

James

1 - Controlling the Tongue

Do you ever write any letters? How do you do them? Many people today send letters and messages by the Internet, or even by phone in text messages. In the days when the Bible was written they had to write on a material made from the centre of the papyrus plant, laid in strips and glued together and for a pen they had to use a stick or reed sharpened at the end. Their ink was often made from soot. These reed pages were rolled up into a scroll so that they could be carried about. There are fourteen letters originally written like this in the New Testament, written mainly by the apostle Paul. Most of them were written to particular churches throughout what we know today as Greece and Turkey. One or two are not to any one church but are general letters to Christians.

The letter of James we are going to study in these talks is one of these general letters. It was written by James, the Lord's brother who, after Jesus' resurrection became the leader of the church in Jerusalem where Jesus had been put to death. All the letters of the New Testament were written to help Christians to become strong believers, not upset by troubles and difficulties, not even put off from following Jesus because of persecution or physical attacks from their enemies.

Although James and the other early leaders of the church in Jerusalem were Jews, they were Jews who had come to trust in Jesus as their saviour and Lord. The word "saviour" which they gave to Jesus means one who rescues from death and disaster. They gave him this name Saviour because Jesus, by his death on the Cross, can forgive all who come to him and to bring them back to God his Father.

They also called Jesus Lord because he is both God and Man and the one Christians are to obey; he is their Master. These first Jewish Christians wanted all non-Jews to become followers of Jesus, to obey his teaching and be welcomed into the churches.

James's letter is a very practical one. He is very concerned that his readers, and you who are listening to this programme, should not be foolish, ignorant or selfish. His letter is meant for Christian believers. He does not tell his readers how to become Christians, but he does tell us that it is God's word coming into our hearts that gives us new birth. (Chapter 1 verse 18) He is concerned here about a Christian's behaviour.

James calls himself "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ". (Chapter 1 verse 1) A Christian, therefore, is someone who has come to bow the knee before Christ as his Lord and know him as his saviour from sin. The name Jesus means the God who saves.

In this letter he says to us, in effect, "If you are a follower of Jesus, then this is how you should live." At times James seems to be a very strict teacher, but this is because he knows that living a careless, selfish life does not honour God who is completely holy and good and true. At the end of each talk I will close with three short thoughts that have come from James' letter, a sort of summary of each session. If you have something to write with, perhaps you could note them down to help you to remember what we have discovered.

So, first of all, let us hear what James has to say about how we should use our tongues:

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless". (Chapter 1 verse 26) By speaking about keeping a

tight rein on your tongue he is thinking about a person who rides a horse, but is not in control of the horse, he lets it go where it wants instead of checking it, by the reins, to go where the rider wants to go.

So, says James, control your tongue, your words, not to say things that are wrong. Once we have said something cruel, or unkind, or untrue, or selfish, it cannot be unsaid, it has run away with us, we cannot go back in time and not say it.

Yet if we do wrong in this way, there is hope for us, for if we are Christians, God is our Father who gave us our birth into his kingdom. Listen to James: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created". (Chapter 1 verses 17 and 18) And one of the good and perfect gifts the Father gives to us is forgiveness when we do wrong. Have you said something evil and wrong in the past? Confess it to God and ask for his forgiveness.

Then what about the future? How can you control your tongue? Here is James's advice:

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry". (Chapter 1 verse 19)

Quick to listen. Listen to what is being said to you so that you can understand properly the other person's thoughts. Often we say things in reply to others before we have really understood what they have said to us and this can cause lots of confusion.

Slow to speak. Before you say things, think carefully about what you say. Words can bless people or cause them pain. This does not mean that you will never have to say things that other people don't like, but that you will have thought carefully about it first.

Slow to become angry. Keep anger out of your heart. Usually when a person speaks angrily he has lost the plot as we say, he is getting himself out of control. James is not saying that anger is always wrong; for example, if the poor are being oppressed, if injustices are happening in our society, we should speak out against them as James himself does here in his own letter, but, in most situations, our anger is not helpful and can do a lot of harm. (Chapter 5 verses 1 to 6)

So, in summary, here are the three short thoughts from James to end this session, taken from chapter 1 verse 19:

1. Everyone should be quick to listen,
2. Slow to speak and
3. Slow to become angry".

James

2 – Christian Unity

We continue to listen to the good advice James, the Lord Jesus' brother, gives in his letter in the New Testament. James is concerned that Christians should live in harmony with one another because we all have one Father who brought us into the truth of the gospel, so we are brothers and sisters. James points out some of the things that hinder Christian unity.

Quarrels and fighting often come from wanting our own way. James writes: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want". (Chapter 4 verses 1 and 2)

The list of the Ten Commandments given to Israel and to us in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy says we must not covet, that is, to want for ourselves something another person has. Coveting is divisive, it makes us unhappy with what other people have. Let us develop a spirit of thankfulness that other people have things we don't have, let us learn to be happy without them for ourselves.

But suppose it isn't things or possessions other people have that we want for ourselves, but some honour or respect or praise that a fellow Christian is receiving instead of us. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain became jealous of Abel because it seemed God was honouring him and not Cain himself. In the end he killed his brother. The apostle Paul puts it like this: "Honour one another above yourselves", Romans chapter 12 verse 10; if we do this then we won't covet what others have.

It is not wrong to ask God for his blessings on us, but be careful how you ask for them. It's our motives that matter: "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures". (Chapter 4 verse 3) If we ask God for things and really all we are concerned about is our own needs, then that is bound to cause disunity with our fellow Christians.

Note how James assumes that Christians live a corporate life, that is, their Christian faith is always related to other people. In his short letter, he uses brothers or my brothers or my dear brothers fifteen times because he is so conscious of belonging to a body of people who love and follow Christ.

James also says we should watch out how we speak of others: "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. There is only one lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbour?". (Chapter 4 verses 11 and 12)

When we criticise our fellow Christians and judge their actions, we are setting ourselves up as though we were in God's place, when our duty is not to condemn others but make sure we ourselves are following God's commandments, his way of doing things. We must remember all of us are judged by God's law, so we must respond mercifully to our fellow believers who, we feel, have broken the law. As we ourselves need mercy from God for our bad behaviour, so we must be quick to show mercy to others; James writes: "Speak and act: as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgement". (Chapter 2 verses 12 and 13) Note the phrase "the law that gives freedom" which James uses here. God's law is not

repressive, keeping it does not make us miserable, but just the opposite, it gives us freedom to be the men and women God wants us to be.

James also says that if we see a fellow believer who is "wandering from the truth" (Chapter 5 verse 19) then we must try to help them to get back on the right way in their belief or behaviour, but we can do this mercifully-"mercy triumphs over judgement".

Eastern Orthodox Christians have a prayer, the "Jesus prayer", which is useful for us all to say quite often: "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me".

Christian unity depends on looking after each other, even to caring enough to correct our brothers and sisters and being humble enough to ourselves stand being corrected by them. Not long after the Evangelical Revival began in England in the 1730's Christians formed themselves into little groups called classes and they practised the confessing of their faults to each other. Of course it takes courage and grace to do this, but it is just what James tells us to do in this letter:

"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (Chapter 5 verse 16)

Another cause of disunity among Christians is when we grumble against each other. (Chapter 5 verse 9): "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door." James says when you are about to grumble against your brother or sister, just imagine that Jesus is at the door of your house or church. Would you want him to come in while you were grumbling?

Why do we grumble? It's because we lack patience with one another. Three times before James says "don't grumble" he has said "be patient". (Chapter 5 verse 8) We grumble because we think only we know how things should be. Patience would help us to see that God's will isn't always done just the way we think it should be done; others may have more wisdom than we have

So, in summary, here are three things to remember from James' letter about Christians living in unity:

1. Don't judge one another
2. Don't grumble
3. Be patient.

James

3 – Facing the World

James, in his letter, tells us how to get on with other Christians, living together in the church. But James has also much to say about how Christians should relate to the world in which they live. The Greek word for "world" is kosmos from which we get words such as cosmology, the study of the universe. This word kosmos is used in three main ways in the New Testament. It is the straight forward word for the earth, the planet on which we live. For instance, when Paul is speaking to Greek philosophers in Athens he uses the word kosmos when he says: "The God who made this world and everything in it is Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts chapter 17 verse 24).

Christians can delight in the world in this sense of the word, the wonderful creation which is all around us, beautiful, mysterious and awesome. We can celebrate the richness of God's creation in so many ways, in music, art and poetry, all those things which Paul calls "true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable" in Philippians chapter 4 verse 8.

The word kosmos can also mean the people who live in this earth, you and me, everyone. Listen to John's Gospel chapter three verse sixteen: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life".

Christians find that their love for Christ gives them a deep love also so for all people.

But the word kosmos is also used in the New Testament for the powers in society which reject God and his ways. The world in this sense is opposed to goodness and righteousness, holiness and truth. This is how James uses the word "kosmos" in this letter. This is the world we cannot love if we are followers of Jesus.

James writes: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." Most of us today live in this kind of world to some degree or other. The world has standards of behaviour which are contrary to God's standards taught to us in the Bible. James writes in chapter 1 verse 21: "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, instead", he goes on, "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you". When James uses the phrase "moral filth" he not only means sexual immorality which is so common today, he certainly means that, but also, the world's ways of doing business, telling lies to get more profit, exploiting the vulnerable.

Note how James says, "anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world" We have a choice, to follow God or to follow the world.

The first Century Greek and Roman world was a world in which self-control, mercy and love were not qualities that were admired. And our world today is much the same in its attitudes to God's standards for human behaviour. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 5 verse 11 that we are to have nothing to do with what he calls the "fruitless deeds of darkness" and he even goes on to say that it is a Christian's duty to expose them. Now this takes courage. To speak out against the wrongs, injustices and oppressions and the worshipping of modern idols in our societies will not be easy.

In Germany in the 1930s an evil political regime took over the country which resulted in the terrible second World War in which many hundreds of thousands of people were murdered just because of their race, or because they opposed the regime. Very few Christians spoke out

strongly against all this. But some did and some gave their lives rather than be silent against the evils of the world in which they were living. Some Christian pastors in Germany opposed this regime and made a declaration in 1934 which stated clearly that they would only bow to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only word of God to which they must listen.

Another aspect of the world Christians are to avoid is what James calls "man's anger", (chapter 1 verse 20). There is a lot of anger today in the world. We should be angry about many of the things in our world today such as child abuse, the neglect of the poor and vulnerable, the suffering of the innocent, but this is not what James has in mind here. When he urges us to avoid "man's anger" he is thinking of the anger which comes from self-centred envy and jealousy of other people; an anger that seeks revenge.

We avoid such anger by humility. James says: "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up", (Chapter 4 verse 10). Elsewhere in his letter James speaks of humility that comes from wisdom. Now humility isn't thinking how bad you are so much as thinking how great God is. "For the Lord is full of compassion and mercy", (Chapter 5 verse 12).

So, in summary, what does James teach us about the world. How should we relate to it? Here are three thoughts to remember:

1. Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God", chapter 4 verse 4.
2. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up, chapter 4 verse 10.
3. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, chapter 5 verse 12.

James

4 – Facing Troubles

We're looking at some very good advice given to us by James, Jesus' brother in his letter in the New Testament. This time we are going to hear what he has to say about facing troubles. Christians can't escape the troubles that come to all people in one way or another, illness, difficult situations of many kinds and sorrow and bereavements. Our Lord did not say that we should not have our share of these things; they come to us as part of our being human, fallen away from God our Father. What, however, James (and other parts of the Bible) teach us is that these troubles can be a source of good.

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

This is startling. He is saying that whenever our faith is tested by trials, small ones or great ones, we should be really glad. I know a couple who, when they receive bad news, look at each other and say "It's all joy". Now this isn't being silly, it's being sensible, because to buckle under trial and to say "Oh, this is terrible, what shall we do?" automatically puts us at a disadvantage. We become open to depression and gloomy thoughts. But if we say, "this bad news can help us to grow more like Jesus, let's see how we can make the best of it" then we mature as Christians. Of course, it depends on whether or not we want to become more like Jesus, mature and complete.

Florence Allshorn was a Christian lady who went to be a missionary in Africa. When she arrived at the mission station she found that the senior missionary was a difficult person to get on with. Florence was allowed only a tiny room of her own while the senior missionary had all the comforts. One day, a fellow lady worker found her crying about the situation. She asked Florence what was the matter and so Florence told her of her trial.

The lady told Florence that others had come out from England and could not cope with the senior missionary so went home. She challenged Florence: "Do you really believe that Jesus is your saviour, then why are you so depressed". This made Florence repent of her selfishness. Every day for weeks afterwards she read Paul's description of Christian love in 1 Corinthians 13 and so she found joy in her trouble and stayed on as a Christian missionary.

James wants to make it clear that testings can come from God to help us become stronger Christians, but temptations, the same word in the Greek the language in which James wrote, do not come from God. We know the difference between testings and temptations. Testings are to make us stronger, temptations come to us in order to make us do wrong. God may test us, but he never tempts us. James writes: "When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me". For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death", (Chapter 1 verses 13-15).

It is our own evil desires that drag us away to do wrong, says James. Adam and Eve, in the story in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, could not blame Satan for putting in their minds to disobey God. Eve did blame Satan and Adam blamed Eve, but it was Adam and Eve's own evil desires that made them want to be as great as God. Satan tried to tempt Jesus to do wrong, but Jesus did not let him drag him away from doing God's will.

So, testings come into our lives and can be used to make us stronger and more faithful Christians, and even give us joy, but temptations come to drag us away to do wrong. The way to counter temptations is to do as Jesus did, cast them away from him, not to let them settle in our hearts. James puts it like this: "Don't allow evil desires to get inside you and grow within you".

Suppose a man is tempted to steal a computer which is lying on the back seat of a car. What he should do is walk right past the car and put the idea out of his mind.

James asks us to remember the great men and women of the past who were patient and persevered in the face of trials and sufferings. He writes: "Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord", (Chapter 5 verse 10). The prophet Jeremiah was put into a deep underground prison; his words were constantly rejected by his own people; Isaiah, Hosea, and Job had severe trials, but all lived to praise God and count it all joy. James is saying and so can we!

Here are some verses from James on the question of facing suffering:

"Count it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds", (Chapter 1 verse 2).

"The testing of your faith develops perseverance", (Chapter 1 verse 2 again).

"The Lord is full of compassion and mercy", (Chapter 5 verse 11).

James

5 – True Religion

What is true religion? How can we tell it from false religion? A man once came to Jesus and asked him how he might have eternal life. Jesus asked the man what the Law of God said about it. The man replied: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbour as yourself". That's it, said Jesus, you are right. Now James agrees with that in his letter and stresses the second part of that commandment in particular.

True religion does not demand rituals and prayers and religious ceremonies in themselves. The test says James, is do I treat my neighbour in love? He writes: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world", (Chapter 1 verse 27). It is possible to have a religion which is really only another way of being selfish, to be so concerned with our so-called goodness that we never think of those around us who need our help.

Note also that true religion does not get caught up with the wrong that goes on all around us. James says that true religion keeps itself from being polluted by the world. That's chapter 1 verse 27. Two translations of the New Testament I looked at use the word "contaminated" instead of polluted. When the oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico blew up, vast stretches of the American coastline were contaminated with oil slicks drifting ashore on to the sands. Sea birds caught up in the contamination died, and far out to sea the spilled oil polluted a great area of ocean. Both these words, contaminate and pollute have to do with touching something dirty and unclean. So when James writes: "keep your selves from being polluted by the world" he means don't have contact with things in society around you that are evil, sexual immorality, lying and cheating, fighting, injustices, worshipping things instead of God. By "world" he doesn't mean people. He is not saying don't mix with people, don't love them and care for them, but, if they are doing wrong, don't do as they do.

James gives us another example of religion which is not true religion, he writes in chapter 2 verses 14-16 "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him: "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well-fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." To do nothing about a neighbour's troubles when we can do something to help is to show that we have no real faith in God or love for him.

Are there people near you who need help? Or even people who live far away from you whom you could be helping some way?

In the middle of the 19th Century there was a young man in London who was studying to be a doctor so that he could go abroad to help those in need. As he was doing his medical training, he ran a school for very poor children in the evenings. These children met in what had been a shed for donkeys. One evening, as he was about to lock the door of the shed after the children had gone home he found there was a boy of about 8 years of age who was still in the shed taking shelter for the night. The medical student said; "Come on, my boy, it's about time you got home to your mother and father". The boy replied: "I've not got a mother and I've not got a father". "Then where will you sleep tonight?", the student asked him. "Anywhere I can" said the boy, whose name was Jim. "And are there other boys like you sleeping on the streets tonight?",

he was asked. "Yes," said Jim, "lots of them". That night Jim took the medical student to see some boys huddled together on a roof top, trying to sleep. That sight completely changed the student's mind about what he should do with his life. He completed his training as a doctor and spent the rest of his life caring for orphan children. He was doing just what James says in this letter: "look after orphans in their distress".

We have said that James' letter is very practical in his teaching to us. Are you able to do something practical to help people in distress?

But what if you who are listening to this broadcast are in great distress? James tell us to cry out to God in our distress for he takes note of those who have been unjustly treated like workers in a harvest who do not receive proper wages: "The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty", he says in chapter 5 verse 4.

God's help comes to the distressed through people who have a real, practical religion. Are you one of these people?

Three things to remember from this broadcast:

1. Religion that is real cares for people in distress, chapter 1 verse 27.
2. Faith should always be accompanied by action, chapter 2 verses 14-17.
3. God hears the cry of the distressed, chapter 5 verse 4.

James

6 – Faith and Works

We ended our last talk from the letter of James in the New Testament listening to what he had to say about helping folk who are in distress. There is in the Bible a very close association between faith, trust in God, and actions, sometimes called works or deeds.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, argues that Abraham (whom James calls "the friend of God", 2.23, was brought into a right relationship with God (justified is the word Paul uses) by his trust in God. He writes: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness", Romans 4.3. In other words, Abraham's broken relationship with God was put right by his trust in God's goodness and forgiveness. James, in this letter, goes on to point out that the faith which put Abraham right with God led Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God; God was testing Abraham and would not let him sacrifice his son to him, but what Abraham was ready to do showed that his faith in God was real. We will probably not be tested in such a severe way as Abraham was, but time and time again we shall be asked to show that our faith really does make a difference to the way we live and act. We become Christians by repenting of our sins, turning round away from them and going God's way, that is the way of being put right with God by faith, but then our faith is completed and made real by the good things we do for God and for others. James puts it this way: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead", 2.26.

At the time of the Reformation in Europe in the 16th Century a great conflict arose on this issue of faith and works. Many people were trusting that doing religious things, like going on pilgrimages, saying a lot of prayers, or giving money to the poor would make those who did them acceptable to God. Martin Luther, the great German reformer, and many others throughout Europe, said no, you can't buy your way to heaven by money or by going through a series of religious rituals. God is a gracious, loving God who wants your trust and love. He himself will put us right because of what Jesus, his Son, did in dying for the sins of the whole world. The Reformers showed that our trust must be in God alone, not in ourselves, or the things we do, but that a real faith in God will result in our doing good deeds. Jesus put it like this: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds, and praise your Father in heaven", Matthew 5.16.

It is important that we understand what the Bible means by real faith. James says, be careful, don't think that just because you say you believe in God that all is well; even the evil spirits believe there is one God. That's chapter 2 verse 19. Real faith is a loving trust in God that results in a changed life.

Throughout James' letter we see faith and works (deeds and actions) working together to produce Christian character.

When your faith is tested (and you don't give way under the testing) then this leads to perseverance. Now this is a fine quality for living for Christ in the world. If we have no perseverance, that is, if we easily give in when things go wrong in our lives, then we cannot make progress as Christians because life is often full of unpleasant experiences and it is only when our faith is tested that perseverance can develop. As long as all is going well in our lives, we may not have deep faith in God, but when hard times come, then it is possible for our faith to grow. If we begin to say "how can God let this happen to me?", then we begin to lose faith in God as our Father and our character becomes weakened.

In chapter 5 verse 11, James gives us the example of someone who persevered in his faith even though he had many trials. We read of this man, Job, in the Old Testament. He was a wealthy farmer who lost everything he had in a series of disasters. He lost all his many possessions, all his children and finally his own health. He was tempted to turn away from God and couldn't understand why all these things had happened to him, especially as he had always tried to be faithful to God. Yet he persevered in trusting God in his troubles, even when his own wife turned her back on God. Job persevered in trust and was wonderfully rewarded in the end.

I have a friend who, with his wife, served as a Christian missionary in Africa for about ten years. About six years ago this couple came home to England for a short break and my friend fell down the stairs one evening and damaged his spine. He was at once paralysed from the neck down. The first time I visited him, in hospital, he told me that he was not going to say "Why did this happen to me?" and blame God for not looking after him. Instead, his faith and deeds worked together to give him a positive attitude to his great disability. By means of the Internet, using his mouth to work the keyboard, he keeps contact with his Christian friends in Africa and helps the kingdom of God make progress there. When I go to visit him, I am greatly encouraged to persevere with my own little troubles. He has learned that faith and works work together to produce a perseverance that brings honour to God, inspires other people, and brings good out of an otherwise bad situation. Says James in chapter 2 verse 18: "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."

Here are three thoughts from James' letter about real faith:

1. Real faith is made complete by what we do, 2.22.
2. Faith without deeds is useless, 2.20.
3. Abraham, who trusted God and obeyed God, is called God's friend, 2.23.

James

7 – Justice for the Poor

James is very like an Old Testament prophet in his strong condemnation of the way rich people treated the poor in his own day. After all, James was a Jew and the brother of Jesus, so he knew how both the Hebrew prophets and Jesus spoke out against the oppression of the poor. He could quite possibly have heard Jesus say: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" and "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy", sayings which Matthew records in chapter 5 of his Gospel in what we know as The Sermon on the Mount. He would also know the great prophetic book of Isaiah opens with words like: "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right. Seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." So when he saw rich people dragging poor people into law courts simply because as rich people they had the power to do so, he was indignant. "You have insulted the poor", he cries out in chapter 2 verse 6. You have dishonoured them, you haven't treated them with dignity. One of the wonderful things about the Christian gospel is that it treats everyone, even the lowliest in society, as having equal value in God's sight.

Further on in this letter James, in chapter 5 verses 4 to 6, expresses again his indignation at oppression of the poor by the rich. He saw how some rich farmers were treating their workmen. He saw the men sweating in the fields gathering in the harvest. He saw them at the end of a day's work going to the master's house for their wages only to be turned away with nothing. He writes: "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty."

We must ask ourselves, "Why it is that wherever we look in the world the poor are often oppressed by the rich and powerful?" It was so in the days of the Old Testament prophets, it was so in Jesus' day, it was so in James' day and it is so today. The answer is that the oppression of the poor by the rich and powerful is just one indication among many of what is wrong with humanity. The Bible calls it sin. James shows that sin is refusing to follow God's law of holiness, righteousness and love and he even goes so far as to say that if we break only one part of God's law, we have broken it all. For example, God's law spoken first in the Old Testament and repeated by Jesus shows that it is wrong to commit adultery. Now, says James, if we do not commit adultery but hate our fellow man, then we are guilty of breaking the whole law. It's rather like if you have a beautiful jug, or plate or pot in your house that has a tiny, very thin crack in it, then that jug is not perfect, it has been broken. Even what seems a little thing, like showing favouritism, is sin, says James in chapter 2 verse 9. It is a sin because it is not loving perfectly someone whom God loves. God has no favourites. The Old Testament prophets made this very clear when they prophesied that Israel would be punished along with all others if they broke God's law of love and holiness. In Psalm 145 verse 9 the writer says: "The Lord is good to ALL; he has compassion on ALL he has made."

The fact is that all of us have broken God's law. So what can we do about it? James helps us to see that there is hope for us. He says in chapter 2 verse 13: "Mercy triumphs over judgement" and in chapter 5 verse 11: "God is full of mercy and compassion." What we must do, says James, is humble ourselves and submit to God. That is true for those who oppress the poor. It is also true for you and me.

Because of Christ's death on the cross, mercy is offered to us. As we receive his mercy to cover our sins of lack of love to others and to God and our sins of selfishness in so many ways, God

brings us back to Himself. We can now become, like James himself, “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s chapter 1 verse 1 of this letter.

So there we have it. God’s uncompromising judgement against the ill treatment of the poor.

Here are three thoughts from this section of James’ Letter:

1. Keep the royal law found in Scripture: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Chapter 2 verse 8.
2. Don’t show favouritism. Chapter 2 verse 3.
3. Mercy triumphs over judgement. Chapter 2 verse 13.

James

8 – Prayer

We are going to continue to study the letter of James found in the New Testament by looking at what he has to say about prayer. All the New Testament writers pay great attention to the place of prayer in the Christian's life and James is no exception. Prayer has been called the Christian's "vital breath"; it is as necessary to our spiritual lives as breathing is to our bodies.

For example, James says that we should pray to God if we lack wisdom: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given him." By wisdom the Bible means the ability to see what is the good and right thing to do in any situation-to do what is pleasing to God. Have you ever thought of asking God for wisdom? Notice, he says God gives wisdom to all who ask providing we ask in faith expecting him to answer: "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does." Yet the newest Christian as well as the oldest can ask for wisdom.

Is there something hard to figure out in your life? Perhaps it is a decision you have to make, or a problem about how to relate to certain people or situations. Pray about these things. Obviously you are going to have to do something about it yourself as well, but often it becomes clearer about what we should do after we have prayed about it. It's good to note that God is generous in his gift of wisdom to us and does not find fault with us simply because we are puzzled. He treats us as a good Father would treat his children.

This truth of God being our Father is underlined by James when he says that every good and perfect gift comes from One he calls the Father of heavenly lights, chapter 1 verse 17. God is the unchanging and unchangeable giver of the good things in life. By prayer we are able to give thanks to and for such a Father.

James says that when we are about to plan some activity, to do some business or to make some money we should pray about it to know God's will first. He writes: "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money'. Why do you not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'," chapter 4 verses 13-16. By prayer we can submit our plans to God.

James urges us to "come near to God and he will come near to us", chapter 4 verse 8. We come near by prayer. In prayer we turn our attention to our Father and we find that he is close to us.

In prayer, too, we humble ourselves before the Lord, chapter 4 verse 10. As we pray, we become conscious of our faults and sins and this gives us a true understanding of what we are really like. Much misery is created in our world by men and women failing to humble themselves before God. It is possible to pretend to pray like the man in Jesus' story who went into the Temple in order to tell God that he was not like other men or even a tax-collector who was praying nearby, but that he was a very good man indeed. But the tax-collector prayed a real prayer asking God to forgive him of his sins. Jesus said it was the humble tax-collector who went home in a right relationship to God and not the other man who tried to tell God how good he was.

Prayer made in faith can bring about the healing of someone who is ill. We have just seen that we ought to say 'If it is God's will, I will do this or that', so also, if we are ill, we should ask for the prayers of our friends and church elders for God's will to be done. Some people say that it always God's will to heal a sick person, but Paul said he prayed three times for God to heal him of an affliction and was not healed. Instead he learned the great truth that God's strength can be experienced in a deep way through our weaknesses. If our lives are right with God and we are sincerely following his ways, then wonderful things can happen as our wills become in tune with God's will. Prayer is to get to know God's will more fully.

James tells us that the Old Testament prophet Elijah prayed to God for a drought to come on the land, no rain for three years, and it was so. Then he prayed for rain and the rain came in abundance. James says that God answers the prayer of a righteous person such as Elijah. He writes in chapter 5 verse 26: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." If our lives are right with God, then a power is set free from God that does good. We may not always see the good happening, often we will, but not always. Prayer enables us to see reality. Elijah prayed earnestly for a drought to be a wake up call to King Ahab who had turned his back on the Lord God. By prayer we get to know God and his will for us as individuals and as churches.

We have said that James' Letter is very practical, it has to do with the way we should behave as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, so it is fitting that he should remind his readers of the power and importance of prayer.

Here are three thoughts from James worth remembering:

1. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault." 1.5
2. "Every good and perfect gift: is from above, from our unchanging Father"- 1.17.
3. "We ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will do this or that' ", 4.15

James

9 – Patience and Praise

Praise and prayer that we looked at in the last study belong together. We cannot ask God to give us prayer-it is something we must get on and do for ourselves. Prayer is telling our Father God about our needs, our anxieties, making request to him as a child would to its Father. Jesus said that if a child asks his father for bread will he give him a stone? No, of course not-he will give him something to eat. But praise is the thanks we give to the Lord for being our wonderful Father.

In James' letter we find several good reasons for praise. But, first, what does the word itself mean? The Greek word James uses is psallo which literally means to pluck the strings of an instrument. The word Psalms comes from this very same word and the book of Psalms is a book of 150 songs most of them singing joyful songs of praise to God. The word praise comes something like 206 times in the book of Psalms. Here is one of those times: Psalm 92 verses 1-4 "It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning, and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the ten-stringed lyre and the melody of the harp. For you make me glad by your deeds, O Lord; I sing for joy at the work of your hands".

Several writers in the Old Testament look forward to the time when, not only in the Temple in Jerusalem, but among the non- Jewish nations on earth people will praise God with their voices:

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles and sing praises to him, all you peoples" - Psalm 117 verse 1. The apostle Paul in the New Testament writes: "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ", Ephesians 5 verses 19 and 20.

Happiness is infectious; Christians should be spreaders of joy in our world so that many sad people will get a glimpse of God's love. Do you remember how James opens his letter:? He writes:

"Count it pure joy when trials and troubles come to you", chapter 1 verse 2. What a wonderful testimony to God's love and power it is when we can praise God even in troubles. Let's make a list of things about which we can praise God as we find them in James' Letter:

1. We can transform trials into joy - chapter 1 verse 2.
2. There is a crown of life promised to those who persevere and love God - chapter 1 verse 12.
3. Praise God that he is our loving Father who gives us many good gifts - chapter 3 verse 9 and chapter 1 verse 17.
4. God is merciful to us - chapter 2 verse 13.
5. God gives us wisdom when we ask for it in faith - chapter 1 verse 5.
6. Praise causes us to sing - chapter 5 verse 13.
7. God can heal us and do amazing things in our lives - chapter 5 verse 13 onwards.

With praise in James' letter goes patience-both go together; a praising person is a patient person. It is hard to praise God if you are impatient because an impatient person is always

dissatisfied with his life, he or she always wants things to be better quickly. The other day I passed what could be called a wayside pulpit, a notice board giving thoughts about God and the Christian life. It said "I asked God to give me patience. He said No, it's up to you to be patient".

Listen to James chapter 5 verses 7 to 10: "Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and the spring rains. You, too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." Now when James speaks of the Lord's coming (his parousia, his drawing near) he can mean his second coming at the end of time or his coming to us in our everyday lives. The New Testament certainly speaks of a time when the present age will end with the return of Christ to earth, so don't let us get impatient.

God is working his purpose out among the nations on earth. Political regimes will come and go, but the work of the kingdom of God will not fail. And remember, too, that Jesus comes to us in our present situation in our personal lives, in our family lives and church lives. He comes to encourage us, to rebuke us, to heal and restore us. So, says James, don't be found grumbling with your fellow Christians when Christ comes, remember, he is just outside the door of your house or church: "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!", chapter 5 verse 9.

When we grumble against our neighbours or fellow Christians, it is often because we are impatient with them and we want them to change and do what we want. It is a great blessing when we are patient with one another, often it brings out the best in them and in ourselves. Think how patient Jesus was with his troublesome disciples! If he had always been impatient with them they would never have learned the all-important lessons he had to teach them before he left them. He was strict with them and had to correct them many times, but he didn't give up on them. Peter denied Jesus three times and all the disciples ran away when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane by the soldiers, but Jesus even then loved them to the end.

The Lord knows your trials, be patient, he will do what is right for you, because "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy", chapter 5 verse 11.

Here are three thoughts from James on patience and praise

1. "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise" - chapter 5 verse 13.
2. "Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming" - chapter 5 verse 7.
3. "With our tongue we praise our Lord and Father" - chapter 3 verse 9.

James

10 – The Person of God in James' Letter

In this final study of James' letter I am going to summarise what James says about God.

We are going to have a review of what has been said on James. I'll give the Bible references to the verses we consider so that you can read them for yourselves if you have a New Testament.

For James, God is not a vague Being somewhere outside the universe, but a loving and gracious and faithful Father involved in our everyday lives. James is clear that there is only one God, not many. He writes: "You believe that there is one God. Good", chapter 2 verse 19. He goes on to say that just believing that fact is not enough in itself; the Christian faith is a relationship with that One, our Father.

God is a generous God, wanting the best for our lives, he gives us many wonderful gifts: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights", chapter 1 verse 17.

God does not change like we do, he "does not change like shifting shadows", chapter 1 verse 17 again.

He does not tempt people to do wrong; "when tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me", chapter 1 verse 13. He gives us tests to strengthen us but not to weaken us.

It is God who chooses to bring us alive as Christians by giving us his word of truth, chapter 1 verse 18. We cannot make ourselves into Christians or be born a Christian. We become Christians by receiving his word into our lives, by making Jesus our saviour and Lord.

God desires men and women to lead a righteous life, James writes: "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you", verses 20 and 21.

Our God, says James, is concerned that what we do as Christians should be motivated by practical, down-to-earth kindness particularly to the vulnerable in our society, to the fatherless and the widows, those with addictions and problems hard to solve, verse 27.

God wants our language to be pure and decent, he wants us to keep a check on what we say, chapter 3 verse 2 onwards. Our speech should be a blessing to other people.

God does not have favourites, says James, of race or gender or social standing. People with riches do not impress God, chapter 2 verse 1 onwards.

God has given a guideline as to how we should treat other people:

"Love your neighbour as yourself", chapter 2 verse 8.

James tells us the amazing truth that all people are made in God's image and likeness, chapter 3 verse 9. Elsewhere in the Bible we learn that truth and we also learn that his image in us has been spoiled by our sin in all of us; we all need to be re-created and God's image in us restored. This means that we must treat all men and women with respect as created by God and help them to see how they can have the image of God restored in them by receiving Jesus the true and exact image of God into their lives.

Quoting from the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, James teaches us that God opposes the proud and "gives grace (help) to the humble", chapter 4 verse 6. Why does God oppose proud people? Pride is a form of self-centeredness and we can only be truly ourselves when God is the centre of our lives. Pride is at the root of almost all sins which people commit. Our true humanity is found in loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; pride rejects this love of God. God longs to lift us up to himself: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up", chapter 4 verse 10.

James reminds us that it is not our job to criticise our fellow human beings- God is the only judge who matters: "There is only one Law-giver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbour?", chapter 4 verse 12.

God has a will and purpose for our lives-wise people will try to find out what that will is says James and not just rely on their own feelings, verses 13-17.

God allows us to go through trials and sufferings and sickness but can transform them all. James reminds us that a person in the Old Testament, Job, suffered greatly in the loss of his possessions, his servants, his family and his health but God had the last word and blessed Job wonderfully in the end. "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy," says James, chapter 5 verse 11.

So what a wonderful God is ours. Is he your God? Is he your heavenly Father? James urges us all to draw near to him. Have you done that? He knows our sins and our failings and still loves us and is prepared to make us his children in his family if we come to him, deeply sorry for our sins and determined to make Jesus our Lord and Saviour. James calls Christians "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, chapter 2 verse 1.

James opens his letter by calling himself a "servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ", chapter 1 verse 1. To become a Christian believer is to become a servant of Christ, to begin to stop living for one's self and to live for him and others. First step, draw near to God by turning away from your sins and trusting Christ to save you and give you forgiveness, next steps, a daily following of the master, doing his will. Listen to James and draw near to God today.