their riches will testify against them. They have been accumulating these riches through

sinful oppression, and they have also not been using them to aid the poor who are in desperate need at that time. We might remember the parable of the unjust steward and the statement concerning unrighteous mammon in Luke chapter 16 verse 9. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Again, in Luke chapter 12 verses 33-34, Sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

James, like so many of the Old Testament prophets, is concerned deeply with economic injustice and oppression of the poor. Wealth at that time was being concentrated in the hands of a smaller group of rich landowners, and poorer people were being oppressed and defrauded. The money that they had been denied for their difficult labours is described like blood crying out to the Lord from the ground, like the blood of Abel that called out against Cain, it calls for judgment upon them.

Possessions and money are not neutral media. Our money and the luxuries that we enjoy at the expense of the mistreatment and oppression of others cries out to God against us on behalf of them. The rich have fattened their hearts, yet they are in a day of slaughter, and this marks them out for destruction.

The righteous oppressed person is condemned and murdered, justice is twisted against him, and his life is threatened by oppression. Yet he does not fight back. God, however, will come to his aid.

Speaking to poor Christians in a situation like this, James wants them to learn the importance of patience. They should not retaliate, they should look to the Lord. They should not be envious of the wicked, they should consider the end of the wicked.

Douglas Moos suggests that we might notice the parallels with Old Testament statements, like those of Psalm 37, verses 1-12. Fret not yourself because of evil doers, be not envious of wrong doers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good, dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness at the light and your justice at the noonday.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath.

Fret not yourself, it tends only to evil. For the evil doers shall be cut off, but those who

wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more.

Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there, but the meek shall inherit the land. And delight themselves in abundant peace. Like the rain, God's vindication will come as we patiently wait for and seek it.

The temptation in such a situation of persecution would be to grumble against or to each other. But they must resist that. God the judge is near at hand, and they must act accordingly.

They must learn from the examples of suffering and patience given by the prophets and by people such as Job. Job's patient persistence in faith is a pattern to follow, especially when we recognise the Lord's purpose and goodness in his story. He warns them about oaths.

This is similar to Matthew 5, verses 33-37. Once again a connection with the Sermon on the Mount. Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.

But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no.

Anything more than this comes from evil. There is the danger of invoking God's name in an oath. God the Judge is at hand and we must speak and act in the light of this.

Truthfulness, care and candour in speech are absolutely essential. He speaks to the situation of suffering and sickness. Once again he encourages people to pray.

If they are suffering, the response is to pray. If they are cheerful, they should sing praise. Our emotional state should provoke us to render our hearts to God in speech, in the speech of prayer and in the speech of praise.

A healthy Christian life is always one in which we express our inner states to God, presenting ourselves and our hearts to him. And he also stresses the importance of prayer in response to sickness. In response to sickness it is not just the individual prayer but the prayer of the Church.

The elders of the Church, mature members of the Church who can also represent the Church as a body, should come to the person who is sick. They should pray over that person and anoint that person with oil in the name of the Lord. This is done so that the person who is sick will be saved, that the Lord will raise him up.

This raising up is not merely a deliverance from sickness. It might take that form but it

looks to something greater. We suffer with Christ so that we might be raised with him.

Christ is the anointed one and at that time of sickness, when that person might feel most isolated from the body of Christ, the body of Christ should come to them and anoint them so that they know that they are a member of the anointed one. So that they might approach and face the enemy of sickness and death with the confidence that they are doing so in the name of Christ. Facing it as those anointed for a mission and with the confidence that they will be raised up through it.

That they will experience God's deliverance through suffering. We have a God who physically heals people and we should not be surprised if people are physically healed in such situations. But we should also recognise that much of the time, God will call people to go through suffering and even to death and that they will experience the raising up as secure in the knowledge that they are in Christ.

They face death without fear, manifesting the victory of Christ over the one who held people in bondage to the fear of death and looking forward to the deliverance of resurrection on that last day. And at that moment when we feel ourselves to be on the threshold of final judgement, we are assured once again of the forgiveness of our sins. What sins we have committed are forgiven us and we are assured of access into God's very presence.

We must pray for each other in response to sin and spiritual failure. Sins obstruct the hearing of our prayers. Hearing of prayers, for instance here in the context of sickness.

We must be those who settle accounts with God and man swiftly. And illness may particularly prompt us to do this. In moments when we feel our great need for God to come to our aid, we may become keenly aware of all the unrepented sins that lie between us and Him.

At such times we must confess our faults to our neighbours, set things right with them and confess our sins against God. As we do so, all the things that would prevent us from coming to God with a whole and undivided heart will be removed. Prayer is powerful and effective but it can be obstructed by sin.

This has been a continuing theme of James' book. He began in chapter 1 by talking about the prayer for wisdom. A prayer for wisdom that must be made with a whole heart.

In chapter 4 he discussed the failure of our prayers because of our uncontrolled desires. Prayer doesn't rest upon superpowers. Elijah was a human person like us.

Yet he prayed and there were three and a half years of drought. And then he prayed again and there was rain. The three and a half years here might make us think of that period of time of judgement.

A time, times and half a time or 42 months. There is a connection perhaps to the theme of judgement and vindication. Faced with the great oppression of the rich, the early Christians that James is writing to might have felt the need to be like the persistent widow in praying for vindication against their adversary.

The book ends with a call to action. We must look after each other. We must bring back any who are wandering.

We are called to be our brother's keeper. We might here think of the commission of Ezekiel in chapter 3 verses 17 to 21 of his prophecy. Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.

Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, you shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness, and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.

Sin leads to death, and we must treat it with the utmost seriousness, not just for ourselves, but also for our neighbours. A question to consider, what are some particular things that we might do in order more seriously to seek the hearing of our prayers by the Lord?