

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 2

JAMES 2:1-13

THE BACKGROUND

As a New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, the Letter of James is practical in applying wisdom to life's various situations. The first chapter introduced the topic of wisdom. Implicit in the exhortation to ask God for this great quality is that wisdom will help us in all matters of life: experiencing trials, perceiving ourselves accurately, receiving and using God's gifts, doing and not merely hearing God's Word, and speaking.

The second chapter of the Book of James continues to apply wisdom as it relates to relationships within the church. In the first century three great barriers divided people: gender, race, and social standing. New Christians might carry into the church these tendencies to divide. Jesus taught that love for neighbor is one of our highest obligations (Matt. 22:39). Paul made clear that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female—that all are one in Him (Gal. 3:28). These teachings are broad principles. James became quite specific and challenged his readers to take stock of how they regarded people who came to worship with them.

The first-century Jewish tendency was to divide the world into Jew and Gentile. Such classification of people represented a great challenge to the early church. The topic deserves careful consideration for it divided Christians. We have seen earlier in this quarter's study how Paul addressed at length the question of whether a Gentile should first adhere to Jewish law before becoming a Christian. (See the lesson for the week of June 14.) This issue, while certainly important in studying the New Testament, is a bit remote to most 21st-century Christians. We simply do not have that same concern today, and most Christians may be surprised to discover the tendency to divide people into the categories of Jew and Gentile was ever an issue.

However, the tendency to divide people according to social standing, and sometimes according to race and gender, has no limit. Where two or three are gathered, the temptation to form two or three factions often exists. As common as this practice is, it does not have a place in the church. James addressed this issue directly and forcefully in a manner that challenges Christians in any century.

1. 20/20 VISION (JAMES 2:1-4)

Real or genuine faith is the subject, and James's initial illustration of real faith in this chapter concerns the tendency we all have to make distinctions among ourselves. James denounced favoritism and cited a clear example of the tendency we all have to judge people by external or superficial matters.

Verse 1: *My brothers, hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without showing favoritism.*

The designation *my brothers* sounds like a preacher about to make another point or application. That description is precisely the case here. James had just described the nature of pure religion (Jas. 1:27), and here he transitioned to a further illustration of the nature of real faith. *Faith*, especially for James, is not a nebulous body of beliefs. Faith is life and action. Genuine faith must be applied daily.

That fact brings us to the main point of this densely packed section of the letter. Faith in Christ and favoritism are completely incompatible. The word *favoritism* is interesting on two counts. First, the actual meaning of the word is "to receive the face." It refers to judging another person's worth by external characteristics.

The second quality of the word highlights the breadth of its application. In the Greek text of James 2:1, the term *favoritism* is plural. Though James provided an example of the contrast between the way wealthy and poor individuals might be treated in the same congregation, his application is far-ranging. Favoritism is not merely a benign and common tendency. It compromises our core mission.

Verse 2: *For suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring, dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in.*

In many ways, this letter reads like a sermon. James provided a concrete illustration of favoritism, and we get the distinct impression he had witnessed this behavior. The contrast is between two men who come to *your meeting*. A wealthy man entered *wearing a gold ring*, a symbol worn by the upper class in Roman society in contrast to the common people. The *fine clothes* were also a mark of wealth and stature. The Bible nowhere condemns wealth or the wearing of fine clothes as an automatic sign of spiritual poverty. What James clearly condemned was the attitude of giving preference to a wealthy individual.

The poor man wore dirty clothes. The Greek word translated *dirty* is closely related to the one translated "moral

filth" (Jas. 1:21). Make no mistake, this poor man might have been genuinely offensive in some ways. He may have been unwashed or sinful. The problem arises in two areas. If we ascribe worth to him based on his appearance, then we have sinned. Second, shouldn't a poor, dirty, and even sinful man find the love of God in a meeting of Christians? Isn't that where he belongs? Isn't his path to purity, in all expressions, found in Christ?

Verse 3: *If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes so that you say, "Sit here in a good place," and yet you say to the poor man, "Stand over there," or, "Sit here on the floor by my footstool,"*

The *you* in this verse might be an usher. If you think about it, the usher is likely the first one to greet people when they enter your church. They make the first impression. This first-century usher looked with favor on the rich man, and we might understand why. Here is someone who is well-connected in the community. He is a potential tither! We can see nothing of the man's heart or motive, but we judge based on appearance. "There it is." He was invited to *sit . . . in a good place*, a sign of privilege.

By contrast, the poor man was asked to either *stand or sit . . . on the floor by my footstool*. While both options are demeaning, when contrasted to the place offered the rich man, the latter is particularly offensive. The floor was typically dirty. The implication is that dirt belongs to dirt. The poor man was not even invited to sit on the footstool but to assume a position by the footstool, a place typically reserved for a defeated enemy.

Verse 4: *haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

James's verdict concerning this kind of conduct is unambiguous and harsh. He also expected his readers to agree with his assessment. The questions in this verse are phrased in a manner that expects a positive response. James was not making a suggestion.

An even harsher assessment of the readers appears in the second phrase. To *become judges* indicates that instead of being a worship service, the meeting of Christians became a trial with judge and jury! James perhaps had in mind Leviticus 19:15 that warns against any partiality because of a man's poverty or wealth. The reference to *evil thoughts* drives home the verdict. This general tendency to appraise is not simply a harmless exercise; it represents a deep and serious spiritual problem.

2. BEWARE THE RICH (JAMES 2:5-7)

In addition to being a spiritual liability, favoring a person based on wealth and appearance goes against common sense. In a twofold manner, James underscored the reasons favoritism dishonors God. First, God has obviously worked through poor people, without preferring them. Second, rich people often used their positions to oppress poor people generally and Christians in particular.

Verse 5: *Listen, my dear brothers: Didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him?*

The phrase *listen, my dear brothers* introduces a further reason favoritism must be rejected. In this phrase we see the balance the New Testament writers maintained. On the one hand, James was clearly provoked by the behavior of prejudiced Christians. Thus we see the force and fervor of his tone. On the other hand, James addressed them tenderly. Whatever their failings, they remained dear brothers. Exhortation is usually best received when it is cloaked in love, compassion, and a genuine concern for the well-being of the audience.

An additional reason favoritism must be rejected may be summed up as follows: it is unreasonable. To illustrate James used questions, each phrased to expect an affirmative answer. The force of his arguments is undeniable.

The first question concerns the fact that God chose the poor. The word *poor* has two meanings. First, it refers to the financially poor. The second meaning comes from a common Old Testament concept of the spiritually poor. These are not people who are lacking in spiritual resources, rather they know they have much to learn. They are teachable. They recognize their need (see Matt. 5:3).

The proof of God's regard for them lies in the fact that God made them *rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom*. God responds positively to faith where He finds it being exercised, thus this promise is *to those who love Him*. The *kingdom* refers to God's ultimate goal. He is in the business of establishing His reign in the world. All things will one day comply with His will and purpose. The spiritually rich poor people are already heirs of this great promise.

James's point is that God prefers poor people, therefore we must not dishonor them. But in what way does God prefer them? Wouldn't His preferring them based on their external circumstances repeat the same error as our preferring wealthy individuals based on their external circumstances?

The difference, of course, is that God can see the heart. The greater principle at work here is that God delights in using apparent weakness to demonstrate His power. Thus, Jesus, in words that James appears to have recalled, said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs" (Matt. 5:3; compare Luke 6:20). Most Christians in the New Testament era were poor. God responds to those who respond to Him regardless of their wealth or lack of wealth.

Verse 6: *Yet you dishonored that poor man. Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?*

James excelled at illustration by contrast and comparison. God's obvious affirmation of poor people is starkly different from that of the Christians who *dishonored that poor man*. The directness of James's speech leaves little doubt but that he had witnessed the very acts he condemned. His argument is quite clear. By showing favoritism, we are at odds with God. By what possible standard could that make sense? The fact that it does not underscores the unreasonableness of continuing in this sin.

Three questions, two in verse 6 and one in verse 7, illustrate how foolish it is to assign value based on external qualities. Again, each question is constructed to expect an affirmative response. The question *don't the rich oppress you* reflects the rigid social strata common in that time, and to a lesser degree today. Wealth and power are first cousins, and those who possess them are often concerned to extend and preserve both, even at the expense of poor people. The prophets often railed against bribes and unfair business practices because these common unethical practices oppressed poor people.

The second question concerns the practice of rich individuals who *drag others into the courts*. A rich person had the advantage in most judicial proceedings because of the ability to influence the judge.

Verse 7: *Don't they blaspheme the noble name that you bear?*

To blaspheme is an offense that is theological rather than social or financial. While there were certainly wealthy first-century Christians, the evidence is that the appeal of the new faith was overwhelmingly to financially poor persons. They became easy targets for wealthy individuals who would mock them, or more specifically mock the Lord to whom they were devoted.

The *noble name* is almost certainly that of Christian, or

follower of Christ. Well-known first-century examples of the targeting of Christians include the persecution by Emperors Nero and Domitian [doh MISH uhn]. Much more common, however, was a pervasive social rejection of Christians because of their refusal to participate in pagan celebrations they had embraced before becoming Christians (see 1 Pet. 4:4).

The phrase *that you bear* deserves brief attention. Literally, the Greek phrase designates calling a name upon someone. It refers to the fact that a name is more than a label. In biblical thought a person's name expressed his character or reputation. It could be also a sign of ownership. God places a name upon us. He claims us as His own.

The fact that God claims poor believers combined with the fact that wealthy individuals abuse poor people in a variety of ways highlight the incongruity of favoring the wealthy based solely on their wealth. James certainly was not condoning being unkind to wealthy individuals, nor was he automatically being suspicious of them. That attitude also would be making a judgment, in this case negative, based solely on external qualities. James's point is that preferring wealthy people simply makes no sense based on their behavior.

3. NO FAVORITES (JAMES 2:8-13)

To this point in chapter 2, James has focused on the negative aspects of the issue of how poor people were being treated in church. In the next section, he turned to a presentation of how Christians can extend love and overcome prejudices. He also included a stark warning that favoritism is, in fact, sin.

Verse 8: *If you really carry out the royal law prescribed in Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well.*

The fact that giving preference to rich people goes against the reality that God delights in using apparent weakness to demonstrate His power (2:5) and additionally makes no sense (2:6-7) leads to a third reason we should avoid favoritism: we keep God's *royal law* by refusing to engage in favoritism. The word *royal* also can be translated "supreme" or "governing," and thus can refer to an overarching principle that reinforces the need to avoid favoritism.

This supreme law is what Jesus described as the second greatest commandment: love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt. 22:39). James has taken us from the mere need to avoid something bad, to the need to embrace something

good. This distinction is important in understanding the basic difference between the life of faith based on law and the life of faith based on grace.

The expression *you are doing well* underscores the need for constancy in showing love. The present tense verb means to maintain an action. Action is key to understanding the Book of James. He was vitally interested in how Christians in the church were conducting themselves. How were they acting? When the specific topic is favoritism, James was clear: avoid it and love other people.

Verse 9: *But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

The reference to the law (2:8) provided James a new angle on the seriousness of favoritism. Failure to show love regardless of a person's standing is not a harmless oversight. It is sin. Giving higher regard to people because they are wealthy, look like us, or have certain external characteristics is committing sin.

As a direct result of our sin, we are *convicted by the law as transgressors*. The law dictates we are not to be partial (Lev. 19:15) and we must love one another (Lev. 19:18). If we engage in favoritism, we are guilty of breaking the law.

Though favoritism is common, it cannot be casually dismissed. To be a transgressor means we are not in conformity with what God wants us to be. We have broken the law and thus come under the law's condemnation. No one wants to stand in this position for reasons James made clear in the next verse.

Verse 10: *For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all.*

This verse emphasizes you cannot pick and choose the laws you wish to obey. Additionally, you cannot minimize the laws you break because you keep other laws. The law must be regarded as a whole, for it is a system by which a person attempts to attain righteousness before God. The problem arises when a person claims to keep the entire law and yet fails in one point. Where does that leave him or her? James is unequivocal. That person is guilty of breaking it all.

Verse 11: *For He who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you are a lawbreaker.*

James's point is quite simple. If you commit murder but do not commit adultery, you are, in fact, a lawbreaker. The law does not care which commandment you broke. Our objection is that we are not murderers or adulterers; we only ne-

glected to treat equally and love a person different from us. That is the very objection James would demand you avoid.

Verse 12: *Speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom.*

The *law of freedom* is another phrase that sounds like Paul (see Gal. 2:4; 5:1,13). The law by itself is inadequate to bring salvation, but Jesus, Paul, and James clearly defended its goodness. The law is not bad. It serves a diagnostic purpose to reveal sin and functions as an ethical guide.

But in what sense will we be judged by this law of freedom? We are still in a judicial setting, but the standard has shifted to grace and away from perfect obedience to every law. In order to stand before God we must be under grace. James's application is clear and encouraging. If we were judged on external performance only, that is, on adherence to the law, then we have no hope. We have all failed at least in one particular element; therefore, we are under the condemnation of the entire law. The standard of grace means that God can forgive and accept us. The implication is that we should apply the same standard of grace to other people.

Verse 13: *For judgment is without mercy to the one who hasn't shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

Our goal as Christians is quite simple, though often hard to apply. We are to treat others in the same manner God treats us. *Mercy* means not giving a deserved punishment. *Grace*, on the other hand, means giving a gift you do not deserve. We deserve condemnation under the law, but God, because of mercy, does not give us what we deserve. Through grace, He grants forgiveness.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 9

JAMES 2:14-26

THE BACKGROUND

James ended the previous section with a warning about judgment, and stated that we will be judged by the law of freedom. Some Christians may be surprised to hear we will be judged in any way. After all, isn't faith all we need? Won't any judgment simply be a verdict about whether or not a person had faith?

This question gave rise to one of the most important paragraphs in the entire letter, and one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented topics in Christianity. Many who read James 2:14-26 rush to the conclusion that James is in direct opposition to Paul in a vitally important point of salvation. Such is not the case at all, as we shall see in detail in the commentary.

The key to understanding this section lies in remembering the background of the early Christians and some of the controversies they were attempting to resolve. Paul's Letters and Acts 15 reveal an early controversy concerning works and faith. The question was basic: "What must I do to be saved?" Paul's answer, and the verdict of the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15, is that faith alone is the means of salvation. Works do not contribute or enable a person to be saved. God gives salvation as a gift through His grace.

This response that salvation is by God's grace through faith created the opportunity for misunderstanding and malicious representation. We often find a reflection of this controversy in Paul's writings where he quoted his opponents' position in such passages as Romans 6:1: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may multiply?" Paul's response to that question is: "Absolutely not!" (Rom. 6:2). Paul's teaching is that we do not receive salvation on the basis of works. The opponents' idea was that because we aren't saved by works, we can do anything we want. Of course, Paul clearly rejected such warped thinking. So did James in the Scripture passage we are about to study. Such thinking indicates a person has missed the whole point of grace.

The real challenge is that Paul and James use the same words, *faith* and *works*, but the two men appear to reach different conclusions. The key to resolving the apparent difference lies in understanding the meaning of each of these words as used by Paul and James and in knowing the nature

of the opponents each man was addressing. For Paul *works* meant a means of salvation. It referred to the works of the law. *Faith* meant belief in and commitment to Christ. Paul's opponents were legalists who were convinced they could earn salvation through their good works.

For James *works* meant the fruit of salvation. *Faith* or belief as James used the term in his letter meant only the mental acceptance of certain facts about Jesus (see Jas. 2:19). James's opponents felt no responsibility to put their faith into action. We must keep these distinctions in mind as we study this important section of James's Letter.

1. AND ... ACTION! (JAMES 2:14-17)

The previous topic of favoritism is still not far from James's thoughts, and he used that topic as an indicator of real faith. His illustration of the futility of separating faith and action focuses on the needs of a poor man or woman.

Verse 14: *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can his faith save him?*

James used a variety of literary techniques in his letter, and one of his favorites was to ask questions and provide the answers. Specifically, this style enabled James to address directly the problems he had witnessed in the church. The two questions with which he opened this section present the problem and highlight the serious consequences of the kind of faith that does not show itself in action.

The term *good* translates a word that also can mean "gain" or "profit." As we will see, the supposed combination of faith with lack of action is meaningless and calls into question the presence of faith. There is no benefit in the kind of religion James was about to describe.

The illustration concerns someone who claims to have faith, but does not have works. It's not hard to imagine the kind of person James was describing. He or she may well have been a church member and almost certainly was. The real problem is that this supposed Christian might have had a distorted view of Paul's faith-and-works theology. Accepting lightly the idea that we are saved by faith, this person may have professed the proper theology but did not give any evidence of it in day-to-day life. That kind of religion is no good and brings no gain or profit to the individual.

The second question brings us directly to the point: *Can his faith save him?* The question is phrased to expect a negative answer. Faith implies belief, trust, commitment, and awe. We must believe the right things. But belief fails to take

us to the muscle of faith, and the muscle involves acting out our faith in clear and positive ways.

James was not denigrating faith. He was certainly not saying that faith, in its complete sense, is inadequate. In the Greek text of this verse, there is a small word that can be translated "that." The point is, that kind of faith, the kind that only believes something mentally but takes no action in love, is, in fact, inadequate. Faith is not deficient, but that kind of faith certainly is.

Verse 15: *If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food,*

The illustration of faith without works concerns a brother or sister. We may understand this reference to mean that the needy person was a fellow Christian, and the Scripture certainly encourages us to give special attention to those who share our faith (see Gal. 6:10). However, we must not limit our help by giving only to other believers. We should not check a person's religious pedigree before we offer assistance. The thrust of this illustration, however, may be that the needy person, as a fellow Christian, is in continual proximity to the individual who claims to be a believer. Neglect to act on behalf of someone so close emphasizes the deficiency of that kind of faith.

Verse 16: *and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it?*

To this naked and starving person, a member of the church James addressed responded with empty, though pious, words. "*Go in peace*" is a traditional biblical blessing but hardly appropriate for a person in the desperate situation described in the previous verse. *Keep warm* is a ridiculous thing to say to a naked person. Also *eat well* means nothing if a person does not have food. This vague encouragement and nebulous blessing is completely useless.

Instead of mere words, the response of real faith is to *give . . . what the body needs*. The verdict is clear. *What good is it?* is the same question with which James began this illustration (2:14). The lack of action results in no benefit or profit. Both the so-called Christian and the needy person are harmed by the lack of the so-called Christian's active faith.

Verse 17: *In the same way faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself.*

This verse, taken alone and out of context, has been the subject of controversy for centuries. When each element of the verse is defined and placed in its context, however, the

controversy dissipates. We must remember James's emphasis here: faith has an element of action in it. Without action, the presence of faith is suspect. Because of their central importance, we should remember the definitions of the terms faith and works as James used them.

Faith in the Book of James indicates belief in or mental acceptance of certain facts about Jesus. We might better translate the term as *belief* here, for this English word can imply a certain disassociation from real life and action.

The statement *it doesn't have works* identifies a necessary element of faith. Remember that, for James, *works* is the evidence of faith, the result of faith, the action of faith. It is what Paul would call the fruit of salvation, or what we were saved to do (see Eph. 2:10).

The point is, faith apart from works, or by itself, is dead. We must not try to diminish the meaning here. Faith apart from the kind of works James was talking about is not merely deficient. It does not rise to the level of living faith at all. James declared faith without works is not saving faith, such as that of one who talks about helping others but takes no steps to meet their needs. If all we do is talk about having faith, we do not have saving faith.

2. USEFUL OR USELESS FAITH? (JAMES 2:18-20)

James anticipated the objections that would follow his words in the previous section. His response was to go to the heart of the problem of inert faith. That kind of faith amounts to intellectual assent alone.

Verse 18: *But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith from my works.*

With the phrase *someone will say* we get the distinct impression that James was not hammering out his theology in isolation. He was in vigorous dialogue with real opponents. He had heard these arguments before and decided to quote his opponents and rebut their positions.

Carefully observe the opponent's statement. In the previous section, James had us consider the incongruity of someone who claimed to have faith but did not act to help a poor person (2:14-17). The opponent there claimed to have faith but had no works. In verse 18 the opponent apparently claimed the opposite: "You have faith, and I have works." The opponent claimed to have works but no faith as opposed to the earlier "someone" who claimed faith but had no works (2:14).

This illustration is vitally important for it shows the incongruity cuts both ways. Faith and works are inextricably linked. You cannot separate them. Absence of one part means the absence of the whole. You can approach the issue from either side: faith and works, or works and faith, but you end up with the same problem.

James's reply is really a challenge. To show someone your faith without works is, in fact, impossible. The opponent would not be able to do so. On the other hand, James would show his faith from his works.

The challenge in this first-century church was twofold. On the one hand were people who sought justification before God by works alone. Paul challenged this legalism and exposed its inadequacy in Galatians and Romans. On the other hand were people who sought justification by merely parroting the words that Jesus is Lord but went no further. James took on this gauzy religion and exposed its inadequacy. We need both emphases without claiming they contradict one another.

Verse 19: *You believe that God is one; you do well. The demons also believe—and they shudder.*

This verse is critical to understanding James's position and definition of faith. He addressed the opponent again but returned to the previous position (in 2:14) of one who claimed to have faith but had no works. Remember in verse 18, James reflected the opposite side of the coin, that of a person who claimed works but no faith. The statement *you believe that God is one* is a direct description of the opponent. The expression *you do well* is James's affirmation that this basic theological proposition is accurate. God is indeed one.

All the opponent has done, however, is put himself in a category with the demons. This situation is full of irony. For all their evil, the demons are well aware there is only one God. At least on this one point their theology is sound! The reference to their shuddering indicates sound theology that lacks a genuine personal relationship with Christ results in neither comfort nor salvation.

Verse 20: *Foolish man! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless?*

James dealt with real opposition from real people. The address may not indicate James had a particular man in mind, but he certainly had heard the argument before, and probably often. The phrase *foolish man* also indicates both the seriousness with which James viewed the error and his growing impatience with this destructive theology.

The question that begins *are you willing* indicates a new angle of argument. James had already assembled some powerful arguments using questions, statements, theology, and illustrations. He next turned to the Old Testament for support that faith without works is useless. James had already indicated that such an arrangement is of no benefit (2:14), and that it is dead (2:17). The word translated *useless* also means "idle" and underscores lack of action. James decried as useless a professed faith that is not demonstrated by actions. If all we do is claim to believe the truth of Scripture, we have a useless faith, not saving faith.

3. COMPLETED OR INCOMPLETE FAITH? (JAMES 2:21-26)

The New Testament writers were well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. They regularly cited texts to support their arguments. This section of James's argument is particularly interesting because he quoted from the same text Paul used to support his theological positions.

Verse 21: *Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?*

James's question, that expects an affirmative response, is clear: *Wasn't Abraham . . . justified by works?* The works involved here specifically was the offering of *Isaac . . . on the altar* (see Gen. 22). The phrase *justified by works* appears unequivocal, and frankly it is. The key to interpreting this verse is to understand the meaning of the verb translated *justified* and specifically how James used it here.

The verb definitely refers to having a right standing before God. However, it can refer to one's conduct as a means of attaining a right standing or as proof of one's right standing. The Jewish reader committed only to the law would interpret the verb in the former sense, and this interpretation would be inadequate. No one can attain salvation through the accumulation of good works. As proof or evidence of right standing, however, good works serve a legitimate and expected function. Thus Abraham's right standing was proved or demonstrated by his conduct.

Did James indicate Abraham achieved salvation through works alone? The answer is obviously no. As will become clear in succeeding verses, James did not present works as opposed to faith. He saw faith and works as complementary.

When it comes to reconciling Paul and James at this point, we must remember their respective audiences. Paul addressed people who declined the need for faith in Jesus

Christ and relied on works alone. James addressed people who claimed the sufficiency of intellectual assent (what he meant by the term *faith*) alone.

We gain further clarity if we substitute the word “fruit” for works. *Works* is a loaded word and with good reason. It conjures up a legalist attempting to earn salvation or to impress God or other people. Fruit, however, fits precisely with James’s intention here and the teaching of Jesus concerning how we are known by our fruit (Matt. 7:17-20; 12:33; 13:23; John 15:1-8). The term *fruit* also reflects Paul’s teaching in Galatians 5:22-23.

Verse 22: *You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was perfected.*

Just as it is possible to distort Paul’s teaching about faith and grace, it is also possible to distort James’s teaching about works. This verse serves as a corrective to any over-enthusiastic interpretation of his theology. He was attempting to show that faith (intellectual assent) alone was useless (Jas. 2:20), and Abraham served as an apt illustration of faith being completed by works. James stated that Abraham’s faith was active together with his works.

The tense of the Greek verb translated *was active together with* is important here as it indicates ongoing force action. Abraham’s faith was continually completed by his continuous works. In this sense faith was perfected. The verb translated *was perfected* also means “fulfilled” or “completed,” hence the title of this section. The idea is that through works faith reaches its intended goal of changing the behavior of the believer to please God. After all, the intended consequence and goal of faith in God is a life that honors Him. That is James’s point.

Verse 23: *So the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness, and he was called God’s friend.*

Paul quoted the same verse (Gen. 15:6) to show Abraham was not justified by works (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6-7). James’s quotation of it also indicates he was not proposing justification by works. The word translated *believed* is the Greek verb closely related to the Greek noun translated “faith.” Through faith Abraham was declared righteous or justified.

Genesis 15:6 obviously comes before Genesis 22 (the offering of Isaac). Abraham was declared righteous prior to any particular work, that is, circumcision (Gen. 17) or the offering of Isaac (Gen. 22). For both Paul and James this order was highly significant, and proof first of all for Paul of justifi-

cation apart from works. For James the order indicates that faith is evidenced by the works later described. Faith is thus fulfilled, proved, or completed by works.

Verse 24: *You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

This verse serves as a summary of James’s main point of this entire discussion and an alert to the readers. The verse also appears to stand in direct contradiction to Romans 3:28 that states “a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.” Once again the key to interpretation lies in the way James and Paul used the terms faith and works, and the context and intent of each letter. Paul directly addressed people who boasted they could be justified by works of the law (Rom. 3:27). James addressed people who were giving no evidence of faith by the way they lived but claimed that faith (intellectual assent) was all that was necessary for justification.

Verse 25: *And in the same way, wasn’t Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by a different route?*

The example of Rahab is a further illustration of the same point James made with Abraham. Her story is recorded in Joshua 2, and the point of the illustration is that her works served as proof of her right standing with God.

Verse 26: *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*

James employed comparison to emphasize the connection between faith and works. The *spirit* is the animating force that makes the body alive. We might imagine a situation where someone would try to claim the body could be alive without the human spirit or without the breathe of life. That situation is preposterous.

In the same way, or *so also, faith without works is dead*. When works are absent, the claim to have faith amounts to profession only. Again, that kind of faith falls far short of the full definition of biblical faith. To ask if faith can be alive without works is like asking if the body can be alive apart from the spirit. The answer is clearly, of course not.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 16

JAMES 3:1-18

THE BACKGROUND

The main thrust of the previous section of this letter is that true religion and real faith manifest themselves in good works. This general theme was specifically applied in the previous lesson by encouraging the believer to look after the physical needs of a poor man or woman (Jas. 2:15-16). In the passage for study in this week's lesson James turned his primary attention to speech. The connection is not hard to make. Real faith is pervasive. One part of our works is our words. Genuine faith, therefore, should change the way we speak. James was well aware of the human tendency to misuse speech. The community of Christians was harmed when members began using hurtful words. We cannot dismiss this vital area of Christian conduct. We need to control our speech as well as other aspects of our behavior.

The importance of the topic of speech is clear from the number of references to it in the letter. James already had raised the issue of the use of the tongue and included it in a kind of summary of Christian conduct along with being quick to hear and slow to anger (1:19). He returned to this theme at various other points in his letter (1:26; 2:12; 4:11; 5:9,12). The problem he addressed was obviously serious but not unusual.

1. AN UNLIKELY LEADER (JAMES 3:3-6)

This section clearly demonstrates James's strong inclination to use illustration and analogy. The idea in the previous verse of controlling the tongue and thus being able to control the entire body evoked images to illustrate how a small item directs a large object.

Verse 3: *Now when we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we also guide the whole animal.*

The first analogy James used to illustrate the destructive power of the tongue is bits in the mouths of horses. The Greek word translated *bits* is closely related to the word translated "control" in the previous verse. In fact, we could translate the phrase in verse 2 "able to bridle his whole body." We are at the beginning of a string of images, where one element of an illustration suggested to James the next illustration.

James was a good preacher. He used an image that would have been familiar to his readers or listeners. The applica-

tion is clear. A bit is small compared with a horse, yet that small instrument directs the huge animal. In the same way, the tongue is a small member of the body that directs the entire body and even our inner beings. As a bit enables a person to guide the whole animal so the tongue sets the course for the whole life of a person.

Verse 4: *And consider ships: though very large and driven by fierce winds, they are guided by a very small rudder whenever the will of the pilot directs.*

Another familiar image for the readers would have been ships. James's audience would have been familiar with fishing vessels on the Sea of Galilee or possibly even larger ships on the neighboring Mediterranean. The way ships traverse the seas is an apt illustration of the power of the tongue.

The ships are driven by fierce winds captured by huge sails. The wind is the source of their movement. But the direction of their movement is determined by something very small: the rudder. Just as the pilot relies on the rudder to guide the ship, so also the tongue directs the course of a person's life.

Verse 5: *So too, though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts great things. Consider how large a forest a small fire ignites.*

James continued the analogy by comparing the size of the tongue as it relates with the size of the rudder. Both are quite small when contrasted to the size of the objects they direct. The fact that the tongue boasts great things illustrates the potential of the tongue to cause trouble for the speaker. A small fire can destroy a large forest. Forests are rare in Israel, but the scrub of that area can ignite easily during the dry periods of the year and fire can spread quickly.

Verse 6: *And the tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among the parts of our bodies; it pollutes the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is set on fire by hell.*

The burning forest suggested the image of the tongue as a fire, focusing again on the tongue's destructive potential. The emphasis of the phrase *a world of unrighteousness*, is on the extent to which the tongue can corrupt. God gave us the gift of speech knowing that it can be used for great good or great evil. James had witnessed much of the latter and so focused on it.

The work of the tongue has two negative results in this verse. First, it pollutes the whole body. Actions without question are important in determining the value and impact of a

life. We cannot, however, ignore the force of words. Careless and critical speech can belie even the kindest acts. We are responsible for our speech, its effects, and its impact on others. We cannot excuse unkind words by pointing out good things we have done. Destructive speech calls into question the motive behind the good works.

Second, the tongue sets the course of life on fire. What we say determines the trajectory of our lives. The phrase *the course of life* also means "the wheel of birth or existence" and was used to describe the entire cycle of human life.

The Greek word translated *hell* is written in English as *geenna*. In biblical times the valley south of Jerusalem was called the valley of Hinnom or Gehenna [gih HEN uh]. The history of that valley is quite sordid. Child sacrifice to pagan gods was practiced there. In James's time, it served as a dump, and fires continuously burned in the valley to consume the refuse. The area became a fitting picture of what hell itself is like and thus for James an illustration of the destructive and foul potential of the tongue.

2. SPEAK CONSISTENTLY (JAMES 3:7-12)

James continued to illustrate the evil potential of the tongue using analogy and example. He shifted from highlighting the small size of the tongue to emphasizing the great difficulty we have in controlling this small part of our bodies.

Verse 7: *For every creature—animal or bird, reptile or fish—is tamed and has been tamed by man,*

When James first began this lengthy discussion of the power and problems of speech, he mentioned that a mature man is able to control his whole body (Jas. 3:2).

The shift to considering control of the tongue begins with a consideration of man's ability to tame wild creatures. This truth is quite amazing and on display for us regularly in zoos and circuses where animals perform wondrous feats. This situation reflects the divine order. God created human beings as the apex of all creation.

Verse 8: *but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

We are presented here with the apparently impossible task of controlling the tongue. James sounds unequivocal: no man can tame the tongue. Christians in the church were biting and tearing at one another. No doubt, he had addressed this problem many times. We must not imagine, however, that James was throwing up his hands in defeat. We must not cease to struggle.

Two further illustrations highlight the destructiveness of the tongue. The phrase *a restless evil* is particularly important. The word translated *restless* is the same word used in 1:8 to describe an unstable man. The emphasis is on the inconsistency and instability of the tongue. Just as an indecisive person will be tossed around by life, so also the tongue can produce a tremendous amount of volatility.

James's mention of the "reptile" in verse 7 may have led him to describe the tongue as full of deadly poison. Words can cause wounds that never heal. Verse 8 declares the difficulty, but not the impossibility, of controlling one's speech.

Verse 9: *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who are made in God's likeness.*

The instability, or restlessness, of the tongue is illustrated by its potential to bless our Lord and Father and also curse men. For the Hebrew or Jewish people, speech had an inherent power. A spoken word was like a unit of energy. Something happened when words were spoken. Observe that God created the universe by speaking. We see this reverence for words in the ancient traditions of blessing. The blessing was real. It set a course for life. A curse was also a real impediment because of the power of words. Whether or not we acknowledge the fact, words retain power.

Verse 10: *Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things should not be this way.*

The phrase *out of the same mouth* recalls Jesus' teaching (Matt. 15:11,17-20). He traced a person's cleanliness in God's sight to what came out of the person's mouth, not to the foods that entered it. James's verdict regarding blessings and curses coming from the same mouth is clear: these things should not be this way. These words emphasize our responsibility to continue the struggle to tame the tongue.

Verses 11-12: *Does a spring pour out sweet and bitter water from the same opening? Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a saltwater spring yield fresh water.*

James enjoyed painting word pictures, and with rhetorical questions he brought to a close this section. Spring water could be either suitable or unsuitable for drinking. However, no spring produced fresh water one day and bitter or salty water the next. The absurdity of unstable speech becomes even clearer with the next illustration. A fig tree is expected to produce figs, not olives. Neither can a grapevine produce figs.

Every object produced what was in its nature to produce.

When we become Christians, God changes our nature (see 2 Cor. 5:17). Thus the exhortation to pure speech is not just a mild suggestion, it is a mandate to be what God created us to be in this particular area.

3. REAL WISDOM (JAMES 3:13-18)

The overarching theme of this letter is wisdom, and to that theme James specifically returned in this section. All our behavior must be governed by wisdom. Wisdom helps us control the problem areas we have in life.

Verse 13: *Who is wise and understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness.*

Anyone who thinks he or she is wise is to submit to a crucial test of action, motive, and intent. The proof of real wisdom is in works, not a surprising measuring stick for James to use. *Works* for James are always the proof of what is truly inside. The specific works he had in mind began with good conduct. Again this thought is in keeping with James's theme in his letter, but here it is especially important. Some who claim to have wisdom do not conduct themselves in ways that help the church. Their conduct contradicts their claim.

Actually the claim to possess wisdom, or to put oneself forward as a wise leader, is in itself problematic, for wisdom is not self-aware. This fact is clear from the further qualification that one's conduct should be couched with wisdom's gentleness. The last word in this phrase can be translated "humility" and is a quality commended by Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:5). Boasting of wisdom is a sign of pride and thus proof of the absence of wisdom.

Verse 14: *But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and lie in defiance of the truth.*

Both of the qualities described here are completely contrary to the humility described in the previous verse. The phrase *bitter envy* describes an attitude that is self-oriented and specifically desires something that belongs to another. The term *bitter* is particularly apt here for it highlights the way this selfishness embitters the person displaying it.

The term rendered *selfish ambition* identifies a self-centered and even unscrupulous attempt at self-promotion. In the present example, the so-called wise attempt to gain a hearing and influence by putting themselves forward as wise. They draw attention not to the goodness of God, but to themselves.

Verse 15: *Such wisdom does not come down from above,*

but is earthly, sensual, demonic.

James provided a threefold description of this kind of "wisdom." *Earthly* is the opposite of *from above* and focuses on self-promotion. The same can be said of *sensual*. The key is the focus on self instead of on God. This kind of behavior is essentially demonic for all of Satan's minions try to take the focus off God by making us think of ourselves first. When we start down that road, we pick up speed and may end up trying to rationalize the most flagrant selfishness.

Verse 16: *For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil.*

Envy and selfish ambition result in disorder. *Disorder* refers to the instability that results from selfish ambitions (see Jas. 1:8). It is the opposite of the unity Christ prayed we would have (John 17) and for which many New Testament writers pleaded. This disorder serves as the gateway for every kind of evil.

Verse 17: *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy.*

This verse is one of the most beautiful in the New Testament for it describes precisely the nature of the wisdom we are to pursue. Remember James opened his letter with an invitation for us to pray for wisdom (1:5). This verse reveals the beauty and allure of what God wants to give us. As opposed to the wisdom that is earthly, sensual, and demonic we are to seek the wisdom from above. Its Source is God Himself. Eight qualities characterize such wisdom.

First, it is pure. This term refers to genuine moral and spiritual integrity. Such wisdom also is peace-loving, the antithesis of the disorder that results from selfish ambition. The third quality is gentle. This term reflects a willingness to defer to others instead of claiming one's own rights and privileges. The fourth characteristic, *compliant*, means "easily persuaded," but it does not indicate a lack of conviction. It is the willingness to see another's point of view with the goal of finding a common ground that moves us closer to God. The phrase *full of mercy* identifies a quality commended by Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:7) and demonstrated by His life and ministry. Mercy does not mean that we lack discernment but that we do not make condemnation our default setting. We look for ways to redeem through love and forgiveness. The sixth characteristic full of . . . good fruits reminds us of Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). For James it is most likely also a concrete call to engage in

fruitful action. The wisdom from above is not just an attitude of mind but also a way of living and acting daily. The phrase *without favoritism* refers to being impartial. The final characteristic *without . . . hypocrisy* refers to a seamless connection between motive and action. We engage in good works as a way to bring others to God and as an end in themselves. Self disappears into the background.

Verse 18: *And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

Our goal is to produce the fruit of righteousness. We reach this goal by demonstrating the self-effacing qualities of the wisdom described in verse 17. If we use wisdom from God to control our behavior, it will be what He wants and will promote good relationships with others.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 23

JAMES 4:1-17

THE BACKGROUND

Wisdom is practical. James covered several topics that were crucial to the life of the church. The third chapter contains an extensive treatment of the dangers of speech and exhortations to watch our words carefully. James ended that chapter with a beautiful description of wisdom and encouraged readers to embrace that wisdom as the way to develop peace in the community of faith.

Chapter 4 is a collection of exhortations, all grounded in the theme of demonstrating wisdom. They are highly practical instructions and imperatives concerning what we should embrace and what we should discard. Envy and selfish ambition (3:16) are not only signs of earthly wisdom but also the cause of much dissension in the church. James turned his attention to that dissension in chapter 4. Getting rid of these problems by addressing them forcefully was clearly his intent.

Chapter 4 thematically is held together by the continuing contrast between an agenda that focuses on self and the agenda that places God first. The contrast could not be starker. The first agenda is the source of all manner of evil. The second agenda produces the peace for which all churches yearn.

1. THE TRUTH ABOUT ARGUING (JAMES 4:1-5)

Worldly behavior is incompatible with Christian commitment. James's aggressive tone in this passage highlights the need for a complete separation from certain behaviors and attitudes. Accommodation is not an option.

Verse 1: *What is the source of the wars and the fights among you? Don't they come from the cravings that are at war within you?*

Jesus, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, emphasized the inner condition of a person's heart as antecedent to actions. James reflected that same emphasis here and elsewhere in his letter. The question *what is the source* invites the readers to look within and discern the motivation behind the problems they face in the church.

What is the exact nature of *wars and fights*? Some interpreters interpret these words as a reference to physical violence and connect this violence to the presence of converted

Zealots in the congregation. However, believing that the congregation was facing a problem with physical violence, and that James waited until this point to address that problem, is unlikely. Controlling anger, acting without partiality, and guarding speech are all important topics, but it's not likely James would have addressed those first and then essentially said, "Oh yes, now about the problem of assaulting one another after worship . . ."

James was probably using these words in a figurative way to describe the animosity present in the congregation. Again drawing on the Sermon on the Mount, James may have recalled Jesus' teaching that hatred and contemptuous name-calling are spiritually tantamount to murder (Matt. 5:21-22).

Another possible interpretation is that James envisioned two applications: the church and the world at large. The most common motive for war is a desire to gain power or to possess the lands and resources of a neighboring country. This insistence on rights and influence is precisely the same motive we find among church members who wrangle with one another over relatively small matters. In the final analysis, James probably had in mind here the church and used vivid language to describe the destructive nature of the members' ongoing disputes. However, his words also describe accurately the motives for disputes on a wider and more destructive scale. In any case, James was not describing petty differences but substantial and chronic conflict among Christians.

The underlying motive for any self-promoting individual or nation is the same. In James's words it is the cravings. From the Greek word translated *cravings* we derive the English word *hedonism*. The focus on personal pleasures and agendas makes the individual or country view itself as the ultimate judge or authority. A Christian, however, is called to account to a higher Authority and refuse to be subject to egotistical whims that lead to congregational upheaval.

Verse 2: *You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. You do not have because you do not ask.*

James already had referred to the treacherous but enticing sin of envy (3:14,16), and here he described in graphic detail the disastrous results of unmet desire. The word translated *desire* is intense and also can mean "to lust." It describes the out-of-control self that lunges for things it does not have.

Murder and covet are the next expressions of unchecked desires. Again, *murder* is figurative when applied to the

church but certainly applicable when applied to a larger worldly setting. The English word *zeal* is derived from the Greek word rendered *covet*. Zeal can be either good or bad depending on the object. Here it is obviously evil. The frustration arises from the fact that a person cannot obtain. Instead of muting and turning away from the covetousness that led to the problem, the problem festers and the dispute escalates.

The next sentence includes two words we have already seen: fight and war. Again, such extreme means do not lead to a satisfactory end, for still they do not have.

James, with vivid language, was trying to alert his readers to the fact that their rancor was not accomplishing anything positive. He added here the reason: you do not ask. Quite simply, they left God out of the equation. Insisting on their own ways and trusting in their own evaluations, they intensified the problems within the church.

Verse 3: *You ask and don't receive because you ask wrongly, so that you may spend it on your desires for pleasure.*

The phrase *you ask* continues the theme at the end of the previous verse. In this case, Christians did ask but still did not receive. Asking is no guarantee of being in God's will. Many times we pray God will bless and guide and bring to fruition our bad plans. We get a false confidence from saying "we prayed about it" and then move forward without really being open to the fact that God may have an alternative plan. All we wanted was His sanction of our desires, not His will.

We get to the heart of the problem with the words *you ask wrongly*. The motive is amiss. Prayers uttered selfishly and without an openness to God's will are nothing more than exercises in self-promotion. God knows our sole desire with some of our requests is to spend it on our desires for pleasure. Selfishness in prayer moves us away from God's perfect will and into the realm of our will. In essence our prayer may be, "Not Thy will be done, but mine."

Verse 4: *Adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy.*

Why the label *adulteresses*? After the warm addresses of "my dearly loved brothers" (Jas. 1:16,19; see also 2:5) why is James's language so harsh here? The reason becomes clear in understanding the meaning of *friendship* in the Hellenistic [HEL uh NISS tik] or Greek world of the first century. This word meant far more than acquaintance as it is often used today. Friendship involved a close bond between two

people. A friend was a part of one's life and the allegiance to friends was one of the highest commitments.

Friendship with the world, therefore, meant pushing God aside to the extent that it resulted in hostility toward God. The word rendered *hostility* also can be translated "hatred." James anticipated resistance to his message in this verse and so repeated the statement. If you become the world's friend, you are God's enemy. The Greek word translated *enemy* is closely related to the term rendered *hostility* in the first part of the verse.

Verse 5: *Or do you think it's without reason the Scripture says that the Spirit He has caused to live in us yearns jealously?*

The reason for James's reference to adulteresses in the previous verse becomes clear in this verse. This verse is not easy to translate. Some versions make the focus human longing and jealousy. In that case the meaning is that our spirits are corrupted and engage in the destructive envy that is so much a part of the context.

The Holman CSB represents a better interpretation. Upon our accepting Christ God caused His Spirit . . . to live in us. This Spirit is the Holy Spirit, of course. God's Spirit within us desires our total and unreserved dedication to Him because that way of life is what is best for us. Thus He yearns jealously.

The Spirit works in accord with the Father's insistence on having no rivals in our lives. Thus the Spirit seeks to guide us toward being friends with God and away from being friends with the world. James denounced worldly behavior by Christians, noting that such behavior indicated they were friends with the world rather than with God.

2. FIGHT STRATEGY (JAMES 4:6-10)

In this section James outlined more specifically what actually constitutes friendship with God. God's grace enables all the actions delineated here. The specific expressions are drawing near to God and submitting to Him, resisting Satan, and repenting of sinful attitudes and actions.

Verse 6: *But He gives greater grace. Therefore He says: God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*

The Old Testament quotation in this verse comes from the Proverbs 3:34 and highlights the connection between selfishness and the proud. The focus on self is an expression of self-assertion and trust in one's own abilities. It is the antithesis of relying on God's grace. God resists proud people

precisely because they are not open to receiving from Him. God will not give what we refuse to receive.

Thankfully *He gives grace to the humble*. This phrase depicts a hard-to-trust truth. We want to retain control and so live with the fiction we are capable of directing our lives. However, no one really desires the ultimate destination of a self-directed life! James already has made clear that selfish desires and the related quality of pride is the source of much of the friction we experience in life. We are often unhappy because we have made ourselves so by our selfishness.

Verse 7: *Therefore, submit to God. But resist the Devil, and he will flee from you.*

The diagnosis is clear, so James began this verse with a *therefore* that marks clearly the cure we need. Our task is to submit to God. The Greek word rendered *submit* means "to place oneself under the authority" of God. It signifies the opposite of another Greek word from the same root often translated "resists" but that literally means "to place oneself against." This comparison is instructive. As long as we resist the order for which God has created us, we cannot expect to experience joy in life. But when we *submit* to Him and subdue our pride and willfulness, then we discover the kind of life we really sought all along. Resistance to God is linked to pride. Submission is linked to humility, a neglected Christian virtue.

The positive embrace of God's will for us also means the rejection of evil. The command *resist the Devil* means literally "to stand against" the Devil. This military image of standing one's ground against Satan's attacks is the opposite of the accommodation envisioned earlier when we make friends with the world. The form of the verb implies urgency, a once-for-all commitment not to tolerate Satan's influence in our lives (in fact the Greek form of all the commands in verses 7-10 underscore a definite point of commitment to take action). We have to admit the ongoing nature of this repentance, but make no mistake that a changed life always begins with a decisive turning away from evil. That reality is the emphasis of verse 7.

The statement *he will flee from you* is a mighty promise. God gives us what we need to resist temptation (1 Cor. 10:13). We can trust that in using the resources He makes available we can win these battles. Satan always looks for ways to bend our will to his, and he does so by making sin alluring. But he cannot force us! By God's grace we have resources to resist.

Verse 8: *Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, double-minded people!*

The verb translated *draw near* was used in a worship setting to describe drawing near to the Lord, and James may in part have been indicating the importance of faithfully attending corporate services of worship. The emphasis, however, is probably more general and underscores the necessity of complementing turning away from sin with turning to God. If we do not draw near to God and fill our lives with Him in addition to having our lives void of evil, then we risk being like the man in the parable whose life was swept, put in order, but empty (Matt. 12:43-45).

The great comfort we find here is that our turning to God will be met by His great desire to draw near to us. God needs nothing, but the Scripture is clear that He deeply desires a relationship with His children.

James returned to the nature of repentance with a two-fold imperative to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. James highlighted both the means of our action (hands) and the motive for our action (hearts). Right action without the right motivation is the dangerous deception of the Pharisees. Right motive that doesn't lead to right action is the focus of James's Letter and casts doubt on whether real faith was ever actually present. Both must be clean and pure.

Two designations apply to those who need these actions: *sinners* and *double-minded people*. The first term needs no clarification, and the second we have seen previously in James 1:8, where it is translated "indecisive." There James identified the indecisive individual, or the one who lacks faith, as unstable. The term also fits the present context as it applies to a person who tries to be friends with the world and with God at the same time.

Verse 9: *Be miserable and mourn and weep. Your laughter must change to mourning and your joy to sorrow.*

This verse is aimed at sinfully proud individuals whose laughter and joy fail to take seriously the presence and effects of sin. Both these expressions are empty and may be compared to a celebration after receiving a diagnosis of a terminal illness. It would be inappropriate. Real sin calls for real sorrow. Seldom do we really take a close look at the sinfulness of our lives and try to imagine the contrast of that darkness with God's holy brilliance. This exercise is healthy, however, for it reminds us of why the cross was necessary. At that point we should be miserable and mourn and weep.

These responses were common calls by the prophets who tried to awaken the indolent people of Israel to a genuine sense of their sins.

Verse 10: *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.*

This verse serves as a kind of closing parenthesis with the opening parenthesis being in verse 6. The admonition to *humble* ourselves means to get rid of all vestiges of self-centeredness and allow God to reign supremely in our hearts. The promise is paradoxical for God will exalt us. Jesus taught this paradox (Luke 18:14). On the basis of God's grace, James called Christians to submit and draw near to God through repentance and humility.

3. WHO'S THE BOSS? (JAMES 4:11-12)

These two verses highlight a necessary and often overlooked problem in churches: critical speech. James was unequivocal in condemning such speech and emphasizing that God alone is qualified to do it. We are not to play God. When judging is needed, we are to leave that task to the Lord.

Verse 11: *Don't criticize one another, brothers. He who criticizes a brother or judges his brother criticizes the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.*

James opened this section with specific expressions of the repentance envisioned previously. The command *don't criticize one another* means literally "do not speak against one another." The word *criticize* refers to slander and the sharing of damaging information in an effort to hurt another person. The chaotic and backbiting situation described in James 3:14-4:3 may have had this specific problem at its core.

James certainly was not prohibiting the legitimate need to address immoral behavior. The church has a responsibility to maintain high standards and address problems some people present. What is unacceptable is complaining about and criticizing others. Of course, the critic will almost always frame his criticism as accurate and in the church's best interest, but if that is not honestly the case, if the person is inaccurate or embellishes the information, then he or she has crossed a line that brings him or her under condemnation.

The addition of the verb *judges* adds a new and clarifying dimension to the prohibition. To judge implies standing above and condemning, and in judging another person, a person criticizes the law and judges the law. What does this phrase mean? The law commands us not to slander one an-

other (Lev. 19:16). Additionally we are commanded to love one another (Lev. 19:18b). If we refuse to love but rather engage in slander and judging, we are in effect putting ourselves above the law and denying its authority over us.

James's final condemnation of the slanderer is that such a person is not a doer of the law. Action is a key to James's theology. Refusal to demonstrate love for one another indicates a spiritual problem.

Verse 12: *There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*

God is both lawgiver and judge. If we engage in criticism and slander, we are trying to usurp God's role. James rebuked believers for assuming God's right of judging other people. Being friends of God involves recognizing He alone is Judge and eliminating from our lives all judgmental criticism of others.

4. GIVE GOD CREDIT (JAMES 4:13-17)

The danger of selfish ambition is never far from James's thoughts in the latter part of his letter, and here the focus is on presumptuous planning that leaves God out. Unchecked ego, especially when connected with wealth, leaves no room for Providence. We are to involve God in all areas of our lives because we desperately need His guidance.

Verses 13-14: *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit." You don't even know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are a bit of smoke that appears for a little while, then vanishes.*

On the surface there appears no problem with a merchant making a plan to travel and make a profit. However, the statement *you don't even know what tomorrow will bring* reveals a problem exists. The problem is that our knowledge is limited and therefore also our ability to discern the right path. The poetic statement *you are a bit of smoke that appears for a little while, then vanishes* illustrates the fragility of life.

Verse 15: *Instead, you should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."*

Again, James did not condemn planning itself. The word instead introduces an alternative that involves God in the planning. The phrase *if the Lord wills* reflects prayerful consideration and the acknowledgment that His providence trumps our plans.

Verse 16: *But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*

James was unsparing in his condemnation of the presumptuous life. Planning that leaves God out is nothing more than a boast, and such boasting is never positive. The problem goes even deeper, however, than a simple boasting of a plan. The addition of arrogance introduces a new facet. The fact that the merchants neglected to seek God's guidance is a problem, but apparently their neglect was arrogant self-sufficiency that did not simply forget but never really took seriously the need for God's guidance in the first place. This type of thinking is common in business persons who intentionally separate their business dealings from their Christian claims because they are convinced Christian ethics simply don't work in the business setting. The verdict is clear: all such boasting is evil.

Verse 17: *So, for the person who knows to do good and doesn't do it, it is a sin.*

This verse suggests the topic of sins of omission in addition to sins of commission. The application can and should be broad. James was a good preacher, and here he essentially said, "I have told you what you should do. Now do it!" Failure to do good after such a warning is a sin.

James complained about people who made business plans without giving any consideration to God's will, pointing to the arrogance of such planning. Being friends of God involves seeking His will before we make decisions or plans and eliminating attitudes and actions related to arrogance.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 30

JAMES 5:1-20

THE BACKGROUND

This chapter opens with the continuation of a theme that stretches back to James 3:14. Selfish ambition has many expressions, and James surveyed some of the problems it creates and the solution godly wisdom brings. Chapter 4 closed with a warning to merchants about making self-centered plans that leave God out. Chapter 5 opens with a more general warning to rich people who may have a tendency to trust in their wealth rather than trust in God.

The remainder of the letter is a collection of exhortations in a format common to James. The theme that binds them together is that they provide Christians with a reason to have confidence—confidence concerning judgment, confidence about the future, confidence in our speech, and confidence about prayer.

1. REDEFINING RICH (JAMES 5:1-6)

This section focuses on wicked rich people and is a warning that their evil and abuse of power will be punished. This section also serves as a warning to Christians who can be tempted to trust in their riches and neglect to live righteously.

Verse 1: *Come now, you rich people! Weep and wail over the miseries that are coming on you.*

The phrase *come now* (as in 4:13) is a call to attention. It is directed to rich people, who are not specifically identified in this verse as either Christian or non-Christian. As the paragraph develops, however, it seems most likely James was addressing wealthy non-Christians who were oppressing believers. The warning does broaden an address to merchants that James began in the previous chapter and underscores the particular hazards that can come with wealth.

James declared a time was coming when unscrupulous rich people would face the consequences of their evil at God's judgment. Eternal punishment is most likely envisioned by James in this verse, rather than some temporal judgment that wicked rich people might face in their lifetimes. While James could not say that an unfair economic situation would be reversed in his lifetime, he knew that God would make all things right in the end, and that His condemnation of the wicked rich would result in their experiencing

miseries or calamities.

James outlined three reasons for the coming misery of wicked rich individuals. First, their riches are temporary (5:2-3). What they thought was so valuable will be ruined, moth-eaten, and corroded.

Verse 4: *Look! The pay that you withheld from the workers who reaped your fields cries out, and the outcry of the harvesters has reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts.*

The exclamation *look* is a call to observe the evidence of the corruption of the wealthy, wicked landowners. It is like a prosecutor holding up a damning exhibit in a criminal trial. The evidence, and the second reason the unscrupulous rich will weep and wail, is the pay that they withheld from the workers. These poor workers tilled and kept the land for the wealthy landowner. In any era such people are economically vulnerable, especially to a predatory owner.

In this case it is the pay itself that cries out (recalling the blood of Abel that cried out from the land, Gen. 4:10) and the outcry of the harvesters that God has heard. Part of the wealth of the wicked rich landowners belonged to the poor farmer. The law taught specifically that wages were to be paid on the day of work, not even waiting overnight (Lev. 19:13). More to the point, the law taught that an owner must be careful not to oppress a hired hand and that if the owner did, the worker would cry out to the Lord and the owner would be held guilty (Deut. 24:14-15).

Verse 5: *You have lived luxuriously on the land and have indulged yourselves. You have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.*

The third condemnation of the wicked rich people arises from the conditions under which they have lived for many years at the expense of poor people. The rich have lived luxuriously and indulged themselves. They have indulged themselves to the detriment of the poor people who worked their lands. We can see the expression of selfish ambition that is a theme of James in this section of the letter. The rich landowners looked out only for themselves.

Their condemnation is made even more certain by the fact that they had fattened their hearts. The word *fattened* calls to mind the image of animals being prepared for slaughter, and ironically wealthy individuals, who abused the poor workers who tended their animals, were headed for the same fate as the animals they owned.

Verse 6: *You have condemned—you have murdered—the righteous man; he does not resist you.*

The charges stated in this verse are particularly damning. The phrase *you have condemned* probably refers to the manner in which wicked rich individuals looked down on poor people. The condemnation *you have murdered* could be literal but more likely refers to the starvation poor people faced because of mistreatment by wealthy individuals.

2. GIVE ME PATIENCE, NOW! (JAMES 5:7-11)

This passage focuses again specifically on the conduct of Christians. We are to be patient as we anticipate the Lord's return. We can be confident of the certainty of His coming.

Verse 7: *Therefore, brothers, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.*

The introductory word *therefore* highlights a resulting behavior from a previous assertion. The certainty of judgment for wicked rich people should result in the brothers being patient. The Greek word translated *patient*, appearing three times in verses 7-8, typically refers to patience with people as opposed to patience with circumstances. The context of verses 7-8, however, seems to call for endurance and not just patience with people. The emphasis here is on endurance.

The example James used draws on the agricultural background of the time. The early and the late rains describe the two seasonal rains that were an essential part of the climatic conditions of biblical Palestine. The early rains fell in October and November and the late rains came in February and March. The farmer's waiting for these rains demonstrated his patience or endurance. He had to depend on God's reliability in the meteorological realm to supply what his crops needed.

Verse 8: *You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near.*

James repeated his exhortation because he knew how hard it would be for us to remain patient. Again, the reason for our hope is because of the second coming, or specifically because the Lord's coming is near. The fact that this text was written nearly two thousand years ago can become an occasion for us to wonder if He will ever come back. All the New Testament writers appear to have had an active expectation that Jesus would return during their lifetimes. That urgent sense of expectation is still essential for believers today to possess for it gives energy to our mission. We must balance eager expectation of the Lord's coming with patient, faithful

service to Him.

Verse 9: *Brothers, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door!*

The critical issue of speech was never far from James's thoughts and his return to this theme here seems a little surprising. What is the connection? The simple answer is judgment. James's focus in the previous verses on the return of Jesus led him to highlight yet another potential judgment.

The Greek verb translated *complain* literally means "to groan," "to grumble," or "to sigh." The Christian, who might try to excuse his criticism of another person as true and in the best interest of the church, cannot escape the net of this verse. All complaining is negative and only serves to poison the atmosphere of the church. The reason for silence is that to do otherwise is to ensure you will be judged.

Verse 9 does not mean Christians will fall under the same judgment as the wicked (Jas. 5:1-7). Instead as far as our eternal security is concerned, we will be judged on the basis of our relationship with Jesus Christ, and the wicked will be judged on the basis of their lack of relationship with Jesus Christ.

Verse 10: *Brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience.*

The prophets serve as an example for us to follow. The writer of Hebrews reported that some faithful men were sawed in two (Heb. 11:37), and tradition holds that Isaiah was one of those who suffered death in this manner. Jeremiah also comes to mind for his suffering at the hands of leaders and his own people. The prophets combined suffering with patience. Again, the emphasis in the word translated patience is clearly on endurance.

Verse 11: *See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome from the Lord: the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.*

Jesus taught that those who are persecuted for His sake will be blessed (Matt. 5:10-12). In that passage Jesus also cited the example of the prophets, though He did not mention them by name. The key to the blessing, however, is that they endured. Here James employed the Greek word more commonly used to denote patience with things and circumstances.

Job's example of endurance is particularly important in this context. He struggled and even questioned his situa-

tion. He was like many Christians who wonder about God's timing and purpose. James called for Christians to be patient as they await Jesus' return, exhorting them to endure on the basis of God's nature.

3. THE POWER OF PRAYER (JAMES 5:13-20)

Verse 13: *Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises.*

This closing section—James 5:13-20—highlights the need for prayer in all circumstances. Three questions in verses 13 and 14 describe three circumstances that call for prayer. The first occasion for prayer is suffering. Many times in the Scripture we find stories of God's people engaging in prayer when faced with grave difficulties. No example is more important than the scenes of Jesus' prayers. He prayed when He was tired from ministering to the needs of the crowd (Mark 1:35), when He was concerned about the welfare of His disciples (John 17:6-19), and when He was about to face the horrendous suffering of the cross (Luke 22:39-42). The fact that Jesus prayed is, in fact, the most persuasive reason we should pray. If the Son of God needed and used this resource, how can we hope to experience victory without it?

James is quite clear that any form of suffering should lead us to pray. Even when the agent of suffering is not removed, we benefit. Paul's thorn remained after his petitioning the Lord three times to remove it, but the apostle gained the insight that God's grace was sufficient for him and more important than a thorn-free life (2 Cor. 12:9).

Suffering sometimes becomes the only time we pray, but that is not appropriate either. The second call to prayer applies to those who are cheerful. Prayers of praise are sprinkled throughout the New Testament as writers paused to honor God for His remarkable goodness. We do not want to have a "foxhole prayer life" where we only speak to God when we are in trouble. Praise prayers acknowledge God in all chapters of our lives and help us to become more aware of His daily blessings.

Verse 14: *Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they should pray over him after anointing him with olive oil in the name of the Lord.*

The third specific occasion for prayer is when one is sick. In this specific occasion the sick person should call for the elders of the church, the spiritually mature leaders, to pray over the sick member. Prayer was to accompany, and actually come after, an anointing . . . with olive oil. This practice

served one or both of two purposes. First, oil was one of the main medicinal treatments in the first century. Taken this way, we would say to a sick person today to go and see a doctor in addition to soliciting prayers, and this admonition would be entirely appropriate. A second purpose was certainly more religious. Oil was often used in ceremonial anointing as a symbol of blessing.

Verse 15: *The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*

James was quite certain of the effectiveness of prayer, and we should not seek to mute the power of his words here. *The prayer of faith will save* is an affirmation of God's desire to heal and raise him up, and also a reflection of what James had witnessed in his life with Jesus during His earthly ministry. We should make our prayers for the sick in this confident spirit.

One further detail of this verse deserves attention. The connection of sins and sickness is not uncommon in the New Testament. Jesus even healed by pronouncing the forgiveness of sins, much to the dismay of His opponents (Matt. 9:2-3). We must not make the mistake of connecting all sickness to personal and individual sins. Some diseases we contract simply because we live in a sin-stained world in which accidents, illness, and death are a manifestation of the chaos that sin creates. Observe carefully that James did not imply here that all sickness was a result of personal sins. His intent was probably that the sick person's turning to God for help also entailed an awareness of the need for forgiveness. A physical healing combined with spiritual healing truly makes a person whole.

Verse 16: *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The intense prayer of the righteous is very powerful.*

A further occasion for prayer specifically concerns the spiritual need to confess your sins to one another. This practice highlights the communal nature of our faith. It creates an environment of accountability that many of us need. To accompany this confession with prayers for one another again highlights the valuable combination of social and spiritual.

There is much about prayer that will always remain mysterious. In the final analysis a simple affirmation should serve as our ultimate motivation: the intense prayer of the righteous is very powerful. God releases His power in our lives through our prayers in ways we never fully understand.

Verses 17-18: *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours; yet he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land. Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land produced its fruit.*

The example of Elijah is important because he was a man with a nature like ours. He shared our potential for weakness. Yet even with this frail human nature he prayed faithfully and the results were powerful (1 Kings 17–18). God does not reserve His blessings and the power of prayer for a spiritually elite class. These blessings are available to all His children.

Verse 19: *My brothers, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back,*

These closing two verses do not sound at all like a traditional closing, yet the topic is appropriate for it concerns spiritual restoration. We are to understand that the person who strays from the truth is a Christian who has neglected his faith. The ministry of restoration includes a fellow Christian who turns him back. This action involves a gracious but determined spirit.

Verse 20: *he should know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

The restoration benefits the restored in two ways. First, he will save his life from death. The Christian, though straying from the truth, is secure in salvation. James meant a literal physical death that could result from a sinful lifestyle. James was not teaching that Christians can save others from their sins or that Christians can lose their salvation. The second benefit is clearer, for the formerly stumbling Christian's sins are forgiven. Based on God's consistency in answering prayers in the past, James assured his readers of the power of their prayers.