

**James's Vision  
of the Perfect Man and Woman**  
*Seven Talks on the Epistle of James*

*David W. Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust  
180 Mountsandel Road  
Coleraine, N. Ireland  
BT52 1TB

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: jas.001/bh

## Introduction

*James's Vision of the Perfect Man and Woman*—when James uses the word 'perfect' he does not mean 'sinless', but 'mature', 'fully developed.'

Chapter 1 shows us faith being tested by trials and temptations. It tells us what the purpose of testing is and gives us the secret of being able to face testing with confidence and joy. But it also shows us that we shall need divine wisdom in order to adopt the right attitude to life and to its affairs, to ourselves and to God, if we are truly to profit from life's trials.

Chapter 2:1–13 calls us to behave consistently with the faith which we profess to believe. If we believe that our Lord Jesus is the Lord of glory, that he died for every one of his people and is not ashamed to call them his brothers, then we must not act inconsistently and despise or discriminate against any of our brothers and sisters.

Chapter 2:14–26 insists that true faith will demonstrate its existence by its works, for salvation involves not only pardon but also sanctification. Moreover, it cites the case of Abraham to remind us that it is not only our neighbours and our fellow Christians who have the right to see our works; God himself also requires us to show him by our works that our faith is genuine.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 direct our attention to:

1. Our faculty of speech
2. Our desires and pleasures
3. Our sense of justice

These are three basic and important parts of our human personalities, placed there by the creator himself for our enjoyment and our ennoblement. Through the fall all three have been distorted and have got so far out of control that they not only disgrace ourselves and damage other people, but they also lead us to behave unfaithfully towards God and at times to call his love and justice into question. If ever we are to become mature believers, then by God's grace all three parts of our personalities must be brought under the control and direction of the Holy Spirit.

## Not Double-minded in Face of Trial

*Reading: James 1:1–18; Genesis 49:3–4*

Central to James's epistle is this solemn warning to all of us who dare to teach, 'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness' (3:1). To teach God's holy word is to profess to understand what it means. It is, of course, comparatively easy to understand what the word of God means; but understanding what it says is not the same thing as doing what it says. No teacher can afford to forget the words of the Lord Jesus,

And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. (Luke 12:47–48)

You may rest assured, therefore, that as we study this very practical and very searching part of the word of God, I shall not be laying down the law to you as though I were in any way superior, or had in any sense already attained. By God's grace, *I follow on*. My task is to wait on the Lord so that he may speak to my heart and I am assured that you have not come sermon tasting, to test the quality of your preacher's eccentricities. You have come to do business with God, to allow the Lord as always to encourage our hearts by his grace and his love. But at the same time we shall want to take courage in both hands and allow the Lord to probe our hearts, to investigate our performance, to put his finger on things that are still not as they should be in our Christian living, so that we might be brought humbly to own the truth of his corrections and seek his grace from this time onwards to be different and better men and women than we were when we first assembled. And our Christianity may be richer and deeper, less superficial and more sincere, more attractive and alive and vibrant, more pleasing to the Lord and more effective in our testimony to the world.

### **What does *perfect* mean in this context?**

Let me explain, first of all, what I mean by 'perfection' — *James's Vision of a Perfect Man and Woman*; I borrow the word from James himself. For instance, he says, 'If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man' (3:2). James does not mean *sinless*. We shall not be talking about sinless perfection, though we believe with all our hearts that one day — when the Lord comes — we shall be sinlessly perfect. We are talking about perfection in the sense of *maturity*; a fully-grown, developed character. In that sense, therefore, we are to read James's lessons as to what those features are that mark a fully mature, fully grown, believer. Once

more we shall have to admit to ourselves what James tells us, that in many things all of us still stumble and fall down. None of us has yet attained and we have to say with the Apostle Paul himself, 'Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect' (Phil 3:12).

On the other hand, we mustn't take that as a get-out or an excuse for our bad behaviour, our grumbly dispositions and all those other ugly things that beset us; *we must follow on*. We must take a leaf out of the book of the two-and-a-half tribes—the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh. You will remember that when Moses accosted them and charged them with being virtual apostates, wanting to settle down and forsake the battle of the Lord and rest on their oars, they protested, 'It is not so, my lord Moses. We are prepared to go in the very forefront of the armies of the Lord to fight relentlessly until the last battle has been won and we may with honour put up our swords and hang up our shields.' We need to be like them.

And so, if we should meet Moses or James and they look sternly at us and say, 'I hear you have been slacking recently and not making progress', we shall be able to say, 'It is not so! Though we have not yet attained, we are determined to follow on, to fight in the vanguard of God's people and thus make progress ourselves and encourage others. Nor are we prepared to give up the battle, sheathe our swords or hang up our shields until the final battle is won.'

We are to think, then, on seven features taken from the many that James lists that help to describe the perfect man and woman.

1. Not Double-minded in Face of Trial
2. Not Religiously Self-deceived
3. Not Guilty of Social Discrimination
4. The Judgment of the Lord for Believers
5. The Tongue
6. Our Desires and Pleasures
7. Our Moral Judgment

Some of those topics are exceedingly practical and may have us leaving with our tail between our legs. But, being a nice, kind teacher, James starts his epistle with a delightfully joyful topic, the topic of *temptation*! 'Count it all joy', says James, 'when you fall into all kinds of temptations' (1:2 KJV), which sounds a bit odd when you first hear it. How can you possibly count it all joy when you fall into various temptations? It will sound even more odd when we discover what James means by his term 'temptation'. He is not talking about those delightful temptations that come in the form of too much cream on the pavlova, which we are tempted to take at the urging of our hostess and to the peril of our figure! James is talking about *trials*, because most trials involve temptations sooner or later. The word he uses means 'trials', and he is thinking of all kinds of trials; but trials that, one and all, will have the effect of showing whether we are true believers or not.

Here, as in so much of what he has to teach us, James is harking back to what the Lord Jesus himself said (which we now have recorded in the Gospels). In particular, when he uses this word 'trial' or 'temptation', he is echoing what the Lord Jesus said in his famous parable

of the Sower. Read our Lord's description of the seed that fell on the rocky ground, 'In the time of trial it shall fall away' (Luke 8:13). What a dismal scene! People who began by receiving the word with joy—you would have said their beaming faces told you of the reality of the work that had been done on their hearts—in the time of trial they fall away. How come? Because, says the Saviour, *they had no root*. They never did have any root; there never was any possibility of their doing anything else but fall away. A plant that has no root is bound to wither and certainly will never bring forth fruit.

### **What does it mean, 'to believe'?**

This is a very solemn thing. Our Lord Jesus himself says that they did *believe*, 'They believed for a while.' And when the Lord Jesus says they believed, it is not for me to say that they didn't believe. You say, 'Can a believer fall away in time of temptation?' The answer to your question lies in noticing how the New Testament uses this word 'believe.' For instance, we read that at the feast day many believed on the Lord Jesus, when they saw the miracles that he did (John 2:23). But our Lord didn't commit himself to them. Why not? 'For he himself knew what was in man' (v. 25) and, in particular, what wasn't in man. He saw they had no root; it was a shallow kind of belief brought about because they had seen miracles taking place under their very noses. It would be marvellous to have somebody like that around so that, when the wine cellar ran dry, he would make new wine for you and provide you with a cheap breakfast and a free lunch by multiplying loaves and fishes. So they welcomed him, but they had no root and presently they withered.

In chapter 8 John calls attention to another group of men. He says that, when our Lord said these things, 'many believed on him.' Jesus, therefore, said to those Jews which had believed on him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (vv. 31–32). Once more we notice that these people had professed to believe in the Saviour and now, taking them at face value, the Saviour says, 'You say you have believed? Marvellous! Now the mark of a true believer, a true disciple, is this, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."'

But, even as he said it, a frown passed over their faces. 'Excuse us, Lord, what do you mean, "the truth will set you free" — free from what?'

'Free from sin,' said Christ. 'You see, by becoming a believer and entering my school as one of my disciples you embark upon a course of learning my word and doing my word, and in the process coming to be made free from the grip and tyranny of sin in your life.'

Now their faces resembled a volcano about to explode!

They said, 'And who asked you to come here? Who do you think you are, suggesting that we are sinners in the grip and slavery of sin? We would have you know that we are children of Abraham and children of God; we didn't ask you to come here with that impertinent talk, suggesting that we are sinners that need to be set free.'

They said at first that they believed, now you see what kind of belief it was. They had no root, they had been attracted by the intellectual interest of our Lord's teaching.

Have you not felt the sheer charm of our Lord Jesus as a teacher? How lovely his parables were; though we have read them a million times they still charm us. Those delightful word-pictures—The parable of the Prodigal Son and the Lost Silver and the Rich Fool and the many others. It is possible to be charmed by the sheer intellectual artistry of our Lord's teaching and to mistake it for the actual carrying out of what he teaches. It was so with these people and they showed their true colours and fell away. Our Lord had to point out that, far from being children of God, they were children of the very devil. In time of trial they fell away and our Lord is speaking of those kinds of trials that inevitably come that will have the effect of demonstrating whether we are true believers or not.

### **Facing trials with joy**

So James's advice must sound exceedingly strange, when you first hear it. *Count it all joy* when you fall into trials so severe that they will penetrate to the depths of your heart and show whether you do have root, or not. They will show whether you are a believer, or not. How could you possibly count it all joy?

In the course of my career I have often had the unpleasant duty of invigilating in an examination. Many times I came down to an examination hall and outside were some hundreds of students—some of them about to face their final examination with all that would depend on that. Whether they passed or not, whether they would get a good enough degree to enter the profession they wanted to enter; everything would depend upon the exam. Their faces were a study. Most were in a sober mood, but there would be some who would be leaping and dancing about, cracking jokes and trying to make out that they felt happy. When they sat down at the desk and turned the question paper over there were some smiles about the place. Some had got the question they wanted, but there were worried looks on other faces, much pulling of hair and biting of nails and furrowed brows. This was Finals, nobody that I have known has counted it all joy. How could they? For the simple reason that they couldn't have known whether they would pass or not until the examiners pronounced their verdict.

Listen to James, 'Count it all joy . . . for you *know* . . . '—mark the verb. He doesn't say, 'you hope'; he says, 'you know.' This is the secret of facing such a trial with joy; we can face it knowing, on God's authority, that the trying, the proving of our faith produces endurance, *perseverance*. It doesn't simply mean that it turns us into persevering men and women. This is the word that the Lord Jesus used in that famous parable in Luke 8, 'But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance' (v. 15 NASB). With *endurance*—not with *patience*, at least if you understand the word 'patience' in the modern English sense—patience, as distinct from *impatience*. Some of God's good saints are horribly impatient! But we are talking here about perseverance, endurance; the good seed that grows and brings forth fruit with endurance.

There is only one way known in this life to bring forth fruit in a plant. That is, if the plant persists in growing through the rainy days and through the sunny days, through the wind and through the calm. By nature using these forces (the sun and the wind, the calm and the

storm, the cold and the heat) in the end it brings forth fruit. The same forces that would destroy a plant that had no root contribute to the maturing and the fruitfulness of a plant that has a root.

As we face trials that will test whether we are believers or not we are to count it all joy, for we have it on the authority of God himself that trials produce endurance and in that confidence we can go through the storm. Paul says the same thing in Romans 5: we glory—not only in hope—we boast, we exult in confidence in the face of tribulation, *knowing that* tribulation works persistence (endurance, perseverance). The students wouldn't have looked so worried if they could have been sure in their hearts that they would come through the test with flying colours!

This is what makes life and trial faceable by a believer. And if I speak to some fellow-believer whose heart is besieged by difficulty, whose life is almost overwhelmed by trial and you feel it is almost impossible to carry on—you feel like giving way to Job's wife's advice, 'Curse God and die' (2:9)—if I speak to you and you are in that frame of mind by reason of extraordinary trial, Courage up! Your examination may be terribly severe, we are all in the examination hall with you and sooner or later we must all face our papers. Courage up! The blessed Lord himself says that you may count it all joy. Grim kind of joy, maybe, but count it joy, knowing that where there is true faith to begin with, tribulation produces endurance.

### **How may we know that we are true believers?**

'You have given the game away!' you say. 'You shouldn't have added that nasty little phrase, "If there is true faith to begin with." It must be nice to know that a true believer cannot be lost, but that is just the point; how can I know that I am a true believer to start with? If I could know that, then I could face life's trials with joy. If you are saying that when trial comes it has the effect of demonstrating whether we are true believers or not, whatever would become of me if after the trial I found out that I am not a true believer after all? How can I know before the trial begins that I am a true believer?'

#### **1. We keep his commandments**

The Apostle John is a great help to us here. 'And by this we know that we have come to know him' (1 John 2:3). Notice exactly what it says, '*We know that we know!*' Why the repetition? Here is a person and she says, 'I know the Lord,' how can that person be sure she knows the Lord? How can she know that it is a true faith that she has; that she really knows the Lord and is not deceiving herself, imagining that she is a believer when she is not? Can you know that you know the Lord? Of course you can! What is John's way of doing it? 'And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.' That is one way of knowing. We don't have to trust moods and fancies, we have to ask ourselves, 'Is there a desire in my heart to keep the Lord's commandments?'

There are many things in which we fall short, but if we are true believers that will grieve us; the set of our heart is that we will want to do the Lord's commandments. If you really know the Lord, you will find him exceedingly wonderful and beautiful and you will want to



do his commandments. A person who says, 'I know the Lord,' but doesn't want to do the Lord's commandments, obviously doesn't know the Lord.

Let me illustrate the whole point. Suppose you say to me, 'Which country in the world do you like the best?'

I say, 'Switzerland is the country for me!'

'When were you last there?'

'Well, not recently; but I love it!'

'That's very interesting. Are there any features in the landscape of any country that you don't like?'

'I don't like mountains and lakes and snow-capped glaciers and cows with tinkling bells around their necks. I wouldn't go anywhere near them.'

'And you like Switzerland!'

I think you would conclude that I am talking nonsense and I do not know Switzerland.

If we say, 'Yes, I know the Lord,' and we don't have any intention of keeping his commandments, we show that we just don't know the Lord. If we knew him, we should know that the Lord is exceedingly beautiful; we should love his word and want to do it and be the first to admit with sorrow that we fail to do it. Yes, we can know that we know.

## **2. Our trials produce endurance**

Knowing that we know we can face trials with all joy, sure of the outcome, it will produce endurance. 'And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing' (Jas 1:4). And that is, perhaps, where the difficulty comes. I would like when trials come, if they have to, that they should be short, if not sharp, and over with quickly. It is the long drawn-out trials—the burden of a bereavement that will never be made good, a loneliness that can never be undone this side of glory, a disability that will be with us for the rest of life, pain that persists, as well as the sudden shock—that call for our powers of endurance. That's what makes it a trial. But the only way of producing maturity, says James, is to 'let endurance have her complete work.'

I suspect that cakes have a difficulty with this advice when the pressure and the heat begin to be felt. So many hours at so many degrees in the oven! If it could, it would say, 'Get me out of this, I have had enough! How long is this going on? Two and a half hours—how do you expect any reasonable cake to put up with all that degree of torture?' The fact is that if you brought it out too soon it would spoil the cake.

How often we, whose concept of time is so small and for whom trial therefore seems so long, feel that somehow God has lost his sense of time because we cannot grasp the wonder of the eternal result at which he aims. 'Let endurance and persistence have her perfect work so that ultimately you may be entire, lacking nothing.'

## **We need to ask for wisdom**

That being so, we shall need wisdom to know how to react to life's circumstances. 'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him' (v. 5). We need wisdom to face life, to see what God is doing and to co-operate

with God, even though at times it will be painful; but not to get grumpy with God and not to 'kick his shins' until he is obliged to ease the pressure. How easy it is to talk, but how difficult to submit to the wisdom of God. We so often think we see the guidance of the Lord when days are sunny and life goes well. We say, 'That was an obvious guidance of the Lord.' Not so readily do we read failure and disappointment, damage and difficulty as the Lord's guidance. But it could be, couldn't it? We need divine wisdom to see it; if we lack it we may ask of the Lord and he will give us wisdom to dare to believe that all things work together for good—that great and eternal good of our being conformed at last to the image of God's Son.

'But let him ask in faith,' says James, 'with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea . . . a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways' (vv. 6, 8). We are not to *waver*, we are not to be in 'two minds.' We come to God and wish for wisdom; we must persist, apply ourselves and constantly come asking God for wisdom. By the very nature of the process, I shall need wisdom today and wisdom next week. Wisdom to face the unexpected event, wisdom to know how to handle my prosperity and joy. (Many a cake has been ruined by prosperity.) Wisdom to know how to face my unexpected success, wisdom to know how to face sorrow. I shall constantly need to come and ask for wisdom and I must, therefore, not be *double-minded*.

Suppose you are a famous teacher of the piano; I hear you play and think to myself, 'I would like to play like that.' Plucking up courage, I come and ask you to teach me. I really do want to play it, so you say you will give me a chance.

'Be here three times a week.'

'Three times a week? I can't come three times a week, I could come once a week. I have to go out playing cricket with the boys.'

'You want to play the piano? OK, make it once a week then; but be here!'

So I come for the next four weeks and then I don't turn up for the next four; and when I finally do turn up, you say, 'Oh, you are the man who wants to play the piano?'

'Yes, I am indeed!'

'Where were you this last four weeks?'

'It's not four weeks since I was here, is it? I didn't realise the gap had been so big. The first week there was such a marvellous film on TV and I felt I couldn't miss it; the second week my friends came round and asked if I would come out for a game of golf; the third week Aunt Jemima turned up and invited us all to Maud's Ice Cream Parlour!'

'Do you really want to play the piano?'

'Yes, of course, I do! You are not going to tell me there's anything wrong with ice cream, are you?'

'No,' she says, 'there's nothing wrong with ice cream, but if you want to play the piano you will have to make your choice. Do you want to play the piano, or do you want to eat ice cream?'

I could be an Olympic gold medallist if I wanted to. As I watch them running and then standing on the podium with the chain round their necks, I've often thought I would like that feeling too! The only difficulty is that I'm not prepared to get up every morning at 5 o'clock and swim twenty lengths of the local swimming pool.

If we would know the crown of life in the coming days, then we have to make up our minds. Do we really want it, or is it just a feeling that comes over us now and again? A double-minded person, who wants to go on with the Lord today and forgets it for the next month, is unstable. 'For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord' (v. 7).

So may God use his word to help us and may we show our divine master, our teacher, that we are not double-minded and we want to go on. By his grace we are prepared to make progress as Christians in the school of Christ the number one activity in life that must take precedence above all else. And so we shall be blessed.

## Not Religiously Self-deceived

*Reading: James 1:16–27; 2:14–26; Genesis 49:5–7*

In our previous study we thought of the fact that one of the marks of a mature believer is that he or she is not double-minded in the face of trial, but constantly and perseveringly seeking the wisdom of God so to interpret life's events as to accept from the Lord the trials he allows, in the belief that he works all things together for good in his eventual aim of bringing us to glory, conformed to the image of his son.

The feature of maturity that we shall now examine is rather different. James will tell us that the mark of true believers is that they do not allow themselves to be religiously self-deceived.

Jacob characterized his son Reuben as an unstable man, 'unstable as water,' and we found that characteristic of Reuben repeated among the twelve tribes to whom James wrote. He warned them that 'a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.'

In Genesis 49:5–7 we read of what Jacob had to say to two more of his sons, Simeon and Levi. We shall have to take our courage in both hands, and with the help of the Lord brace ourselves to listen to a very sombre, if not alarming message. James is talking to us about the mature Christian and the pathway that we should each follow if we would develop our Christianity and become daily more mature, more perfect, more like the Lord Jesus. He gently and lovingly warns us of one of the difficulties that sooner or later will inevitably cross our paths.

### **The deceitfulness of the human heart**

It is a difficulty that the prophet Jeremiah found and complained about centuries ago. Said he, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?' (17:9). In all the intervening centuries the human heart has not really changed.

James will remind us of the very same thing. Our wicked old human hearts, even since we have found the Saviour, can still be exceedingly bad. It is not merely that they are *wicked*; they are *deceitful*. James warns us that such is the deceit of the human heart that it can take our very religion, our very spirituality, as we count it, and use it to deceive us. To use our very godliness (or what goes for being godliness) as a means, not of eradicating our evil desires or crucifying the flesh and all its lusts, but of excusing our sinfulness and disguising it

so that, in the end, we may use our spirituality to express the ugly evil of our carnal natures and not the lovely virtues of the Lord Jesus.

### **The false attitudes of the world**

It is a cruel deception. It is as though a man would take medicine and use it, not to cure his disease, but to perpetuate his disease. James tells us that sometimes we can be deceived by unconsciously imbibing the false attitudes of the world around us (1:16). We are passive—'Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers,' he says, as he talks to us about the possibility that we might be deceived, in regarding *temptation* as a god of some sort that we should not resist. At other times we can be active—'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (v. 22). James envisages the possibility that we could be actively involved in this matter of using religion to deceive ourselves.

Our hearts are indeed deceitful. Our base passions—pride, jealousy, envy, narrow-mindedness, the desire to dominate—these things sometimes have a way of disguising themselves by dressing up in the clothing of good, godly spirituality. We let ourselves be deceived by them and we stand, as we imagine, for the truth of God; yet all the while it is not a godly loyalty to the Lord Jesus, it is our own ugly bad tempers, our desire to dominate other people, our narrow-mindedness, our revenge, or whatever, that is masquerading as godliness. Being deceived, instead of humbly and shame-facedly repenting of these dastardly attitudes, we glory in them as though they were exhibitions of godliness. 'My beloved brothers,' says James, 'don't be deceived. If you are a hearer only, and not a doer of the word, you are running into the snare; you are deluding yourselves.'

### **A cruel deception**

'If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless,' says James (1:26).

I don't know how you would feel if some of these days you found your dear Aunt Matilda had been conned by a stocks and shares man who persuaded her to give up her whole life's savings and invest it in some scheme that was going to give her five hundred per cent profit in the first year. She fell for it, only to find that he was a trickster and her life's savings had gone into the man's unnamed account in Geneva. How would you feel? I fancy you would feel a whole flood of conflicting emotions. You could say, 'Aunt Matilda, I can't imagine what you were thinking about, to let yourself be conned like that!' You would feel annoyed and indignant; but then, as you notice Aunt Matilda's lip begin to falter and the tear glisten in her eye, you would be moved with compassion. You would say, 'It is not you I should be blaming; it is the old crook,' and you would want to know what you could do to help her.

So it is with James. He is going to say some very severe things, but he loves us. Listen to the man's warm-hearted affection come out as he warns us not to be deceived, 'My beloved brothers . . .'. He means every word of it; he loves us and he can't stand by and see us deceived in the matter of religion and spirituality, but there's no denying that eventually he shows a certain holy irritation with some.

In chapter 2 he talks to the man who has got it into his head that the glorious doctrine of *justification by faith* and not by works means that you don't have to bother to do any Christian work and it doesn't really matter if you carry on sinning because salvation is by grace. When James contemplates a man with such superficial thinking, the holy irritation creeps down into his pen nib and spills out on to the page—'Must I bring you an Old Testament example to show you, you foolish, vain, empty-headed man?' (v. 20). To even think that there could be so much as one comma in the whole of holy Scripture that would encourage anybody to think that sin does not matter! How do we get it into our heads that, because salvation is by grace and not by works, the quality of our living and the quality of our works doesn't really matter in the end?

As we survey Scripture it is easy to see that unregenerate people can be deceived by religion. In our Lord's time he warned his apostles that the time would come when anyone who should murder them would think that he does it in God's service. The history of the great Reformation days shows that it is all too plainly obvious that Christendom was guilty of this very thing. Religious authorities murdered and executed, tortured and burnt alive thousands of our dear brothers and sisters in Christ, imagining that they were doing God a service. We should remember it was not only Roman Catholics who executed Protestants; some of the magisterial reformers themselves burnt, tortured and drowned their fellow-believers who refused to accept baptismal regeneration and demanded the right to observe believers' baptism according to the New Testament. Some of the magisterial reformers had those dear believers trussed up and thrown into the rivers, their tongues cut out, or their bodies burned, and they did it imagining that they did it in the service of God.

We shouldn't confine the warning to distant ages. To come from great things to small, have you ever known a Bible reading that started out as a quest to discover God's truth and ended up with brethren getting very hot and losing their tempers, going home defiled by old unregenerate passions that had come to the fore and disturbing the Christian harmony, even as they were supposedly engaged in studying Scripture?

And who could read the history of even recent centuries and not be struck silent and shame-faced by the story of endless divisions amongst God's people? To think with sorrow of men who stood up and split the Lord's people from stem to stern and made their endless little parties. Had you asked them what they were doing, they would have told you they were standing for God's truth. As we look back, we can see that the things they disputed were not fundamental things by any means. As we watch and read of the cruelty, the narrow-mindedness, the tyranny with which they pursued their little causes, it becomes apparent it wasn't just concern for God's truth that moved them; mixed in with it was a good deal of self-seeking, envy one of another, jealousy of the other man and pride in one's little interpretation of some matter. All such ugly things contributed so painfully to the distress of God's people, and to this present day they are a scandal upon the testimony. 'My dear brothers,' says James with tears in his voice, 'don't let yourself be deceived by carnality masquerading in the clothes of supposed godliness and spirituality.'

## Recognizing the source of temptation

There are some areas in particular where we could be deceived by bogus spirituality. James 1:13 is set in the context of temptation. We are not to be deceived; 'Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God", for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one.' *It is exceedingly important when we are tempted to recognise what the source of temptation is.*

Among the ancient Greeks you will meet the idea that if a man felt the strong passions of sexual desire within him, that was a goddess; they gave her the name of Aphrodite. And if a man felt the strong urgings of aggression within his heart, they said it was the god of war. And the result very often was that, if a man had these powers of aggression swelling up within his breast, he felt perfectly justified in giving vent to them and bashing you on the nose, or otherwise destroying you, your house, your family, your children and thousands of others in cruel wars—it was the gods that were moving him to war, he would say. We have still not completely got beyond that, even in this present day.

Here is a bright young woman and she has just seduced her boss, ruined his marriage and broken up his family. You ask her why she did it. 'I couldn't help it; *love* made me do it,' she says. Now love has become a goddess, you have to obey her every prompting and it is enough excuse to say, 'It was love made me do it.'

In that sense our modern world is becoming increasingly like the ancient world. The younger people especially do not need to be deceived by the notion that our passions are gods. A true Christian would never take that view, would he? I hope not!

What would you say to a man who let it slip that he was thinking of joining the Freemasons, with all their old idolatry? He says, 'I was out of work and desperately needing a job and I believe the Lord opened the way for me to enter this firm. It was of the Lord; he opened the way. The principals of the firm said I would have to join the Freemasons. I knew it wasn't for the best, but if the Lord opened the way it must be right.' What would you say to him? We should need to say, firmly and lovingly, 'Don't be deceived, my brother; God never leads anybody, or lures somebody, into sin.'

Joseph believed with all his heart that it was God who had overruled that he should be put down into the pit and then find himself in Potiphar's house as his chief steward. That was the Lord's leading; but when Potiphar's wife made her advances Joseph did not say, 'Well it was the Lord who put me into this situation. He must know about it and perhaps it's OK because the Lord led me.' *Be not deceived, God does not tempt us.*

## Blaming the devil

We mustn't blame the devil too much either; he is a common scapegoat. He certainly does enough damage, but sometimes we are inclined to blame him when we should be blaming ourselves. 'That wasn't me,' says somebody, 'it was the devil.' Somebody else says, 'It wasn't me, it was my ugly temper.' Well, who is your ugly temper if it isn't part of you? Somebody says, 'I've got a demon of pride.' No, you haven't! That's just you, not a demon. When you get the flu you don't say, 'That's not me, it's a bug that has got hold of me' and that excuses you—it's not your fault for having the flu. Be careful! If I say, 'I've got an old demon of

jealousy,' that kind of excuses me—it's a bug that has got hold of me and I need it exorcised or something. No, it isn't; it's me.

Part of our growing up into maturity is to *face the reality of ourselves*; not to keep blaming our faults on other things and other forces, but to face the fact that it is *me*. I am the one who is guilty of the pride and the jealousy and I must repent and seek deliverance. I must learn to stand against it and put to death the things of the flesh.

### **Not curtailing our anger**

It is not only in the question of temptation that I could be deceived, but the question of anger and wrath. God's wrath is holy and indeed beautiful, but our wrath can so readily and easily become tinged with unworthy elements. There is no sadder spectacle than when our human bad temper gets the better of us and expresses itself in religious connections.

There is a lurid example of it in the Old Testament (Genesis 34). Jacob and his twelve sons had returned from Paddan-aram to the land of Canaan. Jacob's daughter, Dinah, sister to the twelve boys, went out for an evening stroll one night near a city called Shechem. The handsome young prince of Shechem saw her, fell madly in love with her and ravished her. Her twelve brothers were naturally incensed and made their protest at the highest level in Shechem. The men of Shechem granted they had every right to be indignant, but the prince said that his purposes were true; he wished to marry the girl and would make her his princess.

But the brothers said that he could not do so. 'We have a commandment from God that we should be circumcised, and you men of Shechem are not circumcised. It is against our religion that we should give our sister to a race of uncircumcised people.' They spoke truly. The men of Shechem said, 'If that pleases your religious feelings we will make a decree that all the men of Shechem will be circumcised,' and that they did. If matters had ended there all would have been well. But two of the brothers, Simeon and Levi, waited and when the men of Shechem had still not recovered from their operation they took their swords, went through Shechem and slaughtered all the men as they lay in their beds.

When Jacob protested they made out that they were standing for morality. 'Should they treat our sister as though she were a common woman of the streets?' they said. But even Jacob—who had himself been guilty of various dodges in his life—saw through it. This was no stand for morality; this was raw, injured pride, revenge, cruelty, sadism made all the worse by dressing itself up in the name of religion and morality. 'Cursed be your wrath, for it was cruel,' said Jacob. Can you imagine what the Canaanites felt about the Hebrew religion after that? 'If that's religion for you—look at it, the sadism, the cruelty—we want nothing to do with it.'

My dear brothers and sisters, we need to heed the exhortation, 'The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God' (1:20).

### **Not putting the word of God into practice**

Another area where James indicates that it is possible to delude ourselves is by simply hearing the word of God, and not doing it (v. 22). This comes immediately to my heart, for



this is one of my many weak points. I find the word of God so interesting, so intellectually stimulating, such marvellous literature that I get carried away. My danger is that when I come out of the study I forget about it and forget to do it. Not enough to read about holiness; we won't become holy by reading about it—we will become holy by being holy. We don't become courageous by reading about courage—we become courageous by facing life's circumstances and daring to stand for God in them and making decisions according to his word, whatever the price may be. We don't become truthful by reading about it in the Bible—we become truthful in our school examinations, in our courses, in our trade, or whatever it is by learning in practice not to cut corners, not to cheat, but to do a proper job. How easy it would be to deceive ourselves. After a lovely meeting, studying God's word and savouring its delights, to go out and think we have become holy, whereas holiness waits for our doing what we have heard.

### **Not guarding our tongues**

This is still another area, says James, where deceitfulness lurks and one could easily be deceived. 'This person's *religion* is worthless'—James uses an interesting word for 'religion' here (v. 26). It is a comparatively rare word in the Greek New Testament; one that you would use specially in the context of religious ceremonies and rituals—'religious worship' or 'divine service,' as some people would call it nowadays. This would involve, among other things, singing God's praise and offering him the devotion of our hearts, singing the lovely songs and hymns of Zion. 'If anyone thinks himself to be devoted to God in his religious activities and rituals, but does not bridle his tongue,' says James, 'then he deceives his heart.' We need not stay long on it; another morning will have us considering the evil that the tongue can do. But it is so possible, having sung the holy words of God's praise in church, to go home and in the next week let our words be the cantankerous words of lost temper and impatience.

### **Pure religion**

Religion that is *pure* and undefiled [thereby implying that there is an *impure* kind of religion] before God, the Father, is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (v. 27)

Perhaps it will help us to recall the delightful parable the Lord Jesus told of the Good Samaritan. You remember, there was this poor fellow who had been attacked and belaboured by brigands and left half dead on the road. There came by two exceedingly religious gentlemen, a Levite and a priest, men whose task in life was especially religious. Religious, in that strict sense; it was their task in life to lead the praise of Israel—the psalm singing and the worship and the reading of Scripture. They saw this poor fellow by the roadside. One came and looked and passed on. The other didn't even bother to look, he passed on regardless. I suspect he had it in his head that his task of singing hymns and songs of praise was so important that he needn't bother his head with lending a practical hand to the down-and-out.

## Works that back up our profession

How about us? James says nothing here against our hymn-singing and our devoted worship of the Lord. What a lovely thing it is, a veritable harbinger and anticipation of the glory—what singing shall be there! We rightly make time to worship the Lord and we enjoy it. But let's not deceive ourselves; pure religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their affliction. If our hymn-singing merely makes our own hearts glow and leaves them as hardened as ever against the poor and afflicted, then God doesn't like our hymn-singing.

There is one area especially perhaps, above all others, where we evangelicals need to be very careful not to deceive ourselves with religion and that is the glorious doctrine of justification by faith *without works*.

Let nobody here be left in any doubt about what I personally believe; 'We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law' (Rom 3:28). Thank God for this glorious truth. Let it be said again, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, *not a result of works*, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8-9). This is the glorious doctrine that broke the tyranny of religion in the Middle Ages and set free the ancient world by the preaching of the gospel and it has set our hearts free too. God give us the grace in these modern days never to let it go; not to consent to seeing the doctrines of free grace compromised by mere religiosity of any kind.

That said, however, there could lurk a danger here. As James now proceeds to warn us, we could deceive ourselves by our very theology and argue (if we are like the shallow-minded man of chapter 2) that because, after all, salvation is by grace and is not of works, then it doesn't really matter whether we behave like Christians or not. It doesn't really matter whether we have works to back up our profession, or not. Reading what James says here, multitudes of people have thought James was contradicting Paul and denying the gospel that we are justified without works. But that is not true; James says the same as Paul and Paul says the same as James.

Take one little test. Referring to Abraham, James observes, 'You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works' (2:22). *Faith active with his works*. If you question Paul about that, Paul would say, 'Yes, Amen, that is the truth of the matter. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love"' (Gal 5:6). Paul says exactly the same thing as James. *We are justified by faith, but the mark of genuine faith is that it leads to works*.

## How does anyone get saved?

So let's pause a minute and make sure we have got this straight and are not deceiving ourselves in any way. Salvation is a gift; you cannot pay for it; you cannot contribute a penny or a cent or a dime to it. Try to make salvation depend on one little good work or one religious ceremony and you have ruined the whole scheme; you have transformed a gift into something that you have earned. However, that being so, I have to confess that sometimes I get a little nervous! Far be it from me to criticize my brothers whom God uses magnificently, but sometimes I get a little worried when I hear preachers say, 'You don't have to do anything to get saved.' I know what they mean. They mean you can't earn salvation; but it

isn't quite true to say you don't have to do *anything* to get saved. If you are not saved and you want to be saved, it won't just happen automatically. There is something you have to do—you *have to come to the Saviour*.

Listen to the Lord Jesus:

'Come to me' (Matt 11:28).

'I am the living bread . . . if anyone *eats of this bread*, he will live forever' (John 6:51).

'If anyone thirsts, let him *come to me and drink*' (John 7:37).

'*Strive to enter* through the narrow door' (Luke 13:24).

If you are going to be saved you will have to make it life's chief business, the thing that commands your attention and energy beyond everything else. Make sure, strain every nerve and see to it that you enter through the narrow door, but you don't earn salvation by those activities. If I held out my pen to you and said, 'This is a glorious pen. Look at it! Would you like it? If you would like it, I will give it to you; but if you want it you must come and get it.' Would your coming earn it? Of course not! It remains a free gift, but if you want the free gift *you will have to come and take it*.

### **Evidence of eternal life**

Similarly, we want to be clear as believers. We cannot earn eternal life by our works, but works are the necessary evidence that we have eternal life.

Let me pass completely out of my experience and take the case of a little baby. Little babies tend to cry and drive their fathers to distraction! They pace the bedroom floor every night until they look like ghosts and then praise the institution of marriage! What about this crying—is that how babies get their life? No, indeed not; babies don't get life by crying. Life is given to them as a gift, but the mark of life is that, if they are really alive, they will start to cry. What a marvellous moment it is when the new-born baby lets out a yell! He or she is alive. Can you imagine a mother, fearing what she has read about cot deaths, going up to the bedroom one day and the baby is as still as anything. She says, 'Come on, dear,' and there is no response. Fear begins to grip her heart and she wonders if her baby has died. She pushes him and the baby lets out a yell. 'Oh, thank God,' she cries, 'he is alive.' A baby does not get life by crying, but if he has got life he will cry. If the baby had suffered cot death and was actually dead, you would understand a distraught mother saying, 'Come on, cry, cry!' But it would be no good, the baby will never cry. The only way he will ever cry is to be born again.

We don't get life by our works, but if we have got life there should be works to show for it. James has a number of arguments to press the point home. He is talking now to the shallow, empty headed man, who thinks that justification by faith without works means that it doesn't matter if he has no works to show that he is a believer, he just goes on living as he always lived. 'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that of faith save him?' (2:14). Of course not. Why not? *Because it is not the real kind of faith*.

Take an ordinary analogy. Here is a very poor brother and you say to him, 'I see your coat is rather ragged and you look hungry. Well, have great faith and the Lord will supply your

need; go in peace, have a good meal and get some decent clothes. There is a good tailor down the High Street and he will be able to fit you out with a good suit of clothes.' The hypocrisy!

How does that profit? It doesn't do the man any good to say that faith in God will supply his needs when you have got a spare suit or two in the wardrobe and could give him one. That is not godliness; it is hypocrisy. What good is it, if someone says he has faith but does not have works; can that faith save him? No! Why not? Because a faith that never issues in works is not real faith at all. It is as dead as a dodo!

'But someone will say. . . ' (2:18). What James simply means is this (there is no real difficulty, although the commentators say there is one), 'My dear brother, you say you have got faith and it doesn't really matter whether you have works or not, but one of these days someone is going to face you and say, "You have faith; I have works. You show me your faith, if you can, without works and I will show you my faith by my works!"'

### **Someone is going to ask for evidence**

They have a right to ask for evidence; don't expect people just to take our say-so. If we say we are believers one of these days someone is going to come alongside and gently demand to see the evidence and the only evidence there can be is our works.

James almost gets cruel now and perhaps there's a touch of sarcasm. He says, 'Your belief is impeccable; you believe the foundational doctrines of the faith. You believe that God is one [all Jews did and all Christians should] but, before you start patting yourself on the back, remember the demons believe that as well. And, what is more, the demons not only believe it they do at least show some reaction and they shudder.' If we say we hold the great doctrines of the faith, there should be some reaction. Even if the only reaction is that we fear the Lord and fear his word.

### **The evidence of Abraham's faith**

For a biblical example James quotes Abraham, who was certainly justified by faith but he was also justified by works. 'The scripture was fulfilled that says "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"' (2:23). It was fulfilled when, on Mount Moriah, Abraham offered his son to God.

What does it mean to be *justified by works*? It doesn't mean that we now contradict faith or dispense with faith. The situation with Abraham was that God had come to him and said, 'Abraham, I am going to give you a son.' In spite of the fact that Sarah was barren, Abraham believed God and there and then the man was justified. His faith was totally in God; he saw clearly that his body was as good as dead, and Sarah's too. His only hope was in God, he put his faith in God and there and then he was justified.

As the years went on, from time to time Abraham's faith became a little bit wobbly and God had to develop it and mature it. There came a day when God put it to the test.

He came to Abraham and (if I may paraphrase it) he said, 'Abraham, in your early days, some years ago you learned to trust me and you were justified. Your faith was in me and in me only. Tell me, Abraham, now you have got Isaac, where is your faith now? Your faith for the future, is it in me still and only me, or could it be in Isaac?'

Abraham said, 'No Lord, it is in you.'

'Very good,' said the Lord. 'Now Abraham, I will take Isaac and you can show me that your faith is in me and in me only.'

What a bitter test it was to have to demonstrate that his faith was solely in God, that his faith was genuine and he showed it as he offered everything he had upon the altar to God.

My dear brothers and sisters, there will come a time in our lives when God will call upon us to show by our works that our faith is genuine. He may bring us to a point where he will ask for everything we have; he may call upon us to offer all and be left standing with nothing except God. Should we be ready for it? You say, 'That is a high standard and I think in my heart that I would be willing, if God called me, to surrender all I have. My heart is willing, but I don't know if I would be able to 'bring the knife down' upon the sacrifice. What if, in the end, I couldn't go the whole hog and faltered?' Courage, my brothers and sisters, God sees your heart.

You remember in that lovely story, when Abraham took the knife and showed God in his heart that he was ready to justify his faith by his works, the angel interposed and the sacrifice was stopped. But the sacrifice wasn't aborted in that moment. Once Abraham had demonstrated what was in his heart, God removed Isaac and in his place put the sacrifice of the ram. Abraham came down the mountain and he called the place *Jehovah Jireh*. He didn't call it 'The mountain of my tremendous sacrifice for God,' for everyone to see it. No, indeed not! 'The mountaintop of my devotion to the Lord'? No! He said, 'In the mount of the Lord, it shall be seen.' What shall be seen? 'It shall be seen that, when I came to my test and it was almost more than flesh and blood could stand, I was prepared to do it. Then God came in and provided the shortfall by the sacrifice of a ram.'

We may be assured that God will test us. Who among us would dare to say that we shall come through one hundred percent with flying colours? You say, 'What if I come short and my sacrifice is not what it should be?' Ah, my friend, it is precisely there that God has the sacrifice of his glorious Son, which more than makes up for the shortfall of our devotion. But be assured, God will want to see by the attitude of our hearts and in the action of our lives that our faith is genuine.

### **The evidence of Rahab's faith**

And finally there is Rahab (v. 25). She showed her faith by standing with the people of God. She not only received the spies and with them the message of salvation and was saved, but when the king came knocking on her door with his officers she had to make her choice. Would she stand with the king and the people of Jericho, or would she stand with the spies and the people of God? She was called upon to show the genuineness of her conversion by standing with the people of God and separating herself from the world.

My dear young Christian, of course we are to go out into the world as evangelists; we are not to hide ourselves away. But, in the other sense, remember that you cannot *run with the hare and hunt with the hounds*. If we are the Lord's, the Lord will challenge us to take our stand with him and his people and show the genuineness of our faith by the way we live.

## Not Guilty of Social Discrimination

*Reading: James 2:1–13; Leviticus 19:15–18; Matthew 22:35–40; John 13:34–35; Romans 13:8–10*

First of all, let's just pause so that we understand what James is saying. 'My brethren, have not [do not hold] the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory with respect of persons' (2:1 KJV). It doesn't mean the Lord's personal faith with regard to respect of persons; it means, 'Do not hold that and along with it, at the same time, indulge in respect of persons, for the two things are contradictory and cancel each other out.'

So James calls us, with the authority of the Lord Jesus, to consider a matter that lies at the very heart of our Christian faith; the way in which we believers treat each other and value each other. In our studies of James's vision of a perfect man and woman we have considered wrong and sinful attitudes that will impede our progress towards spiritual maturity.

On the first occasion we considered one of those false attitudes, which is *double-mindedness* when it comes to facing trial and temptation. Then we thought of another difficulty that lies in the path of our advance towards spiritual maturity; the ever-present danger in the use of *religion and spirituality*, not to eradicate and crucify the flesh but rather to spare it, excuse it and dress it up in the clothes of spirituality, so that we use our spirituality to perpetuate our ugly tempers and envies and jealousies, instead of getting rid of them.

### **The sin of discriminating between believers**

Now James calls us to face another ugly attitude that sometimes could mark us, even as believers, and spoil our spiritual progress. The names that you could give to this sin are varied. You could call it *partiality*, or favouritism, or discrimination—discriminating between people, between believers; making a great fuss of somebody and giving the cold shoulder to another. Making discrimination on the grounds of social status, maybe, or the strength of one's bank balance, or the cut of one's suit. Or on the grounds of class, introducing class distinction into the fellowship of God's people. Making distinctions on the ground of sex; treating men as if they were the important ones and consigning women to washing up the dishes after the conference.

So that we may get this thing into proper focus and in due proportion, we ought to spend some time thinking first of the special form that social discrimination took among the believers in James's day; it could conceivably take a different form in our day. As we hear James talk about what happened in the synagogue, it was a discrimination in favour of the rich against the poor and it is evident from how James describes it that he is thinking of the economically rich and the economically poor. He pictures the possibility of a rich man

coming into the synagogue and he could be an unbeliever or a believer. (From what he says subsequently, it is apparent that James conceives the possibility that unbelieving men who were blasphemers of the name of Christ would, nevertheless, attend the synagogue.) The Christians make a tremendous fuss of him simply because he is rich, they give him a prominent seat and fawn on him. Presently there comes in a dear believer in the Lord Jesus who is economically poor. His clothes are of a very poor cut, they have been worn for far too long, and he doesn't know how to use the right after-shave lotion! So it is suggested to him that he should have this draughty seat down behind somebody's chair, on the floor where he won't be seen. Discrimination is made on the ground of economic poverty and economic riches.

### **Different kinds of poverty and discrimination**

Economic poverty is not the only kind of poverty, of course; and there is less of it around today than there used to be. But there are other kinds of poverty; people who are not very well endowed with a splendid physical physique, poor as to the body. They might have oodles of money, but that's a very different thing. Or people who are poor in the sense that they are not very well endowed with artistic or intellectual gifts. Or poor in status—there are some lords and ladies in the British Isles that have eminent status and very little money, which is a great embarrassment to them; but they are still rich in status and many of us are very poor in status. There are all kinds of poverty and riches and the temptation is that, if we are not careful, we shall fall into the way that many in the world have, of showing favouritism and partiality and discrimination on the ground of riches or poverty.

On the other hand, we must bear in mind that, when James wrote this paragraph, he was writing against the sin in those particular synagogues. They were actually discriminating against the poor and, therefore, James's paragraph is totally taken up with a very fierce and strong rebuke and an exhortation to stop discriminating against poor believers. In other circumstances we should have to be careful not to go to the other extreme. If it is wrong to discriminate against the poor, then it is wrong also to discriminate against the rich. James quotes from Leviticus 19:18, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' He surely had not forgotten the earlier verse that says, 'You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great'—you must treat all alike (v. 15). That would hold good still, not only with economic poverty but with all other kinds of poverty and riches.

In observing that intellectual equipment can sometimes lead people astray, even to the extent of denying the truth of holy Scripture, sometimes the Lord's people get it into their heads that there is some benefit in being ignorant and unlearned. Believers have been known to say, 'We don't want any educated people here!' That is a sad and ghastly mistake. We are not to discriminate against the poor and we are not to discriminate either against the rich. It is far easier, of course, to discriminate against the poor and James rightly talks about it.

### **God gives to some the responsibility of riches**

James warns us not to discriminate against the poor and points out that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith; but let us notice that there is nothing particularly good about being

poor! Certainly, in itself there is nothing wrong in being rich. (There is a very strong rumour going about and I have every reason to think it is true, that the circumstances in which our blessed Lord now is are fantastically and fabulously rich beyond all description.) There is no sin in being rich, but we must be careful that we do not read James out of his context. In both the Old and New Testaments we are exhorted that if God has blessed us with material riches then we have a duty to help the poor. If there was some essential benefit in being poor, it would be wrong to help them get out of their poverty!

There is no blessing in and of itself in being poor, nor is there any sinfulness in being rich. Though, to be sure, riches are accompanied by greater dangers and are much more difficult things to handle in a right way, perhaps, than poverty. The Lord has entrusted some with wealth and many are using it as good stewards of the Lord's possessions.

There are two businessmen known to me. One of them owns a thousand shoe shops in Germany and America, the other owns two or three factories. These are the men who are proposing to put the articles into the Russian newspapers.<sup>1</sup> There is no sin in itself in being rich, if the rich brother uses it as a good steward for the benefit of God's people and the spread of the gospel. We should remember that there are some who are poor and, like some of the rich, they blaspheme the name of the Lord Jesus. Not all poor people are believers.

### **Some distinctions are obligatory**

And then there is another matter we ought to consider as a preliminary to our present study. We are not to show favouritism or partiality one of another, yet there are certain distinctions that are perfectly right. Indeed, they are charged upon us. If Her Gracious Majesty Queen Elizabeth II came to Newcastle and turned up in this tent, I am sure you would expect the organisers to give her the best seat. We should honour her above all others; not because she is rich, but because of her office. God has put her in the office of the sovereign monarch of the United Kingdom and commanded us to honour the monarch.

Or again, Paul would tell us that servants of God, such as Epaphroditus, who risk their lives in the cause of God's work, are to be given special recognition. If one turned up here we would very rightly give him a place of honour in our midst.

Or in another scenario, we are not to show discrimination between one believer and another. Sometimes that causes problems.

A good man said to me (miles from here in another country), 'Is it right for believers to have special friends in the church and to be more friendly with some believers than others?'

Lost for a sensible reply, I said, 'Well I thought it was a command that gentlemen should have only one woman that they regarded above all others and it wouldn't do for a man in the church to love all the women as much as he loves his wife!'

We are allowed to have special friends of various kinds, but, of course, what the gentleman would not be allowed to do would be to show partiality in the church towards his

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<sup>1</sup> Over many years following the collapse of communism, David Gooding and John Lennox wrote bi-weekly articles for several Russian newspapers: *Uchitelskaya Gazeta*; *Literaturnaya Gazeta*; *Poisk*; and other magazines, resulting in thousands of requests for Bibles and other literature. These articles now form some of the books published by The Myrtlefield Trust.



wife just because she is his wife and put down another woman who is more gifted in some respect or other.

### **What is wrong with partiality?**

So let us remember these things as we come now to what is a serious matter and the main topic of our study. We are not to show partiality between believers; we are to value all the same. Why is favouritism, partiality and discrimination wrong? James tells us that it conflicts with the very basis of our Christian faith. Our Christian attitude—our value, our estimate, our treatment of one another as believers—must be according to the great values that God has shown to us in the glorious gospel of our Christian faith.

'My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory' (2:1). If you show respect of persons, you show that your heart is divided. One moment you are basking in the wonder of your faith, that your blessed personal Saviour is none other than the Lord of glory; but the next minute you are treating one of his brethren shamefully. Some of your standards are taken from the gospel and some from the wretched practices of the world.

### **The King of glory**

Here is the key to the matter, so let us spend some time thinking about it. Fundamental to our gospel and to our whole salvation is that *Jesus Christ is the Lord of glory*. If you are to behave as a Christian should behave to all your brothers and sisters, then first somehow I must bring it home to your heart what this means, that Jesus Christ, your Saviour, is the Lord of glory.

Psalms 24, with its majestic cadences and rhythms, raises the question, 'Who is this King of glory?'

Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!  
... The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory! (vv. 7-10)

With my faint powers I must bring it home to your hearts, God's Holy Spirit helping me. How should I tell you of his exploits, his might, his victories and his wonders? Would you have me paint the glory of his ascension when seraphim, rank upon rank of mighty angels, principalities, ranks and dominions, folded their wings in reverence and bowed their heads as Jesus, the once-time carpenter of Nazareth, and he of Calvary, was bidden by the Father to rise and sit at the pinnacle of glory at the very right hand of God?

*Who is this King of glory?* No angel is comparable to him. 'And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?' (Heb 1:13). Yet to him, who is your Saviour, God has said, 'Sit at my right hand.'

*Who is this King of glory?* Would you have me tell you of his coming conquests? 'When he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have

believed' (2 Thess 1:10). Or as the rider of the great white horse (Rev 19:11–16), clothed in a robe dipped in blood, as he comes to consume his enemies, put down his foes and reign triumphant from shore to shore. Then again it shall be said, 'Lift up your heads, O gates, that the King of glory may come in,' and ancient Jerusalem shall lift the head of her gates, asking the question, 'Who is this King of glory?' The answer shall come back, 'It is that very same one who hung upon a cross outside your city wall; now the triumphant Messiah, Son of God, mighty in conquest, "He is the king of glory," and he shall enter in.'

*Who is this King of glory?* Would you have me tell you again of his conquest that lies ever nearest to your heart and sing the words of R. C. Chapman's hymn,

The Lord of glory, who is He?  
 Who is this King of glory?  
 Only the Son of God can be,  
 The Christ, the King of Glory.  
 Consider all his wounds, and see  
 How Jesus' death upon the tree  
 Proclaims him King of glory.<sup>2</sup>

I hazard the guess that you scarcely know which to decide; which you think is the more wonderful. Is it the multi-diadems that crown his brow, or that ugly crown of thorns that he wore when the King of glory died for you? That is our gospel.

Let the poorest believer here stand up and let the rest of us observe that the King of glory died for that dear brother or sister. My fellow believers, whatever should we do if one day the Lord of glory appeared in our midst and said, 'Where is Mrs Smith?' or 'Where is Mr Jones?' and you had to say, 'Well, they happen to be sitting down here behind this chair. We had a very distinguished rich visitor this morning and Mr Jones is a dear brother, but he has been wearing his suit for the last ten years, it smells a bit and he doesn't have very good taste. We felt a little bit ashamed of him, so we put him where he couldn't be seen. The Lord would say, 'You mean to say that you took a man for whom I, the Lord of glory, was not ashamed to die and you asked him to sit on the floor?' What would we say? Surely, if we are guilty of that kind of behaviour, we have become judges who are moved by evil thoughts in our assessment of people's value.

### **The uncreated glory from which all other glory is derived**

We have not finished with the topic yet; there is a translational difficulty in James 2:1. How tiresome those preachers are who keep referring to Greek and translational problems and things! But it is a fact, the learned translators don't know whether to translate this verse, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory,' or whether simply to translate it, '... the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glory.' That is, whether James means us to think of Jesus as the Lord of glory; or whether he is simply using the noun 'the glory' as a title of the Lord Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> R. C. Chapman (1803–1902), 'The Lord of Glory, Who is He?'

What would it mean if James referred to the Lord Jesus as 'the glory'? My good friend, it would mean something almost unspeakable. It would then be a title of the transcendent LORD, the creator of the universe, the ineffable glory—that glory from which all other glories and splendours emanate. Be they of the sunset or the majesty of a monarch, the beauty of the human form or the beauty of a machine, he is that uncreated glory from which all other splendour and glory is derived.

Whether James would have us translate the passage like that or not, the thing is true. Let John remind us, 'And the Word [the uncreated Word through whom all things were made] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory. . . .' (John 1:14). The faith of our gospel is that the uncreated transcendent glory stooped to bear the shame and nakedness of Calvary for us—it is almost incredible.

Well might the sun in darkness hide,  
And shut his glories in,  
When the Incarnate Maker died  
For man, his creature's sin.<sup>3</sup>

The rich and the intellectuals of the day got their values astoundingly wrong. They did not know the wisdom of God, the secret and hidden wisdom, 'None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8).

But we could get our values very wrong, if in the church we made a fuss of one believer because he or she happened to be rich and well turned out and gave the cold shoulder, under-valued and despised poor believers because they were poor, when our very gospel tells us that the Lord of glory died for both poor and rich alike.

### **The Lord Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters**

I haven't finished with it yet, nor has James! James has the modesty not to tell us, but actually the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, was his brother. I know there is some doubt, but all the best commentators (the ones that agree with me!) hold that the writer of this letter was James, the Lord's brother. I take back anything wrong that I said about James and if you heard anything wrong, please don't tell him! I hope Luther has repented over what he said about James—he said his epistle was 'an epistle of straw'! You don't treat a brother of the Lord Jesus like that.

Why didn't James tell us that he was a brother of the Lord Jesus? Because he is a remarkable example of what he preaches. If he had said, 'I am a brother of the Lord Jesus,' we should have given him a prominent place simply on that ground. But the wonderful fact is that, in a far more important sense, every believer is a brother or sister of the Lord Jesus. The epistle to the Hebrews says that the Lord of glory is not ashamed to call us his brothers.

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who

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<sup>3</sup> Isaac Watts (1674–1748), 'Alas! and did my Saviour bleed'.

sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers. (Heb 2:10–11)

Have you thought why it is that the Lord Jesus is not ashamed to call you his brother or sister? If you thought hard and dredged up from the bottom of your brain, could you come up with at least one small reason why the Lord Jesus should not be ashamed of you? I only have to ask the question and one thousand and one reasons will come to our minds. Imagine, when we have our off-days and when we are bad tempered, the Lord (amidst the angelic intelligentsia of the universe) being called upon to own us as his brothers. Why isn't he ashamed of us and all our wrong ways, small-mindedness and nasty habits? You say, 'He is not ashamed of us because he is very humble.' Come now, we all know he is humble; he is 'gentle and lowly in heart' (Matt 11:29).

Notice the real reason why he is not ashamed to call us 'brothers and sisters.' 'He [the Lord Jesus] who sanctifies and they who are sanctified are all of one.' They are indeed! By his grace he not only died for us at Calvary, but in order to die (says Hebrews) he took our humanity and became truly human. *He is really human*—'Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death' (2:14). He is not using empty words when he calls us his brothers and sisters; he is not using religious sentimentality; he is referring to the wonderful reality that, for our salvation, he became human. There is more to it, for now in resurrection he takes all those that trust him and makes them one with himself.

Don't ask that poor brother to sit down on the floor; you might as well ask the Lord Jesus to sit on the floor. Don't shun that poor brother or poor sister because they are poor or they may not be as educated and gifted as you. You might as well shun the Lord Jesus, because he is one with that brother and is not ashamed to call him 'brother.'

The world is in for a very big shock one of these days. When the nations are gathered and the Lord divides them as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats and he shall say unto those on his right hand, 'Blessed are you, for I was in prison and you visited me.'

And they shall say, 'When was that Lord? We don't remember you being in prison. When did we visit you? And when did we see you naked and clothe you?'

And he shall say, 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me' (see Matt 25:31–46).

Don't let sentimentality carry us away into wrong interpretation here; our Lord Jesus is not saying that every old scoundrel under the face of the earth is his brother. Of course not! Who are the brothers of Christ?

Our Lord was asked it once and he said, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Matt 12:48–50).

Those on the left hand shall be told, 'Depart from me into the everlasting fires.'

Why?

'For I was in prison, and you didn't visit me. I was naked and you didn't clothe me.'

They shall say, 'But when, Lord, did we see you in prison?'

And he shall say, 'Do you remember that time when Paul was in prison?'

'But you are not saying that Paul was a brother of the Messiah, are you?'

'Indeed yes!'

'But we didn't know he was. He looked a very funny fellow, he was beaten black and blue. He wasn't a very good orator and his speech was contemptible, how were we supposed to know that he was a brother of the Messiah?'

They shall find out too late, for the judge will say that the way they treated his brothers is to him an infallible mark of what their attitude to Jesus himself was. How careful I must be if that is what the judge is going to take out of it. I must be careful in my treatment of you, my brother, my sister, for the Lord is watching and, in how I treat you, he judges how I treat him.

### **The God who chose us does not change**

If you think James has said enough, he hasn't! Here is another argument.

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor man. (2:5-6)

Now James reminds us of that glorious truth that not only the poor, but all believers are chosen of God. What a lovely thing it is to be chosen of God—sit back and enjoy it for a minute! Remember what James told us in chapter 1 when he was talking to us about temptation and warning us not to be deceived. He says, 'Don't say when you are tempted, "I am tempted of God," for God cannot tempt anybody with evil' (v. 13)—and, anyway, he wouldn't! James begins that lovely description of God that shows him constant and faithful, 'Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change' (1:17). His attitude never varies; if he gives you a good gift today it is because his heart is good and his heart will be the same tomorrow. He never changes, 'I the LORD do not change' (Mal 3:6).

The glorious fact is that the God who never changes has, *of his own will*, brought us forth that we should be a firstfruits of his creatures. He did it for man at the creation, making man the lord of creation on this planet. He did it of his own will—or was it you who suggested to the Lord that he might create the world and make man at the head of it? No, of course not! It is true also at the level of redemption.

What raised the wondrous thought,  
Or who did it suggest:  
That blood-bought saints to glory brought,  
Should with the Son be blest?

Father, the thought was thine.  
Thine only it could be.  
True to that wisdom, power divine,

Peculiar unto thee.<sup>4</sup>

'God has chosen the poor,' and James brings home his exhortation to us by saying, 'but you have from time to time been known to despise the poor.' Be very careful!

It sometimes happens that a young gentleman falls in love with a young lady, proposes marriage and marries her. But some of his friends mutter to themselves, 'I can't think what he saw in the woman! What on earth did he see in her to marry a woman like that?' If you must say it, be careful not to let your friend who married the girl hear it! You won't say in his presence, 'I can't think what you saw in that woman.' You won't say that, when he has chosen her, will you? Not unless you want to insult his choice.

You had better watch what you say about me, for if God has chosen me, be careful lest you criticize God for his choice. He has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. That doesn't mean that all poor people are believers, but, on the whole, a believer who is poor is generally likely to have stronger faith than people who are not poor. Why is that? Well, because they are obliged to trust God.

The miners in north east England amongst whom I once lived used to tell me what it was like in the days of the terrible Depression. They had no unemployment benefit and husbands could be out of work for ten years at a stretch. The women told me how they used to get down on their knees and pray to God for the next meal.

### **The value of faith and love**

If you are in difficult circumstances—poor economically, physically, poor in any sense—it will take much more faith to believe that God loves you than when you are surrounded by riches galore. And yet faith is the most valuable thing in all God's universe. Faith is the thing that holds the universe together, it holds God and his people together. If we are thinking about values, then let us get Peter's perspective on it. 'Our faith is much more valuable than gold' (1 Pet 1:7). Next to the blood of Christ, it is the most valuable thing in all the universe. That poor brother could be remarkably rich in faith, and faith will outshine all other riches.

God has promised the kingdom to them that love him; how would you put a value on love? Do you suppose God values the love of the rich more than he values the love of the poor? Love is love and God (I say it reverently) has bought our love. Why it bothered him to have it, I don't know. God has bought our love with Calvary's life-blood. He has chosen the poor; rich in faith, heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to them that love him. If we are going to be selfish and want to be in with the right people, then let's make a good job of it! Get in with the right people, whatever you do—get in with the people who are going to be heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to them that love him.

### **The dignity of being a Christian**

And, finally, let us notice James's next argument. He pleads with his fellow-believers not to become absurd.

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<sup>4</sup> George V. Wigram (1805–79), 'What raised the wondrous thought?'

Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called? (2:6-7)

Not all the rich people do this. Of course not; some have been benefactors, but over the centuries it has often been rich people who have exploited the poor and made their fortunes on sweated labour. They know all about the law of the courts and can wangle their way out of their duties to the detriment of the poor. 'Do not [the rich] blaspheme the honourable name by which you are called?' Not all rich do; some have a great respect for it, but in James's day there were a lot of rich people who did blaspheme the honourable name by which believers were called.

What sense does it make, if such a rich man comes into your church and you fawn on him, when he is the very man that denies the dignity God has conferred upon you? It would hurt you to hear the name of the Lord Jesus blasphemed, but remember also your own dignity. We are called upon to be humble, but we are not called upon to be worms. My brother, my sister, you can be as poor as poor, but think of the dignity of your position and the name that is called upon you, which is nothing other than the name 'Christian.' *The name of the Lord of glory.*

When I was a youngster, going about doing this and that, my father had no great claim to high social position. But he used to waggle his finger under my nose and say, 'Remember, my boy, if you misbehave it is not your name you are bringing into disrepute; it is my name, William Gooding, that you are bringing into disrepute. The lesson has lasted to this day! Royal offspring have to be careful how they behave; they can't even do what the likes of us do. Why? Because of the name they carry. Don't be proud, but don't be ashamed of your dignity. You are a veritable princess or prince, you carry the royal name itself and one day you shall appear in glory with him.

May God's Holy Spirit make these things real in our hearts. This is what our gospel says. We who have believed it, let us seek God's grace that we shall act upon it and not hold the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, along with hurtful, harmful, sinful favouritism and discrimination against our fellow-believers.

## The Judgment of the Lord for Believers

*Reading: James 3:1–18*

We have been looking at some of the leading themes as James puts before us the characteristics that should mark a mature believer, and as he points to the difficulties which we shall have to overcome along the road towards true Christian maturity.

On our first occasion we noticed that the mark of a true believer is that he or she is not double-minded when it comes to seeking the wisdom of God to face life's trials and temptations aright.

On our second occasion we noticed that, similarly, the mark of mature believers is that they do not deceive themselves or allow themselves to be deceived by that type of godliness and spirituality that may look well on the surface, but is a bogus spirituality. Instead of eradicating sin it allows sin to continue.

Last time we thought how a mature believer will be very careful not to indulge in social discrimination, but will learn to value all his fellow-believers equally, as the Lord himself values them.

Next time we shall have to deal with the difficult topic of worldliness that could divide our loyalty; one minute we want to love the Lord, but the next minute we are taken off guard and swept away into loving the world, thus behaving as enemies of God. Worldliness is a difficulty that we are told we must overcome on the road to spiritual maturity.

Then we shall have to consider the provocation that evil is. We live in a terribly evil and unjust world that vexes our spirits. If we are to become mature believers, we shall need to learn patience in the face of evil and injustice and consequent suffering.

The difficulty that James now puts before us, which we shall study, is the difficulty in controlling that little member of our bodies, the tongue. 'It is a small member' (3:5), but it is extraordinarily difficult to control; perhaps the most difficult member of all our members to gain control of. So much so that James says, 'If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body' (3:2).

### **The Lord as our judge**

Just at this point we ought to notice that there is another topic that now begins to be woven into the Epistle by James. It is the topic of the Lord as our judge. Beginning with the topic of the wrong of social discrimination, James reminds us that one of these days we must face the judge and submit ourselves to his judgment and he interweaves this topic into all the other topics.



In chapter 2 we were studying the evil of *social discrimination*. We notice how James concludes this topic by reminding us of the judgment of the Lord (2:8–13). So, in order to enforce this lesson against social discrimination, and to help us to give heed to it and behave ourselves as we should, James now reminds us that one of these days soon we must stand before the Lord Jesus as our Judge.

In chapter 3 he is going to talk to us about *the use of the tongue*. Notice once again how he introduces the topic of judgment. 'Be not many teachers, my brothers, knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment' (v. 1). As I stand before you I must remember to guard my tongue for one day I must stand before the Lord as the judge as to how I have used it.

In chapter 4 James is going to talk to us about *the danger of worldliness* and how worldly desires can so work within us as to lead to strife and bitterness and envies and jealousies, even among believers. He thinks it wise in that context to remind us once more of the Lord as judge.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour? (vv. 11–12)

James is urging us to remember that we are not the judges. Let us pause before we attempt to judge our brethren and remember that one day we shall stand before the supreme judge.

Similarly, in chapter 5, when *he is urging us to be patient* in the face of this world's evil and suffering, 'Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door' (v. 9). Very soon the door will open, the judge will enter and we shall find ourselves standing before our blessed Lord as our judge.

### **Helps and incentives to spiritual maturity**

This is a very solemn subject and liable to dampen our spirits more than the weather, but it is obviously a topic that we cannot afford to overlook, it fills such a large part of James and it is so closely tied with these practical matters. Indeed, if we were to slide over it and neglect it, we should be robbing ourselves of one of those great helps and incentives to a life of spiritual maturity. It is a tremendous help, as it is a solemn incentive, that in these various avenues of life I remember that one day I must stand before the Lord Jesus as judge. Let us then take as our motto this morning the advice that James gives, '*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.*' (2:12).

It seems to me that we could do with reminding ourselves of this topic now and again. Perhaps, for failure to remember it, we sometimes have gone astray and brought public disgrace upon the Lord—in past years the sad occurrences of the TV evangelists (so-called) in America, for instance. Sometimes the very way we preach the gospel fosters the idea that we won't have to stand before the Lord Jesus as judge.

'He is our saviour,' we say, and we tell the unconverted, 'Decide tonight, for tonight the Lord Jesus offers himself as your saviour and as your advocate. If, in some foolish response,

you were to reject him as your saviour, maybe tomorrow you would find the door closed against you and you would meet the Lord Jesus then, finally, not as your Saviour but as your judge. Receive him, that you might know him as your saviour and advocate and not know him as your judge!

And, of course, we know what we mean; and as far as we mean it our gospel is true. We are pointing out that, because the Lord Jesus has died for us and borne the penalty of our sin, 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). There is no penalty; we shall never have to bear the terrible curse and penalty of sin, for Christ bore that penalty for us when he was forsaken of God at Calvary and 'bore our sins in his body on the tree.'

But we would be wrong to give the unconverted person the idea that once he has trusted Christ he will never have to face him as judge in any sense—that would be untrue. We need to balance our preaching by the other side, 'If you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile' (1 Pet 1:17). *The Father judges!* While we are on the subject of not discriminating between one and another, Peter reminds us that, when it comes to judgment, God is no respecter of persons. It doesn't matter whether you are an apostle or a Christian private citizen! It doesn't matter who you are, whether you are rich or poor, a young convert or an experienced and mature elder, it makes no difference to God when it comes to judgment. 'The Father judges without respect of persons,' says Peter, 'and he judges every man according to his works.' He has every right to judge, hasn't he?

### **Our time has been redeemed**

Peter goes on to explain why we are to pass the time of our sojourning here in fear. He says it is in view of the fact that we have been redeemed from our empty manner of life—our 'vain conversation *received* by tradition from your fathers' (v. 18 KJV). We have been redeemed by the most costly thing in all the universe, the blood of Christ. Christ has bought our time by his blood. All the long ages God has been waiting for us and here we have our brief seventy years of time to pass 'sojourning in fear' (v. 17 KJV). Half of them, perhaps, some of us have already wasted if we didn't get converted until we were thirty-five. That's half of them gone. Perhaps we have got thirty-five years left and the Father has bought those thirty-five years with the blood of Christ. He won't stand by and watch us fritter them away. 'Pass the time of your exile here in fear; knowing that you were redeemed. . . with the precious blood of Christ.' The Father will judge critically how we use the time of our redeemed lives.

### **A present judgment for the believer and for the church**

'We must all appear,' says Paul, 'before the judgement seat of Christ' (2 Cor 5:10). *The Lord Jesus will judge*—when and how and what will he judge? We gather from the New Testament that there is a present judgment. 1 Corinthians 11 discusses it in some detail, as Paul warns his fellow-believers at Corinth not to abuse the Lord's Supper; not to come and eat of it unworthily, failing to recognise and discern the body (v. 29). 'If you do,' says Paul, 'you will bring down the Lord's judgment.' If we would judge ourselves, if we would discern

ourselves and confess our sins, then we would not be judged. But if as believers we will not cooperate with the Lord in discerning our weaknesses and faults, confessing them—discerning our false attitudes and seeking the Lord's grace to put them right—then the Lord will judge us now. 'When we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world' (v. 32).

There is a present judgment of the individual and there is a present judgment of the church.

For it is time for judgement to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And 'if the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?' (1 Pet 4:17–18).

That isn't an emphasis which evangelicals often sound. We have a very big example of judgment beginning at the house of God in the book of Revelation. Chapters 4–20 of that book tell of the solemn judgments that shall fall on the world at the end of this world and chapters 1–3 depict our blessed Lord in the solemn robes of a judge walking among the lampstands that are his churches, judging them.

It is not a thing that we should shun, surely. As we thank the blessed Lord for being our saviour, should we not praise him for being our judge? He who died for us comes alongside us in life and gently but firmly and solemnly points out our mistakes and waywardness and tells us how we may be delivered from them. There was a solemn moment when the apostle John saw the risen Lord in all his glory, his face shining as the sun shines in its strength and in that instant he fell at his feet as dead. He was the man who leaned on the bosom of the Lord Jesus at the last supper; seeing him now in his risen glory as judge he was overcome, almost to the point of death. Thank God for the blessed things that he heard and felt in that moment.

He laid his right hand on me, saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore . . .' (Rev 1:17–19)

In those moments John learned the secret of being able to stand as a believer and face his judge. This glorious Son of God, now in resurrection, has the keys of death and hell; not to unlock the gates of it and let us in, but to let us out! In virtue of his death, his resurrection and the guarantee of his eternal resurrection, he gives us the strength to stand and face his judgment and listen to his criticism. In our listening and in our obeying is abundant treasure of reward.

### **A future judgment for the believer**

'We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil' (2 Cor 5:10). Once more, let us remind ourselves that *no believer will ever be lost*. The very passage in 1 Corinthians 3 that talks about that coming judgment of the believer assures us of that glorious fact, 'If any man's works survive the Lord's criticism, he shall receive a reward; if any man's work is burned up,

he shall suffer loss: *but he himself shall be saved*' (1 Cor 3:12–15). Thank God for that statement! But how can he be saved if all his works are burned up? Because salvation never did depend upon our works! Salvation is a gift and once given is altogether nonforfeitable and cannot be lost. 'He himself shall be saved.'

While we rejoice in that security, let us not forget the other part of the picture. 'He will be saved, but only as through fire.' It is as though a man were sitting in his house at night when suddenly, to his amazement and shock, he found the whole thing had burst into a conflagration of flame around him and ran for his life without pausing to pick up even his greatest treasure. He escaped with his life from a house that was burning around him. Paul pictures the possibility of some believer coming before the Lord and finding his life's work go up in flames under the Lord's judgment. Saved himself; but saved like Lot, escaping with his skin out of Sodom while his life's work goes up in flames.

What, then, will be the issue when we stand to be judged at the judgment seat of Christ, when the judge (as James reminds us) 'stands already at the door'? He bids us enter and we stand before him. You say, 'Perhaps what will be examined then is our work for the Lord and we shall be given rewards for our work?'

Here comes Mr Smith! The Lord will say, 'How many tracts did you give out?'

'Ten thousand and fifty-six!'

'Very good! You get a reward.'

Now here is Mr Brown! 'How many tracts did you give out?'

'Sorry, Lord, I didn't give out any; I was too interested in fishing.'

'You mean, literal fishing? Well, you don't get any reward—pass on!'

It won't be like that!

At the school I went to there were a lot of very doubtful characters, me included! There was a prize-giving at the end of the year and each form received three prizes. The best one would have cost three shillings and six pence in those days and out of a form of thirty-five boys there were only three who would have got a prize. Do you know what the reaction was of many of the boys? They didn't even try to get a prize. They said, 'Who would waste a summer evening swotting up chemistry when you could be out playing cricket and all for a three and six pence prize that you mightn't get anyway?' So they didn't bother and enjoyed the cricket. They went straight through the exam at the end and it didn't bother them at all that they didn't get a prize. Some believers could take that attitude.

'Some of the keen Christians will get a reward, but I am not in that league, I haven't got the time. I like other things and even if I tried to get a reward I mightn't get it, so I won't try to get one. Let the apostles get it!'

But that would be a shallow view.

## Rewards

We shall be rewarded for our work for the Lord and for any sacrifice for him. The going rate is marvellous—'No one has left children, parents and home and has sacrificed for my sake', says the Lord, 'but what shall be given one hundredfold' (Matt 19:29)—on the Stock Exchange one hundredfold is ten thousand percent. And it is not merely the man who has gone out and left his wife at home who will get a reward, but the wife at home who has let

her husband go to the elders' meetings, to preach around the countryside and forfeited what, as a wife, she had a right to have. She too shall be rewarded ten thousand percent.

There will be wonderful rewards, but not merely for spiritual work. Paul reminds the slaves in Colossians 3 that they can work for the Lord even under their grim taskmasters. They can work and do their hoeing of the sugar beet for the Lord, and from the Lord they will get the reward of the inheritance for their daily work.

Then it won't be simply our work, but our behaviour. There is a solemn passage in 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul has been describing why he goes even beyond the call of duty, goes the extra mile, surrendering his lawful freedoms. He does this so that he may win more converts and therefore share the rewards that the gospel is reaping in the world. He uses the illustration of the Olympic Games.

In a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize. Let that be the quality of your running, so that when the Lord comes you will receive the prize. . . I rigorously discipline my body and keep it under control, lest being exhausted and tired by my preaching I let my body go astray and fall into sin and bring disgrace upon the gospel and upon my own testimony. (see vv. 24–27)

You say, 'What would happen then, Paul? Would it matter? You would still get a reward for all the work you have done, wouldn't you?'

'Not necessarily! I keep my body under control, lest having preached to others I myself should be disqualified.'

It is possible for a preacher to tell the unconverted that they need to get saved and stop their evil way of living and then for the preacher himself to fall into sin and show that he is not one hundred percent genuine in his preaching. 'He can be disqualified,' says Paul.

Take the matter James has been discussing with us; the way we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ and the way we value them. It is easy to lay down the law as a preacher and to bask in the undeserved 'thank you' of the congregation, then in daily life to spurn believers because they don't have our knowledge and make cutting remarks, like, 'They know very little,' and disparage believers. Do you suppose that, just because I have taught the theory and in practice have not valued my Christian brothers and sisters as I should, when it comes to the judgment seat of Christ he is going to give me a position of authority in his kingdom?

'We will be different then!' you say. 'We shall value everybody as we ought.' Well, if we want to reign then, we had better start valuing them now. If we misbehave now, the danger is that it could disqualify us from the reward of our work later on.

## **Principles of judgment**

Being such a solemn matter, let us examine these passages in James where he discusses the principles of judgment that apply now and will apply then. We take up the chapter we were discussing in our previous study; here are the standards set out before us by which we are judged now and shall be judged then and the principles according to which that judgment will proceed. First of all, James calls us to observe the fact that as believers we are expected to observe the law.

If you really fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (2:8–9)

### **The principle of grace**

Here comes a commotion of theological verses! Someone says, 'That's James; you shouldn't take it too literally! Paul tells us that we are not under the law, we are under grace. We don't really have to take the law into account as we live as believers.'

But, wait a moment! James believes in grace as much as we do. Remember what we were considering in chapter 1, how we got converted and were born again. He said, 'Of his own will [God] brought us forth by the word of truth' (v. 18). We owe it to his sovereign grace and to his sovereign will, not to any merit on our part whatsoever.

Certainly we are not under law in order to get salvation and we are not under it as a principle. Law, as given at Sinai, was not just instruction, not just advice.

The law of Moses did not come alongside you and say, 'Look here, I have got a suggestion or two to make. Don't you think it would be a good thing if you were to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength? Have a go at that and see how you get along—do the best you can!'

No, the law did not speak like that; the law said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with every ounce of your mind, soul, heart and strength, and your neighbour as yourself, and if you fail I shall curse you.'

Thank God, in that sense we are not under law; as believers we have another principle of life. *We are led by the Spirit*, there is no penalty and we shall never be lost. God does not hang over us, holding out the flames of hell and say, 'Get to it, my dear redeemed believer, or you will suffer the curse of the law and the pangs of hell itself.' No! There is no penalty. We have another motivating power, the blessed Holy Spirit within.

### **The principle of love**

But let us not forget that even Paul says that the purpose of God's salvation is nothing less than this; 'That the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us' (Rom 8:4). That is God's objective and, when it comes to the righteous requirement of the law, here James describes it as *the royal law*, meaning the law as expressed by the king—the kingly law. The Jews regarded the Old Testament law as king. Now as we Christians think of our blessed Lord's commandments, he is the king and this is his royal law, the law of his kingdom. Do you hope to get a reward and reign with the Lord Jesus when he comes again? Of course you do! Then, if you want to reign in his kingdom, you will have to reign according to the laws of the kingdom. The royal law proceeds according to this ancient scripture, which has not changed, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

Therefore, James exhorts us to remember that the law that we are called upon to observe is not a thing in which it is enough to do one part and neglect the other part. He goes through the argument that you have heard many an evangelist use.

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery', also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. (2:10–11)

Many of us have preached it to the unconverted, wanting to bring them to repentance. We have spied people who are so full of their good works that we think this would do them good and get them thinking.

We say, 'It is no good if you say you have kept the whole law and you come short in one point; if you come short you have broken the law and are guilty of all. Then, my good religious man and woman, the plain fact is you are a hell-deserving sinner because, even if you have broken only one of the ten laws, or the one hundred and ten, or the six hundred and twelve, you would still be a sinner and lost.'

Now and again it can be quite a healthy thing to preach our gospel sermons to ourselves! It is like going into the house next door, which is built on the same design as yours, but it is built the other way round because it is a semi-detached. It looks kind of different when you see your own house from a different angle; sometimes gospel sermons, when they are applied to the believer, look rather different.

James is talking to believers here about the royal law, the law that comes from the king and it is not a lesser standard than the Old Testament. Our blessed Lord himself declared that there were two great laws embodied in the principles of the Old Testament law. The one is, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your might, heart, soul and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. On this hang all the law and the prophets,' said our Lord (see Matt 22:37–40). And then he reinterpreted it, 'A new commandment I leave you, not just that Old Testament law, loving your neighbour as you would love yourself. I leave you a new commandment, "that you should love one another; just as I have loved you"' (see John 13:34). What height of a law the blessed Lord has put before us!

The Apostle John, recalling his contemporary believers to this standard, said, 'Look my brothers, in enunciating this royal law, we have to love our brothers and sisters and it is no new commandment. This is not some new, super-duper, modern, recent invention in Christianity that elevates normal Christianity to a deluxe edition. No! This is ordinary, basic stuff. This is the word that you heard right from the very beginning; "If anyone says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar for he who does not love his brother . . . cannot love God . . ."' (see 1 John 4:20). This is the basic law, the royal law.

Says James, 'Don't try and argue, "That's a bit of the law I don't keep. I am not good at that so I don't bother about it. I do keep the rest, though."' No! If you lose one piece out of a bar of chocolate, you still have the rest and the rest tastes good; ninety-five percent of a chocolate bar is better than none! You could say, 'Well, I am very good at prophecy,' or 'I am very good at church organization, but this little bit about loving—I am not that type. I don't come up to that, but I am a marvellous preacher!' You are? Well, James will tell you that if you have kept the whole law and you offend in this you have broken the lot. The law is like a plate-glass window; put a bit of granite through it and you have shattered the lot. You say, 'That's exceedingly severe!'

It is, but Paul would say the same. He said, when it comes to using my gift for the Lord, 'If I have knowledge (and know all things), if I have faith (so I could remove mountains) but have not love I am nothing (1 Cor 13:2). Not seventy-five percent at least—nothing! Do you feel the earth beginning to quake under your feet? —'If I have not love, I am nothing.'

How carefully and honestly I must review my work before the Lord, and in particular if I want to pass his judgment in a coming day. God is not going to have people occupying thrones in that day and ruling others, that did not learn on earth to serve according to the basic principles of the kingdom.

### **The principle of freedom**

And then there is another principle, 'So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.' (2:12). Why, we ask ourselves, does James call this a *law of freedom*? All sorts of reasons are given. For time's sake, I choose the one that appeals most to me, where Paul describes how God has gone about getting us to fulfil the righteous requirement of the law.

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [as a sin offering], he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom 8:2-4)

When I stand before the Lord and he says to me, 'Gooding! Why didn't you love your fellow-believers, as you should? You pretended to teach them, but why didn't you love them as you should?' Then in his justice he will consider the question, could I have done it? And suppose I say, 'Lord, you know I couldn't do it.' Then he will say, 'Come, my child, you could! Certainly, you couldn't have done it in your own strength, but there was available to you *the Spirit of life that set you free in Christ Jesus*; you could have done it and you didn't.' Our Lord is not a pharaoh who requires us to make bricks without straw. In the judgment he will consider if I could have done it; if I could and I didn't he must censure me.

You say, 'You are making out the blessed Lord Jesus to be very stern and demanding.' Well, I dare not lessen his holiness, but I am delighted with the next principle that he enunciates.

### **The principle of mercy**

He says, 'For judgement is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgement' (Jas 2:13). So we come to this great principle that, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, there will be mercy. That could sound very strange to you because, perhaps, you have been attracted by that rather shallow definition that is sometimes bandied around when people say, 'Grace is giving people what they don't deserve'—salvation is by grace and so you get the gift of salvation although you didn't deserve it. And then, 'Mercy is withholding what you did deserve'—you deserve eternal hell and, by God's mercy, you have been saved



from it. That sounds very nice and neat, but if you hold that definition you will say, 'Why would any believer need mercy at the judgment seat of Christ?'

You will need mercy at the judgment seat of Christ! Let me convince you of that fact, if I can. Paul says,

May the Lord grant mercy unto the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me—may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord *on that Day!* (2 Tim 1:16–18)

Those last three words put it beyond doubt. Paul is not praying that the Lord would show him mercy now in this life; Paul is praying that God will show Onesiphorus mercy in that day, *the day when the Lord comes.*

So let us be clear. Mercy does not always mean withholding some terrible thing that you have merited, the word *mercy* in scripture is wider than that. It means 'compassion.' It is used, for instance, in the lovely parable of the Good Samaritan. Who proved to be neighbour to him that fell among the thieves? And the lawyer replied, 'He that had compassion' — he that showed mercy. So when the Good Samaritan came upon this man on the road, who had been brutally assaulted by these thugs and brigands, he was not withholding from the man something that he deserved. That isn't the meaning of the word 'mercy' there; it means that the Good Samaritan had 'compassion' on him. Did he say to himself, 'The man is a Jew; if he was standing upright on his two feet and I came anywhere near him he would spit in my face, so let me leave him there; serve him right'? No! The Samaritan had compassion and he bound up his wounds with oil and wine.

Amidst the Father's judgments and amidst the judgments of our blessed Lord, there will be mercy. Our Lord illustrated it in the parable when he spoke about rewards, the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16). Some men came in at the eleventh hour. It wasn't their fault they hadn't worked; nobody had employed them. If only somebody had employed them, they would gladly have worked all day.

So when the man came out at night and asked why they weren't working, they said, 'Nobody employed us.'

'Would you like to work?', he said.

'Yes, we would do anything to work, standing around here doing nothing is absolutely boring. Oh, if only somebody would employ us so that we could work.'

'Well, go and work then in my vineyard', said the master. 'I will give you whatever is right.'

They didn't wait to hear the terms and they literally ran down the road with the sheer joy of breaking the boredom of doing no work. When the time of payment came, the master called them first. Strictly speaking, they only deserved one-twelfth of the payment. Sheer justice would have said, 'You only worked for one hour and these others worked for twelve hours. They are to get a penny, so you will only get one-twelfth of a penny.' But with that decision it wasn't sheer justice that prevailed, it was mercy and they got more than they strictly deserved, for the master was good.

What an insight into the heart of our blessed Lord it is. He will never be less than just. By his very nature he reserves the right to be more than just and to show mercy and be generous. In the doing of it he delights in it; he delights to be merciful and not simply just.

My brothers, I tell you I am glad it is so. When I stand before the judgment seat of Christ if I get simply what strict justice would give me, how little should I get! Because the Holy Spirit is available to the youngest convert, would you say that he or she must overcome all sinful tendencies overnight? No, the Lord is merciful in his assessment of what is possible to that young convert and the Lord will be merciful. The trouble is that I am not a young convert, I have been a believer some fifty-five years and I have got less excuse. I pray that the Lord will be merciful when he assesses my reward and place in his kingdom.

But that lays on me an urgent consideration. If I want him to be merciful to me then I had better start being merciful now. Keep it in the context—James is talking about the way we treat each other. Here's this poor brother, a good man. It isn't merely that his suit is a cheap old suit and badly cut, and he hasn't had a change of shirt for a long while so it smells a bit. He hasn't had the advantage of culture and his conversation is a bit tiring; his outlook is a bit restricted and his manners are difficult. Shall I put him in a corner, or will it not move me to compassion so that, if possible, I love him all the more? Will I not have mercy and if I don't show him mercy now, when I stand before the Lord and he begins to examine the way I have behaved, my 'suit of clothes and the cut of my shirt,' as he comes to estimate my reward, then he won't have mercy on me. 'So speak, so behave, as men and women who are going to be judged' (Jas 2:12).

The Lord loves to be merciful in his judgment. When it comes to our judging the behaviour of our fellow-believers, God save us from an overly censorious and critical spirit. Remember how indignantly the Lord rebuked the Pharisees as they criticized his disciples for rubbing the corn in their hands on the Sabbath and would have condemned them as sinners.

Said our Lord, 'If you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice", you would not have condemned the guiltless' (Matt 12:7). 'But in your hardness of heart you have added all sorts of rules to the Old Testament that God never laid down and, judging by your hard-hearted Pharisaic rules, you condemned those men as though they were sinners. They are not sinners,' said Christ. 'They have broken your little rules but they have not broken any biblical commandments. You come with your elaborate sacrifices to God and think you please him, but have not yet learned that God said, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."' "

The Lord speak to us by these solemn things that come from our lovely brother James. Solemn as they are, he says them because he loves us. They come from the Lord who died for us; the Lord who is our saviour, but the Lord who is our judge. God help us to carry with us the exhortation, 'So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.'

## The Tongue

*Reading: James 3:1–10; Genesis 2:19–22*

We have been studying together some of the obstacles that lie in the path of our progress towards the perfection that we long to see. It is, I suppose, a melancholy fact that none of us has ever seen with our two eyes either a perfect man or a perfect woman.

Of course, we have read about one, namely our blessed Lord Jesus. He was truly human as well as God incarnate, he was perfect in all his ways. As the Holy Spirit illumines our eyes, we may behold the Lord Jesus and say with the writer to the Hebrews, 'We see Jesus' (2:9). The sight of him is the key to our transformation into his glory. Even as we have sung together our songs of praise, our hearts have leaped within us at the prospect that 'we know not what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). But until that time it remains true to say that none of us has ever seen with our two eyes a perfect man or a perfect woman.

As Dr Campbell Morgan used to remark, it is as though all we know about a beautiful steam train is the engine and the carriages all buckled up after a crash. We have to deduce what a perfect machine is from what we see now, after it has been so cruelly ruined. Our trouble is, as James will show us, that one of the most difficult obstacles we must overcome on our path towards perfection is the ruination of what were originally some of the highest and most exalted gifts that God bestowed upon human-kind. As the Latins used to say, 'the corruption of the highest is the worst.' For instance, if you take an ordinary angel (not an archangel) and you corrupt him, you end up with an ordinary demon. But if you take the highest anointed cherub that stood in the very presence of God and you corrupt him, you get the very devil himself. If you ruin my little finger that would be sad, but it wouldn't be all that bad. If you took the highest features of human personality that are in me and you ruined them, then the corruption of the highest would be the very worst that you could imagine.

### **Three high features of the human personality**

From chapter 3 onwards James is going to direct our attention to three of what were originally the most exalted features of human personality as it left the hand of God. Those features retain some of their grandeur, thank God, but they have been ruined and distorted by the fall. James will show us that, because they were such high and wonderful gifts, the corruption of them brings sad and sorry disaster in its trail. And what is more, because they are high and wonderful gifts, recapturing them for God and bringing them to heel—not to be our tyrants but our servants and to get them under the rule of our blessed redeemer so that

we become more like him in the highest features of our personality—is going to be one of our major struggles in the Christian pathway.

What, then, are those high features to which James refers? We shall spend a few moments just surveying each one of them because it is doubtful whether we shall get to studying all of them in detail, though we shall do our best!

## 1. Our faculty of speech

*In chapter 3* James speaks to us about the first high feature of human personality—the tongue. Not, of course, those few ounces of flesh that wobble around behind our teeth, but the faculty of speech that uses the tongue for its performance. What a magnificent part of the human personality the gift of the faculty of speech is. It immediately puts man supreme over all the known animals. Dolphins and whales have a system of communication and some apes manage a grunt or two in the direction of intelligence, but when all is said and done the comparison between a dolphin and you leaves a vast gap. You are endowed by the creator with the gift of speech; it is one of the most God-like things about you.

Never be tempted to say, 'Oh, that's only words,' as though you were despising words. I know James warns us that we can use words and then not carry them out and, therefore, belie these lovely things that we have used. But when words are used properly, see what a God-like thing it is. It makes us like him who is *the Word* and capable of communion with him. We become vehicles to express to the world around us the glories of him who is the Word.

Hence, the human faculty of speech is one of the highest things in the human personality. Even now that it is injured through sin, what a magnificent gift it is; from the mother cooing her baby and building up marvellous bonds of love and affection that will last a lifetime, to a Churchill rallying a whole nation in time of war and leading to victory. What a marvellous gift God has given to the evangelist; power, life and death are in the tongue, when a word spoken can lead a soul to Christ and save that soul for eternity. I must resist the temptation to rave about song and poetry and the written word, I merely want now to observe what a stupendous gift the faculty of speech is in our personality.

It was a cruel thing that Satan did when in a sense he made humans mute; still with a faculty of speech, but now estranged from him who gave them that faculty. So today we have millions of men and women endowed by the creator with this glorious faculty of speech, but as far as God is concerned they are absolutely mute. They never speak to him; they never pray to him and they have never known the highest function of speech. Luke in his Gospel brings before us a man who was possessed of a demon and the form that the demon's power took was that the man was unable to speak. I hope there is nobody here who has this physical disability; it is like a prison where the human personality wants to express itself and can't. It is caged in by its physical muteness; but the spiritual muteness that Satan has induced in the human race towards its creator is an astounding tragedy. When the Lord Jesus came by and drove out the demon and released the man, says Luke with precise accuracy, the man who was mute spoke and all the people glorified God.

What a magnificent moment that is. I hope you have shared it. To sit by somebody who has never used the faculty of speech to speak to the Lord and the very demon is cast out of him or her, and for the first time a creature uses his God-like gift and talks to the Saviour.

But our troubles are not at an end when first we come to the Saviour. Being one of the highest gifts, the faculty of speech has suffered one of the biggest ruinations. James tells us that, even for a redeemed person, it is one of the most difficult things to bring back under control. Because it is such a high gift, when used aright it is full of blessing, but when used wrongly it can be lethal; so he is going to talk to us particularly about the need, if we are to be mature believers, to set about bringing it under the control of Christ.

## 2. Our desires and pleasures

*In chapter 4* James will turn to other faculties we have, our desires and our pleasures. Before you begin to denigrate these, allow me to remind you what a lovely thing God gave us in our human personalities when he gave us inner desires and pleasures. As they came unspoiled from his hand they were beautiful things.

Take the desire for food; that lovely kind of feeling that overcomes one when the clock is ticking up towards one o'clock. What a gorgeous thing it is; if you don't get it, then I am sorry for you! It is not only the desire itself, so packed with anticipation, but the process of satisfying the desire is normally accompanied with all sorts of enjoyment. A roast potato here and a strawberry there plus a dash of cream—marvellous! The Lord needn't have made us like that; he could have made us so that we are filled up like a car is with fuel. It has an inordinate desire for petrol, but it never says thank you and doesn't appear to enjoy it! God could have made us like that. We could swallow a few pills and that's that and no enjoyment. What a magnificent God he is, that he attached lovely pleasure to the humble day to day process of satisfying the desire of hunger.

But our desires and pleasures have gone wrong. In the Garden of Eden, they were the ruination of us. Satan, who knew their potential, played on them and allured Eve into rebellion from under that supreme desire that should have kept all other desires in control.

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I might dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD. (Ps 27:4)

That should have been the chief of our desires, controlling all the others, but Satan in his craftiness upset it all as he dangled in front of Eve the forbidden tree that was good for food, lovely to look at and desirable to make one wise. He played on her hunger, on her desires for physical satisfaction, aesthetic satisfaction, intellectual satisfaction and told her to *go for it*.

'Satisfy your desires, woman!'

'But what about the word of God?'

'Nobody takes notice of that. Go for your desires! Forget God and his word—forever tantalizing you, holding out lovely trees in front of you and then saying that you must never eat their fruit. Tantalizing your desires and then cutting off the lovely sensations of fulfilling them.'

Thus did the deceiver entrap mankind and, as a result, us too. Our desires escape their proper control and have become tyrants, very often waging a civil war inside us as one desire pulls us this way and another that way. The result is wars and fighting and all sorts of unseemly behaviour between believers and inside our own hearts. If ever we are going to become mature men and women that is one thing that we shall have to attack, and bring back our desires and pleasures under God's control and the loving sovereignty of our redeemer. It is not that God is out to kill all pleasure and forbid all desire, he wants to bring them back as an orderly servant under the rule of that supreme desire and let others take their subordinate place.

### 3. Our sense of justice

*In chapter 5* James calls our attention to another God-like feature in human beings. That is, our sense of justice, moral sense, the sense of right and wrong. Once more, this is a feature of the human personality that marks us out as different from the animals. I can tell you now that cows never go to bed with a bad conscience or worry about what they have done during the day, whether it is right or wrong. It is men and women, human beings, that have been ennobled (and sometimes you might think, cursed) with a moral sense, because having that moral sense involves having free will and what a tremendous responsibility free will is.

God could have made us like bumble bees, going about our busy business by instinct, with no moral sense. If a bumble bee erroneously stings you, you don't summon it to court and argue the rights and wrongs of the case and sue it for damages or something! You say, 'It was a bumble bee; it stung me because that is what its nature is, it was simply acting according to instinct.' But if your clumsy neighbour deliberately stands on your foot, you will have a word in his ear because you recognise him as a responsible moral being. He had a choice.

What an enormous responsibility that is to bear. Our moral sense is still there, even in the ungodly, as a powerful pointer to the supreme God himself. We discover that our moral sense is not merely a matter of taste. Right and wrong are not judged as though they were matters of taste and preference; you may like strawberries and I like cucumbers. There's no settling our differences, it is merely a matter of taste; but when it comes to right and wrong, it is not a matter of taste. In our hearts we know there is a supreme definition of right and wrong, a supreme standard of justice. It is the creator himself who has put that sense of right and wrong into our hearts. Inescapably so, as a witness, even in fallen humanity, to the existence of God.

The sense of right and wrong has been badly injured in humankind, with endless injustices even in the most civilized and democratic countries and amongst redeemed people at times. It is sad enough to see an atheist taking his sense of right and wrong and on the basis of it denying there is a God.

I had a colleague once in the university. As far as I knew he was a professing believer, but years later I discovered he was not. He told me he had now become an atheist.

I said, 'Why?'

He said, 'I cannot reconcile all the suffering that there is in the world and in our Ulster here with the existence of a good God.'

Using his sense of right and wrong and justice, he had come to the conclusion that there isn't a God. How sad!

But sometimes as believers we get into situations where our very sense of right and wrong tempts us to question whether the Almighty loves us after all. Job, whom James mentions in his chapter 5, came perilously near to doubting God's justice. It wasn't because he had lost his goods; when that happened he blessed the Lord still. But when his friends began suggesting that he was suffering because of some secret sin, it proved 'the last straw on the camel's back.' In his misery, as he scraped the puss out of the carbuncles on his body, he cried out, 'It isn't fair—all my life I have been seeking to serve the Lord and love my neighbour as myself. Where is there any fairness in this universe? If only God would come down here, I would speak to him and tell him that it isn't fair! But that's the trouble with God; you go forward and he isn't there; you go backward and he is not there either' (see Job 23). The poor man came perilously near to doubting the justice and fairness of God because of what he suffered in this evil world.

If you can honestly sing that hymn, 'He is not a disappointment, He is all in all to me!' then you are indeed blessed. As the Lord Jesus said, 'Blessed is the one who is not offended by me' (Matt 11:6). Bigger men and women than we are have been stumbled. Poor John the Baptist was in prison because, in faithfulness to the Lord, he had preached the gospel and denounced Herod's sin. He had said there was a God in heaven who cared about righteousness; Messiah was coming, 'His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (Matt 3:12). He would deal with the wicked chaff as they deserved. In the faith that Jesus was the Messiah, John had defied Herod and denounced his sin. Herod had him put in prison and John waited those long days, persuaded that presently the Lord Jesus would come as Messiah and let him out and deal with Herod. But the Lord didn't come and he began to wonder. He sent a message to the Lord, 'Are you really the one who should come, or have we been mistaken and should look for another?' (Matt 11:2-3).

James honestly reminds us that we shall be blessed indeed if we get through life without ever coming to great conflict of thought and asking ourselves, 'Why doesn't the Lord intervene and put down evil? Why does he allow injustice to cry out?' And we shall need to bring our sense of justice to the Lord, lest it stumble us in our very faith and fellowship with him, and let the gracious Lord himself help us to handle this gift so that we do not murmur against the Lord or doubt either his justice or his love.

These are life's big things because they are the big things in our personality. The God-like faculty of speech, the wonderful desires and pleasures that God has made us capable of, and the high sense of morality, of right and wrong—these are life's big things. If we would move on towards perfection, maturity, towards being more like the Saviour, then we must bring these things to the Lord himself and let him put his redeeming hand upon them.

### **Our faculty of speech**

So we shall look at the first of these great faculties. You will have noticed how Genesis 2 introduces it to us and points to one of the questions that interest scientists who deals with

speech and its origins. It says that God brought the animals in front of Adam, and Adam named them. It is not too much to say that, in that simple verse, the Bible is pointing to the absolute genius of a human faculty. Animals roar and birds sing, but they do not have what we call a *language*. Language is an arbitrary system of sound. When you see a tree, if you are English you say the sound 'tree.' The sound has got nothing to do with the shape of the object or the leaves or the fruit or anything like that; it's just that it's been agreed that we say the sound 'tree' when we see this phenomenon. Other nationalities have got their own words. They are just as arbitrary, but there's the genius of it. Once you have got the idea of making an arbitrary sound and all agree to make the same sound when you see the same object, there is scarcely a limit to the number of sounds you can make—thousands upon thousands of sounds! What a genius language is, yet most of us are content with three thousand words and use the same ones over and over again. An hour or two with the dictionary would show us how marvellously rich we are!

But notice also that, not only does Genesis tell us that Adam got this idea (the Bible does not say from where) of making up arbitrary sounds to give to each animal, the whole thing is told in the bigger context where God says, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him' (Gen 2:18). So God brought the animals to Adam to see what he would call them. He summed them all up and named them and among all the animals, it says, there was not a helper fit for him. So God made Eve and brought her to him. It wasn't only the beauty of her form, but the wonder of the fact that she had language too. What a marvellous thing language is in that kind of context. Don't you feel sorry for the lion—when he wants to tell his lady how marvellous she is, he can manage a grunt or two and a grimace on his face, but he is limited in what he can say. But you, gentlemen, what words you have invented! It is one of the highest things in life. The soldier at the front, who is found dead in the trench, is unlikely to have a tin of cocoa in his pocket. It will be his last letter from his wife and he will read it thousands of times before he dies.

What things words are; what a magnificent part of our human personality. And that is not their crowning glory. Consider again what the faculty of speech has made possible to men and women. Among all the creatures of earth God has given to us the unique privilege to be the high priest of creation—a creature able to talk back to his creator is an indescribable wonder.

If you were a successful author like Charles Dickens and created such colourful characters, imagine if one of them stood up out of your book and started talking back to you! That's what God has done. He made us creatures, each with his or her own personality and, in giving us each the faculty of speech, made it possible for us to talk to him. The magnificent wonder is that he listens. Just tell me, if you can, the glory of prayer; when you may kneel and begin to speak and the transcendent Lord of the universe will bow his ear and listen to what you say. How our enjoyment of life is increased when, through the faculty of speech, we share it with the Lord. He made mankind high priest of creation, able to have fellowship with him who is the Word, the one who manifested God to us.

What are you proposing to do through eternity? I suspect most of you will put singing high on the list! You will thank God then that he made you with the faculty of speech and song. But if it is such a high and glorious faculty, then break your heart over what sin has



done to it. In its worst cases, humans have taken the faculty of speech, used it and use it still to blaspheme the very name of him who gave them the faculty; those sad men who stood before God incarnate and he was silent. (How else could he be?) They blindfolded him and said, 'Prophecy to us now; we have had enough of you and your words and your prophecies. Tell us who it is that struck you' (see Luke 22:63–65).

Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things *that ungodly sinners have spoken against him*. (Jude vv. 14–15)

### **The power of words**

Words are more important than we are liable to think. Our Lord warned hard-hearted Pharisees and Sadducees who saw quite clearly that Jesus was doing supernatural signs, but they were determined not to believe him and therefore made out that he was the very devil. He said, 'Careful! For of every idle word that a man speaks, shall he give account in the day of judgment. By your *words* you will be justified, and by your *words* you will be condemned' (Matt 12:36–37).

Now that we have been redeemed we shall find it easy to agree with James that the faculty of speech is the last citadel to give in to the power of salvation. The trouble is that it is so difficult to control; more difficult than any other part of our personality. So difficult that if anybody is able to master the tongue and control it, that person will be able to control all the rest of the body.

Many of us who would never dream of letting our hands get out of control and in a flush of temper lift a hand and bash another believer in the face, will let our tongues fly. We say hurtful and unworthy things about our fellow believers and gossip away irresponsibly, cutting their characters to pieces, making out that we are doing it because it is true. So what if it is true—we didn't have any need to say it. We are not seeking the cause of truth but the sheer enjoyment of twisting a little sweetmeat of gossip under our tongue.

Sometimes it is deliberate venom. Many of us who wouldn't let our fingers get out of control and steal a ten-pound note will let our tongues get out of control and rob a fellow-Christian of his character. What a sad thing that is. All of us would have to admit that this old tongue—this faculty of speech—is a very difficult faculty to bring under the control of the Lord Jesus.

The trouble would seem to be that we don't think it matters. We seem to think that the tongue is a very little thing and therefore it doesn't matter. When James begins to talk to us about the tongue he has to emphasise that it does matter and he has to get us to see what a powerful thing for good or evil the tongue is.

There were days when the motor car was only recently invented and it didn't really matter which side of the road you drove on because you were hardly likely to meet another car for the next week! As motor cars multiplied and accidents abounded the Government had to institute programmes for reminding us that when you get into a car and sit behind a

driver's wheel you are using a machine that has marvellous potential for good, but it could be positively lethal if, for a fraction of a second, you let it get out of your control.

So James begins by saying, 'Don't be anxious to be many teachers' (3:1). That's not an excuse for those whom God has called to be teachers to use if they don't teach. But apparently in his day there was a great rush to be teachers. You say, 'Why would anybody rush to be a teacher?' Well, perhaps you don't know, but it can be marvellously enjoyable (though not always!). Just imagine my privilege to talk to the four hundred of you and you have the grace to sit there and listen. I suspect there were many who liked to feel the joy and perhaps the power of it.

James has to remind them to look at the other side for a moment; as a teacher you will come under the Lord's stricter judgment. First of all, if you teach and profess that you know and you don't carry it out; but also because of the potential effect. 'We all blunder in many things,' says James; 'but the man who doesn't blunder in his speaking is a perfect man' (v. 2). If it is ordinary conversation, blundering may not always be that important, but when you are supposed to be teaching God's word, blundering and saying the wrong thing could have very serious effects.

I once had a lady brought to me in a very serious psychological state; rampant fears, anguish, sweat, sleeplessness. What had triggered it all off was a preacher. He had preached that if you were really a Christian you wouldn't fear death. She said to me, 'I do fear death, so therefore I can't be a believer.' It had set off a huge reaction of shock and psychological fear. We know what the preacher meant. He was talking about death in its theological sense; a believer doesn't fear to go home to be with the Lord because there is no condemnation. But he didn't think to explain it and she thought that he meant that if you are a believer you won't fear *the process of dying*—death in that sense.

I felt grieved; I felt that I would like to take that preacher, put him in the middle of a forty-acre field, set loose a wild bull behind him and see what he would do! Would he stand there and say, 'I am a believer, I don't fear death.' He wouldn't stand and think anything; instinct would take over and he would be across the field and over the five-bar gate before he knew where he was.

It is God himself who has put within us a fear of death. That's how he preserves us. It's how he preserves the sparrows—one pick-up of the corn and two looks round to see whether there is a hawk about. It is our fear of death that stops us putting our hands in the fire, which is wholesome and healthy and the Bible is not saying that when you get converted God will take away that instinct. But it is saying that when you become a believer you know that heaven and home lie beyond death and there is no condemnation. The preacher in his zeal didn't trouble to make the distinction and the result was one woman in the throes of a very serious nervous breakdown.

### **The power of such a small thing**

The tongue has enormous power, says James, and our first need in this connection is to observe what power it has: the ratio between size and effect. James uses two illustrations. We put the bit into the horse's mouth, a tiny part of the horse's anatomy and the bit a tiny thing,

but with that bit we control the whole horse. There goes a mighty great ship, driven by the wind and the wave, but it is controlled by the tiny little bit at the end, the rudder.

That's the way it is with the tongue. It is a tiny thing but it boasts great things. It has a right to boast great things when you see what the little thing can do! A father has been pacing the floor with a fractious infant and can't get him to subside. Mum comes and she sings a lullaby and the fretful baby is hushed to rest. An apostle Paul and an apostle Peter preach and thousands come to the Saviour. What a thing the tongue is! The Sunday School teacher labours and who knows that in twenty or thirty years from now the word taught will bear its fruit and an old, bald-headed sinner will come in repentance and trust the Lord.

But just as the tongue is tiny and has great power for good, it also has great power for evil. If a cigarette is thrown down in the forest in the heat of summer, a mighty great forest can go up in flames. And in the same way, says James, an ill-advised word can cause world conflagration. Hitler spoke with his special type of oratory that roused that intelligent nation to virtual frenzy and millions of his fellow-countrymen and millions of people around the world died in consequence of his speeches. We have all got tongues and tongues have been known to divide churches, split them and cause heartbreak, sorrow and grief that life itself will never overcome.

We should be careful before we speak. 'The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness . . . staining the whole body' (v. 6)—the body of the one who uses it and the body of the one who hears it. What disasters there have been because young men have not controlled their words and have set going all sorts of desire. My dear brother and sister, I don't want my mind defiled by your reciting to me all the oddities and funny doings of the fellow members of your church; I don't need to know them. If you must talk to me, talk to me about the Lord. If I were one of the elders, whose job it is to listen to those things and in the fear of God try to put them right, that's another thing; but I don't want to be defiled by mere gossip. The tongue can be fuelled by the very grace of God and it can also be set on fire of hell itself and used as an instrument of Satan. When Peter said to the Lord Jesus, 'Far be it from you, Lord!' (Matt 16:22), it was nothing other than the instigation of Satan that moved his tongue and his thinking, though he didn't know it.

### **How may we control the tongue?**

If we contemplate the power of this little tongue for good or for ill, we shall presently want to know how it can be controlled. 'Every kind of animal,' says James (quoting Genesis), 'has been tamed by human nature' (v. 7). That is what James literally says, though it is obscured in some translations—'Every nature of animal has been tamed and is tamed by human nature.' God has given human nature the ability to overwhelm and control even the wildest animal nature, but the tongue no human being can tame, and that is the next lesson. You say, 'That is a melancholy lesson!' Yes, but as Christians we know where that leads us. I have no hope of controlling my tongue by my own unaided human effort; my only resource is in the Saviour and the Holy Spirit. If only I realised that more, I should be more on my knees, saying, 'Lord, today I must speak; help me tame my tongue.'

What is the trouble? Our divided nature is the trouble. A fountain can't put out sweet and salty water simultaneously; a fig tree won't produce grapes; a thorn bush won't produce figs.

Yet when we speak it is evident that there are very curious contradictions within us still. One minute our tongues are blessing the Lord with all sorts of holy phrases and beautiful songs, the next minute you should hear us when we get bad-tempered, frustrated, envious and jealous. The same tongue that blessed the Father, in bitterness curses our fellow-men.

Why is it? Facing up to that question could be the beginning of controlling the tongue. We are believers, yet inside we still have those unworthy motivations and emotions. If they are not kept under by the grace of God, they will capture and use our tongues. Hence James finishes his chapter by reminding us that we need *wisdom*, not just *knowledge*. We need not merely to know the truth, though that is important for us—let's not devalue knowing the truth, but knowledge is one thing and wisdom is another. I know the truth and I need wisdom to know how to use it or I could do damage to people by using the truth in a wrong way.

You can't stand for the truth and preach the truth, if all the while you are being motivated by false motives like pride and party spirit. You can use the truth not merely to state what the word of God teaches, but then to go further and in pride of heart bitterly to denounce any other believer who doesn't yet grasp the truth exactly like you have grasped it. You can train believers to be proud; instead of loving their fellow-believers, to say, 'We are better than they,' and introduce harsh differences and loveless attitudes to dear fellow believers in Christ. We must stand by the truth, of course, but may God give us wisdom to know how to use and how to speak that truth.

Says James, 'A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace' (v. 18). If our teaching is guided by unworthy wisdom that comes from below and we use our preaching to foster animosities, struggles and strife and hatreds towards fellow-believers, we may be successful as orators, but one thing we shall never produce is a harvest of righteousness. The fruit of righteousness can only be grown in the soil of peace when it is tended by teachers who aim to make peace.

## Our Desires and Pleasures

*Reading: James 4:1–17; Genesis 27:1–4, 21–27*

We shall be studying James chapter 4, but first of all just some preliminary comments.

*Genesis 27.* This passage involves the matter of blessing and the five senses: sight (v. 1), hearing (v. 22), touch (v. 21), taste (v. 4), and smell (v. 27). What is the relation of our senses and our sensations to the question of blessing? This will be considered at the end of our study when we shall look at the story of Isaac.

*James 4:5.* This is perhaps one of the most disputed verses in all of the New Testament, as to what it actually means. There are some questions that I ought to investigate with you just now before I give you what my humble opinion is. I am sure that a lot of the learned theologians present will disagree with me. Perhaps we shall go on disagreeing until we get home to glory and then we won't need to know who was right! But, in due deference to them, I must explain what the difficulty is and what I think the right interpretation and translation should be.

*First question.* Is verse 5 one whole verse and is it meant to be a specific quotation from the Old Testament? Shall we read it, 'Or do you think that the scripture says in vain that the spirit which he made to dwell in us longs unto envying?' (RV)—Is it all one verse with a quotation from the Old Testament?

The learned point out that there is no verse in the Old Testament that explicitly says that the spirit which he has caused to dwell in us longs unto envy. So there are some who would divide the verse in two, 'Or do you think that the scripture speaks in vain?'—What scripture? Not any particular scripture, but a whole array of scriptures in the Old Testament that warn us against the sin that James has just mentioned in verse 4, spiritual adultery and worldliness. There are, of course, many scriptures in the Old Testament that warn God's people against the flagrant sin of spiritual adultery, and so they say that James is not referring to a particular scripture but to Old Testament scriptures in general on this topic.

*Second question.* What shall we do with the second part of the sentence? That's the problem and the problem lies in many different things. First of all, how it should be translated. Shall we take it as a statement, '. . . the spirit which he made to dwell in us longs unto envying'? Which spirit is he talking about? The learned say that it can't be the spirit of God, because it says 'he longs unto envying.'

We must pause here to try and grasp the precise meaning of the noun *envy*. Normally in scripture envy is a bad thing. It is true we read of God being *jealous*, but jealousy can be a good thing. Some jealousy is bad, but there is a type of jealousy that is good—the Lord is a jealous God (Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Josh 24:19; Nahum 1:2).

In Numbers 5:11–31 the word is also used against a background of marital infidelity. A woman, whose husband is being taken by another woman, will quite rightly be jealous over her husband. If she weren't jealous, she wouldn't really love him. If she could see her husband carted off by some other woman and say that it doesn't matter, then she never did really love him. The more she loves him, the more she will be jealous if her husband's love and loyalty to her is tampered with by somebody else.

Using that figure, God informs us that he certainly is jealous for his people. If the world or the devil or whatever passing pleasure takes away the love and devotion of his people from him, then God rightly becomes jealous. So jealousy is a good thing.

But some will say, 'The word used here is not 'jealousy', it is 'envy'; envy is always bad and it cannot be used of God, so it can't be the Holy Spirit that 'longs unto envy.'

So those who think that the Holy Spirit is referred to, translate the whole thing as a question; 'Do you think the scripture speaks in vain?' Of course not! 'Does the Holy Spirit that God has caused to dwell in us long unto envy?' Of course not—perish the thought! If you become envious of other people, you are offending against the gracious person of the Holy Spirit himself and that at least makes good sense. It is true anyway, whether that is what James is saying or not!

I, myself, am not quite so sure that the word translated 'envy' cannot be used of God. This word in Greek can be used of envy in the sense of begrudging somebody something. The Greeks talked of their pagan gods as being *envious* and we can see that their ideas were false and wrong. They said that if you were exceedingly wealthy it could become dangerous because the gods would become envious of your wealth. The best thing you could do to stop them smiting you would be to get the thing that you treasured most and throw it away so that it couldn't come back again, and thus stop the gods being envious. That's pagan superstition and God is never envious in that sense, but I am going to suggest to you seriously that God can begrudge us things.

Let me give an absurd and exaggerated illustration! Here is a charming young gentleman and he has a magnificent fiancée. When they marry he is so in love with her that he endows her with five hundred thousand pounds in the bank to do with as she pleases. Of course, he is hoping that she will now and again use it to his advantage, but he wants it to develop her personality so that she should be an even more wonderful woman and love him more intelligently and fervently. He smiles as he sees her buy a set of artist's paintbrushes and he says that it will do her good to get out from the kitchen and into the countryside and develop her artistic sense. It will have a spin-off in the home, so he doesn't mind when she spends so much money on the paint kit.

But one day she comes home with an exotic racing car. She tells him that she met a chap at the painting club who is into racing and she would like to go into racing too! In actual fact, she will be away all summer following the racing circuits in France.

'And what about me and the children?'

'Well, I can't help that,' she informs him, 'there's nothing wrong in racing. I am going to have my pleasure.'

So he manages to get through the summer and she comes home. Then one day he finds a firm delivering exotic ski equipment. She says, 'I have taken up skiing and I have bought a little chalet in Switzerland, so I am going off for the winter. I should be back next March when the snow is gone!'

Tell me, would you think it a wrong thing if the husband now began to begrudge the woman that five hundred thousand pounds? He may feel jealous under the notion that it is some other man that has taken away her love, but in addition to the jealousy he could well begin to begrudge the money. 'If this is how she is going to use it, I wish I had never given it to her. I wish I could take it from her, for all my money has done is to take her heart away from me to other things.'

I think that is what James is saying and it is so possible, is it not? Sometimes God finds it difficult to be kind; when he would want to give us lovely things, the danger is that in the end the lovely things take our hearts away from the Lord and consume our time, so we have no time for him. It wouldn't be wrong to say then that God begrudges even the lovely things he has given us, if that's going to be the result.

*Third question.* Why do I think that God is the subject of the verb, 'longs'?—'longs unto envying.' It stands in contrast to our lusts—God's longings—and the word is always used in the New Testament in a good sense. Says Paul of the believers, 'I long after you' (Phil 1:8 KJV). It is a verb that is telling us the marvels of the heart of God as he longs after his people; he *wants* them. Can you not see how he longs after you? He longs after your heart and after your time; he longs after you more than anything else, for he gave all that heaven had in his longing to buy your heart and your affection. He longs over you to the point of getting envious, jealous, if your loyalty and love are tampered with. He longs after you to the point of begrudging you even those otherwise harmless things if they take your love and heart and time away from him. His begrudging may even go so far that, if we don't cure it ourselves, he might remove those things and feed us on bread and water for a time until we come back to him.

*Fourth question.* What shall I make of 'the spirit that he has caused to dwell in us'? I do not think it is the Holy Spirit, though it is true that God has caused the Holy Spirit to dwell in each of his people. In Greek, the verb 'to long' must take an object; you have to *long for* something. I take the verse to be saying that God longs for the spirit that he has caused to dwell in us. Unlike the brute beasts, we were made so that we might have fellowship with God who is Spirit and God caused a spirit to dwell in us for the very purpose that we might respond to him and be able to have fellowship with him. Almighty God, who put that human spirit with all its potential within us, longs for that spirit and it will break his divine heart eternally if that spirit is alienated and perishes at last in the outer darkness.

*James 4:6–17.* James has been setting before us conquests which we must make if ever we are to reach spiritual maturity. In chapters 1–3 we saw that he brings before us certain major features of our human character and personality, our human make-up. He talked to us of the tongue, *the faculty of speech*—a major high endowment of our human personality. He talked

about *our moral sense*, the sense of justice that distinguishes mankind from the brute beasts—one of the God-like features of a human personality.

In chapter 4 he speaks about those powerful motors and motivators inbuilt by the creator himself, *our desires*, and the delightful side effect that God has built into our personality, *our capacity for pleasure*.

They say that one of these days, computers will be so marvellous that you won't be able to tell the difference between a computer and a human being. Roger Penrose, the great mathematician in Oxford, will not agree to that proposition and he proposes a simple test to see whether you can distinguish a computer from a human being. A computer may know vastly more than any one of us, or all of us put together, and be able to do marvellous sums in its head.

'But,' says Roger Penrose, 'you could put this question to any human, "What does it feel like to be a human being?" and they would know what you mean, even if they could not adequately describe it. But you could stand there for ever and ask a computer, "What does it feel like to be a computer?" and it wouldn't know what the question meant, never mind know how to answer it.'

Aren't you glad that God didn't make you as a computer? You would be very clever and could be paid many thousands a year, but what you would miss if you were just a computer!

God has made human beings with that marvellous capacity for pleasure and enjoyment. When we came from the hand of God all these great features of our human personality were perfect, but through the fall all of them have been injured, damaged and spoiled. They have not been completely destroyed or eradicated; much of the original glory still remains, but it is the fact that in very serious respects these great faculties and features of the human personality have been harmed and damaged and put to some extent out of control.

So James's point in reminding us of them is that, if ever we are to attain spiritual maturity, we shall by God's help have to face these faculties of our human personality and by the gracious power of the Saviour and his Holy Spirit bring them back into control. We must bring them under the beneficent reign of our holy redeemer, so that once more we may be integrated, wholesome personalities, glorious princes and princesses as God designed us to be, fit for the very mansions above.

## **Our desires and pleasures**

We must start off by thinking what lovely things they are and give honour to the creator who gave them to us. Earlier we thought of *the desire for food*, the marvels of hunger and the sheer glory of satisfying it. There are other lovely sensations that God has invented and they are the more remarkable because you don't get hungry for them; they come all unexpected. Food is glorious, but it has a disadvantage. When you are hungry food smells marvellous; you start to eat and you enjoy the lovely feeling, but the more you eat the less the feeling (to most people at least!). You get to the point that you don't want any more and when you have had a very good dinner the smell of bacon in the frying pan becomes a little revolting!

There are other marvellous physical delights that are not like that; you don't get hungry for them. Take the fragrance of a rose, for instance. You have been in the smoke and grime of



the city, you happen to turn a corner where there is flower shop and the fragrance greets you. You weren't hungry and you got that delight for nothing. God took you by surprise when you had forgotten you had such a thing as *a sense of smell* and you realise what a wonderful God he is; what an inventor of delights. What is heaven going to be when we will meet delights that we didn't know existed! The God who loves you and has given you the capacity for delight and pleasure is a God of infinite ingenuity.

It is not merely the desire for food or the enjoyment of fragrance that is a pleasure, there is *aesthetic pleasure*. The Bible tells us that in the Garden of Eden God made trees. The historian put them in this order, trees good to look at and then good for food. Some trees and plants are there simply to be beautiful. You can't eat daffodils, so what use are daffodils? You say, 'Give me turnips!' Oh, you must put a great value on the stomach! God happens to think that tulips, perhaps, are even more beautiful than turnips—he puts first the trees that are good to look at. We need food for our minds as well as our stomachs.

How marvellous God has been to supply flowers with all their colour. Even when we are not thinking they do us an enormous amount of good, soothing us, bringing joy and gladness and stability. How grateful we ought to be that we don't live in a world that is grey all the time. If you were going to visit a friend who is very ill in hospital you might not think it appropriate to take him potatoes or turnips! If he is too ill for grapes you might consider taking him a bunch of beautiful roses; the sight of the roses will charm and calm the mind and perhaps give a sense of the beauty of life so that his desire for life might be invigorated and he may start to enjoy it again.

What a magnificent God we have! Not only may we enjoy flowers and colour, but music brought to us by the very birds that sing. When we get home to heaven there will be singing such as angels have never heard, and with it our ability to be creative in ourselves and copy the creator.

And then there is *intellectual desire* and intellectual satisfaction. It is best when it is pure, like the scientists who study the universe *just because it is there*. Great scientists like Kepler and Faraday studied the universe because they believed it was the work of God's hand. As God gave them to understand intellectually how it works, it moved them to awe and worship at the wonder of the mind of God. Said Kepler, 'We are thinking God's thoughts after him.' Perusal of the intellect of God brought such profound intellectual satisfaction that it bowed their hearts in worship.

There is another desire that you might call *ambition*. Do you think that Adam had any ambition? He was to look after the garden and be responsible to tend it and keep it in a good state of repair. Then he was told that there was a big world outside and he had to go out and organise and develop and rule it. I hope that somewhere in his head he had the ambition to do the great task that God had given to him and make something of the earth with all its potential.

## The controlling element

But in all those great desires, powers and motivations that God put into man there was one great controlling thing. In the middle of the garden was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and God had put a restriction on it.

You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. (Gen 2:16–17)

Amidst all those delights and desires and pleasures God put the supreme controlling element of his word, his commands. He charged them that, if they would enjoy these things, their desires must be under this limitation. First, they obey the Lord and honour his word. They must never allow their desires to move them to seize pleasures independent of the Lord or in disobedience to his word.

As we know, that is precisely where the tempter ruined humanity.

'Go for it, Eve,' he said. 'There is marvellous satisfaction for your pleasures. It is good for food, aesthetically pleasing and satisfying, stuff there to keep you intellectually amused and give you wisdom.'

But Eve said, 'What about God, what about his word and what about our relation to him?'

'Don't worry about that', said Satan, 'you will get more out of life with physical, intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction. That's all there is to life; let God go.'

But God had warned them that in the day they ate of the tree they would surely *die*. It did not mean that from that very moment on they would never again enjoy the satisfying of their hunger with food, or that they would forget the significance of colour or become deaf to music. But they 'died' because an exceedingly subtle change had taken place. There had come into being in that moment what the Bible technically calls *the world*. The world has many aspects, but one of its chief characteristics is described by the Apostle John,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. (1 John 2:15–16)

What had happened was this. All those lovely things that we long for and rightly hunger for were meant to be under the control of God and his word and enjoyed as we were responsible to him, making him our chief desire. These very joys should express God himself and lead us back to him in worship and gratitude and humble and willing obedience. That is what went wrong. Cruelly enough, Satan had not used bad things to take Adam and Eve away from God—there weren't any bad things at that point. He had used the beautiful things of life.

I tell you now, there will be more people in hell and lost as a result of the lovely things of life than there will be for the vicious perversions. It is not always the vicious things that take our believing hearts from the Lord; it could be the lovely, beautiful things of life that eventually so fill our time and hearts that they draw us away from him and that is *worldliness*. Gone from the love of the Father, the great aim in life is no longer the Father and serving his

will; it is satisfying our desires and enjoying our pleasures and these become goals in themselves.

It is like a girl who comes to work one day and you notice an engagement ring on her finger, so you have a look at it and show your admiration. When you have done that you ask, 'Who is the fortunate young man?'

What if she should turn round and say, 'What do you mean—young man?'

'The young man who give you the ring!'

And she says, 'But there isn't any young man! I don't believe in young men!'

What will you say next? 'Well, it's a lovely ring'? But the ultimate significance has gone out of it.

All the pleasures in all the universe heaped together are marvellous, but without the Lord their significance has gone; they are like the engagement ring without the eternal lover. What happens to people like this?

*In extreme cases our passions can take over.* Instead of being under God's control, or even under the control of the man and woman trying to enjoy them, pleasures can take over and rule the person. 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?' (Jas 4:1). We have all sorts of desires in our bodies and we ought to learn how to order them and put them in our hierarchy of values. Woe betide the people who lose control of their desires and pleasures and they come to rule them, for, in the end, they will tear them to pieces.

Now and again I meet a student who could pass his examinations and has the ability to do so, if he pleased. His trouble is that he is not in control of his desires and pleasures. He tells me most seriously, 'I do want a degree, I really do!' That is one desire. But his friends play golf in the mornings and he wants to play golf too, so off he goes to play golf. In the evening he settles down to study for his desired degree, but then he hears the music from the disco and he desires the music, so off he goes to the disco and there is no more study!

I vividly remember a certain gentleman. He had had many attempts at his exams and, in the mercy of the university, he had been allowed many more. Now he had come to the last attempt to pass his Finals. He told me he really wanted a degree, so the university arranged a re-sit examination in September. When the re-sit time came he didn't turn up. At last I was able to track him down—about the beginning of November! I said, 'I have been missing you, where did you get to? You didn't turn up for your exam!'

'My uncle gave me a free ticket to America and I wanted to see America.'

'I hope you enjoyed it!' I said.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to see America, but his desire to see America quite cancelled out the other desire to get a degree. That is an extreme case where people allow the whole menagerie of desires within them to pull them this way and that way until it leaves them a wreck.

Do remember that James is talking to believers! I have a desire to be holy, but I have got a thousand and one other desires that in themselves are quite legitimate. What must I do? I

must decide what's going to be the ruling desire and as a believer see that all my desires are arranged in their proper hierarchy and all of them under the supreme desire to please the Lord and do his will— 'This one thing I do, I press toward the mark . . . (Phil 3:13–14).

Most unregenerate people have learned this; they submit one desire and put it in subjection to a bigger desire. The man who wants to get on in business has to curb his desire to play golf all day long or he will not attain his commercial desires and never have the money to play the golf, so he has to arrange them.

## **Various dangers outlined by James**

### **Ruthlessness**

But there is something dangerous here too, for if the supreme desire is not the Lord and merely my desire, it can turn me into a ruthless kind of a creature. 'You fight, you war,' says James, 'you are prepared to murder . . .'. (He is using metaphorical language, but what he is expressing is the utter ruthlessness of our desires.)

Take the man who has a love of money. It is his chief objective and he won't mind who he cheats as long as he gets away with it, so morality goes out of the window. The ruthless, supreme desire in his life is to make money. Here is another man whose ambition and desire is for power. If that is his supreme desire he won't mind who he pushes down so that he gets to the top.

Remember, James is talking to believers. It can happen even amongst believing people in a Christian church and the old unregenerate desire for power masks itself as godliness. A man who is determined to have his way and determined to control doesn't mind who he pushes out of the way so that he can be the boss. If you make one pleasure your tyrant and go for it, it can ruin both you and other people. A man who has made sexual pleasure his tyrant doesn't mind whose heart he breaks. It will in the end depersonalise him and those he sullies. What he wants is pleasure and sensation. Presently he will lose all concept of love that is loyalty to a person, he is simply out for pleasure.

### **Disloyalty**

Our modern world is going that way. They tell me that sometimes young gentlemen come to marriage starry-eyed and they imagine that it is all going to be ecstasies and glories and wonders. For the first six months it is, perhaps. But then the normalities of life take over—the prose more than the poetry. The man who is not in it for love but for pleasure or sensation, when the pleasure and sensation begin to diminish he thinks he has every right to ditch the good woman. There is no sense of loyalty and true love; he is off to the next victim to keep up the pleasures and sensations of novelty and when that wears off he looks for someone new. Let me say it with baited breath, this is becoming a scourge among the people of God in some countries.

## How shall we put it right?

Not by denying desire; that would be foolish. To deny all desire is the Buddhist way of trying to reach perfection, it is not the Christian way. God has put within the heart of everybody a deep-seated desire and whether we know it or not we are contingent creatures who depend upon God. If we try to live as though we were independent of God, we shall always feel an empty gap within. Our lovely Christian gospel doesn't order people to suppress their thirst, but offers to satisfy it. 'Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again' (John 4:14). 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?' (Isa 55:2). 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink . . . out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:37-38). The very gospel speaks to us in terms of our desires and will bring us back to the true fountain of all pleasure.

When we get converted Peter will come alongside and say, 'Do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance' (1 Pet 1:14). If you are now born again then begin to look to your desires, don't let them pull you all over the place. Get this consuming desire predominant among the rest, 'As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct' (v. 15). And let your controlling desire be, 'Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation' (2:2). We have got to take our desires in hand as believers and see to it that they are all under the supreme desire of pleasing the Lord.

*But even here there is another danger.* 'You do not have, because you do not ask' (Jas 4:2). And then sometimes you ask and you don't get because you want to spend it on your pleasures. (Remember that he is still talking to believers.) You say, 'Isn't pleasure a good thing—doesn't the Lord like to give us pleasure?' Yes, he does!

Let me talk to you about Isaac and his experience of the blessing of God. In order to do that, I shall have to set up a little framework.

## Experiencing the blessing of God

What do we mean by *the blessing of the Lord*? God promises us forgiveness; if we will repent and believe he offers us the blessing of forgiveness. So we listen to his word, we hear about his offered gift and are moved to repent and believe it. In believing it we get the blessing, the forgiveness of sins.

Sometimes along with the blessing we get lovely emotions, like David did. When he was forgiven he said, 'Oh the blessedness of the man whose sin is forgiven' (Ps 32:1). He nearly danced for joy and he wrote a marvellous lyric to express the emotional joy of having got forgiveness. But you have to get the gift first before you can get any emotions; and even if you don't get the emotions it doesn't matter, if you have got the gift. The order is: God's word; believe; the blessing; then, maybe, the emotion of joy.

Sometimes God is so rich in his mercy that he gives us not only emotions of joy, but he gives us marvellous sensations of pleasure as well. Haven't you seen somebody weeping for joy—that funny sensation that dissolves people into tears for very joy? You can weep for

sorrow and you can weep for joy. God allows the sensation sometimes of sheer joy, perhaps going into tears.

But we mustn't get it the wrong way round. I have heard that when a man and his wife have quarrelled and then make it up, it is heavenly! What would you say of the man who said to his wife, 'I think it's about time we had another quarrel!'

'Whatever for?' she asks.

'Well, to get the sensations when we make it up!'

There is a hymn that says it, 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I knew the Lord?'<sup>5</sup> I felt my heart deeply moved with contrition; they were marvellous sensations, but would I want them all over again? No, that's not the way. We must not try to rake up past experience but go on with the Lord, thank him for his past blessings and go in for new blessings. Sometimes we make the mistake and go for the sensation and the joy, and miss the blessing.

It happened with Isaac. He had been blessed of God, and now came the time in his life when he was going to pass on that blessing to his sons, Jacob and Esau. He felt he couldn't just pass it on stone-cold; he must work up some kind of a feeling.

How should he have blessed them? Well, his wife had had a word from God that the elder son should serve the younger and he ought to have put the younger first. That was the word of God, but just now Isaac wasn't particularly interested in the word of God. He preferred Esau and in his heart was the beautiful smell of venison made in the special gravy. God had blessed him with lands and crops and herds, and often he had tasted this venison out of the goodness of God. But now, when he came to pass on the blessing, it wasn't the word of God he went by. What he was looking for was the sensation and the taste of roast venison. So he sent Esau out to get it.

You know the story how Jacob deceived him. He came in dressed up and Isaac's eyes were dim so he could not see. But he could hear and he said, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob; it is not Esau at all.' He should have listened to his hearing, but nothing would do. He said, 'Come here until I feel you.' Yes, this was something solid. It was hairy flesh so it must be Esau, but it wasn't and the sensation deceived him. Then he said, 'Come here until I smell you.' Yes, this is the smell of the field which the Lord has blessed and, going by his smell, he was deceived. Then he ate what was supposed to be the venison—deceived again! It was not venison but something that Rebekah had cooked up. Instead of going for God's word he went for the sensations and was horribly deceived.

My dear believers, there is a lesson there. Even in your spiritual devotions you ask and you don't receive. Why is that? Because you are more interested in something that is going to tickle your sensations and you ask so that you might use it in your pleasures. Even in the spiritual life it is possible to make the pleasures, the sensations and the emotions the chief thing we are going for. As long as our emotions are moved in a meeting of the church, we think we are doing well. But let God begin to talk calmly through his word and we say, 'That is a bore; you can't expect us to put up with that boring stuff!' If we would enjoy what God

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<sup>5</sup> William Cowper (1731–1800), 'O, for a closer walk with God'.

has given, we must start with God and believe his word; then receive the blessing and let emotions and sensations come, or not come, as God pleases.

## Our Moral Judgment

*In this study I want to say a few more words about chapter 4 and then move into chapter 5.  
We shall not do any formal reading.*

In chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this epistle, James talks to us about three major features of the human personality. In chapter 3 we saw it was the *faculty of speech* and in chapter 4 our *desires and pleasures*. In chapter 5 we shall now discover it is our *moral judgment*, our sense of right and wrong.

All three of these are the lovely gifts of God, given to mankind in the day of his innocence; beautiful gifts of God for which we should never cease to thank him. But all three have, in some part, been injured, perverted, put out of gear and got out of control as a result of the fall. When God saves us he begins his work of reparation and re-constitution, but that is not quite the end of the matter. If we would come to spiritual maturity and to perfection, then all three of these great departments of our human personality must, part by part, be brought under the redeeming grace and power of the Lord Jesus.

In chapter 4 we considered our desires and our pleasures. We noticed again that God provided mankind with these wonderful things in the days of his innocence and all of them were to be enjoyed under the control of man's spirit in communion with the Father of spirits. Thus were men and women free to enjoy these desires, these great engines, these motivators of their behaviour and attitudes, and the delightful pleasures that God has built in as side effects into our living. But then we saw how Satan by his craftiness put everything out of joint. He got Eve to think that she could enjoy life to the full if she let God go, took no notice of him and positively disobeyed his word.

Cutting fellowship with God, mankind relied solely on his desires, his ambitions and his pleasures and we noticed how, sadly, that has come unstuck. By that means Satan has built what the Bible calls *the world*. The world doesn't necessarily mean a collection of evil things, evil in themselves. One of the secrets of Satan's tactics of worldliness is to take the lovely things of life that came from the hand of God and use them to take our hearts away from God. And when that happens these lovely things themselves ultimately turn into a disaster.

We were thinking about that in our last study and I want to pick up at that point and say a few more words about chapter 4 and then move into chapter 5. What I propose to do is just to go over in skeleton fashion the material and the arguments that James uses in these remaining verses. I must leave you to put flesh upon the bones.



### ***God delights to give his people pleasure***

We shall begin with 4:4 and I shall be referring to the text from time to time. God's answer to Satan is the preaching of the gospel. Not to get rid of our desires, but to redirect them; not to suppress pleasure, but to offer us true pleasure. We remember that, finally, we shall be admitted to the courts of heaven, where at God's right hand there are pleasures for evermore (Ps 16:11). We should not give ourselves, and still less the world, the idea that Christianity is a killjoy affair. God is a happy God who delights to give his people pleasure. So it is that in the gospel the Lord Jesus offers to quench the unbelievers' thirst if they will repent and believe, offering them the water of life and the bread of life to satisfy their thirst and their hunger.

### **Spiritual adultery**

But once we have eaten of that living bread and drunk of that living water, it doesn't mean that all our desires and pleasures are at once put into orbit. We were noticing how possible it is for believers still to find their desires and their pleasures out of gear with the Lord and his word. It is possible for a believer to allow the enemy to dangle before him, not some vicious way of behaving, but lovely and delightful things and, by that means, draw a believer away from the Lord.

When that happens it is exceedingly serious; James says that it is spiritual adultery and disloyalty of heart to the Lord Jesus. He calls believers who give way to this kind of thing 'adulterous people' (4:4). It is not a very pleasant word—it is an ugly word that describes an ugly thing. Paul naturally agrees with James in everything and he says, 'I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor 11:2–3). That is precisely what Satan tries to do to get us divided in our hearts and in our loyalties to the Lord Jesus.

When a girl is not yet engaged, she is free to keep an open mind. 'Shall it be Thomas? There's a lot to be said for him; look at his handsome face and his manly stature, but he is a bit overbearing! Shall it be Fred? He is not quite so handsome, but he is kind and he would make a very nice father to our children. But then, what about George? He has a beautiful Alfa Romeo!' She doesn't know which, so she must take her time and choose carefully. (You will make sure you choose a believer, won't you!) While she is not yet engaged she can keep an open mind, but once she has given her word she is not free to keep an open mind. The girl who has been engaged to a young man (or vice-versa, of course) and keeps flirting around with others is not giving a sign of being broadminded; she is giving a sign that she is immoral.

Young folks, if I may talk to you. Satan will do his best to get you to be intellectually dishonest and disloyal to the Lord Jesus, using that lovely thing God has given you, your intellect, the longing and desire to know. Then craftily he says, 'Look here, you are an intelligent person. If you are going to satisfy your thirst for knowledge and your enquiring mind, you are not going to be satisfied with just any old explanation. You like to go into the deep things.'

Little by little he will siphon off that intellectual desire and get it involved in all sorts of things that are lovely in themselves. It could be science, physics or chemistry. It is a lovely thing to study God's handiwork, but it is a tragic thing to let your science so absorb you that, little by little, prayer, Bible reading and communion with the Lord Jesus are abandoned and presently nothing remains of church fellowship but a formal attendance and a man who at fifty-five is a brilliant physicist and a dwarf Christian.

Does it matter? 'It matters!' says God. 'It matters,' says Christ, 'it is stealing my very heart's affections.' 'It is spiritual adultery and enmity with God,' says James (v. 4). Someone will say, 'That's pushing it far, isn't it! A believer can't be at enmity with God, can he? We have been reconciled to God by the death of his Son; how can we be at enmity with God?' If any man decides willingly and deliberately to be a friend of the world, he thereby constitutes himself an enemy of God.

Here's a dear believer who once was keen for the Lord, but he got engaged in fishing. Well, as far as I know, there's nothing wrong with fishing! It is a lovely hobby and past-time. But wait a minute! It gets a grip of him; he makes a conscious decision to abandon the prayer meeting and the study of the word and little by little he leaves off his walk with God. Presently he is scarcely ever to be seen in church at all. He has made a decision to go for fishing in a big way and if that involves his weekends and all his time, he is going for it. What does that matter; there's nothing wrong with fishing! Of course there isn't, but now the enemy has got him where he intended to get him all the while. He uses the lovely things of life, fastening on a man's desires and his pleasures, not to lead him nearer to the Lord but to lead him away—that's the enemy's work.

Says James, 'You have the world on the one side and God on the other. If you choose the world's side and attitudes, you are constituting yourself an enemy of God. "We are not to think that scripture speaks in vain. God longs after the spirit he has caused to dwell in us" (v. 5), to the point of begrudging us all those lovely things that have taken us away from him.' But if God begrudges his people those things, if we are not careful he will discipline us and take them away from us, if need be, to bring us to our senses and back to him.

### **There's a way back to God**

Yet it remains true of him that 'He gives more grace' (v. 6). Grace to repent and grace to come back and James now exhorts us in verses 6–10, if we have got away in heart and our loyalties have been divided, to come back. There is a way back.

'Be subject to God; but resist the devil' (v. 7). Learn to say, 'No, I am not going further down that road, I am going to draw near to God, close the gap that has opened up and come back to the Lord.' Not just mouthing a few hymns, but to come near to the Lord to hear his very heart throb and taste again his love.

'Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded' (v. 8). Therein lies the trouble—double-mindedness; one minute living for the Lord and the next minute living for the world. If we are going to make spiritual maturity, that

double-mindedness and double-heartedness must come to its end and be a single heart beating for the Lord.

'Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom' (v. 9). This isn't the recipe for every day of the Christian life. We were talking earlier about the lovely things that God has put into our personalities; lovely desires, which he fulfils with lovely gifts and beautiful pleasures. But if those lovely things have taken us away from the Lord, then rather than the laughter of enjoyment and the cackle of fun we would be better off breaking our hearts in floods of tears and coming back to the Lord in genuine repentance, saying 'Sorry, what fools we have been to have wasted so much of life.' Then, indeed, tears were better than laughter.

When you come back, 'he will exalt you' (v. 10), and after the rain of the tears will come the lovely sunshine of the joy of his presence. He is not wanting to be a kill-joy. The one who gives us desires and pleasures assures us that at his right hand there are pleasures for evermore; but you can't ultimately have the pleasures if you have no time for the Lord. Those who permanently and finally reject the Lord must come where desires will never be satisfied and will haunt them like writhing worms in their very insides for all eternity. Ultimately, there is no good, no satisfied desire, no thirst quenched, no hunger met, no joy, no real music, apart from the God who made us and longs to redeem us.

### **Knowing when and how to speak**

In verses 11–12 come two verses where James seems to be at his habit of suddenly jumping off at a tangent and introducing some other subject, but this time he is not really doing that. Notice what he says, 'We are not to speak one against another.' The word does not mean to spread false rumours around, like some translations suggest. It merely means to *speak against*. This is not a prohibition against speaking what is not true of the man; it is a prohibition of *sometimes* not saying what is true of the man.

Suppose he has done something and is at fault, if I am an elder and I must deal with him, I must speak. But if I am an ordinary citizen, it is not my business to go about speaking against the brother everywhere I go. Why should I? The law says I am to love my brother as myself. Suppose you, my brother, had fallen into some fault; would you like somebody to be your free advertising agent? If we really loved our brother as we should, we shouldn't say more about it than absolute necessity forced us to say.

But it seems to me that James is not just thinking about our general faults. If we take it in this context, these verses have a special force. James has been discussing the matter of worldliness, and there seems to me to have been few topics where believers speak against each other more than on the question of worldliness. In particular, criticizing each other on what pleasures they allow themselves. Have you noticed that?

I think I can tell you how it comes about! Here is a good man and before he got converted he was head-over-heels into tennis. He had no time for God or anything else. Sometimes after the match he ended up in the pub the worse for wear. When he got converted he came to see that he had wasted his life. From then on he wanted to live for the Lord and he wasn't going to waste his time on tennis, so he decided he wasn't going to play any more tennis. He will give himself full time to the Lord.

Then, over the garden fence, he suddenly sees another brother playing tennis! Forthwith he decides there is something seriously wrong with his spirituality; he must be worldly. 'I gave that kind of thing up when I got converted,' he says. Then he proceeds to spread it around the earth, 'I saw Mr So-and-So the other day playing tennis!' And so it goes on and someone says, 'He will never preach here again!' Several of us may have been tempted to talk against a brother like that.

Read the inspired apostle's lesson, 'You are not to speak against a brother like that.' But what if he is doing wrong? Well, suppose he is, the Bible says you are not to speak against him, you are to love him and if you start speaking about him all about the place you are doing worse than ever he could. You are now positively breaking a straightforward commandment. There is not a commandment in the Bible that says, 'You shall not play tennis,' but there is a commandment that says, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18). If you start criticizing him, you are speaking against the law. The law says that you shall love your neighbour and that means that you will not go around speaking against him. If you don't take the law seriously, you are saying by your behaviour that you are superior to the law and know better than the law.

### **Who is the judge?**

Worse still, you are in danger of appointing yourself as the judge in the matter, and you are not the judge (vv. 11–12). There is only one judge, and that is the Lord Jesus.

That other brother might not be wrong! What is worldliness? You say it is playing tennis, but where did you read that? You say, 'When I played tennis . . .'. Yes, when *you* played tennis! It wasn't the tennis that was wrong, but the tennis was used by the devil himself to draw your heart away from Christ and that was what was wrong. That doesn't mean that, because this dear brother is playing tennis, it is drawing his heart away from Christ, does it? How would you know anyway—who is the judge of whether something is drawing my heart away from the Lord? Must it not eventually be the Lord? 'Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls' (Rom 14:4). It is an impertinence for me to put myself between the Lord and his servants.

Of course, my dear elder, if you see me getting to love the world too much, you will have a quiet word in my ear. That's another thing and thank God for elders like that, who gently enquire whether this or that is taking me away from the Lord. But then an elder like that wouldn't go spreading it around!

James says it is not for us to be judge in the matter. I have enough to judge my own heart in the things that I allow, to make sure that I guard myself in these lovely things that are innocent in themselves and good for recreation, lest I go over the line and they become the means of taking my heart away from the Lord. And I suggest, my brother, you have an equal job to do it for yourself. We must beware of making mere arbitrary rules that in the end turn out to be nonsense. Many of our dear Russian brothers won't wear a tie because they think it is very worldly. We must beware of making rules and regulations and then judging other people by them. A man who seems to be keeping the rules and has never played a game of tennis in his life had better watch out in his business, lest his business take his heart away from the Lord.

## Depending on the Lord

From verse 13 to the end of the chapter James wants us not to allow ourselves, even in our business lives, to become independent of the Lord. We so easily get enthused and rightly so; God has given us ambitions and we should be ambitious to please the Lord. If God has put the stewardship of money or capital or factory or firm into our hands, along with that stewardship come the heavy responsibilities of running the firm well. Upon its smooth and proper running depends the welfare of many a workman, his wife and family. Let us give thanks for men who know how to manage. Very often the workman goes home to bed and hasn't another care in his head until tomorrow, whereas the manager, who has got to find the funds for the salaries at the end of the week, can spend many a sleepless night.

Let's be thankful for the various gifts that God has given. If he has put us in business, it's easy for the joy, the thrill and excitement of it to carry us away. We have plans here and plans there; this is what we are going to do next year. What's wrong with that? First of all, you don't know what is going to happen tomorrow (v. 14).

'Are you proposing to be alive tomorrow?'

You say, 'I hope so!'

'Don't you know?'

Why has God left it uncertain? One effect it has is that we have to take every single day as a gift from God to which we have no right. We can't take it for granted and we are dependent each day on the Lord.

Therefore, that habit of mine whereby I constantly remind myself to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that' (v. 15), brings us to a more realistic confrontation with life. It is not mere pharisaic religion. At the same time, it stops that incipient worldliness, which is the creeping tendency to become independent of the Lord in our lives. That, after all, is what worldliness is—getting away from the Lord and the sense of dependence upon him.

## Our moral sense

With that we come to chapter 5. I have suggested that the third great feature with which James deals here is the matter of our moral sense; our sense of justice, our sense of right and wrong. This is a marvellous part of the personality. God could have made us to work like animals or robots without free will and therefore without a true moral judgment, but he didn't. He made us higher than bumble bees or even lions in the forest; he made us human beings with a God-given faculty, a sense of right and wrong, a moral sense.

'Where do you get that out of James 5?' you say! Look at verses 1–6. It is a long denunciation of wicked, unregenerate men, who are called upon now to weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon them. According to verses 2 and 3 they have stockpiled their riches in the selfishness and miserliness of their hearts. It is not merely that they have got a change of clothes for every day of the week and every week of the year, they have so many clothes that they never use them and they are packed away in the wardrobe where they are becoming moth-eaten and mouldy, while many are going half-naked. They have got money so stock-piled that the very gold is going rusty for lack of use. James is not talking about sensible capitalism, he is talking about what in his day was nothing short of oppression

of the poor—racketeering, building up vast fortunes beyond anything that could conceivably be used, let alone needed, while the people who worked for these rich men were scarcely paid a living wage. 'The cries of the workmen who have reaped your field, and have been swindled out of their proper wages, have come up into the ear of the Lord of hosts' (v. 4).

### **Presently the Lord will judge**

So James talks to us about the coming of the Lord (v. 8) and the problem of evil in our world. In this case it is commercial and economic evil, the oppression of the poor. Evil can take all sorts of forms; not just economic evil, but political evil and other kinds too. Our world is cursed with it still, with its lies and its cheating and its double talk at the lowest and at the highest levels of government.

Look at the reference in v. 11 to Job. We know his long story; the anguish of a dear man of God, who tried to live for the Lord and was overcome both by disaster to his house and then to his children. Then he himself was afflicted with torturing *disease* and the problem of *pain*—two major problems in our world. They are not to be laughed at or treated lightly. They are problems for unconverted men and women and they can remain problems even to believers. The very fact we can see that things are wrong shows us that we are moral creatures with a conscience. That's Paul's argument,

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practise the very same things. (Rom 2:1)

Here is Mrs Brown in the supermarket and she has met Mrs Smith.

'Have you heard about Mrs Jones? She has run off with the baker!'

Mrs Smith says, 'She ought not to have done that; it's wrong.'

'But her husband was a brute . . .' says Mrs Brown.

So there they are; the one is accusing and the other is excusing. What does that show? It shows that these dear ladies have a sense of right and wrong, or else they wouldn't start to either accuse or excuse.

We have got a moral sense which tells us not only that other people are wrong, but very often we are wrong ourselves. Some people have tried to get rid of the difficulty. Atheists deny there is a God; they say you don't need a god to account for your moral sense. So, what do you do then?

A colleague of mine in Queen's said to me once, 'You can have a morality without God; it is a matter of a *social contract*. If you put your finger in my eye, I shall reply by putting my finger in your eye and you will learn that it doesn't pay to put your finger in my eye. We shall come to a gentlemen's agreement not to put fingers into other people's eyes and we shall live happily ever after! You don't need God to support all that.'

When it came to question time, like a David before a Goliath, I said, 'My name is Hitler and I am proposing to put my finger in your eye and the eyes of six million others, what do you say to that? There's no good saying that you will put your finger right back into my eye, because you won't! I happen to have all the tanks in the world; for the next three or four years

you won't get near me and I will be putting my finger into all sorts of people's eyes. And then, when you try to come back at me and put your finger in my eye, I shall blow my brains out. There is no God, of course, and nothing to fear, so I shall have got away with six million murders.'

What will the atheist say to a row of people who are going to be gassed? They are pleading with him, 'Why don't you do something? We want justice!' What the atheist will have to say is this, 'I am sorry, but there is no point in your crying out like that. You are not going to get justice, you are going to be gassed and there is nothing that anybody can do about it. You won't get justice in this life and because there is no God you won't get justice in any life to come either. You poor fools; fancy having put your faith in justice!'

If there is no God, this moral sense is, in the end, a mirage. But of course there is a God and there is a judgment. When the ancient Israelites heard there was going to be a judgment they clapped their hands together and asked all the mountains to join in as well. 'Clap your hands, for the Lord is coming to judge' (Ps 98:8-9). Any right-minded person will surely agree with the psalmist—you don't want evil to go on forever, do you? Don't you clap your hands at the very thought that in heaven there is a God of judgment and one day he will arise to judge the world? And don't you rejoice at the fact that evil men, like these terrible industrialists who have trodden on the poor so wickedly, shall be dealt with? Or are you on the side of evil?

We shouldn't always preach the coming judgment as though it were a gloomy thing. We should preach it as a subject over which you should clap your hands for joy. There's going to be 'a day on which he [God] will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed' (Acts 17:31). Why don't we clap our hands? If God came along and cut off the heads of all the unrighteous and left the good, where would our heads be? That is why our gospel is so marvellous. It has the answer to the predicament of human beings with a conscience, a moral judgment—a capacity to understand right and wrong that comes from God himself. We are conscious that not only has the world sinned, but we have sinned too and we have the answer in the gospel, from which we can find forgiveness and peace with God.

But that is not quite the end of the topic. There are two further problems.

### **Why does God allow evil to go on so long?**

That was a difficulty for many of the early Christians. The Israelites believed that if they behaved themselves in Canaan God would bless them abundantly. Good behaviour would be rewarded with lots of honey and milk. As the nation began to grow older they began to notice that things were not quite working out like that. The farmers were alarmed when they noticed that it was not the righteous who were prospering in the world but the ungodly. 'How come, God?' they asked. 'We thought you said that if we kept your commandments we would prosper and the wicked would be dealt with. It is the other way round—the ungodly are prospering.' The answer came back, 'One day, God will send the Messiah and he will judge the world in righteousness.'

Then the Lord Jesus came. The early Christians believed that he was the Messiah and he was the one to deliver Israel forthwith. The evil oppressors were going to be put down, the righteous would flourish and be rewarded for their righteousness. They trusted the Lord Jesus, but the evil oppressors were not put down. Very often, instead of things getting better they got worse and now the believers are being persecuted for Christ's sake. Why? Many dear believers have been in prison, under torture, for many, many years, and they have cried in their cells, 'How long, O Lord?'

Our Lord himself gave a parable to explain it, *The Widow and the Unjust Judge* (Luke 18:3–8). She came asking the judge to put things right and avenge her, and the judge did not. She kept on coming until at length he gave way and avenged her. 'Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?' said the Lord Jesus (v. 7). 'He will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (v. 8). Why not? Well, some believers will have grown weary of the waiting—'How long, O Lord, do you not avenge us?'

Why doesn't God put it right sooner? We can think of all sorts of reasons. James says,

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. (5:7)

Why doesn't he bring judgment at once? '[He] is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish' (2 Pet 3:9). Do you want the Lord to come tonight? If all your relatives are not saved, you might say, 'Not yet, Lord.'

### **We need to learn to do what is right**

But there is another reason. I have to learn to be good before I get home to glory. How will you know whether I am good, or not? Suppose there is a big box here and inside it is a lump of gold. If nobody was around I might be tempted to take it! But suppose I knew that there was a device on the box and if I dared to touch it I would get a lethal dose of electricity and be no more? Well, I wouldn't touch the box! It is not that I wasn't tempted to touch the gold, but I didn't want to commit suicide. Would you say that I must be a very good, godly man because I didn't touch the gold? Of course not! The only thing that kept me from touching the gold was not my goodness, it was fear of punishment.

If God punished everybody as soon as they did a sin, there wouldn't be many people left and it wouldn't make people good. To be good, and to be proved good, you have to be given the chance of doing something wrong and not being punished immediately. That is the test of whether you really are a moral person living in the fear of God. Even if you could steal the gold, get away with it and nobody would ever know, still you would not take it.

There is an extra test. What if you could steal it and become managing director of your firm, because it was gold in the shape of bonds that you had stolen by insider trading? If you refused to do it, you would get kicked out of your job and be on the dole and suffer for being righteous. That would be some test! To suffer for positively doing what is right! That also is



one of the reasons why God leaves us in this wicked world. He gives us the chance to be proved and tested and to be developed into moral men and women.

### **The matter of illness**

James quotes Job, that lovely righteous man, who was 'upright in all his ways.' God had blessed him and he was wealthy, but he used his wealth for the good of the poor. He became ill—what should he do? You say, 'Ask God immediately to heal him.' James himself tells us that if someone gets ill we are allowed to pray and, as it suits his wisdom and good plan, God is prepared to listen to us and heal a brother or sister (vv. 14–15). That is still true, but you could have prayed a long while for Job and nothing would have got better, for Job's story tells us why God allows some illnesses to last so long.

There came a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before God, and God said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job?'

'Yes, I have', said Satan.

'What do you think of him?'

Said Satan, 'You think he is one of your trusted people, full of faith and he loves you. That's just because you have made life easy for him, he has the best of health, beautiful daughters, lovely sons. But you are deceived if you think that is faith. It pays him because you feather his nest. Let me take away his prosperity and touch his health, and you will find out whether he has faith in you or not. He will curse you to your face!'

Does God take notice when Satan talks like that? Yes, he does. God has to justify himself before the intelligentsia of heaven. If he is going to save you on the grounds of faith that you are a genuine believer, then God is concerned about his character. If Satan accuses God and says, 'This is not genuine faith at all', God is prepared to go to tremendous lengths to demonstrate before principalities and powers that his people's faith is genuine faith.

In the early days Job didn't know what was going on and it led to much anguish of heart. 'Why does the Lord let me suffer?' He was serving a greater cause than he knew; his very suffering was clearing God of the charge of favouritism and demonstrating God to be just, because Job's faith was genuine.

It is a marvellous thing when God saves his people from sickness. He is prepared to do it. But it can be a bigger marvel and a bigger triumph when God allows his people to suffer and in their anguish they come through and bless God and refuse to allow any accusation against God or his love. God is vindicated by their unbroken faith and that is a victory that eternity itself will never forget.

May the Lord give us grace and ever deepening understanding and courage in the big battles of life until the blessed redeemer takes us home; until, in these three great parts of our personality, he has brought us to maturity. One day we shall enter his presence with joy and gladness and, upon the sight of him, we shall be like him, clothed in a perfect redeemed body never to feel pain again—a redeemed personality and a redeemed body to the glory of God for ever.