

Gems From James

A Bible Study

Gems From James

Bond-slaves

James, elder of the Lord's church in Jerusalem, was well-qualified to write this catholic (or *universal*) epistle. Practical and punchy, the letter has continued through the history of the church to exhort the brethren of Jesus to spiritual heights and to get them to quit playing silly mind games.

One of the things plainly apparent from the Bible is that human nature has not changed through the millennia. And to the extent that the new creatures in Christ have not yet crucified the practices of their flesh, to that extent problems crop up in the assemblies of the saints. Enter James, son of Joseph and Mary, half-brother of Jesus, shepherd of Jerusalem's saints, with his inspired directives to Christians and to the church as a whole.

- **Bond-servant** — The writers of the New Testament letters often refer to themselves, in the diction of the New American Standard Version, as "bond-servants." This letter is no exception: "James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," is his introduction of himself (James 1:1). The Greek word *doulos* carries the general connotation of one's being in bondage, that is, being a slave. The NASB, in translating the word in context of men like James, styles it "bond-servant" to carry the idea that their servitude was voluntary.
- **Old Testament bond-slaves** — In Israel, a man might fall on hard times and have to sell himself and his family in order to discharge his debts. But specific instructions from the Almighty were aimed at the Hebrews in regard to this necessity. "If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you," was the Lord's directive, "then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free" (Deuteronomy 7:12). But a man might desire to continue to serve as a slave of his master voluntarily. Instructions for this scenario were given: "And it shall come about if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you,' because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you; then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. And you shall do likewise to your maidservant" (Deuteronomy 15:17,18). Thus they became *bond-servants*.
- **The ultimate bond-servant** — Of the Son of Man it was written in the Psalms: "Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; My ears You have opened; burnt offering and sin offering You have not required. Then I said, 'Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of Me; I delight to do Your will, O My God'" (Psalm 40:6-8). The reference to the ears has to do with the ears' being "dug" or pierced; Christ is the bond-servant. As the translation is worked through the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) and freely quoted by the writer of Hebrews in the New Testament, the meaning is brought out: "A body You have prepared for Me" (Hebrews 10:5). Christ is the ultimate bond-servant in that He willingly offered the most that could be given — His body for the sins of mankind.
- **James, bond-servant** — James was a willing servant of His Lord Jesus Christ. At first he and his brothers were not believers in the Lordship of Jesus (John 7:5), and it was necessary for Jesus to transfer the care of His mother Mary to the apostle John at His death. But following the resurrection, James and the other brothers were disciples of the Lord. James himself became an elder in the church in Jerusalem, and died the death of a martyr by being stoned by the Sanhedrin around 63 AD in Jerusalem.

This letter, then, was written, "to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad." This letter is written to Christians, not to Jews of the Dispersion. The expression, "twelve tribes," therefore, is a reference to the spiritual Israel which in God's plan had supplanted the nation Israel according to the flesh.

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All Joy

Attitude is everything! The true religion of Christianity, then, should produce the greatest of attitudes among its followers. After all, at the core is something called *the gospel*, the good news. “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,” is the affirmation of Paul, “and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (I Corinthians 15:3,4). The hope of eternity, the sense of victory over sin, self, and circumstance, should produce a vibrancy of spirit, an infectious salubrity such that all should be attracted to the virtues of the message of Christ. Happy though suffering, hopeful though persecuted, first century Christians set a standard of excellence worthy of imitation by twenty-first century Christians. Torn apart by lions in the Coliseums, ripped by the gladiators of the day, burnt at the stake in public spectacles, those early believers pictured kneeling in prayer before the onslaught, joyfully dying for the Lord, is a frame indelibly imprinted on history’s conscience. And some of the credit goes to the epistle of James, sent out to disciples of Christ, “dispersed abroad.”

- **Consideration** — James rushed immediately to the content of his letter. “Consider it all joy, my brethren,” he exhorted, “when you encounter various trials” (James 1:3). The initial focus is on “consider.” The mind is capable of making decisions about its attitude, regardless of circumstances. Therefore the exhortation of James and the Holy Spirit comes as a command to the mind to make a decision about perspective. Whatever ugly and perverted face of persecution or disappointment is presented to the Christian, his perspective is to be focused on the shining lights of heaven and the joys of fellowship with Jesus. “Consider” – think, reckon, lead the mind into the right perspective.
- **All joy** — The writers of the New Testament are unanimous in their analysis that followers of Christ are to regard their circumstances from a victorious outlook. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time,” was Paul’s perspective, “are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). “Momentary, light affliction,” he called it in another place (II Corinthians 4:17). So the saint is to shift his perception around, and make sure that he considers everything that is happening in his life as “all joy.” No whining here, just joy!
- **Various trials** — The wise man, said Jesus, “built his house upon the rock” (Matthew 7:25). The foolish man, by contrast, built his quickly upon the sand. And when the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew, bursting against the houses, the one built on the rock would stand. It is not a question of whether the “various trials,” as James styled it, are coming. The only question is whether the house is standing after the trials have passed through. Attitude is everything!
- **Testing of your faith** — The Lord allows the trials in the saints’ lives because they have a purpose. The saint is to know “that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:3). God is the one who produced the faith in the willing heart through presenting the message of Christ in the first place. He then is quite interested in the faith of each follower being strengthened, so that the obedience of faith produced among the Gentiles stands as a testimony of His righteousness. But faith that is not tested is really not faith. Hence it that the Almighty allows the testing to go on, “that the manifold wisdom of God might be made known *through the church* to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10).

“These things I have spoken to you,” said the Lord, “that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11). One of the tests of faith is whether the Christian is experiencing joy in the midst of his circumstances. Where necessary, shift the focus, and pass the test!

Gems From James

Endurance

“For you have need of endurance,” bespoke Hebrews’ author. There is a fight to be fought, a faith to be kept, and a course to be finished. Without endurance, none of these is possible.

No one ever said, honestly, that Christianity was some sort of cakewalk. Only the charlatans, purveyors of puff, indicate that followers of Christ are guaranteed blessings in the physical realm. Health — maybe, for a while. Wealth — not likely, though some may have wealth for the distribution of the gospel and assisting those who have need. Happiness — only if the disciple of Christ decides to have joy in his circumstances. Rather, the Christian is following the upward call of God, fighting his way forward against the sewage channels of earth’s courses. “And indeed,” Paul reminded Timothy, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (II Timothy 3:12). “Let us run with endurance,” then, “the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

- **Producing endurance** — Endurance is not an instant concoction produced in a microwave minute. Endurance is the result of prolonged effort in striving against resistance. Endurance is the power of muscles that have been strengthened through lots of sets of twenty “reps” on the weightlifters’ bench, the conditioning of a body that has been run over the hills and through the heat and cold. Endurance is the iron will of the individual who pressed on against the odds, who persevered for years under duress while everyone else around was shouting, “Curse God, and die!” Know, then, “that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:3). Faith tests are the resistance centers set up for the building of endurance. Welcome to God’s Jungle Gym, where your faith will be tested on all different kinds of machinery, to enhance your endurance in all areas of your faith.
- **Your faith** — “Your faith,” says James. Not someone else’s faith; your faith! The emphasis of the Almighty has always been on the “one sheep.” Saints of the Holy One, therefore, are rightly grateful in knowing that the Father in heaven takes an interest in their personal problems and priorities, who personally handles each of their prayers. But that same Holy One is also making each sheep individually responsible; there is no hiding in the crowd from the eyes of Him with whom we have to do, and no “skating” through His courses without personal accountability. Hence it is that each Christian has his own “tailor-made” discipline program, that each’s faith might be perfectly tested by the times and circumstances of his earthly sojourn.
- **Getting results** — God, Creator of the universe and Judge of men, is not interested in merely going through the motions; purposeful, He wants results. “And let endurance have its perfect result,” affirms James, “that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). “Let endurance,” is the exhortation; don’t fight the process, because there is no other process. True admiration results in imitation; true admirers of Jesus desire to imitate Him. Inasmuch as “He learned obedience from the things which He suffered,” His followers also are going to imitate Him by passing through the same processes of suffering. The guarantee is there: let endurance have its *perfect* result.
- **And the result is** — The scriptures do not even hint at anything less than the character of God being produced in the faithful follower of Christ. Christians, although active in the process, are “His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:10). Hence the work of God, involving submission to the trials designed to produce endurance, produces individuals that are “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Pretty clear!

When some individuals contemplate the endurance process that God is going to put a true disciple of Christ through, their response is, “No thanks!” They want to go to heaven, they want to be lifted up as leaders in the body of Christ, but they don’t want the trials of a true faith. Consequently they devise theologies around the straight path of God. Imitators of Christ, however, “let endurance have its perfect result,” and rejoice when they are considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

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Got Wisdom?

Do the challenges of earthly existence require wisdom? Is there any need to have heavenly counsel in knowing which way to turn in the face of the trials that test the faith? Anyone who is far enough down the spiritual road to ask these questions has already come to a conclusion: God is smarter than men, and the saints of God need His wisdom in order to carry out His will.

Knowledge comes from study. Experience keeps her own dear school. But the wisdom to make a decision about the future without having enough facts, to help people find steps to solving their knotty problems, or to develop creative and honest organizational structures and motivational schemes is going to come from God.

- **Recognizing limitations** — There is a humility involved in recognizing that a person needs help for himself from God. The proud, by contrast, charges off into his projects with the attitude that he doesn't need any assistance or wisdom, and essentially tells the Almighty and All-knowing to back off. James makes a reasonable appeal: "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).
- **God's openness** — God so earnestly desires that His children of faith share in His wisdom that He makes it clear that there are no barriers to asking Him. The invitation is very clear: "Ask of God." And there is no complicated system designed to discourage the applicant, like all the paperwork someone has to go through to get a rebate on a computer printer package, for example. The Father is willing to shovel a lot of wisdom out of heaven's door: He "gives to all men generously." Furthermore, there are no frowns from the Father when the kid lines up at the door every day to ask for more wisdom; He gives "without reproach."
- **Building faith** — There is a conditional aspect to receiving the wisdom from God, however. "But let him ask in faith, without any doubting," comes James' explanation. The Lord God has always been committed to His word, having repeatedly established the principle that once He has stated a promise or condition, He will not go back on His word. "If you trust Me," He essentially says, "you will trust My word." In the area of wisdom, then, He has plainly stated that if a Christian will ask for it, it will be given to him. So when the saint prays for wisdom, he had better rise from his prayer with the full confidence that he has received that wisdom. The God who sees the future will be guiding him through that wisdom to be doing the right things at the right time in such a way that the news of God's kingdom spreads in the most efficient fashion possible.
- **Character flaw** — God has established beyond any shadow of doubt the veracity of His word. The men and women of old were victorious in their faiths, the records being kept of their trust in the stated word of God so that the modern follower of Christ might have their positive examples to build upon. He who does not trust in the scriptures has a serious character flaw. "The one who doubts," stated James, "is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6). Back and forth, back and forth, these people demonstrate their lack of trust in God's ability to carry out what He has promised.
- **Results of doubt** — "For let not that man expect to receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:7,8). The double-minded man, unable to fix his hope firmly in heavenly places, not only will not receive wisdom from God, but will not receive anything at all from Him!

God has infinite wisdom. And, as a good Dad, He is extremely willing to share that wisdom with the members of His family, if only they would just ask.

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Rich and Poor Instructions

Christianity, as that which is given as the end of the ages, has as one of its objectives to destroy artificial distinctions between men. “Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh,” stated Paul to the Corinthians (II Corinthians 5:16). The barrier between Jew and Gentile came down; the two were brought together as equals in the body of Christ, wherein a person’s ancestry is of no consequence. Any sense of total male superiority over female was torn down; a woman’s soul is of equal value, and a woman’s role is of equal value in Christ. The artificial distinction between slave and free was abolished; the slave is the Lord’s freeman, and the master is the Lord’s slave; there are no castes in the church of the living God. Likewise, any sense of economic strata is eliminated inside Christianity. Rich and poor were to leave their distinctions at the door.

- **The poor man** — The little and arbitrary distinctions man makes between himself and others are means by which man tries to elevate himself apart from humble obedience to God. God, however, is the great leveler, as Mary, betrothed to Joseph, affirmed in her prayer of praise: “He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed” (Luke 1:53). The scripture lets the bond-servants of God know that this earth is not their final home, and what counts is their fellowship and position in relation to the Almighty, as James notes, “But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position” (James 1:9). And how high is this position? God made even the most lowly of us “alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:5,6). There is no higher position for anyone to glory in, and the brother of humble earthly circumstances is not to allow any of the looks from richer earthly brethren to bother him.
- **Rich man’s glory** — The Christian with many earthly resources to draw from generally has a lot of people hanging around, fawning over him and giving him unearned respect. This can be a major ego-trip, and is what prevents many of the rich from going through the eye of the needle to enter the kingdom of God. James adds, “And let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like the flowering grass he will pass away” (James 1:10). Not only is he to recognize the humbleness of his position of being in a body that will pass away and of living on a temporary earth, but he is to *glory* in that humiliation; this helps him keep the true perspective of focusing on Christ and the eternal reward for the faithful saint.
- **Emphasis on temporary** — Fleeting, fleeting, fleeting are any of earth’s treasures, toys, and joys. James paints more on the picture: “For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will pass away” (James 1:11). It doesn’t take long for a hot wind to change the green grass of June into a July brown; just so the rich man’s greenery can wither in an instant.
- **Midst of his pursuits** — The poor man historically has only had enough time and resources for survival. If a Christian has enough time and resources for attending games, vacations, the pursuit of hobbies and special interests, he is a rich man, and needs to pay careful attention to the instruction on humiliation offered by the Holy Spirit.

This great leveling of “socio-economic” strata is key to enabling the local congregation to function. God has gifted each person with special abilities for working in the local congregation, but if a person’s wealth or position prevents him from humbly working where he needs to work, then it is destructive to the purpose of Christ. Likewise, if a gifted poor man is prevented from exercising his gift due to his poverty, or feels intimidated because of it, then the cause of Christ likewise suffers. Let each, then, lay aside artificial surface distinctions, and get to work!

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More on Trials

As surely as the sun rises upon the surface of earth, so must the trials come. God is willing to endure “with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction ... in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy” (Romans 9:22,23). The vessels of mercy must demonstrate their faith through trials in order to be distinguished from vessels of wrath. Without a period of testing, who could tell the difference between wheat and tares? “If necessary,” gently implied the apostle Peter, “you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 1:6,7). It is worth re-stressing: Faith that is not tested is not really faith! Hence it is that James is going to return to the theme of facing trials with a great attitude.

- **True happiness** — Happiness is not found in things; happiness is found in areas where man tends not to expect it. “Blessed [happy] are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness,” were words of wisdom from Him who was wiser than Solomon, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). James interjects his thoughts in a similar vein. “Blessed,” said he, “is a man who perseveres under trial” (James 1:12). As famous Coach Vince Lombardi said: There is nothing compared to exhilaration of lying on the field, totally exhausted and spent, but victorious. Happy indeed, then, is the saint who has victoriously persevered through the trial, and has come through the darkness of the suffering into the light of triumph, by the grace and strength which the Almighty provides for those of precious faith.
- **Needing approval** — While the trials of life are manifold, the focus the elder James is specifically on the trial that comes as a result of standing for the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. “The testing,” he had indicated earlier, is “of your faith.” Will a person compromise his faith so that he can run with the lemmings of the “brotherhood” into the sea of destruction? Will he bend under the scrutiny of the press’ public eye? Will he break under the pressure of jail or threat of lawsuit? Will the prospect of death part him from beliefs in the scripture which professed during the green tree? Only after going through those experiences successfully can the words be said: “once he has been approved ...”
- **The great reward** — Most fit the category of those who, in the words of Jesus, “lay up treasures upon earth” (Matthew 6:19), and, as a result, “have their reward in full” (Matthew 6:16). “For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it,” He said, “but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it” (Mark 8:35). When the perseverant pilgrim faces and overcomes trial, “once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life” (James 1:12). The ambitious and avaricious have gone after earth’s crowns, pillaging and poisoning to achieve a moment of glory at the top of one of this life’s heaps. But the *crown of life* – the great reward that lasts forever!
- **Available for all** — Only one person at a time can wear an earthly crown. But the crown of life is open for all the faithful; there is no competition among brethren for this, or some yowling scum. The brethren can actually greatly encourage one another to persevere to receive “the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:12).

Those who find happiness or blessings in the Lord are those who enjoy the journey, the adventure of faith. Those who want to coast or find an easy way, or who want the company of those on the broad path, will never find the rejoicing of those who desire the victory in fighting the good fight of faith, and will not be able to persevere. May each, then, be “blessed” of the Lord!

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Temptation and Sin

“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). That Jesus took on flesh is one of the great and powerful truths of the scripture, and is the foundation for all that follows. “Since then the children share in flesh and blood,” expostulated Hebrews’ author, “He Himself likewise also partook of the same” (Hebrews 2:14). The question that comes up in the mind of the contemplator is, “How human was He?” The reason that is a question is because, as the contemplator considers Jesus’ tremendous victories over sin and suffering, he wonders if the Lord wasn’t giving Himself a little edge or advantage over the rest of the race of men. But the word of God is emphatic: “He had to be made like His brethren in all things,” is one statement (Hebrews 2:17). And another powerful one: He “has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 2:16). Those statements should be sufficient for anyone interested in truth, anyone not trying to run some sort of excuse agenda.

But was Jesus God? “The Word was God,” was the apostle John’s simple answer (John 1:1). “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,” was the apostle Paul’s contribution (Colossians 1:19). Jesus indeed was God in the flesh, but He gave Himself no significant advantage over the sons of men in taking on flesh and in being subject to temptation.

- **God is not the tempter** — After Jesus was immersed, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness “to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). While God allows temptation to take place on earth, it is the serpent who offers subtle suggestions to the descendants of Adam and Eve, finding if possible a prurient interest and expanding it. James is forthright regarding the nature of God: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13). When the servant of the Lord is suffering under cruel constraint, his mind might have the tendency to think that God is tempting him; the scripture cuts off that escape route, making it clear that the temptation is not coming from God, and that is not His character to be involved in temptation.
- **God cannot be tempted** — Not only does God not tempt any one, He Himself is in the realm beyond temptation. Thus — while Jesus emptied Himself to take the form of a bond-servant, He was tempted in the flesh as are all men — when He rose from the dead and ascended to the realm of glory, He has since that point also been beyond being tempted. His period of testing is over, and He now can intercede for the saints from a position of perpetual purity.
- **The location of the problem** — God does not have a problem with temptation. So the nature of living in the earthly realm is that there are things that tug on the fleshly side of man, pulling him (as it pulled on Jesus) to the easy way instead of the right way. “But each one is tempted,” affirmed James, “when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust” (James 1:14). To be tempted is not the same as to sin. Jesus was tempted, but He pulled past the temptation and never committed sin. The problem comes when the individual follows the enticement of the particular lust.
- **The cycle of sin** — If, instead of dismissing the lust, the pagan or even a Christian lets his mind toy with it, then a cycle of sin and destruction works. “Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:15).

The cycle of sin is no minor whirlpool. To deliver Israel from the Philistines did not cost God the death of His Son, but to break the cycle of sin, it did!

Gems From James

Goodness of God

Eve followed the cycle of sin. First there was lust for the fruit and an unholy desire to be wise like God. As she allowed that temptation to work in her heart, then she was moved to stretch forth her hand and eat. The lust conceived, it gave birth to the sin of direct disobedience of the clear command of God. And the sin, once accomplished, brought forth spiritual death, as God had told Adam, “For in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). The spiritual death they did die, even though Adam lived physically in the flesh for a total of 930 years.

The descendants of the first pair follow in the same cycle. When each is old enough to know the difference between good and evil, then by each’s choice he follows the lust of his heart and is lost, separated from God. But the reason James brings it up is as a warning to those who are already Christians not to be trapped into the same cycle.

- **No mind games** — The Christian can choose to follow the enticement of some lust and descend once again into the depths of the darkness he came out of. The word “entice” is, as expected, well chosen. The appeal of the lust of the flesh or the lust of the eye is strong, crafted by the behind-the-scenes marketer to have maximum pull. The grace of God covers the Christian while he is in the process of overcoming past bad thought patterns and nasty habits. But if any of these stay entrenched in the lifestyle of the Christian, he is in major danger. After listing what he called “the deeds of the flesh,” the apostle Paul issued his caveat, saying, “of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:21). The key word is *practice*. A one-time slip-up is not the same as an entrenched habit, and the apostle’s point is that if any of his list is the lifestyle of one making a claim to godliness, that person is not paying attention to his warning. That an individual who is immersed into Christ can drift into such practices is obvious from the scriptures, and can even begin to convince himself that he is still in good standing with God. The advice from James is: “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren” (James 1:16).
- **Goodness comes from God** — God is no tempter, and, as James had emphasized, He does not tempt anyone; evil in any sense is not a part of His character. His goodness is exemplified in the original creation, as Moses recorded: “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Nothing created was evil; evil cannot exist in and of itself; it is always a perversion of something good. Satan himself was perfection, until unrighteousness was found in him (Ezekiel 28:15). Since that time the master of deceit has been trying to pervert goodness, but God Himself is not a participant. “Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above,” averred James, “coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17).
- **His consistency** — Perversity by its nature is inconsistent. It is arbitrary, capricious, serving self for the gain of the minute. Goodness, by great contrast, is consistent, steady, rock-like, having a pattern that can be duplicated and a track that can be followed. The great and good God, “the Father of lights,” James remarked, is the One “with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). No flickering light, no candle guttering in the wind, our Father shines with brilliant intensity and with perfect luminosity.

“The scripture cannot be broken,” said Jesus. God is good, His word is good, and He keeps His good word. “For His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Psalm 136:2).

Gems From James

Real First Fruits

“Do not suppose,” said John the Immerser to Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him for immersion, “that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father.’ ” The Jewish hierarchy in particular prided itself upon its physical lineage, maintaining essentially that God would bring them into heaven simply because they were of Israel according to the flesh. The Immerser warned them, however, in elevated tones: “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). The apostle Paul, thinking of how God would bring children of Abraham into existence from the ranks of the Gentiles, used this terminology, speaking of God, “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence that which does not exist” (Romans 4:17). “And if you belong to Christ,” he asseverated, “then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29). Through Christ the Almighty was going to bring into existence a people “born from above,” a spiritual people fit to walk with Him and fellowship with Him.

- **The will of God** — “In the exercise of His will,” James noted, “He brought us forth” (James 1:18). Some make the assumption that the sovereign will of God somehow excludes the active participation of man. *If God chose* to exclude man’s ability to decide, this would be true. Then the charge leveled by the imaginary Jew in Paul’s argumentation would be legitimate: “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” (Romans 9:19). But *the will of God* requires man by his free will to respond to a reasoned presentation of the gospel, as the prophet Isaiah recorded: “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 1:18).
- **Born again** — It is a powerful and exhilarating truth that the corrupted human being can really be “born again” of water and Spirit. “Therefore if any man is in Christ,” affirmed the apostle Paul, “he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come” (II Corinthians 5:17). Like someone coming forth from the dead, even so “He brought us forth by the word of truth.”
- **Power in His word** — “You have been born again,” confirmed Peter, “not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God” (I Peter 1:23). God has always exerted His power through His spoken word, and the scripture itself affirms that the written word is regarded as the same as the spoken word. Thus, when a person obeys the scripture in being immersed into Christ, he is created in Christ as a new creature by the word of God. “He brought us forth by the word of truth,” is James’ statement, noting that any other word is not the word of truth but of falsehood.
- **First fruits** — For the priests in Israel, these instructions were given: “All the best of the fresh oil and all the best of the fresh wine and grain, the *first fruits* of those which they give to the Lord, I give them to you” (Numbers 18:12). When Israel began to bring the crops in, they were to harvest the very best section first, and this then was set aside for the priests as an offering to the Lord. This is the figure which James uses to describe Christians: “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures” (James 1:18).

Man is the highest order among the creation instituted at the Genesis. But man is of the earth and not fit to be tabernacled with God in eternity. Hence, with great power in accordance with a plan carefully and willfully executed over the millennia, Christians are generated out of nothing by the word of God, and offered then as the true “first fruits,” holy, spiritual, and acceptable to Him.

Gems From James

Fitting Exhibition

The letters of the New Testament were written to people who already had the basic definitions and teachings delivered to them. The epistles, then, often remind the readers and hearers of what they already knew, while occasionally adding more information or arguing in defense of doctrines previously delivered. Regarding the bringing forth of “the first fruits among His creatures” — the raising of disciples from the waters of immersion as new creations in Christ — James wrote, “This you know, my beloved brethren” (James 1:19). Some assume that the only information the recipients of the letters had was the information contained in those specific letters; this is a false assumption as evidenced by many such statements as the quotation above. The people in the New Testament churches were taught the basic doctrines now revealed to us in the collection of writings, and thus any information from an epistle, a “gospel account,” the book of Acts, or Revelation is relevant to comprehending any of the epistles or other scriptures.

- **Hearing** — Based on the ideas that sin is the result of the conscious mental decision to follow lust and that God has brought Christians out of such darkness into a new life as “first fruits among His creatures,” the brethren are exhorted: “But let everyone be quick to hear ...” There is a difference between letting the words of another pass through one ear and out the other and really listening to the whole of his conversation. It is critical, first of all, that every follower of Christ make a sober and careful effort to listen to the words of instruction from the Father in heaven, as His thoughts are recorded in the pages of the holy writ. “Let these words sink into your ears,” Jesus is quoted (Luke 9:44). But not only is it critically important to hear the voice of the Almighty, it is paramount that children of faith listen to those around them. Spouses need to be listened to, offspring need to be listened to, brethren in the Lord need to be listened to, employers or employees need to be listened to, and those from the ranks of the lost need to be listened to. To really hear what another person is saying, not just the surface words, is an art worth cultivating, and critical in meeting his needs and understanding his perspective.
- **Speaking** — “... slow to speak ...” follows the injunction on hearing. The major cause of not listening is the desire on the part of the next speaker to interrupt and put his “two cents worth in”; the next speaker is listening for an opening rather than listening to what is being said. God wants His “lights in the world” to be examples of those who exhibit true concern for others by listening rather than rushing to speak.
- **Slow burn** — Most of the unregenerate have a seething anger within due to frustration with themselves and with a world that does not run in a manner most pleasing to them. This anger surfaces very easily under provocation, and is often reflected in the language expressed by the tongue. Hence the quotation links these three together thusly: “But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (James 1:19,20). When the disciple of Christ extends himself to hear a situation out before jumping to conclusions and puts a check on his tongue, he also effectively stifles those quick-tempered outbursts and moves toward measured anger in the likeness of God (and then only when necessary).

The first fruits among God’s creatures are not of much value unless they can be exhibited to the world as the best of the harvest. Hence it is fitting that the best of the offering would be exhibited in exemplary behavior, commencing with the characteristics of being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. May the exhibition continue!

Gems From James

The Righteousness of God

“And there is no other God besides Me,” announced the Almighty through His servant Isaiah, “a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me” (Isaiah 45:21). God indeed is a righteous God, and He desires to produce His righteousness in the sons of men. What a marvel it is, that the Master of the universe would not only redeem a fallen creature, but would impute His righteousness to him with the comprehension that imputed righteousness is to produce practicing righteousness! “Little children, let no one deceive you,” exhorted the apostle John, “the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (I John 3:7). “He made Him who knew no sin,” affirmed Paul, “to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (II Corinthians 5:21).

Be slow to anger, then, was the caution of James, “for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (James 1:20). Implicit in this statement is that there is a general category called “the anger of man,” and by contrast a category styled “the anger of God” or “righteous anger.” “Be angry, and yet do not sin,” is Paul’s injunction to the Ephesian brethren; “do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity” (Ephesians 4:26,27). The goal of God is for the anger of a Christian to be the same anger He has about sin and Satan. The anger of man is a selfish type of rage, a being upset over his plans’ being thwarted or someone’s not meeting his expectations. The anger of God is an unselfish indignation and eventual wrath over the destruction caused by the rebellion of the devil and the death and devastation resulting from man’s participation in Satan’s deceptive schemes.

- **“All” means all** — After mentioning the righteousness of God, James comments: “Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness ...” (James 1:21). While those imbued with Calvinism or other remnants of first century Gnosticism think the body is “vile” in the sense that it is bad and will always be bad, and therefore that even the Christian is always going to have commit sin, the word of God continually asseverates otherwise. *All* filthiness is to be put aside, and implicitly *all* wickedness. If *all* this can be put aside, as the scripture exhorts, then a Christian can be perfect as His heavenly Father is perfect!
- **Elimination of filthiness** — “Filthy” even sounds disgusting; the onomatopoetic ring of the word all by itself makes you want to wash your hands. A filthy mind is one which descends into the garbage heap of human thought processes, one which enjoys perversion and kinky twistedness, not befitting of Christians at all. The apostle Paul concurs with James’ assessment, that all filthiness is to be eliminated: “But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints,” he dramatized; “and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks” (Ephesians 5:3,4).
- **Remnants of wickedness gone** — Occasionally a woman will be described as “the wicked witch of the West,” a term taken from the book “The Wizard of Oz.” Such a woman would have a knife blade for a tongue, and the ability to stir up strife in any situation in which she would be involved. Wickedness also is connected with the long-term schemes for evil that some men have for the generation of wealth and power for themselves, even to the extent of destroying others who stand in their way or are expendable as “the cost of doing business.” All such thought processes and behavior are to be put “aside” as the new creature is brought forth by the word of truth.

The solution is for each person to “receive the word implanted,” which is able to save the soul of the lost one and transform his character into the righteousness of God. Let the transformation begin!

Gems From James

The Word Implanted

While the word of God today is basically black words on white pages, bound in book form, it does not mean it is without power. Biblically, the written word is regarded as equivalent to the spoken word. When the apostle Paul, for example, wrote to the brethren in Rome, as he discussed certain promises to Abraham, he noted: "As it is *written*, 'A father of many nations I have made you.'" He further stated, in the same context, "... that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been *spoken*, 'So shall your descendants be.'" (Romans 4:17,18). Thus the *written* is equated to that which had been *spoken*. God, then, has now "spoken to us in His Son," and Jesus' "voice" is heard by those who read and heed what is written. The "voice" which speaks from the black (and occasionally red) on white is the same voice which spoke into existence the heavens and the earth in six days, and the same voice which thundered the Commandments from the top of Sinai. Just because it is written does not mean it is sterile or without power.

- **Receive it** — "Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness," James had written, "in humility receive the word implanted ..." (James 1:21). The pride of man makes him stubborn and unwilling to listen to heavenly advice. Hence humility is required; each person must recognize the error of his ways and come to a consciousness that the foolishness of man is greater than the wisdom of men. Then, and only then, is the individual mentally positioned to "receive the word," to comprehend that it is the communication from God to man, and that it, and only it, can guide anyone down the paths of truth and righteousness.
- **Able to save** — "The word of God," said Hebrews' author, "is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). Not dead words on dead pages, the word is able to do what no mighty man or dramatic deliverer of earth has been capable; it "is able to save your souls!" And this is not merely a once-and-for-all salvation. James had earlier stated that God "brought us forth by the word of truth"; this initial new birth was accomplished indeed by the word of God. But the thrust of the later passage about the salvation of "your souls" is more directed at the continuing ability of the word to save those who are obedient to its tenets. "But prove yourselves doers of the word," he exhorted, "and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22). Directed to people who are already Christians, this exordium clearly establishes that the word only saves those who are doers as contrasted to those who are delusional. The word of God is the instrument of God's salvation initially, and it is the instrument of continuing salvation for those who truly endeavor to follow its instructions.
- **Implanted** — But to be mighty to save, the word must be "implanted." The mere nodding of the head in approbation of its truths will not save anyone. Its principles must be internalized, driven deep into the inner man. Its words must be those that form the roadbed of thought. Its directives must be the guidelines for action. And its exhortations must be the governors of the motives and attitudes of those which claim to be its adherents.

To really be implanted, the word must be memorized. Hearing the preaching and teaching of the word helps, but it alone does not drive the words of life deep enough into the inner man. Teaching the word is excellent, as the repetition of certain passages that show up in expounding the scriptures results in memorization coupled with application. But to get major chunks of the holy writ into our heads, the only way is the direct, head-on, frontal approach of memorizing. Let it be reiterated: the only way the word can be implanted is for it to be memorized. That's how Jesus did it.

Gems From James

Doers of the Word

There are three that must line up in order for the claimant to be a true disciple of Christ: mind, mouth, and motion. Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine" (John 8:31). Failure to abide — to live in — God's word is a demonstration of lack of discipleship. But abiding in God's word will result in renewing of the mind, discipline of the mouth, and motion in the proper direction, all of which are necessary to for the individual to "prove" that he is a doer of the word and not just a hearer. Thus, even from the beginning of his conversion, the saint is in the process of bringing all these three elements into subjection to the Father in heaven. Once the individual has believed in the testimony of the Word concerning Jesus, he is to *repent*, that is, to bring the *mind* into submission. Then he is to *confess* Jesus as Lord, bringing the *mouth* under the discipline, followed by his *immersion* into Christ, which is the *motion* of submitting the body to burial and for resurrection to walk in newness of life. Brotherhood with Christ begins with "doing the word," and is to continue throughout the years of his sojourn on the plains and pathways of earth.

- **Potential for delusion** — "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22). The potential for self-delusion is an obvious factor. A Christian can delude himself by simply not keeping track of his performance. Hence, he ends up thinking that he has read his Bible more than he has, that he has prayed more than he has, or that he has set up more Bible studies than he really has. The writer of Hebrews avers, "For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it" (Hebrews 2:1). Drifting is a subtle form of delusion, and a very dangerous one, since the saint is somewhat unsuspecting as to what is really happening in his life. Other forms of delusion are also rampant, ranging from stages of denial to deliberate rationalization and justification. All are fatal.
- **Casual Christianity** — "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer," James informs all the brethren, "he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was" (James 1:23,24). The Bible is a learn-by-doing book, and its lessons are not learned in the sterile environment of desks and classrooms. The person, therefore, who fails to *do* his lesson from the word of God possesses only a casual Christianity, and casual leads to casualty! The quick look in the mirror does not leave a deep, driving impression.
- **Image and performance** — The Bible consistently sets forth the proposition that a person's image of himself is what determines his long-term performance. The problem that the person who takes the casual glance in the mirror has is that he has "immediately forgotten *what kind of person* he was." He slips back into his old picture, and therefore into his old level of failed performance.

God wants proven doers of the word. The positive effect of the *mirror*, then, is to alter the *mind* of the disciple of Christ. He ceases to view himself as sinner, and takes the robes of a saint. He no longer looks at himself as the hateful and destructive old self, but he sees himself as a new creation in Christ Jesus. As this image shift takes place in his mind, then the mouth and the motion follow, and the brother thereby exhibits the effects of the word implanted. Woe to him to takes the casual glance into the mirror. Blessings be upon him who "looks intently."

Gems From James

Mirror, Mirror, Forming All

The mind is programmable. More than that, it is reprogrammable! “Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed,” the prophet cried out to the remnant of the nation, “and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O Israel?” (Ezekiel 18:31). Israel of the flesh was unable to step up to the level of making themselves a new heart and a new spirit; Israel of the Spirit is able to do so, but only by looking into the “mirror.” What good news! What hope! is now brought to view by the mercy and love of God! The gates of salvation and the mechanism of change have now been opened to everyone; a person’s past, his level of education, or his socio-economic status is of no consequence, for “whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed” (Romans 10:11).

- **The mirror** — James opens the discussion by commenting about a Christian who is not a doer of the word; “he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror,” was his remark. He then follows with, “But one who looks intently at the perfect law ...” (James 1:25). The “perfect law” is paralleled with a mirror, and is something that the redeemed is to look intently into. The apostle Paul uses the same parallel: “For we know in part,” said he, of the gifts extant in the first century church, “and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away ... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (I Corinthians 13:9-12). The perfect thing — the completed New Testament writings — is what is paralleled with the mirror, and is once again noted as something a Christian looks into.
- **What is seen** — “But we all,” writes the great apostle to the brethren in Corinth, “with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord...” (II Corinthians 3:18). What is seen clearly in the completed New Testament is the glory of King Jesus — no longer a babe in a manger, a beaten figure hanging on a cross, or even a somewhat shrouded figure standing next to the empty tomb. He is resplendent in glory, radiant and dwelling in the midst of unapproachable light! This, then, is what the completed New Testament reveals to the inner man of one who has had the veil of his flesh removed in a spiritual circumcision. God, affirmed Paul, “is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Corinthians 4:6).
- **Transforming power** — The only mechanism for transforming the inner man — for giving him a new heart and a new spirit — is the seeing of the glory of the risen Lord by faith as revealed in the pictures and preaching of the New Testament. The message of the scriptures, introduced in a physical fashion in the transfiguration of Moses’ face at the giving of the Law, is that whatever beholds the glory of the Lord is transformed into the likeness of that same glory. Those who behold the glory of Christ, then, “are being transformed into the same image.” Jesus, the origin and object of faith, is always at the center, even in the renewal process.
- **Reprogramming** — The saint of God must be active, rather than passive, in the reprogramming process. “And do not be conformed to this world,” was the call of Paul, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). Thus, as James states it, the transformation cannot be accomplished by one who looks into this mirror, and then turns forgetfully away; he must look *intently* into this mirror!

Mirror, mirror, forming all; who’s the fairest of us all? Fairest is Jesus the Lord, from whose mouth comes the sharp sword. Out of His reflection in the mirror (now complete, and much clearer), beams of radiance gloriously shower those transformed by its spiritual power.

Gems From James

Law of Liberty

Responsibility, maturity, and liberty go together. A child, noted the apostle Paul, “does not differ at all from a slave” (Galatians 4:1). The reason for lack of liberty for the child is that the child does not have the maturity level to be able to handle the complexities and decisions connected with adult life. Nations, like Israel in her history, plunge into despotism because the people as a whole did not have sufficient morality and responsibility to remain free. Without responsibility and maturity, there can be no lasting liberty.

Liberty is not to be confused with license. Liberty is the freedom to be up at 5:00 am, milking the cows, feeding the horses, and getting ready for a full day’s work on private property. License is partying all night the night before, finally rolling out of the rack at 11:00 am, drinking some wake-up coffee, ducking chores by finding some excuse to go into town, and hoping the money from the inheritance will last a while longer. License is always offered to those who have liberty as a corrupting influence; the easy way is presented as an alternative to the right way, and individuals and nations thus decay rather than prosper. “Do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh,” posited Paul (Galatians 5:13). “Act as free men,” exhorted Peter, “and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil” (I Peter 2:16). “Ungodly persons,” affirmed Jude, “turn the grace of our God into licentiousness” (Jude 4). Spiritual liberty, like political liberty, is precious, and it needs to be understood to be preserved. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free,” observed the apostle Paul. “Therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

- **The perfect law** — “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25). The new covenant is called, among other terms, “the perfect law” because it is the completion of the revelation of God. As such, it moves beyond the slavery of “do not taste, do not touch, do not handle” to a mature faith picture of Jesus in glory. The power of transformation is found in the spiritual eye’s seeing the radiant Christ, altering the conduct of the faithful follower from the inside out. “For Christ,” affirmed Paul, “is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4). This perfect law, focusing on the Prince and Savior exalted to the right hand, not seen by the physical eye, is therefore called the “law of faith” (Romans 3:27).
- **Liberty** — This law is the law of liberty, allowing the grace of God to be operative in the life of each sincere believer. What it does is to allow the Christian, obviously with an adult-level mind, to set his priorities in a responsible fashion, to determine (among other projects) which sinful habit he will overcome first, and what good habit he will form in its place. “We have obtained,” remarked the apostle to the Gentiles, “our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5:2). The purpose of this law operating through grace is to enable the disciple of Christ to move toward the character of Christ one step at a time, making real progress rather than feeling forced into a cosmetic outward show.

Where there is liberty, there is opportunity for license. The responsible Christian will not choose license, but will appreciate the grace of God in His offering opportunity for continued efforts in improvement. Others, perhaps reacting against license and frustrated at their own moral lapses, will try to impose law or standards of conduct on others. Of such, the Lord said, “You too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:28). Brethren, understand and abide by the perfect law, the law of liberty.

Gems From James

Effectual Doers

Where there is liberty, there is possibility for self-deception. The natural tendency for the immature is to quit being responsible when no one is looking, and then to engage in some sort of self-justification to cover for the irresponsibility. The new covenant, by contrast, produces a new race of royal priests who joyfully accept the responsibilities of sonship in Christ. But, because the reprogramming process takes time and because the old self can get a resurrection, warnings have to be sounded for the new creatures. “Prove yourselves doers of the word,” James had counseled, “and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” The Christian is confronted with the concept that in every situation there is a choice: doing or deception!

- **The natural man** — One of the great themes of the new covenant is that the new creation in Christ really is a new creation; the old man has been crucified and an entirely new self has been raised from the waters. This new nature is capable, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, of laying “aside the old self with its evil practices” and putting “on the new self” (Colossians 3:9,10). But the natural man has to be dealt with by this new creature, so warnings abound in page after page of new covenant script. If the disciple devolves into only being a hearer of the word rather than a doer, “he is,” James warned, “like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.” This forgetting is a form of self-delusion, and once the natural man comes roaring back, the individual is going to revert to the sinful habits of his former life.
- **The intent look** — For the new self to continue to be actuated, there has to be a concentrated daily focus on the risen Christ as revealed in the written word. “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25). The “forgetful hearer,” or reversion to the natural man, is contrasted with the one who looks “intently” into the picture painted by God’s word. What the intent look does is to burn the image of the radiant Christ into the faith center of the new creatures’ brain; when he continually recognizes that this is who he is and Whose image he is being transformed into, then he becomes a doer of the word. The one who fails to look intently into the perfect law forgets what kind of person he was — he loses the all-powerful transforming image in his cranium and defaults back to the old failed self-image.
- **Blessed people** — Inner image comes first; performance comes second. The consistent saint, by focusing on his new image, becomes “an effectual doer” as an outgrowth of his focus. He is not a “desultory doer” — one who slogs sloppily through his day, doing the bare minimum; he is an “effectual doer” — one who is not only efficient in doing the tasks in front of him, but who also gets the high priority spiritual projects done. Such people are the truly blessed; they are the strangers and pilgrims who have been called out of the world into eternally productive action, who will not lose their acclamation in the courts of heaven. These are the “blessed” who persevere “under trial,” who once have been approved by passing successfully through the testing of their faiths, “receive the crown of life” (James 1:12).

The effectual doers are the ones who shake the world with their prayers. They are the ones whose care and influence circle the globe. They are the ones whose consistency and character are modeled, whose desire to reach the lost is imitated, and whose perseverance stands as great encouragement for those seeking to increase their faith. Such effectual doers are truly blessed in what they do.

Gems From James

Bridle Your Tongue

The transforming power of the gospel is centered on the revealed picture of Christ in glory. It is axiomatic that if an individual focuses on himself, the selfishness entailed in such a look is destructive. Therefore the Almighty has designed the mechanism for change such that the Christian must focus on the radiant Jesus; this directs self-destructive attention away from the individual, and fixates on Him who is worthy of glory and honor. Embodying the principle that whatever beholds the glory of God is transformed into the likeness of that same glory, this mechanism for change requires that the saint look “intently at the perfect law,” with the result that the former stranger to the covenants of promise now becomes an effectual doer of the perfect law. God is thus glorified, and the disciple of Christ is transmogrified.

- **Possibility of self-deception** — That which begins in the mind, to be fully accomplished, must result in the proper direction and control of the mouth as well as getting the body into scripturally purposeful motion. “If anyone thinks himself to be religious,” is a crisp warning from James, “and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless” (James 1:26). The All Wise God has revealed that as a man “thinks within himself, so he is” (Proverbs 23:7). But is sometimes difficult for the citizen of the holy nation to determine objectively what it is that he thinks within himself; he can apparently deceive his own heart. Therefore the Father has set it up so that what the mouth says and what the body does are indicators on the spiritual dashboard — they let the royal priest know what is going on in his mind.
- **Religious?** — James here is equating the word “religious” to doing what the New Testament requires. An “effectual doer” of the Word is his definition. There are some things that are comparatively easy to do without having to have had major character transformation. People can attend the assemblies of the saints, participate in the Lord’s Supper, sing the hymns, and carry their Bibles around without there being any change in character. Thus the elder in Jerusalem’s congregation proposes a test: “If anyone thinks himself to be religious,” he challenges, then let him check on the talk of the tongue.
- **Bridling the tongue** — The tongue needs a bridle; it needs to be kept in check. An unchecked tongue has a tendency to rattle off all sorts of hurtful comments and malicious gossip. That which has great power to preach and teach God’s word, to edify the saints, to encourage the fainthearted, and to give kind reassurance also has a commensurate power to destroy and to create schisms. An undisciplined mouth is clear evidence that the Christian has a lot more work to do on his inner picture, to reprogram the inner man. “The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart,” stated the Lord Christ. “The good man out of his good treasure brings forth that which is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil” (Matthew 12:34,35). The “treasure” may need further work!
- **Worthless religion** — That which takes years to build can be destroyed in a moment by a vicious or factious comment. If a man is trying to be an effectual doer, but keeps tearing down his own work by his tongue thrusts, then he is wasting his time. In order for the saint to be an effective worker in the kingdom, his mind, his mouth, and his motion must be consistently directed in the ways of Christ.

“And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak,” Jesus informed the world, “they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned” (Matthew 12:36,37). Bridle your tongue!

Gems From James

Pure Religion

The purpose of the intent look into the mirror is to alter the mind of the follower of Christ. A true alteration of thought processes will provide true alteration of speech and behavior patterns. Hence our God and Father is very concerned with the attitude and actions of His children; “Bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance,” are words that resound for all who trust in Christ (Matthew 3:8).

The tongue is to be brought under the discipline of the new heart of the Christian. Out of the old, corrupted heart of man, for example, come things like slandering and false witness. A new creature in Christ who fails to “bridle his tongue,” James stated, “but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless” (James 1:26). Worthless religion will not carry a person’s eternal soul into the courts of heaven!

Not only has the tongue to be controlled, but the rest of the Christian’s body needs to be put in motion and directed properly. James therefore writes of what he calls “pure and undefiled religion” which focuses on the discipline and direction of the outer man.

- **Pure and undefiled** — The word of God emphasizes purity as one of the great principles of the Way and one of the characteristics of the Father that is to be acquired by His children. “Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him,” says the apostle John in reference to Jesus’ return, “purifies himself just as He is pure” (I John 3:3). James thus speaks: “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father ...” (James 1:27). For the saint there are to be no hidden agendas; the inner motive is to be pure, resulting in performance that is pleasing to God, although not necessarily noticed by men. “To the pure, all things are pure,” was the inspired observation of Paul, “but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled” (Titus 1:15). “Pure and undefiled religion” is only going stem from a pure heart and a good conscience.
- **In the sight of God** — There is a God in heaven who reads the hearts of humans and tests the motives of men. “All things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do,” commented Hebrews’ author. The Christian needs to have a raised consciousness of the presence of God and an awareness that He actually knows the reasons why the person making a claim to godliness is doing what he is doing. Absolute honesty with the Omniscient One is required.
- **Visiting** — Pure and undefiled religion, expressed James, is “to visit orphans and widows in their distress.” Orphans and widows, generally speaking, are the most defenseless and needy persons on the face of the earth; they have nothing to offer the avaricious. Now if “visiting” such as these becomes merely a “photo-op” to set the stage for the next power play, then it is not “pure and undefiled religion.” But if it is carried out only for the sight of God and for caring for the needy, then it is acceptable to God as an expression of a heart that has been purified.
- **Unstained** — Another aspect of pure religion is “to keep oneself unstained by the world.” What a person does and thinks while no one else is looking indicates his purity or his defilement. The Christian — in his mind — separates himself from the world and focuses his attention on his fellowship with the Father.

The Pharisees, said Jesus, were like whitewashed tombs, who looked good on the outside but on the inside were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Pure and undefiled religion, by contrast, results in a people who are holy on the inside, and whose holiness is reflected in control of the tongue and discipline of the body. These, then, are the “doers of the word.”

Gems From James

Which Favored Few?

Selfishness and desire for acceptance by a peer group are powerful but destructive motivators. Selfishness is so inimical to the plan and purpose of Christ that Jesus had to speak strongly on that topic: “If anyone wishes to come after Me,” He averred, “let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). Self is to be put aside, and all that remains for the pure in heart is the salvation of souls and increase for the King. Peer pressure likewise is a strong enemy of following truth. This pressure was so intense that even the rulers of Jerusalem’s synagogues, even though they had come to believe that Jesus was the Christ, “were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God” (John 12:42,43). The desire for Christianity to be acceptable to men was a powerful force in the first century church; the pressure was so strong that the churches of Galatia were in danger of being pulled back into Judaism, for example. Thus it was necessary for James to write: “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism” (James 2:1). Some were wanting to use the church for their own purposes and others wanted to be a group acceptable to the community around them, but the exhortation was to refuse to sink to those levels.

- **Welcome to the rich!** — The smiles of Caesar and the regard of the rich have always been courted by those who have a personal and earthly agenda. Forgetting that their actions are carried out “in the sight of God,” they lose their bearings and begin to operate on the basis of human wisdom. Caesar can make it a lot easier for the “church” to increase its membership, and being able to point to the rich and influential in attendance is a worldly way of recruiting more people for the organization. Scenario: “For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes ... and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ ...” (James 2:2,3). Under those conditions, the church had sunk to the point that they were recognizing men according to the flesh, and as such lost the approval of God.
- **Shunting aside the poor and undesirable** — The eternal soul of man has intrinsic value, and the soul of the poor or disadvantaged is as valuable as the soul of the rich or famous. God repeatedly affirms that He shows no partiality, that He is no respecter of persons. But man, in his desire to build an organization, tends to make distinctions between persons, and to operate on the basis of what sort of people are going to give his organization the “proper” public relations image. Scenario: “There also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes ... and you say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,’ ...” This man is shunted aside so that he is not particularly visible, and therefore the shake-down of the unsuspecting public can go on.

“Do not,” the Holy Spirit had said through James, “do not hold your faith with an attitude of personal favoritism!” While man looks on the outside, God is the one who looks on the inside; God loves all the people of the world and has set up a system of proclamation of truth so that those of honest heart can respond. Man gets in the way when he shows favoritism. When those artificial delineations are established, then the judgment of God kicks in: “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?” (James 2:4). The divine analysis is that anyone who plays the game of public relations image using the rich and famous because of their poster boy or poster girl appeal has “evil motives.” The favored few are those who love truth and are obedient to God, not necessarily those who would win the smiles of Caesar or the regard of the rich.

Gems From James

Of Synagogues and Glory

“How can you believe,” asked Jesus, “when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?” (John 5:44). Glory from man, however fickle or fleeting it may be, is in direct competition with glory from God. Most of the human race, sadly, seek the acceptance and approval of their earthly peers rather than desiring accolades of heaven. But the few who have decided to be chosen “seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life” (Romans 2:7).

In the midst of this conflict is the built in need for a sense of community. God did not design the individual as a stand alone unit, nor did he design the family as a stand alone unit; He designed the housing of the new creature to be a part of a congregation of believers, a working part in the team or body of Christ. Men, in the absence of commitment to the local congregation, tend to set up all sorts of “church substitutes,” wherein these built in social needs are to some degree met. In consequence, there is the opportunity for earthly glory, the possibility of being the biggest fish in a small pool, and this results in the obscuring of the humble servanthood that is characteristic of team effort inside the church of Christ.

- **The synagogue** — By the will of God the Jewish synagogue developed in connection with the Babylonian captivity, culminating with the return of a small band of Israelites to an empty Jerusalem in 536 BC. The remnant of Jews drew the conclusion that their ancestors had fallen into idolatry and captivity because of their ignorance of the scriptures. So the concept of the synagogue (coming from a Greek word meaning “a gathering, or assembly”) developed as a means of having the Old Testament scriptures read out loud to the people. By New Testament times there were Jewish synagogues throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, as evidenced by James’ statement to the convocation in Jerusalem in Acts 15: “For Moses from ancient generations,” he said, “has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21). The “synagogue” was a term that was not only a description of the people, but became attached to the building where the people met also. Thus the apostle John wrote of Jesus, “These things He said in the synagogue, as He taught in Capernaum” (John 6:59). The church of the New Testament was, by the will of God, a natural and direct outgrowth of the synagogue. To distinguish the two, the term “ekklesia,” another Greek word meaning “a gathering, or assembly,” generally came to be the word usually translated into the English “church.” But not exclusively. The verb form of “synagogue” was used to describe the assembling on the first day of the week to break bread (Acts 20:7), and other similar usages. And James, more oriented toward working with the Hebrews, perhaps, than others, uses “synagogue” as a term for the congregation of the saints: “If a man comes into your *synagogue* ...” was the expression (James 2:2).
- **Glory** — “I am Yahweh, that is My name,” the Almighty had stated, “I will not give My glory to another” (Isaiah 42:8). Jesus is the “radiance of His glory,” so it is pretty obvious who Jesus is (Hebrews 1:3). James refers to Him as “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (James 2:1). He offers to share this glory with His faithful, first by faith and, at His coming, then by sight. “Whom He justified, these He also glorified,” was Paul’s description of those of faith (Romans 8:30).

The need for community is supplied in the New Testament “synagogue.” The positive desire for God’s glory is met in the building up of this kingdom through caring for the eternity of lost souls and conservation of the saved. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). May all His disciples follow in His steps!

Gems From James

Rich and Poor

When a man with money and influence walks through the doorway of the church meeting place, there are those types who salivate at the prospects. Preachers who are interested in the numbers game make special mention of the “guest,” he is seated in a place of prominence, and he is to be greeted by all with respect and honor. Others look forward to serving alongside a man of such distinction as he is groomed for rapid advancement to the eldership. His name on the left hand column of the official church stationery certainly helps to establish the congregation as respectable in the community, and a place where other nobility can assemble without blemishing — even enhancing, perhaps — their reputations.

But what does the poor man who has just darkened the door of the meeting house have to offer, in an earthly sense? No money, no reputation, no prospects; all he can do is add to the body count, and such as he are a dime a dozen. Thus he can be shifted off to one side, out of the way, not visible so as to be any further blight on the church’s PR image for the more desirable members of the local community.

Those who make such distinctions, and engage in such behavior, are described by the holy writ as those who have “become judges with evil motives” (James 2:4). This is not particularly complimentary language coming from the courts of heaven, and all saints need to consider the consequences of sinking to such despicable judgment and behavior.

- **God’s view of the poor** — “The rich and the poor have a common bond,” wrote Solomon, “the Lord is the maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2). Any distinction between men, then, as far as intrinsic value is concerned, is capricious and arbitrary, and indicative of one who has a hidden agenda. James is emphatic: “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him” (James 2:5). The poor have a lesser tendency to be spiritually blinded by materialism and the pursuit of pleasure that plagues those who have more earthly resources available. Having less earthly hope, they are more able to focus on heaven; “rich in faith,” is how the Almighty describes those who are thus called out of darkness. With no earthly prospects, they are better able to recognize the value of being “heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him!”
- **God’s view of the rich** — While men fawn at the feet of the rich and grovel in the presence of the glitterati, the Father has a different view of those who have positioned themselves as lords of men or objects of adoration. “Is it not the rich who oppress you,” was James initial query, “and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?” (James 2:6,7). O’erweening ambition and avarice are often cloaked with beautiful bodies and personable presentations. But the rich and the famous often have in their train a body count of those who somehow were in their way. Christians in particular, throughout their history, have been those who bore the brunt of blame for the excesses and failures of the lords of the manor. The wealthy, but not wise, in their arrogance, laugh at God and blaspheme the name of Jesus. Their end is coming, and their doom is sure.

The concern of James can be capsulized thusly: Why do you brethren in your congregations shunt the poor aside and give undue honor to the rich, when, generally speaking, the poor are the ones truly interested in the faith, and the rich will be the ones to mock you? “But you have dishonored the poor man,” was the elder’s comment. “Honor all men,” is Peter’s injunction (I Peter 2:17). Treat all men fairly, and give each an equal opportunity to hear and obey the gospel.

Gems From James

The Oppression by the Rich

There are certain earthly advantages which accrue to those who are wealthy. Money not only buys pleasures and comforts, but it also purchases power and prestige. Hence, for those who have such ambitions, there is a mad dash for riches, and a dog-eat-dog scrambling for influence and leverage. All this comes under the general heading of “mammon,” and is equated to a form of idolatry. “You cannot serve God and mammon,” said Jesus. If mammon is the master, then God is gone as the object of worship in Spirit and in truth. The saint, of course, is warned accordingly: “Greed,” affirmed Paul, “amounts to idolatry” (Colossians 3:5).

The wisdom of Proverbs gives us a clue as to how the rich operate. “The rich rules over the poor,” stated Solomon, “and the borrower becomes the lender’s slave” (Proverbs 22:7). The wealthy desire to oppress the common man, and advance their agenda through banking and credit schemes. The modern saint will do well to pay attention.

- **Super-rich of the current era** — The word of God prevented the Israelite from collecting interest from his brother (Deuteronomy 23:20). As the Roman Catholic Church applied this to their people in Western Europe, Catholics were not permitted to loan money out at interest. But those who called themselves “Jews” were able to charge interest on money lent, since they were not Catholic. This gave rise to the banking and investment houses of Rothschild, Lazard Freres, Goldman Sachs, and others whose names are now hidden under corporate banners such as Citigroup. These and others who have been able to join with them have since engaged in a global effort to subjugate all of mankind. They not only have been able to persuade western peoples such as the American citizen to operate on their credit, but they have been able to move every country in the world off a gold standard for their currencies, and have thus moved people and nations into the positions of being these lenders’ slaves.
- **Follow the money trail** — Who controls the major media organs and the outlets for television and Hollywood entertainment? Follow the money trail. Who promoted the breakdown of the family and the implosion of the moral structure through the public educational system and the entertainment industry? Follow the money trail. Who publicized and promoted the homosexual lifestyle and established it as “normal” in the popular press? Follow the money trail. Who pushes the agenda of marginalizing Christianity, ridiculing and outlawing the Bible, and castigating “the religious right” as outmoded relics of a benighted age? Follow the money trail.
- **The inspired analysis** — If a really rich man were to enter the assembly of the saints, the tendency would be to give him undue attention. But James and the Holy Spirit present the divine analysis of the general agenda of the super-rich: “Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?” (James 2:6,7). The rich have the power and position to demand the immediate attention of “law enforcement officials,” and the clout to have the ear of the judge. So when their persons are offended at Christ’s call for repentance, then their claws come out. These are the ones who promote the dissolute lifestyles, the ones who pander to their personal pleasures; they are not about to give those up and they are not about to have someone twinging their consciences by reminding them of their accountability to God. Hence the oppression and the blaspheming.

Mammon is a heady substitute for submission to King Jesus. Those who have inserted the letter “l” in the English word God and made it their focus end up totally ruthless in their quest for one more dollar. Using their power, influence, and propaganda organs, they have been able, in modern times, to put all peoples in position as debtors (and therefore slaves) to their banking houses. Make no mistake about it: their war against Christianity is about ready really to crank up, and they will use their push for “democracy” as a cover for imposing tyranny, and “peace and security” terminology for establishing perpetual war against God.

Gems From James

Love Thy Neighbor

The Father in heaven is concerned about how guests in the assembly are treated. He is quite concerned that His children recognize the value of each immortal soul and are not swayed by the casual trappings of earthly station. The rich are not to be slobbered over, nor are the poor to be shoved off into a corner. In fact the motives of the brethren are exposed as less than pure if this scenario occurs. "Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?" was the rhetorical question.

The Jewish synagogue, the providential precursor to the assembly of the saints, welcomed guests. In Antioch of Pisidia, for example, the apostle Paul was conscious of the distinction of those in the audience: "Brethren, sons of Abraham's family," he addressed the Jews in his audience, "and those among you who fear God," was his inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 13:26). But in the congregations of Christians, arbitrary distinctions among people are abolished. Gone is the division of Jew and Gentile, gone is the superiority of value of the male over the female, gone is the elevation of master over the slave. At the Lord's Table, then, all children of the Father are of equal station, and none is to have pre-eminence. "So then, my brethren," was the injunction of Paul, "when you come together to eat, wait for one another" (1 Corinthians 11:33).

- **Equal regard for all men** — When Cornelius fell at Peter's feet to worship him, Peter established clearly that he was not "the first Pope." Instead of having the centurion kiss his ring, "Peter raised him up, saying, 'Stand up; I too am just a man.'" (Acts 10:26). When the residents of Lystra tried to worship Barnabas and Paul as Zeus and Hermes come to earth, their response was, "We are also men of the same nature as you" (Acts 14:15). Even the Lord Jesus emptied Himself, and took the form of a bond-servant, coming not to be served but to serve. Hence guests in the assembly — rich or poor, famous or infamous — are of equal standing.
- **Fulfilling the "royal law"** — The saints who show partiality toward the rich and shun the poor are under condemnation. "If, however," the elder James writes, "you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well" (James 2:8). "And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer had asked in an attempt to justify his favoritism (Luke 10:29). Jesus told the parable about the loathsome Samaritan as contrasted to the high and holy priest and Levite to illustrate the point about all men being each's neighbor; the loathsome Samaritan cared for the men who fell among thieves, while the priest and Levite each crossed to the other side of the road in pretending not to see. "Do this," were Jesus' words in regard to caring for all the human race, "and you will live" (Luke 10:28). The congregation which opens its doors in welcome to all who are willing to come under the government of King Jesus fulfills His royal law, and is "doing well."
- **Convicted by the law** — By contrast, the congregation which discriminates between people on the basis of wealth, social standing, color, or any other arbitrary distinction is "committing sin" and "convicted by the law as transgressors" (James 2:9). This conviction by the law is no minor conviction; the worst of all possible sentences is eternal capital punishment in the lake of fire, and this is the fate of those punished for violation of the law. The sin of showing partiality is an eternally fatal sin.

God really loves the lost, the lost of all ranks and stations among the sons of men. But the All Wise knows that the poor man is more likely to become a Christian than "the rich man in the midst of his pursuits" (James 1:11). So saints are to show no partiality; they are to love all their neighbors equally, and accept with open arms "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord."

Gems From James

The Poor and Partiality

In matters of business, it is important to talk to people who have investment capital. Hence it is that there is always a scramble to get an audience with men of influence and women of position. The poor, by contrast, have no investment capital and are not worth the time of those seeking someone to partner up with them in the realm of “buying and selling.” Where mammon is still god, there is a hush of excitement and a thrill of possibility when someone of position and power walks through the church building door. But scarcely an eyebrow would raise were someone from the ranks of common men to come into the assembly. The world is in rebellion against God, and consequently always has the wrong analysis of what is important and how to carry out His will. It behooves the saints to consider carefully the perspective of the Father and to govern themselves accordingly.

- **Rich in faith** — The goal of God has always been to produce faith in Himself among the ranks of men. Abraham is touted as a man of faith, being described as “the father of us all,” from both the lists of the Jews who turned to Christ and those from the Gentiles. “Without faith,” wrote Hebrews’ author, “it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). Hence the wealthy of the world, reveling in their delights and ignoring the God who created them, are of no account in the eyes of the Almighty. But the poor of the world, the outcasts and the aliens, are “rich in faith.” They are the truly blessed.
- **Heirs of the kingdom** — When someone rich is about to die, all the potential heirs generally line up and honor the one about to make his eagerly awaited exit from earthly affairs. They obsequiously drop by the sick room, hoping to catch the favorable eye of the testator, and ensure a prominent spot in the will. All this bowing and scraping is for a few passing earthly riches, riches that can be gone with the wind. But the poor of this earth, according to the holy writ, are “heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him.” The riches of this inheritance far outshine anything earth has to offer, and are eternal; this is a Master worth pleasing!
- **Promised to those who love Him** — This particular Master cannot be fooled. The rich uncle can be duped by a couple of fawning nephews, who secretly can’t wait until the old boy “kicks off” and they can splurge the inheritance. But the great God, who reads the hearts of men, knows those who love Him and those who are merely pretenders. Hence the passing of His inheritance is certain; it is promised only “to those who love Him.
- **Fair name** — An inheritance usually passes on to members of the family. The “heirs of the kingdom” of God wear His name; specifically those who are indwelt by His Spirit and belong to Him are divinely called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). But these family members are tested and true; they only receive the inheritance after having suffered shame for the sake of the name of Christ, and having weathered the storms of the rich who “blaspheme the fair name” by which these saints of God have been called.

The brethren are exhorted not to regard anyone according to the flesh; the value of the individual is in his immortal soul. The divine analysis is that the poor of the world are more likely than the rich to be interested in the affairs of the kingdom of God, and therefore worthy of at least equal love and attention. “But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (James 2:9).

Gems From James

The Triumph of Mercy

Man has an innate sense of justice. It gets twisted a bit by bias and personal agendas, but every man knows what is fair and right. One of the great challenges to man, however, is that this world is not fair; in a realm where everything is bent and tortured by sin, justice is rare. Hence the offended cry out to God for justice, and plead for justice to be done to their enemies and oppressors. What they fail to recognize is that in the process of appealing that justice be meted out to others, they are also pleading for justice to be done to them. And what they also fail to recognize is that if justice is executed in their cases, it will not be pretty. What all need before the throne of God is mercy.

- **The way of the transgressor** — Those who show partiality, said James, referring particularly to those who fawn over and favor the rich above the poor, “are convicted by the law as transgressors.” While this is not a direct violation of any of the Ten Commandments, it is a violation of that which is equally law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Thus James notes, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). The Law may be pictured as a pane of glass; if the glass is shattered at one point, the whole pane is broken. The person, then, who favors one person above another is just as guilty as the most heinous of murderers.
- **Point of emphasis** — To illustrate and emphasize his point, James the elder goes back to two of the Ten Commandments: “For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not commit murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (James 2:11). The violation of any of the principles of the Law establishes the transgressor as a lawbreaker, and therefore worthy of eternal condemnation.
- **Christian conduct** — The Christian has been delivered from the condemnation of breaking the Law through the blood of Jesus Christ. Conscious of the tender mercy visited upon him through the Sunrise from on high, the saint is quite willing to make sure that this same mercy can be extended to all without partiality. He is reminded of this: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty” (James 2:12). The law of liberty contains provisions for mercy; the Law of the Commandments does not.
- **By your standard of measure** — The One who is able to save and to destroy has made it plain that His children are to extend mercy just as He does. “For judgment,” states the Almighty through James, “will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). The penalty for not showing mercy is severe; it is the ultimate penalty in the fires of hell.

The Lord is serious about the trials His Son went through in order to bring mercy to the lost. In the language of the apostle Paul, He “did not spare His own Son” (Romans 8:32). He does not, then, intend for the intensity of His outreach to be thwarted by a few snooty brethren who are more interested in making sure that “only the right kind of people” attend their assemblies. “Blessed are the merciful,” was one of the beatitudes of Jesus, “for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Those who cannot extend the Lord’s mercy to the poor as well as the rich will not be able to plead for mercy at the judgment throne of Jesus. God is committed to the extension of His mercy; His mercy triumphs over His judgment, as well as over the petty judgments of men.

Gems From James

So Speak and So Act

The only true God is quite interested in performance from His children. His mercy is great; He is willing to separate the saint from his past sins as far as the east is separated from the west (Psalm 103:12). But His goal is not the mere forgiveness of sins granted to the objects of His mercy. His earnest desire is that His character be reproduced in His spiritual offspring, as illustrated by Jesus: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). The Father then works His infinitely complex plan, so that while man still exercises his own free will, the events still fit to discipline the saint perfectly, and that all things work together for good to those who love God and to those who are called according to His purpose. "For whom He foreknew," affirmed the apostle Paul, "He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:28,29). Don't "just believe" in Jesus, is the exordium from James. "So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty" (James 2:12).

- **Image at the core** — The key to performance is the inner picture, what the individual thinks of himself. Consequently the scripture is always working on making the presentation to Christians, emphasizing first who they are before it emphasizes what they accomplish — *be* before *do*. "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us," remarked the aged John, "that we should be called children of God; and *such we are*" (I John 3:1). God's desire to bring out the performance worthy of those called by His name is predicated upon their desire to have the new picture within themselves. "But love your enemies," stated the Lord Jesus Himself, "and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you *will be* sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35).
- **So speak** — Image takes place in the *mind*. With the proper image in place, as being the son of God, now the *mouth* has to be directed. "So speak," James adverts, "as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty." Gracious and edifying speech is to flow from the mouths of the redeemed, seasoned with salt, wooing and winning the willing of the world to Christ.
- **So act** — Not only are the *mind* and *mouth* to be subjected to the discipline of faith, but the *motion* of the follower of Christ is similarly to be controlled and directed. "So act," is the parallel thought of James, "as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty." "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness," Paul exhorted Timothy (I Timothy 4:7). "Walk in love," the same apostle encouraged the Ephesian brethren (Ephesians 5:2). "We know love by this," affirmed the apostle John, "that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I John 3:16). Love is far more than a sentiment; it is *action*.
- **Law of liberty** — The law of liberty offers grace, whereas the old law did not. Because the Christian is conscious of the liberty and grace extended to him while he gets his new image firmly planted, while he gets his speech under control, and while he gets his act together, he then is patient with brethren and with outsiders. Not judgmental, he works to edify and encourage those others as they draw near to God through Jesus Christ and bring their lives into subjection under the King.

There is to be no partiality toward guests in the assembly, or with those who are to be studied with. The speech and action of Christians is to regard all men of equal value to the Creator, and earnestly desire their salvation. The mercy of God on His terms is extended to "whoever will call" on His name.

Gems From James

Faith, but no Works?

Wherever the sons of men roam, there is a lot of empty boasting. Great swelling words emanate from mouths of those who have accomplished little or nothing in comparison to what their claims are. “Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams,” declares the Lord, “and related them, and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit,” declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:32). Those who claim they have wrestled with the devil in the darkest of midnights, or have caused someone’s crippled leg to grow four inches and be fully restored, are some of these empty boasters. Denominationalists who talk about the miraculous ways in which God answers their prayers are empty boasters. And some who just plain run their mouths inside the church of the living God are empty boasters.

- **If a man says** — “What use is it, my brethren,” queries James, “if a man says he has faith, but he has no works?” (James 2:14). Just because a man says he has faith doesn’t mean he has any; it could be empty boasting. Biblical faith is always connected to motion. “By faith Abel offered ...” “By faith Noah ... prepared ...” “By faith Abraham ... obeyed ...” “By faith [Moses] left ...” (Hebrews 11). Faith that is not tested is not really faith; faith overcomes real doubts and real obstacles. No works really means no faith.
- **Works of faith** — “For we maintain,” argued Paul, “that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28). There is a difference between works of faith and works of the Law, a distinction which some fail to observe and end up in some sort of stratosphere theology. Works of the Law are those things which a person would do to try to justify themselves before God — alms to the poor, fasting twice a week, outward show of prayers, tithing mint, dill and cummin seed, etc. Works of faith are those deeds which flow from an obedient belief in Christ as revealed in scripture — remaining faithful in the face of persecution, doing acts of kindness to spread the gospel, powering through obstacles with a great attitude, etc. When James speaks of works, he is not dealing with works of the Law but works of faith.
- **Can an empty faith save?** — After asking the rhetorical question concerning a supposed faith with no works, James follows with another: “Can that faith save him?” Not only is an empty faith useless, but it cannot save the individual either! One of the problems of James’ age as well as ours is the rationalization that “Since I believe and have been immersed, I’m saved,” regardless of whether there is any action following immersion. As an old preacher once exhorted his congregation: “We may not believe in ‘Once saved, always saved,’ but we sure act like it!” The issue here is of utmost seriousness. An empty faith cannot save a person; therefore he will go to hell on judgment day.

What God is looking for is a vibrant, forward-moving faith. This is the faith that moves mountains, conquers kingdoms, shuts the mouth of the roaring lion, and resurrects the dead from the waters of immersion. This the faith of those who are willing to go about in mountains, caves, and holes in the ground, carrying the torch of spiritual revolution into the recesses of a very dark world. This is the faith of those who have undergone the first resurrection, who are priests of God and of Christ, over whom the second death has no power, and who live and reign with Christ now! “Be faithful until death,” is the Lord’s own exordium, “and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

Gems From James

Practical Illustrations

The realm of faith is the realm of the unseen. “We look,” said the apostle Paul, “not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (II Corinthians 4:18). The brethren occasionally need some illustration from the physical realm, however, in order to be able to discern what is happening in the realm of faith. That’s when, the brethren say, the scripture gets “practical.”

A problem, in the realm of faith, is that some of the brethren *say* they have faith, but there is no fruit or evidence of that faith in their behavior. Such a faith is not only useless, but it cannot save the professor of said faith. Hence James brings in an illustration from the physical realm in an attempt to communicate the uselessness of an inactive pretense of faith.

- **In need** — No one claiming to be a Christian could ignore someone who had a desperate need. Jesus’ parable of The Good Samaritan established clearly that His followers are going to be those who love their neighbors by physical action. So James makes his appeal: “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?” (James 2:16). To say to a shivering, starving skeleton of a man that he can hype himself into having clothing or being over his hunger is the height of hypocrisy! James’ question really stands out: “What use is *that*?”
- **Illustration** — The point of the clothing/food illustration is not that clothing the naked or feeding the starving is faith. The point is that failing to do so while *saying* something positive is useless. “Even so faith,” affirmed the elder in Jerusalem’s congregation, “if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (James 2:17). Faith, by itself, is just an empty word; it is not the living faith that saves and powers forward in the kingdom of God, it is a dead faith in a spiritually dead person.
- **Friendly challenge** — James then paints a picture of someone’s issuing a friendly challenge to the faithless. “But someone may well say, ‘You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’ ” (James 2:18). Good challenge! The one who has been shooting his mouth off, *saying* that he has faith, now has nothing to say!
- **Demons believe** — “But I really do believe,” the inactive professor might say. James responds: “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder” (James 2:19). In other words, “big deal!” The demons are not exactly paragons of faith and virtue, but they believe in God. Faith obviously is not mere mental assent of the existence of God.
- **A foolish fellow** — The problem this nominal church member has is that he is deceiving himself about his faith and its ability to save him from his sins on judgment day. “But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow,” probes James, “that faith without works is useless” (James 2:20). If that faith will not justify the individual before God on the last day, it is certainly wasted and worthless, and the supposed Christian needs to come to grips with that; he needs to “recognize” the emptiness and hopelessness of his condition.

The theme of self-deception runs thread-like through the early portion of James’ epistle. “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren,” he had written in a previous section, talking about the baleful effects of sin. “Prove yourselves doers of the word, not merely hearers who delude themselves,” he had also written. Likewise, a person who pretends to have faith but has no works is deceiving himself, refusing to recognize that uselessness of his profession. May each examine his works to see if there is any self-deception involved, and may each’s real faith increase.

Gems From James

Faith of Abraham

In the gospel, Paul had said, the righteousness of God was revealed “from faith to faith.” This was in accordance with what had been written by the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk, “But the righteous shall live by faith.” Each of the Old Testament greats was justified by his faith, not by perfectly performing good deeds. Issues of faith are first concerned with “why” the person does what he does, then “what” he does as a second consideration. The apostle Paul thus stated, “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

Issues of attempts at justification by works of the law are not concerned with “why,” only with “what.” The Pharisee, according to Jesus, gave alms, prayed, and fasted. Those actions, which in and of themselves cannot be faulted, can be carried out without the proper heart; and a person who attempts to justify himself by law would simply point to those actions, saying, “See, I did these things; therefore I am holy and righteous.” Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, laying the foundation for *the faith* which was to come, affirmed that the Pharisees and hypocrites gave alms, prayed and fasted to be honored and seen by men. “Truly I say to you,” He iterated, “they have their reward in full” (Matthew 6:5). “This people honors Me with their lips,” was His quotation from Isaiah, “but their heart is far away from Me” (Matthew 15:8). Right action, wrong motive.

- **Justified by works?** — One of the apostle Paul’s thrusts in Romans is that an individual is not going to be justified by works of the Law; rather he is going to be justified by faith. James posits, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?” (James 2:21). This is only a contradiction if a person assumes that there are no works connected with faith.
- **Faith working with works** — Biblical faith always involves action based on a picture given by God; and faith therefore is concerned about the motive behind the action. “You see that faith was working with his works,” stated James of Abraham’s offering of Isaac, “and as a result of the works, faith was perfected” (James 2:22). Abraham certainly did not offer Isaac as an attempt to get to heaven. He simply did what God had told him to do in hope that somehow God would raise Isaac from the dead and thus fulfill His promise that, through Isaac, Abraham would become the father of many nations.
- **Believed God** — Before Isaac was born, Abraham believed God’s promise that his descendants would be as numberless as the stars of the sky, and that’s when Genesis states that Abraham’s belief was reckoned to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). James stresses, however, that had Abraham not offered Isaac as God directed, then Abraham would not have had the faith God could hold up as an example. Thus “the scripture was fulfilled,” James attested, “which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God” (James 2:23). God’s friends are those who trust Him enough to do what He says.
- **Not by faith alone** — Can faith without works save a man? was James’ rhetorical question. He gets to his answer following his comments on Abraham’s offering of Isaac: “You see,” he avouches, “that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone” (James 2:24).

The fleshly tendency of man is to try, as did Martin Luther and as have done all his Protestant descendants, to maintain that man is saved by mere mental assent, and that this is God’s definition of faith. And they hate James 2:24, because it affirms that faith requires action and that without the God-determined action, there is no faith. The question for all, then, is this: If a man is justified by works, where are the works of faith that justify?

Gems From James

Justified by Works

The God of glory knows the motives of man. From the time that Eve saw that the forbidden fruit was a delight to the eyes and that it was desirable to make her “wise,” man has been driven by “I want!” Hence he tends to maneuver and manipulate so that he can get his way and accomplish his selfish goals. Conspiracies — large and small — develop, body counts mount, and truth is trashed just so that ruthless and driven men and women might grasp their “I want’s.” “Their inner thought is, that their houses are forever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they have called their lands after their own names. But man in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beasts that perish” (Psalm 49:11,12).

Into this foray God has injected Himself in producing something He calls “faith” for anyone willing to follow His lead. The All Wise has put the consciousness of right and wrong into the heart of man, but that is not sufficient to provide solid movement toward faith. God, through Israel, introduced the Law as the next step in the preparation of mankind. “But before faith came,” stated Paul, “we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to *the faith* which was later to be revealed” (Galatians 3:23). God even brings the Gentiles under the Law through the preaching of the gospel, that they might be moved to the faith of the gospel. “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). The entrance of God personally into the world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ brought the love of God for each person to the fore, and through this process the Father has the opportunity to upgrade the motives of men. “For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory so that your faith and hope are in God” (I Peter 1:20,21). Man is now moved from total selfishness to an upward desire to please God. What a difference, and what wisdom!

- **Abraham’s example** — Abraham is called the “father of the faithful” because he was able to look to Him who is unseen long before Jesus’ birth. His offering of Isaac on the altar to please God stands as one of the great examples of faith for all time, and believers under the terms of the new covenant can learn from him. “You see,” pointed out James, “that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” His works were undergirded by the pure motive of faith in God.
- **Rahab** — Another person out of the Old Testament James and the Holy Spirit bring to the forefront is Rahab the harlot. As Israel was preparing to take the promised land, she hid spies from her fellow Canaanites because she believed God was with Israel. “And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works,” affirmed the elder, “when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way” (James 2:25). Her good intentions alone would not have saved the spies; those intentions had to turn into action or “works.”
- **Body without spirit** — One more illustration was apparently necessary to complete the message of how imperative it is for saints of faith to be in motion. “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26).

A “faith without works” is dead, useless, and cannot save. Without the works of faith the individual is not justified, and if he is not justified, his eternity will be in the outer darkness away from the presence of God. Are the saints listening?

Gems From James

So You Want to Teach

The undisciplined flesh wants to skip steps. Halfway done jobs and half-hearted efforts are the hallmarks of those who want to do things the easy way rather than the right way. The prince of darkness, the destroyer and murderer, works on a mass scale as well as on an individual basis to produce undisciplined creatures who have a poor work ethic and bad attitudes. Many of these never have an interest in the Son of God; the seed of the word of God lands in the packed portion of the soil in their cases. But those who become interested in Christ Jesus and obey the gospel often struggle when their faith is to be translated into action. “Faith without works” is the undisciplined approach to the highway of holiness. The problem, of course, is that such a “faith” cannot save.

This lack of discipline tends to carry over into some who want to be teachers in the body of Christ without having done the study and life preparation necessary to be effective purveyors of the word of truth. James and the Holy Spirit continue their warnings.

- **Not many teachers** — The apostle Paul exhorted Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15). Handling the scripture is compared to being a skilled craftsman; it takes some training and on-the-job experience to become an effective communicator of the truths of God’s word. A Christian who does a poor job of presenting the word, or who comes off with some half-baked ideas or lousy exegesis “needs to be ashamed.” James informs us of the seriousness of teaching the eternal truths: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1).
- **Stricter judgment** — Anyone who teaches the word of God must be aware that he is accountable to the Almighty God who delivered the word to the world through the gospel of His Son. Timothy, for example, was reminded that his preaching was “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus” (II Timothy 4:1). And the apostle Peter remonstrates teachers of the word, “Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God” (I Peter 4:11). Because of how many people’s eternity hangs in the balance, and because the influence of instructors is so great, those who are teachers of the word of God are to come under “stricter judgment.” That is how it should be.
- **Get the study, keep the study, expand the study** — The easy way to be a teacher is to come into a ready-made group that someone else has set up. A Bible school class that has been developed over the years, as an example, has momentum that a new teacher can step into. The problem this may present is that the people in the class will continue to attend even though the teacher is doing a poor job; there is no feedback mechanism in place for the teacher to know whether he is really being effective. The right way to “pay the dues” is to learn how to set up studies with people who are outside of Christ, work with them through their problems and lack of understanding, defend the faith against false doctrines, have enough knowledge and love and enthusiasm to keep the study going, and accumulate enough experience eventually to have that study be so encouraging and edifying that the other people’s friends want to join.

Any saint who truly wants to be accountable to God will set up feedback mechanisms so that he has some way of tracking his effectiveness. While it is true that not everyone will obey the gospel, the fisher of men must continually be seeking ways to improve his knowledge and communication skills. The “faith without works” mentality is a characteristic of those who want to avoid accountability and built-in feedback; the “faith with works” mentality is one which is willing to step up to the challenge of “stricter judgment.”

Gems From James

Power of the Tongue

It was not easy for Jesus to overcome temptation and be the victorious Savior. His anguish as He approached the cross is recorded in the gospel accounts, and is easily related to by all those who have walked this earth. Sin, then, is described as that “which so easily entangles us” (Hebrews 12:1). That statement does not mean that an individual has to sin, but it does point out how easily anyone may fall into sin. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall,” is Paul’s injunction (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Connected with victory over sin is control over the tongue. Words can edify, or words can tear down; words can encourage, or words can deflate. Not only are words which are said to others able to save or destroy, but words which people say to themselves also have this same power. The tongue is a tool, and it has great leverage in the lives of mankind.

- **Teachers of the word** — Teachers of the word of God have the utmost in responsibilities; while other words may be edifying or encouraging by themselves, the words that scriptural teachers bring are the very words of eternal life. Hence it is that false teachers are regarded as “anathema,” the very worst in the ranks of men. “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren,” James cautioned, “knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1).
- **Tendency to stumble** — The record of man is that when he operates under his own power, he fails. “For all have sinned,” is Paul’s inspired analysis, “and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “For we all stumble in many ways,” is James concurrence. And showing the connection between the tongue and the rest of a man’s life, he adds, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well” (James 3:2).
- **Bit, bridles, and rudders** — “The tongue,” observed James, “is a small part of the body” (James 3:5). But the tongue is placed strategically so that it sets the course of the entire life of the individual. A person speaks into existence his success or failure, his glorious future or his fall! “Now if we put bits into the horses’ mouths so that they may obey us,” is one illustration, “we direct their entire body as well” (James 3:3). Compared to the size of a horse, the bit in its mouth is pretty small, but it is so placed that it turns or halts a massive steed. “Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires” (James 3:4). The picture of a great ship being turned by the reeving of the pilot on the wheel controlling the rudder is a super parallel to the Christian’s turning the vast bulk of his life positive by controlling the words rolling off his tongue! The “pilot” must so incline, and the ship of his life will be steered in the proper direction.

What begins in the *mind* must move through the *mouth* to result in the victorious *motion* of the life of a Christian. “The mouth,” said Jesus, “speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34). Man in his natural state has a deceitful heart, and therefore his “mouth is full of cursing and bitterness” (Romans 3:14). But the new creature in Christ has a circumcised heart, and through the process of renewing his mind, that which comes out of his mouth directs his life in the path of righteousness. Long gone are “bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander”; in the place of that blackness come wholesome words which are good for edification — both for the saint himself and for all who are blessed to come into his presence.

Gems From James

Taming the Tongue

“The words of wise men are like goads,” recorded the sage Solomon, “and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd” (Ecclesiastes 12:11). “The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable,” was another of his wise sayings, “but the mouth of fools spouts folly” (Proverbs 15:2). The tongue is a powerful weapon, for good or for evil. “There is one who speaks rashly like thrusts of the sword,” stated Solomon, “but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18). Taming the tongue, then, is of critical importance.

- **Great destruction** — One small spark can set off a great conflagration; such is the description of the tongue when its words are misdirected. “So also the tongue is a small part of the body,” spoke James in comparing the tongue to a bridle bit or ship’s rudder, “and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!” (James 3:5). The cascading effect of strife-driven words can be immense, impacting the lives of hundreds or thousands in a major way. The tongue is small, but its claims can be humongous, and its destruction almost beyond measure.
- **The course of our lives** — When words begin running that negatively impact the reputation of a corporation, for example, that corporation — in order to salvage its existence — puts procedures into effect called “damage control.” “And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity,” affirmed James. “The tongue is set among our members as that which sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell” (James 3:6). The untamed tongue, one of the most salient features of the human race, does not receive a very complimentary rating by the Lord’s inspired bond-servant here. But what is so significant is that this which is “set on fire by hell” is what directs the course of everyone’s lives! That is why, in redirecting the channel of life for a person in the process of becoming a Christian, the *mouth* must be brought into submission by its declaring that Jesus is Lord. “For by your words you shall be justified,” is the statement of the Judge Himself, “and by your words you shall be condemned” (Matthew 12:37). The untamed tongue defiles the entire body; to be cleansed of all defilement the follower of Christ must develop a controlled tongue.
- **The challenge** — The tongue, it is admitted, cannot be controlled by human effort alone; divine assistance is going to be needed. “For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison” (James 3:7,8). The human race can tame lions, tigers, bears, and elephants, but the tongue is a more vicious animal than any of those and less easily subjected. As a “restless evil,” it just can’t wait to spread bad news and discouragement; as “full of deadly poison,” it explodes with slander and words of strife.

The good news is this: that while the human race may not be able to control its tongues, there is a superior race which can. The “chosen race,” a set of new creatures, created in Christ Jesus for good works, cleanses itself of all defilement of flesh and spirit, and with a new heart controls the tongue. “The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good,” stated Jesus, “and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil” (Matthew 12:35). By God’s changing the treasure within through the power of the indwelling Spirit, as the new creature beholds the glory of the Lord, that which flows through the tongue is changed. The Christian’s tongue is now an instrument of righteousness, accomplishing the greatest of all tasks: bringing healing and life to the souls of men otherwise condemned to an eternity of destruction.

Gems From James

Consistent Speech

“The tongue is a fire,” remarked James, “the very world of iniquity” (James 3:6). Not a good recommendation!

The unregenerate tongue causes a tremendous amount of trouble in the world among the sons of men. Words that wound and barbs that burn are the norm of the day, and trash talk is not limited to football fields or athletic arenas. Day after day the downward drivel goes on, and life after life is destructively impacted by twisted tongues and their crude comments. The tongue in the natural man “is set on fire by hell.”

Not only are destructive comments issued by the tongue, but hidden agendas work through that small but directive organ. “Their throat is an open grave,” is one of Paul’s selected quotations from the Old Testament, “with their tongues they keep deceiving” (Romans 3:13). “By their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting,” he says in another place (Romans 16:18). Such “double tongues” are not consistent in their speech; that which flatters today slanders tomorrow.

- **From the same mouth** — Some of the problems from the world of the unregenerate carry over into the church because the church consists of those who have been redeemed from the world and have not yet been able to get the renewing of the mind firmly entrenched. “For since there is jealousy and strife among you,” queried Paul, “are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?” (I Corinthians 3:3). And these problems will manifest themselves through the tongue. “With it we bless our Lord and Father,” James commented, “and with it we curse men, who have been made in the image of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing” (James 3:9,10). The inconsistency is established by James’ reasoning: how can a person bless God, and turn around and curse someone made in the image of God?
- **Not to be** — The writings of the New Testament do not paint this picture of the tongues as one of hopeless resignation, that this is how it will always be; rather the positive thrust of victory in this is what is set forth. Regarding this inconsistency of speech, James posits, “My brethren, these things ought not to be this way” (James 3:10).
- **Illustrations of condition** — The disparity of a Christian’s bad-mouthing a brother or “dissing” the degenerate is brought forth in illustrative interrogatories: “Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?” is one of James’ questions. “Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs?” (James 3:11,12). The obvious answer to these rhetorical questions is, “No.”
- **Source of the fountain** — After asking these questions, James responds with a terse comment: “Neither can salt water produce fresh.” The conclusions that the saint is to draw is that the right source produces fresh water and the right trees produce the right fruit. If the Christian finds his tongue spreading the wrong kind of talk, then he needs to work on changing the well-spring of his conversation or working on the roots of his character tree.

“The good man,” said Jesus, “out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil” (Matthew 12:35). In order for the tongue to bring forth the sweet water of pure conversation, the source or “the treasure” has to become pure. Through the principles of *the new creation* as laid out in the New Testament writings, that source can become pure and the tongue can be tamed. “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good,” was Jesus’ instruction, “or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit” (Matthew 12:33). The captives who have been liberated by the conquering King Jesus thus fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: “So they will be called the oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified” (Isaiah 61:3).

Gems From James

Who Is Wise?

In quelling the apostles' rising feeling against James and John, Jesus illustrated what it was going to be like to be one of His imitators. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served," He affirmed, "but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The Christian is saved to serve, to give and not to get. "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant," emphasized the Lord Himself, "and whoever wishes to first among you shall be slave of all" (Mark 10:43,44). The focus, then, of the true bond-servant of the Lord is outward rather than inward, and his thoughts are directed toward how he might be most effective in assisting others in their spiritual growth.

- **Edifying speech** — The untamed tongue spews forth destructive comments in the midst of its attempts to be positive. But saint who is going to be effective in assisting the brethren and reaching the lost is going to have a disciplined tongue, and the overflow of his heart will be reflected in the edifying encouragement he is able to spread around. "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth," is Paul's exhortation, "but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). This control of the tongue even reaches to the types of discussion the Christian will engage in. "But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations," Paul instructed Timothy, "knowing that they produce quarrels." The saint of God, outwardly focused, is able to keep his attention fixed on the main direction the conversation should take. "And the Lord's bond-servant," the apostle continued, "must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will" (II Timothy 2:23-26). If there is ever a place where discipline of the tongue is needed, it is in exhibiting the gentleness required to reach the lost.
- **Wise and understanding** — James adds action to the talk of the tongue. "Who among you is wise and understanding?" he inquired. "Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom" (James 3:13). Just because a man nods wisely and utters words in an authoritative voice does not mean he has any wisdom. As in all matters of importance, the "walk" has to be there with the "talk." "Deeds in the gentleness of wisdom" is no small matter. It takes some "practice" or experience, according to Hebrews' writer, for those who would be wise "to have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14). And in the delicate matters of restoration of a soul that has wandered into sin and away from the truth, Paul writes, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). Knowing how to approach such a one with the goal of restoration requires a lot of wisdom and understanding, and it is not a job for the novice to tackle.

The truly wise knows which way to walk. He comprehends how to set the direction for himself and for those whom he influences, he disciplines his body and tongue, and he has the experience to see the evil lurking just underneath the surface and how to glide past it into the good and right and true. He has the gentleness and patience to reach the lost and encourage the saints, but he also has the toughness of will to move the lost and wandering to repentance. It is a good challenge: "Who among you is wise and understanding?"

Gems From James

Bitterness and Selfish Ambition

There have always been those who are avaricious and ambitious. In Jesus' day, some of those who sensed the stirrings of the Messiah were at work to establish an earthly kingdom, as Jesus noted, "From the days of John the Immerser until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force" (Matthew 11:12). Their ambitions, driven by a fleshly focus, resulted in violence as they attempted to remove by force anyone who thwarted their aspirations for a physical kingdom. As the church developed, Peter warned of the avaricious, saying, "In their greed they will exploit you with false words" (II Peter 2:3). James, then, is going to require that each claimant to the footsteps of Christ examine his heart in the matter of motive, questioning the thrust of his labor in the context of the kingdom of God.

- **Bitter jealousy** — The best anyone can do in evaluating the heart of someone else is to examine the fruit of his conduct. But each person can probe own heart if he chooses to do so, honestly assessing his inner motives. "But if you have bitter jealousy ... in your heart," challenges James (James 3:14). The Christian needs to carry the lamp of investigation into the very depths of his soul, looking for what the writer of Hebrews calls the "root of bitterness" (Hebrews 12:15). These taproots go deep into a person, cause a lot of trouble, and defile many souls. But James is calling for an investigation into a special kind of bitterness, that which is wound together with jealousy. Jealousy is that green-horned monster lurking in the heart of fleshly man, especially despising excellence in others. Jealousy, for example, often glittered in the eyes of those Jews who first heard the apostle Paul preach in their synagogues. Rather than obeying the gospel, they chose instead to try to destroy him who aroused interest in the crowds, an interest they could not generate. Their smoldering, jealous resentment finally burst into full flame as they had him imprisoned, beaten, etc. This bitter jealousy, then, in the heart of any believer, will not only send his soul to hell, but will also cause tremendous damage in the church.
- **Selfish ambition** — James is also concerned about "selfish ambition in your heart." There are those who love the souls of men and desire that they be saved; and there are those who love position within the church and use the "love of souls" as a cover for their position ambition. This is pure selfishness, according to the divine analysis, and likewise will send a person to hell and cause destruction in the church.
- **In your heart** — The problem with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition is that they are hidden from physical sight. Because they are not so easy to detect, many of the saints get blind-sided when they are working alongside one of the wolves-in-sheep's-clothing. The hidden bitterness and ambition lay the foundation for their action much like a general's laying out a battle plan; when the strategic moment arrives, bitterness and ambition strike, and countless sheep are destroyed while war is waged for the control of the church.

Those with the jealousy and ambition are warned: "Do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth." Such ungodliness has to be rooted out of the heart by the individual's own desire to be honest and to serve God. His failure to do so is regarded as arrogance — the opposite of humility — and worthy of eternal condemnation. But, because such jealousy and ambition are hidden in the heart, it is very difficult to prove that they exist, although those with experience have their senses trained to discern them by the fruit of the possessor. Hence it is that the individual who is jealous and ambitious who is going to have to deal with his own problem; if he does not, then all sorts of destruction is coming down the pike.

Gems From James

Wisdom – But Not From Above

Christians need to be aware that the earthly realm is not nice. It is in fact a war zone, where every trick in the book and every intimidation tactic are being used on a daily basis against the souls of men. The saints in Ephesus, for example, were warned not “to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). That men would be tricky, that they would craft their lies, that they would actually take the time to set up spiritual scams make it clear that there is some intelligence or wisdom on the dark side, a shrewd craftiness that followers of the Most High must be constantly aware of. “This wisdom,” commented James, “is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic” (James 3:15). It is going to take scriptural knowledge, experience in handling the sword of the Spirit, intelligence, awareness, and wisdom from above to perform productively in this war zone.

- **Earthly** — Things of earth have their allure. The perspective here is not warning saints about the seductive appeal of the appurtenances of Babylon, but how these things can be used by those who have bitter jealousy or selfish ambition. When the apostle Paul, for example, wrote to the congregation in Corinth, he drew the conclusion that there were fleshly desires extant in their midst: “For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly ...” (I Corinthians 3:3). Where there is no fleshly desire, earthly wisdom has no opportunity to operate because it has nothing to appeal to. But, as in the case of Corinth, where there are brethren who have not yet crucified the flesh with its passions, then the worldly wise can find the weakness in the brethren, give their agenda a fleshly appeal, and they are on their way to causing strife and major disorder.
- **Natural** — Water naturally flows down hill. The body naturally would rather rest than keep moving. “Natural” wisdom appeals to these natural tendencies in order to accomplish its goals. King Jeroboam, in accordance with his agenda of keeping Israel from associating with Judah, instituted the worship of golden calves at Dan and Bethel, appealing to the natural desire to do the easy thing rather than the right thing: “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem,” he said (I Kings 12:28). Thus the bulk of Israel was sucked into worshipping the calves and descending into idolatry, while only a few of the ancient stock migrated into Judah rather than compromising their faith.
- **Demonic** — It is interesting that worldly wisdom would be associated with demons. Catholicism, and other religions which require celibacy and abstinence from certain foods, resulted from “paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (I Timothy 4:1). There is a certain devilish craftiness, a dark intelligence, connected with those who introduce destructive heresies into the body of the Christ; they are wise in how they go about introducing their sedition into the congregations. And the doctrines themselves may have been concocted in the pits of the abyss and distributed to the selfishly ambitious and bitter by means of séances or other occult activities.

The wisdom from above is manifested in the good behavior of its possessor, and it is possessed by those who have prayed earnestly for it from heaven. The *earthly, natural, and demonic* wisdom, however comes as a result of following ambition or a desire to hurt someone else. Driven by the natural fleshly desire of man, and whipped into an inner frenzy by Satan himself, the wisdom of darkness now begins its rampage. Stealthily, craftily, and at strategic moments openly, this wisdom foments division and destruction. Congregations are split, those who “were not of us” leave, weaker members and the young are spiritually injured, and everyone suffers in really having to work to keep attitudes focused and positive. This wisdom, clearly, “is not that which comes down from above.”

Gems From James

Disorder in the Ranks

Christians need to remember that the Almighty is at war with Satan, and that His army is the church of the living God. The church, therefore, does not exist for the benefit, pleasure, and performance of the brethren; the assembly of the saints exists solely for the purposes of God. When the individual turns from darkness to light, receiving the blessings of forgiveness of sins and the indwelling Spirit, he must recognize that he has signed on to serve. Self is buried in the waters of immersion, and a soldier of the Lord has arisen from that watery grave. "I have been crucified with Christ," asseverated the apostle Paul, "and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Running counter to the program God is individual selfishness. Where the prince of darkness, therefore, can find the opportunity in the still unburied fleshly desires of a saint, he will do everything he can to incite such selfishness.

The selfish individual thus becomes a traitor to the cause of Christ. And traitors are especially dangerous. They walk among the brethren, and are trusted as one of them. They speak the language of the saint; they are familiar with his terminology and nuances of expression. They are invited to the center of fellowship gatherings, and are trusted in meetings of strategy. These betrayers know the offensive strengths of the local battalions of God, and they are conscious of holes in their defenses. As such, when they decide to do damage, their actions are like the explosion of a pipe bomb inside a theater. The death toll is high, the carnage and injury is horrific, and the time to repair damage is considerable and expensive. Such are the products of "enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying," and such traitors justly "shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:20,21). "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist," affirmed James, "there is disorder and every evil thing" (James 3:16).

- **Disorder** — God has a powerful offensive thrust in which He continually advances on the forces of darkness. One by one, He snaps the chains of captivity that bind those who were held in the bondage of sin and despair. Of the church, Jesus Himself said, "The gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Hence one of the major strategies of the Adversary is to have his agents burrow inside the church, and cause disruption to the offensive order generated by the Spirit of God. "Certain persons have crept in unnoticed," was Jude's observation, "ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). By creating disorder, these false brethren are the greatest hindrances to the work of the productive saints of God.
- **Every evil thing** — These false brethren prey on every weakness inside the local body of Christ. "Many will follow their sensuality," was Peter's comment, "and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned" (II Peter 2:2). They encourage fleshly rebellion; instead of exhorting their brothers and sisters to overcome sin, they offer excuses and justification for less-than-perfect conduct. Rather than pointing out the potential for taking the higher ground, they continue to guide others into destructive habits, often sowing seeds so subtle that the Christian is at first not aware that he is being programmed for rebellion. The result is that every evil immorality and rotten attitude is exhibited inside the congregation, and the name of Christ is once again trashed for the outside world.

Where disorder and every evil thing exist for a congregation naming the name of Christ, there is jealousy and selfish ambition somewhere. It is the job, particularly of church leadership, to find where the jealousy and selfish ambition are, and intelligently root it out. Until that is accomplished, Satan will have his pipe bombs inside the theater, and the church will not be able to move forward.

Gems From James

Wisdom That Is Pure

“You know,” stated Jesus to the apostles, “that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them” (Matthew 20:25). These rulers and great men got there because that was their driving ambition. They learned that, in this world, the way to get ahead or get to the top is by climbing over the dead bodies of their opposition and by continuing to crush their competition. They not only “talk trash” to intimidate their rivals, but they resort to brutality and torture as well. “The poison of asps is under their lips,” commented the apostle Paul, “whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known” (Romans 3:13-17). Most of those who “make it to the top” in the business and political world are intelligent, cunning individuals, who are indeed guided by wisdom, a wisdom that is not from above but “earthly, natural, demonic.” The history of this world is replete with conspiracies of men who operate with demonic wisdom for their own riches, position, and power. “Concerning evil,” analyzed the prophet, “both hands do it well. The prince asks, also the judge, for a bribe, and a great man speaks the desire of his soul; so they weave it together” (Micah 7:3).

But the saints of God are not of this world. They have been called out of darkness to live above the world, to function in accordance with the dictates of a higher calling. They have been “born from above,” and therefore are guided by “wisdom from above” (James 3:17).

- **Motive** — “The wisdom from above,” adverted James, “is first pure.” The very first thing about godly wisdom is purity of motive. Those of the world are selfish, and have their own interests in mind as they make their decisions and reeve on the circumstances of their lives. Saints of God, by a great contrast, have at the center of their concern the interests of their King. In His own defense, Jesus noted: “He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him” (John 7:18). Had Jesus any desire other than to glorify the Father, His speech and action would have been twisted by personal interest and bias; He would not therefore have been able to carry out one of His greatest purposes, that of becoming “to us wisdom from God” (I Corinthians 1:30). In this matter of motive, saints need to be imitators of Christ.
- **Purity of thought** — Purity of motive can only flow from purity of thought. Any person making a claim to godliness must discipline his thoughts. Those who allow their minds to drift into longing for the prurient, love for the pecuniary, or lust for power are not going to be able to have pure motives. The defilement associated with selfish thought patterns colors all motives with the pungency of evil. “To the pure,” commented the apostle Paul, “all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled” (Titus 1:15). Hence it is that spiritual soldiers engage in their warfare by disciplining their thought processes, “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (II Corinthians 10:5). “Whatever is pure,” is one of the items on Paul’s disciplined-mind list, adding, “let your mind dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

There is no escaping the essentiality of purity in connection with Christianity. “Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him,” affirmed the apostle John, referencing seeing the Lord at His coming, “purifies himself, just as He is pure” (I John 3:3). James’ application of purity to the issue of wisdom cannot therefore be sidestepped: “The wisdom from above is first pure.” If the saint wants godly wisdom, he must purify his heart!

Gems From James

Wisdom That Is Peaceable

“Upon this rock,” said Jesus, referencing the bedrock truth that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matthew 18:18). The picture is that the church is storming the stockade of Hades to deliver its captives, and those gates fall before the onslaught of the gospel. The implication is that Hades is not anxious to release its captives, and that the warfare for spiritual freedom is intense. Hence it is that the saint of God, the spiritual warrior, needs to be secure in the knowledge that his position is impregnable, that he is certain of victory so long as he continues to carry out the General’s battle plan. This is what is contained in the expression that “the wisdom from above is ... peaceable” (James 3:17). Wisdom from heaven and spiritual counsel provide the calm assurance that God’s child, regardless of his external circumstances, is on the right track and that God his Rock is standing with him (or provides means by which the struggling saint can get on that right track). The great God and All Wise Father has provided some awesome assurances so that the faithful follower of Christ has the proper focus, winning the war for the release of the captives rather than being battered and disoriented by the vagaries of earthly existence.

- **God is in control** — The scourged, beaten, and oft imprisoned Paul was able to assure the brethren: “And we know,” he asseverated, “that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). The conditional aspects of this promise are that the individual has to: 1) love God, and 2) be called. True spiritual counsel, therefore, will help that struggling sheep to be certain that he really loves God and will assist him in making sure that he has followed the scriptural protocol in being one of the “called.” Once those two issues are settled, then the sense of impregnability can overflow the Christian, and the wisdom from above will have done its “peaceable” work.
- **God is faithful** — Jesus said, “The scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). While the world chafes at the narrowness of “the way,” the church appreciates the fact that what God has spoken will not change. “It is a trustworthy statement,” affirmed the apostle Paul, “For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself” (II Timothy 2:11-13). *He remains faithful!* Godly counsel, in consonance with the “peaceable” wisdom from above, will assist the disciple of Christ to trust in that faithfulness, and to govern his life accordingly.
- **God will not abandon His own** — The forces of darkness are allowed to put all kinds of pressure on the saint. Threats of jail, incarceration itself, physical punishment, and even brutal death have historically been the lot of those who followed the Savior. The apostle Peter quoted, “And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled” (I Peter 3:14). Jesus Himself had these encouraging words: “If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26). Financial pressures — where the next meal will come from — are real challenges also. “Let your character be free from the love of money,” exhorted Hebrews’ author, “being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.’ ” (Hebrews 13:5). This wisdom from above puts the Christian in the confident position of knowing that God will cover his needs, and he can be “peaceable.”

The holy ones of God have always been those who believed what God said. The wisdom from above, spoken in the scriptures by the Almighty, provides the calm assurance that all is well, that things are proceeding in accordance with the mighty hand of God. And a person who provides spiritual counsel will always take the saint to that written word, establishing the peaceable, impregnable position of the faithful.

Gems From James

Gentle and Reasonable Wisdom

The “gentle giants” of the faith are those who have the spiritual strength to reach down and truly help those who need wisdom. They can get to the point without engaging in “put downs.” They can strengthen others without putting them in straight-jackets. They walk in the footsteps of the gentle Jesus Himself, of whom it was written, “A battered reed He will not break off, and a smoldering wick He will not put out, until He leads justice to victory. And in His name the Gentiles will hope” (Matthew 12:20,21). Battered reeds have to be handled gently, and smoldering wicks require a lot of intelligent care before they can burst into full flame. “Wisdom from above,” says James, is “gentle, reasonable ...” (James 3:17).

- **Gentleness of wisdom** — The goal of correction is to provide change of behavior. Sample scenario: Which is going to provide real change, a young father yelling at his three year old for accidentally spilling the pitcher of water, or a grandfather patiently and intelligently showing that same three year old how to pay a little more attention to surroundings? Wisdom from above is gentle, and is truly concerned about assisting people in changing their character, so that real change in performance will result.
- **How God works** — God is gentle, and God is reasonable. Listen to His appeal: “Come now, and let us reason together,” spoke He through Isaiah, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). The Father in heaven is gently wooing the race of men, those who have alienated themselves from Him through their sins and have made themselves enemies of God. His approach is to sit down and reason with them, making a reasoned presentation of their condition apart from Him, and showing His solution to the problem through Jesus Christ.
- **Wisdom from above is not unreasonable** — The scriptures recognize that men (and women) are often unreasonable. “Servants,” Peter addresses the occupation-bound brethren of the first century, “be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable” (I Peter 2:18). “In the same way, you wives,” the apostle adds, implying that husbands can be unreasonable. Trying to deal with someone who will not listen to an appeal, or who makes demands that are not in touch with reality is very frustrating. “Fathers,” is one of Paul’s injunctions, “do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart” (Colossians 3:21). One of the most exasperating things parents do is to make decisions regarding their children for no particular reason, decisions that are just plain arbitrary or have nothing to do with the issues of the moment. This is not “wisdom from above.”
- **Wisdom is reasonable** — When the Lord Jesus told Ananias to go into Damascus and talk to one Saul of Tarsus, Ananias was a little skeptical. “Lord,” he answered, “I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Your name” (Acts 9:13,14). The Lord was not angry with Ananias’ asking a reasonable question; He took the time to explain that Saul was to be a chosen instrument of His, and that Ananias was therefore to go on into the city. Wisdom from above does not regard good questions as rejection of authority; it hears the question out and listens to the input of others.

This wisdom from above is to be prayed for. “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God,” was the earlier instruction from James. Those who truly desire to be gentle and reasonable in their dealings with the frailties and foibles of the human race will pray for such wisdom.

Gems From James

Full of Mercy and Good Fruits

When Satan was able to get King David to take an ill-advised census, the Lord asked David what sort of punishment he should receive. David's response is instructive: "I am in great distress; please let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are very great. But do not let me fall into the hand of man" (I Chronicles 21:13). When the thin veneer of civilization is removed and the blood lust of man runs unchecked, the real ruthlessness and brutality of his character is exposed. "Their feet are swift to shed blood," was Paul's selected quotation, "destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known" (Romans 3:15-17). Man, master of the "feeding frenzy" and participant in the "pile on," is not naturally merciful. Against this backdrop comes "the wisdom from above," and pretty obviously "from above": It is "full of mercy and good fruits."

- **Mercy** — David was correct; the mercies of the Lord are indeed very great. When the angel of the Lord stood with outstretched sword at the field of Ornan the Jebusite, ready to destroy Jerusalem, David's appeal to God's mercy checked the plague and the city was spared. "Mercy," James had commented earlier, "triumphs over judgment." Mercy suspends the punishment and rules for punishment, allowing for the weakness or special situation of the individual; as such it is the major means by which the sinner-turned-saint comes to appreciate God, and give the praise and glory due His name.
- **Administering mercy** — Those who possess the wisdom from above bring the message of mercy to struggling members of the fallen race. "And have mercy on some, who are doubting," was the exhortation of Jude, "save others, snatching them from the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 22,23). And those who are spiritual know how to be merciful and non-judgmental to others, encouraging them along the way. "He who shows mercy," according to Paul, is to show it "with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:8).
- **Good fruits** — "So then," said Jesus Himself, "you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:20). The "fruits" is the track record of the person, the cumulation of past decisions. It just makes good sense that trustworthy Christians are those who have that good track record in giving advice and assistance. Rehoboam, son of Solomon, wanting to be independent along with the other young men, made the mistake that cost him a major portion of the kingdom. "And the king answered [the people] harshly," records the Chronicles, "and King Rehoboam forsook the counsel of the elders. And he spoke to them according to the advice of the young men" (II Chronicles 10:13,14). Woe to the individual or congregation which neglects the advice of those who have a proven record of spiritual performance, and listens to the pleasing talk of the untested. Wisdom from above is full of "good fruits."

God gives wisdom to those who ask in faith, without doubting, "generously." Hence the wisdom from above will be *full* of mercy and good fruits. The mercy rendered cheerfully by those who have such wisdom will be ongoing, not a one-time special occasion circumstance. The good fruits of the spiritually wise are a continual round of wise decisions and counsel, steering people in paths of righteousness and keeping them from the destruction of wolves and false prophets.

The way to become full of this mercy and demonstrative of the good fruits is through the process of "getting the study, keeping the study, and expanding the study." In dealing with people's problems down in the trenches of their warfare, the saint really learns to pray for wisdom. Here he is responsible for giving the mercy and guidance necessary for new contacts taking the first steps on the road of spiritual freedom. Here he has the opportunity to get feedback from his track record (or lack of one), and grow in the grace and knowledge of our God and Savior. Here he can become tested and ultimately "full of mercy and good fruits."

Gems From James

Unwavering, without Hypocrisy

Consistency of good character communicates more than millions of empty words. Christ, then, “became to us wisdom from God” (I Corinthians 1:30). “And the life was manifested,” said the apostle John, “and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us” (I John 2:2). The consistent character of the great God was thus communicated to mankind, that all might trust Him for salvation and all lesser things of earthly existence.

Furthermore, this life was manifested that the brethren might develop that same consistency of character. “For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises,” animadverted Peter, “in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (II Peter 1:4). The All Wise God has thus made provision for His spiritual offspring, that they might progressively shed the thought patterns of the past and shine as consistent lights of good character in the midst of a darkened and perverted generation. “Partakers,” Peter said — joint participants — “of the divine nature!”

- **Unwavering** — The “wisdom from above,” averred James, is “unwavering.” One of the purposes of this heavenly wisdom is to produce people who are confident in their decision-making ability in the sight of God. “The one who doubts,” observed James, “is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6). Our Lord Jesus, during the years of His earthly sojourn, as this “wisdom from God,” exhibited the unwavering confidence of such wisdom. “I know where I came from,” He noted, “and where I am going” (John 8:14). There was no doubt in His mind as to the efficacy of the great plan of redeeming mankind, nor was there doubt in His mind as to His ability to carry out His portion of the plan. “And it came about,” is Luke’s affirmation, “when the days were approaching for His ascension, that He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). The disciples of Christ, receiving this same wisdom from above, thus know likewise where they came from and where they are going. They likewise, having prayed for wisdom, know of the intelligence of their plans, and their ability to carry out their portion of the plans.
- **Without hypocrisy** — A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be pious and holy, when in fact in his private life he is not. Jesus was harder on hypocrites than anyone else. The prostitutes and tax-gatherers were gently welcomed under the condition that they repent, but for the hypocrites his words were harsh and pointed. Of these walking whitewashed tombs He said, “Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:28). “Wisdom from above,” then is clearly going to be without hypocrisy, because it is not wise to be condemned for all eternity as one who play acted with Christianity. But this wisdom is also going to be without hypocrisy, because the hypocrite is lawless and therefore has a subtle lawless agenda; the hypocrite is one of those who causes “disorder and every evil thing.” The one without hypocrisy, by contrast, has pure motives, and does not try to pretend to be more than what he is.

The consistency characteristic of those saints who are unwavering and without hypocrisy is what makes the rest of the world sit up and take notice. These are the ones who are wise in the conduct of their personal affairs, and these are also the ones to whom spiritually weaker saints should turn for advice and counsel. “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy” (James 3:17). Pay attention, very close attention.

Gems From James

Fruit of Righteousness

How does a Christian evaluate himself and his performance? Such evaluation is important, as the scripture says, “I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment” (Romans 12:3). There is danger that the saint may be running a personal agenda, as Paul warns: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit ... do not merely look out for your own personal interests” (Philippians 2:3,4). The New Testament is replete with warnings about caving in under pressure, or using liberty in Christ as a cover for licentious activity. And the one who truly follows the teachings of Jesus and who works in the church for the glory of God often faces accusations from those who are fleshly-minded, who cast aspersions upon the spiritually-minded to deflect attention away from their own short-comings. “By this we know that we love the children of God,” are words of stability and perspective from John, “when we love God and keep His commandments” (I John 5:2). “And the seed who fruit is righteousness,” is James’ contribution, “is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:18).

- **The seed** — No individual can change another; people can influence others, but change must always come from the individual himself. This influence is of major importance, however, because the struggling occupants of the human race tend to be sheep without a shepherd, needing direction and motivation. “Seed,” then, is planted in the minds of people. Bad seed is going to produce bad fruit; good seed — points, principles, and practices — from the word of God is going to produce good fruit.
- **Fruit is righteousness** — The first test of fruit is its doctrinal purity. Someone who is sowing the seed of false doctrine cannot be having any fruit of righteousness, although they may “disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (II Cor. 11:15). The second test is whether those taught as a general rule gradually change into spiritually focused and improving individuals, or whether they remain the same fleshly, back-biting, critical persons they always were.
- **Sown in peace** — There are people who like to argue for the sake of arguing. There are those who are pugnacious, on the prowl for someone to pick a fight with. But the one brings “the gospel of peace” is only going to be effective if he brings the gospel in peace. “And the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome,” instructed Paul, “but kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition” (II Timothy 2:24,25).
- **By those who make peace** — There are two major types of peace to be made: peace between a man and his God, and peace between a man and his brother. The doctrines and practices of the scripture will produce both; false doctrine and/or failure to implement the practices of scripture will guarantee that there is no peace between a man and his God or between brethren. God gave us, said Paul, “the ministry of reconciliation,” and “committed to us the word of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:18,19). Any two individuals who are truly reconciled to God will then be reconciled to each other, whether Jew or Greek, whether slave or free, whether male or female, whether rich or poor; and if this reconciliation is not transpiring, then one or both are not really reconciled to God.

By their fruits, said Jesus, “you will know them.” And by your fruits, you will know yourself. If what is behind you is a trail of “disorder and every evil thing,” then you know that jealousy and selfish ambition are driving forces in your life. But if the legacy you are leaving behind is producing people who are being reconciled to God in accordance with scripture, and that the fruits of your efforts are people whose mind is set on the things of the Spirit, then you know that you are sowing the proper seed, regardless of the accusations of your detractors. Sow on!

Gems From James

Quarrels and Conflicts

James was an elder in the Lord's church in Jerusalem. That he was experienced in handling with the perversities of human nature that often carry over into the church is evident in his instructions in his catholic epistle. Attitude toward suffering, rich and poor relationships, taming the tongue ... all of these were issues dealt with by this bond-servant of Christ. Keeping the congregation spiritually focused is one of the major functions of an elder, as well as defusing the bombs of conflict thrown into the congregational mix by those perversities of human nature. James therefore is very practical, bringing each of his readers to a point of personal accountability in his instructions.

- **Quarrels and conflicts** — Family feuds are endemic to the human race. Even though peace and harmony should reign in those most intimate of relationships, carnal nature raises its ugly head and turns pleasantries into peevish pout sessions, good times into grouch times, and familiarity into fits of anxiety and anger. Such things should not exist within the brotherhood of the church either, but occasionally such outbreaks occur. James then questions: "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?" (James 4:1).
- **The source** — The torrent of verbal and physical abuse ripping through relationships must have its source somewhere. James answers with a rhetorical question: "Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" (James 4:1). "I want ..." is not a cry limited to three-year olds; "I want what I want, and I will do whatever I have to in order to get it," is the mission statement of most adults. The drive for power, the drive for control, and the drive for mammon are rooted in the pleasures of the flesh, those being the means by which the individual positions himself to get what he wants.
- **Waging war** — "Habits are first cobwebs, then chains," is a sage observation. The first off-target pleasure, like a cobweb, is easily brushed aside. But when those sensually gratifying desires are habitually fulfilled, then the thick chains of addiction are formed, and would require much effort to snap. These entrenched desires, said James, "wage war in your members." And this warfare is against the spiritual development of the individual Christian, blocking his progress, and sucking him once again into the maw of hell.
- **Murder?** — "You lust and do not have;" is the reminder of James, "so you commit murder" (James 4:2). Lust is not necessarily sexual, although the panting for illicit pleasure is what defines the drive of every form of lust. These pleasure-crazed individuals will even commit murder to fulfill their cravings. Inside the church, the murder is often not so much physical as spiritual; the body count mounts due to direct destruction and collateral damage as selfish individuals just have to have their own way.
- **Throw in envy** — "And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel" (James 4:2). Envy is a stronger driving force than is generally recognized. Envy on the part of the Jewish hierarchy — wanting the influence and respect that Jesus had — is what got Jesus crucified, as the scripture notes: "For [Pontius Pilate] knew that because of envy they had delivered Him up" (Matthew 27:18). The green horns of envy can arise in any member of the congregation, and when they do, fighting and quarreling is going to break out.

When Christians are carnal, then they commit those murders and provoke those quarrels. The solution, not surprisingly, is for each saint to engage in the renewing of the mind: putting the scriptures in, laying aside the old self, and continually putting on the new self that is being renewed according to the image of the One who created him anew. God wants order and every good thing in His kingdom!

Gems From James

Asking and Receiving

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men,” Paul reminded the church in Corinth, “but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ” (I Corinthians 3:1). A clear picture is that of a toddler wanting his special glass with something to drink. Self-willed, he refuses help and insists on trying to get that which is out of his reach. Failing and frustrated, his cries resound throughout the neighborhood. Such is the core of the human race. “Daring, self-willed,” was Peter’s description (II Peter 2:10). “Accursed children,” he stated in the same context (II Peter 2:14). Men of flesh reject God and are in fact hostile toward God. In this self-willed mode, they reject His counsel and His help, and plunge on into the darkness.

Brethren in Christ, then, can obviously be fleshly as babes, or go back into fleshliness due to failure to focus on the things of the Spirit. As a result, they also end up as squalling, brawling children, driven by jealousy or selfish ambition, creating disorder and every evil thing within the church of the living God. This ought not to be!

- **Don’t ask, don’t receive** — They want and don’t have, so they “commit murder.” Self-willed, falsely independent, they plan on getting what they want by their own efforts and power. In this mode of thinking, they could care less about whether what they want is pleasing to God; as a result they are not about to ask for God’s help. “You do not have,” James simply said, “because you do not ask” (James 4:2).
- **Wrong motives** — There is a God in heaven who tests the hearts of men, who knows their motives. When Christians lose consciousness of God, then they easily drift into having a hidden agenda, working on something for personal gain or position. Blinded, their prayers become perfunctory, centered on God’s giving them what they want right now. “You ask,” observed James, “and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives ...” (James 4:3). Generally speaking, God answers prayers only for those who are properly immersed into Christ. Not only that, He requires that the professed follower of Christ make his petitions with the proper motive. Prayer is serious business to God; the saint needs to have that perspective also.
- **Pleasure problems** — Seeking for earthly pleasure or comfort is the exact opposite of following Christ. Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, *let him deny himself*, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it” (Mark 8:35,36). The pull of pleasure is strong; Moses, for example, is heralded as one of God’s heroes because he chose “to endure ill-treatment with the people of God [rather] than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt” (Hebrews 11:25,26). So if a Christian falls back into seeking “the pleasures that wage war in your members,” his prayers are cut off. “You ask and do not receive,” is the reiteration from James, “because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

God wants His children to learn to say, “Please,” before He grants their requests; He is a good Dad, and thinks that the family should be educated in good manners. He also thinks that the kids should learn to share their cookies, and not fight over the toys. When they get themselves settled down, when they get their attitudes adjusted, and when they are ready to help clean the room, then Dad is interested in listening to what they have to say. Dad can provide a lot of help, but He isn’t going to until His conditions are met.

Gems From James

Spiritual Fidelity

“Our God,” says the chorus, “is an awesome God, and He reigns in power and love.” Our God, it can be added, is a jealous God. “I am the Lord,” He emphasized, “that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images” (Isaiah 42:8). He is the Creator; why should another get the credit? He is the Redeemer; why should another receive the thanksgivings? Satan, in his envy and arrogance, has waged a long war against God, siphoning off the allegiance that rightly belongs to the loving Father and shunting it off into any and every form of idolatry. But the great God, rich in mercy because of His love for the lost, devised a means of communicating His undying devotion to man through the message of the cross of Christ. “For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world,” noted Peter, of the Lord’s predetermined plan, “but has appeared in these last days for the sake of you, who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (I Peter 1:20,21). Through the gospel, the Gentile world comes to believe in God, and is now susceptible to being wooed and wived.

- **No death to do us part** — “He who hears My word,” said the Lord Jesus Christ, “and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life” (John 5:24). Having tendered His expression of love in the gospel of Christ, the great King awaits the response from those whom He has called. When His intended confesses that He is Lord, and submits to His government in obeying the gospel, then His commitment is that there is nothing that will separate them in this union of true love. “For I am convinced,” affirmed Paul, “that ... death ... shall [not] be able to separate from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38,39).
- **Strained relationship** — A wandering eye or illicit magnetism has been the destruction of many a husband/wife relationship, redirecting the affection that should exist between the spouses. The rightly jealous God, sensitive to the drift that is taking place in the affections of His intended, proclaims His wake-up call: “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?” (James 4:4). The world is a wily competitor for the attention of the saint, using “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” to accomplish its ends (I John 2:16). So when the seductive allure of worldly pleasures is beginning to suck the saints into its orbit, God rightly calls them “adulteresses.” There is no possibility of making this a successful “love triangle”; just even being friends with the world is an open expression of hostility toward the Father in heaven.
- **Pull of peer acceptance** — It is built into mankind to want acceptance, whether it be family, fellow workers, or even an imaginary group that never really existed. What God wants is for people to want His approval and have the values which are acceptable to Him. But because He is not visible, the world has its opportunity to create the appearance of desirable opportunities for fun and fellowship — for example, the beer commercials which depict what fun and frolicking a bunch of drunks have at their parties. “Therefore,” James informs us, “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

God is rightfully a jealous God, but He also knows that “the world” is not a real friend, but a mortal enemy of the saint. The world has all its fleshly appeals, but like a spider it sucks the eternal life out of anyone caught in its web. The warning of God, then, is for the benefit of the Christian: anyone who is a friend of the world, or even wants to be a friend of the world, is no friend of His.

Gems From James

God's Desire

Adam was formed from the earth. Because he was of the earth, the focus of his attention was on earth, and he was therefore not a particularly spiritual or heavenly-minded man. Adam was not the kind of man with whom God could have the type of fellowship He desired. Thus it was only a matter of time when the earthy yielded to temptation, and that which was "very good" now was corrupted and loathsome. And his descendants fare no better, as noted by the apostle Paul, "As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy" (I Corinthians 15:48). From the time of Adam to the beginning of the church as recorded in Acts two, there was no one "born of woman" who could be a companion of God.

The Father, however, was not content that such should be the permanent condition of the race He created. Working specifically with the nation Israel, whom He brought into existence by miracle and preserved through miracle, the Old Testament scriptures were written, idolatry was driven out, and a people was prepared for the message of redemption through Jesus Christ. "Now I shall restore the fortunes of Jacob," Ezekiel had prophesied, "and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I shall be jealous for My holy name" (Ezekiel 39:25). The message of mercy and redemption led directly into God's offer of His Spirit. "And I shall not hide My face from them any longer," were additional words, "for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel" (Ezekiel 39:29). "And I will put My Spirit within you," the great God had promised (Ezekiel 36:27). Consequently, when the terms of pardon were first announced by the apostle Peter on Pentecost, the promised Spirit was emphasized. "For the promise," Peter had stated, "is for you and your children ..." (Acts 2:39). These new creations were then described by the apostle Paul as "having begun by the Spirit" (Galatians 3:3).

"Born of the Spirit," "born from above," the saints are no longer "mere men"; rather they are a "chosen race" of spiritual people, and fitted to walk and fellowship with God. "As is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly" (I Corinthians 15:48).

- **The appeal to scripture** — The world, having lost one of its own to the cause of the gospel, fights back. Working its allurements on the weaknesses of any of the saints, it attempts to draw them back into its fold, counteracting the tremendous effort God had made to produce a people of a spiritual wavelength capable of fellowship with Him. James thus appeals to all those Old Testament scriptures, their lessons, and their promises; "Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose" (James 4:5).
- **God's jealous desire** — God had long looked forward to a people that He could walk among, in whose midst He could dwell. Now some of them were taking His efforts and desires lightly, wishing to be friends of the destructive world. James collects the general thrust of the word of God in these terms: "Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: 'He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us?'" (James 4:5). All the burning intensity of the Almighty God is focused on His desire to fellowship with those created in Christ Jesus through His Spirit; this should register strongly with the saints.

As fine and humble a man as Moses was, he was of the earth, earthy. As fine a man as David was, a man after God's own heart, he was of the earth, earthy. The same could be said of Daniel, of any of the Old Testament greats. But there was not one of them that was spiritual enough really to fellowship with God. Only those truly born again are fitted to eat with Him in the Lord's Supper, the participation with Him through His body and blood. May the saints regard the Lord's intense jealousy highly!

Gems From James

Greater Grace

“We all stumble in many ways,” was James’ assessment of Christians in general (James 3:2). Quarrels and conflicts, lusting and murderous intent, selfishness and self-serving — these are all issues that must be dealt with on a regular basis inside the fellowship of the saints. Why do those who claim the name of Christ sometimes desire to be friends with the world? Why do they often drift into the shoals of wrong motives, or be once again battered on the reefs of pursuing their own pleasures? The answer is that the pull of the world is strong. The temptations to follow after the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the boastful pride of life keep presenting themselves to sense gates of the saints; continual watchfulness and continual renewal of the mind are absolutely necessary for each follower of Christ to have victory over these. But before his programming is complete, before he has the mental and spiritual discipline for total victory, he often stumbles, and occasionally makes a severe veer into the rough of the world. He might allow himself to become discouraged over the great work involved in building the true temple of God, and find himself once again desiring the old friends of “the easier way.” He may find himself reverting to the old habits of snapping, biting, and devouring others when he has “a bad day.” Who knows what evil thoughts still lurk in the febrile minds of those who assemble to break bread? Someone greater than “the Shadow” knows!

- **Greater grace** — The honest disciple of Christ, having fought some of the battles with his mind and having lost, may find himself distraught or discouraged, and really concerned that God may be disappointed in him. This is where the grace of God comes in — God’s willingness to overlook transgressions so that the stumbler might pick himself up and get on with the long race. “But He gives a greater grace,” is James’ comment (James 4:6). It is hard to believe, but the grace of God really is greater than *any* sin or combination of sins that a Christian might commit. Under certain conditions!
- **Grace for the humble** — The proud in heart, the arrogant who archly inform God that He has to forgive them, are in for a rough surprise on Judgment Day. God has great grace, but ... “Therefore it says, ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ ” The humble stumbler receives God’s grace when he requests it; the loud proud and the errant arrogant are outside the light beam of His favor and continue to plunge into the darkening abyss.
- **Submit** — The key to all fellowship with God is a remembrance of who He is, and a consciousness of the fallen condition of the redeemed. The one who has “forgotten his purification from his former sins,” according to Peter, “is blind or short-sighted” (II Peter 1:9). The word of God, painting the picture of the great King, wrathful where necessary, opposing sin and injustice, but with lovingkindness toward those who fear Him, “produces reverence” for Him (Psalm 119:38). The solution: “Submit therefore to God” (James 4:7).

The proud heart simply will not bow before God. It may pretend to bow, but it will not admit its mistakes and submit to the whole will of God. By contrast, and with eternal consequences, the humble beats his breast and petitions the Almighty for forgiveness and an opportunity to try again. The entire host of heaven stands in opposition to the heart that is lifted up in defiance, but the humble is strengthened with power through God’s Spirit in the inner man. In the entire New American Standard Bible, the phrase “humble in heart” appears only once. It belongs to Him who said, “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). Learn from Him!

Gems From James

Two Doors

Every day the saint of God must make a choice. Every day, when his eyes begin to uncloud themselves from the slumber of the night past, he sees two doors before him. One is the doorway to light and life, and the other is the doorway to darkness and death. The doorway to darkness is gilded with all sorts of glitter; flashing lights around the door frame beckon, and appealing sound effects call attention to the “action” within. By contrast, there is no pretense at the daily doorway to life; a simple doormat lies at its quiet entrance, calmly reminding those who would enter there that “God is love.” Every day the saint must choose which doorway he will enter. Choose he will, by deliberation or default.

- **Submission** — The doorway to life requires the abolition of pride. “God is opposed to the proud,” James had quoted, “but gives grace to the humble.” The bond-servant therefore affirms this need for the saint: “Submit therefore to God” (James 4:7). Expressions such as “stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears” are those which resound for those who refuse to submit to God. The true follower of Jesus Christ willingly figures out what God’s will for his life is, and with joy charges into the projects of the kingdom.
- **Resistance** — The entrance to darkness and death is the devil’s doorway. He works on all the edges of fleshly desire, picking and probing to find a weakness in the saint’s resolve. The encouraging words come: “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” It is exciting for the challenged Christian to know that Satan will actually rush from the premises when he is resisted. The disciple of Christ simply needs to remember that Satan is the one offering the temptation, and to follow that with the will to resist.
- **Drawing near** — God in heaven is not some impersonal force, something that wound up the universe and let it go. Rather, the Father is a caring personage, desiring fellowship in an intimate way with each of His children, patiently waiting for any opening to deepen His interaction with them. “Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you,” James informs the brethren (James 4:8). What a promise! Because the promise is in the realm of faith, the struggling saint sometimes has difficulty in believing that the promise is true because he can’t detect with any of his senses that God is nearer. But it is a powerful, encouraging, and endearing truth that when a child of faith moves toward God, God moves toward him for strength and comfort.
- **Cleansing** — The member of Christ’s body who has been stained with sin due to his fellowship with the world needs to remember that God is a holy God, and nothing unholy or unclean will be permitted in His presence. Having temporarily been enamored by the pull of the world, the saint needs to reflect on his action and attitude when he decides to draw near to God. “Cleanse your hands, you sinners,” is James’ exordium, “and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8). Only in James are Christians ever called sinners, and here it applies to someone who has had one foot in the world and one in the church. The statement is pretty blunt, but obviously pretty necessary.

“Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?” the psalmist had asked. “And who may stand in His holy place?” The answer ties in with the appeal of James, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart ...” (Psalm 24:3,4). Those who choose the doorway of death choose the route of defiled hearts and hands dipped in the filth of the world. But those who this day choose life put the past behind them, draw near to God, purify their motives, and put their hands into clean work. Choose fellowship with the heavenly Father, and live!

Gems From James

At the House of Mourning

“It is better,” said Solomon, “to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting” (Ecclesiastes 7:2). Death has taken place in the house of mourning, and the sage of old commented, “that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart.” The person who seriously contemplates his own death will take a serious look at getting his eternity straightened out; the one who fails to do so is earth-centered, and therefore open to the pull of Satan. “The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,” the wise added, “while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure” (Ecclesiastes 7:4).

The Christian who falls back into the ways of the world ends up with his mind in the house of pleasure. Double-minded, driven and tossed by the winds, this poor soul can’t make up his mind whether he wants to go to heaven or drift into hell. He has to be reminded that “friendship with the world is hostility toward God,” and that the loving Father, “jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us.” God does not wish an eternity in hell for anyone, especially for those who once were delivered from the domain of darkness. He therefore appeals to them to join Him in the house of mourning, that they may come to their senses and see the value of eternity.

- **Seriousness of sin** — In the house of mourning, the view of eternity is clearer. “For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street,” asseverated Solomon (Ecclesiastes 12:5). And what is it that would keep a man out of the proper eternity? The answer is likewise clearer at the door of death: sin! The saint who has let himself be pulled back into the path of sinners is exhorted, “Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom” (James 4:9). Godly sorrow, according to the apostle Paul, “produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation” (II Corinthians 7:10). Without this misery, without this mourning, without this weeping, there will not be sufficient recognition of how these sins offended the Almighty, and there will not be sufficient drive to effect real change. The hapless hilarity and the melting merriment in the house of pleasure have to be recognized for how temporary they are, and the now contrite heart is to be sacrificed to the Lord.
- **Hope in humility** — In the days of yore, sackcloth and ashes were the garments of those who humbled themselves before the Lord. When the angel of the Lord stood with drawn sword over Jerusalem to destroy it because of David’s sin in numbering the people, “Then David and the elders, covered with sackcloth, fell on their faces” (I Chronicles 21:16). This wearing of sackcloth, itchy and uncomfortable, was an acceptable means of showing God the contrition of the wearer, especially when accompanied by the wearer’s sitting in ashes. The saint in the New Testament does not have to go to such lengths to garner the attention of the Almighty, having Jesus as an Advocate, but he must have the same attitude. “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord,” James writes, “and He will exalt you” (James 4:10). Admission of straying from the way of truth, misery over the grief caused the Father, and making the mental commitment to move forward in the righteousness of faith is the humility the Father is looking for.

The straying saint who will come to the house of mourning and who will come to his senses will find rest for his soul. Ultimately he will receive the greatest exaltation of all when he hears the commendation of the King on His glorious throne: “Well done, good and faithful slave ... enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

Gems From James

Speaking Against A Brother?

Those who come to Christ are a remarkably diverse group. Some are barbarians to the max, some are refined Greeks of learning and station. Slave, freeman, male, female, rich, and poor are all lumped together in the body of Christ to serve God's purpose. "The obedience of faith among the Gentiles," preached Paul, is "for His name's sake" (Romans 1:5). "But now God has placed the members," he affirmed in another place, "each one of them, in the body, just as He desired" (1 Corinthians 12:18). All these diverse members, of varying background, custom, and family norms, must remember that ultimately they have been collected in the local congregation by the will and plan of God. They did not choose who their brothers and sisters are; part of their job description is to learn to accept one another and learn to work together for the common cause of Christ. "Wherefore," adverted the apostle Paul, "accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

One of the challenges of all this conglomeration is for each Christian not to be critical of the ways of those differing lifestyles. Gone is the uniformity of a simple village culture, whose norms have been established for a thousand years, whose residents eat the same food, herd the same flocks, plant the same crops, who have their established rituals for courtship and marriage union. An exciting mix of citizens of heaven has come into the church of Christ, whose culture will merge and meld into the culture of the kingdom. Thus, those natural tendencies to criticize the peculiarities of others have to be eliminated.

- **Speaking against one another** — James' instruction is plain: "Do not speak against one another, brethren" (James 4:11). This speaking against one another is a vain attempt to elevate self by shoving others into the mud. Criticizing the dress of another, the type of cloth on the table, or the brand of pickup is not only not productive, it is destructive to both the criticizer and the criticizee.
- **Judging the law?** — "He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother," James affirms, "speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it." James and the Holy Spirit engage in a little progression to establish the seriousness of such criticism. First "speaking against a brother" is shown to be the same as judging. Then judging the brother is shown to be equivalent to judging the law. Following this, the "judge of the law" is established to be above the law; he does not have to be a doer of it because he is a judge of it. For a Christian to claim to be above the law is obviously audacious. The disciple of Christ then is brought into consciousness of the seriousness of speaking against a brother.
- **Equal with God?** — James jerks the chain on the saint who has been running his mouth one more time. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge," is his statement, "the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?" (James 4:12). Good question, "Who are you?" There is only one Lawgiver and Judge; is that you? There is One able to save and to destroy; is that you? If not, you had better just shut your mouth!

The follower of Jesus needs to move from being a criticizer to being a builder. "Whatever is true," exhorted Paul, "whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things" (Philippians 4:8). The mind that lives in the midst of the excellent and praiseworthy is looking for the good in brethren, and will cease to speak against them. Ninety days of constant praise is often a needful solution.

Gems From James

If the Lord Wills

This life on earth is all that anyone breathing has had. There are a few kooky folks who have been tricked into thinking they have remembrances from a previous life, but these are under devilish delusions. And there are some who think they have had an out-of-body experience, or who went to the edge of death and came back. But these “experiences” are shaky at best, and offer no reliable guide to the realm of the unseen. The realm of the unseen — the realm of faith — is only revealed by the scripture. But most of earth’s residents, unwilling to trust the word of God, operate by the experience they have had on earth and end up focusing on survival and earthly pleasure rather than making their decisions in accordance with the dictates of eternal life. In fact, the pull of earth is so much in the face of followers of Christ, and some of its seductions so alluring, that the saints sometimes are sucked back into its orbit. James steps in to assist those whose attention is being affixed by the profit motive.

- **“Come now”** — When the attention of the hearer is to be arrested, and he is to sit down and listen to a reasoned presentation, the scripture says, “Come now.” “Come now,” says James, “you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ ” (James 4:13). The elder, experienced in the ways of the Lord and tendencies of brethren, tells them not to be so rambunctious. “Come now,” he says.
- **Perspective** — There is nothing wrong with going to “such and such a city.” There is nothing wrong with planning to spend a year there, engaging in business and making a profit. The problem was that the rambunctious saint was forgetting something of extreme importance. “Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow,” James reminded them. “You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” (James 4:14). Even though earthly life is all that anyone can know by his own experience, and that life on earth therefore tends to occupy a foremost sector of a person’s thoughts, God’s word brings things into perspective. The saint doesn’t know whether he will be alive tomorrow, or whether he will be too sick to carry out his magnificent plans. And should he live to ripe old age, he is still reminded that the longest life is still nothing but a wisp of vapor, gone in a comparable instant. The eternal perspective is never to be forgotten in any of earth’s dealings.
- **If the Lord wills** — There is a Mighty Hand which guides and governs the affairs of men, who holds the key of death and of Hades. “The Lord,” stated the prophet Zechariah, “stretches out the heavens, lays the foundation of the earth, and forms the spirit of man within him” (Zechariah 12:1). Those spirits are formed at the will of the Lord, and those spirits are called home at the will of the Lord. Thus the saints are reminded, “Instead,” of rambunctiously charging into life, heedless of eternity, “you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.’ ” (James 4:15). Only by the will of the Lord does any saint live, and only by the will of the Lord is he going to be able to accomplish his goals.

When the disciples of Christ preface their thoughts and their statements with, “If the Lord wills,” then they are conscious of the claims of eternity on their immortal souls. And thus conscious of eternity, they are more likely to make their decisions based on eternal values rather than the short-term basis of earthly existence. “If the Lord wills, we shall live,” is a constant reminder that the Christian may be taken from earth today. “If the Lord wills, we shall do this or that,” is a constant reminder that “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Proverbs 16:9).

Gems From James

Arrogance

“For the Lord of hosts will have a day of reckoning,” asserted Isaiah. “For behold, the day is coming,” added Malachi, “burning like a furnace” (Malachi 4:1). That day of reckoning, according to Isaiah, will be “against everyone who is proud and lofty, and against everyone who is lifted up, that he may be abased” (Isaiah 2:12). “And the pride of man will be humbled, and the loftiness of men will be abased, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day” (Isaiah 2:17). As James had earlier noted, “God is opposed to the proud” (James 4:6). The sifting that is done by Jesus’ winnowing fork separates out the proud and the arrogant, leaving for the harvest the good grain of the humble in heart. The arrogance stemming from the boastful pride of life thumbs its nose in the face of God. It essentially claims that it does not need God, that it can go its merry way on earth and that it can waltz into heaven on its own terms. Arrogance reeks with the stench of the rebellious Satan, and is severe condemnation when applied to someone claiming the name of Christ.

- **Boisterous businessmen** — “Today or tomorrow,” says the heedless one, “we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Where does God fit in the planning? Where is the “seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness”? The boisterous businessmen need to tone it down a notch, and they need to get their perspective back by saying, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”
- **Evil arrogance** — But for the heedless one who continues on his way, James has something to say, “But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil” (James 4:16). The one who fails to make God a part of his plans, plans to fail, eternally! This reckless neglect of including the will of God is called “boasting,” and the strong word “evil” is attached to this abandon. Serious business indeed!
- **Do the right thing** — There is often subtle resistance to doing the right thing, a downward pressure saying that right now is not the right time. But James, elder in Jerusalem, experienced in the weaknesses of those even who claim the name of Christ, emphasizes, “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). No excuses allowed! The right thing would be to consider the things of the kingdom first. The right thing to do would be to pray for wisdom before charging off into some profit venture. The right thing to do would be to say, “If the Lord wills.” And for the one who fails to do these things, to him it sin.

The mind of man is capable of creative rationalization and clear justification for what it is that he intends to do anyway. The fact that the words “rationalization” and “justification” with these negative connotations exist in the English language indicates that such convolutions are pretty common. James attempts to put a stop to such rationalization by those whose palms were itching with the pull of potential profit. He makes some blunt statements, using verbal two-by-fours to try to get the attention of these arrogant ones who are so ready to plunge into spiritual oblivion through neglecting to consider the will of God. “Come now,” he says to the boastful, trying to get them to listen.

All saints need to carefully consider the exhortation from James in this section. His words — “to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin” — should cause each Christian to consider his priorities and his motive every day. Dereliction of duty apparently is grounds for court martial of the soldiers of God.

Gems From James

Three Kinds of Sin

As early Restorationists such as Alexander Campbell worked their way into the New Testament, the major religious resistance they encountered was Calvinism. A major tenet of John Calvin's teachings was *total depravity*, the idea that children were sinners and evil from birth. Sin therefore was not a choice; sin was endemic in the bad, bad body, and everyone who had a body had to sin. Correspondingly, every good action a Christian took was likewise not a matter of his choice. God is the absolute Sovereign, and His sovereignty, according to Calvinists, was such that God accomplished the good action through the Christian without that being the Christian's choice. The "Wesleyan holiness movement," contemporaneous with the early Restorationists, was based on the platform of Calvinism, wherein likewise there was no choice. Their system involved a "second work of grace"; the individual prayed until the "Holy Spirit fell afresh" on him, and he was now sanctified, and was elevated to a plateau (apart from his choice) where he could not sin. This was called "sinless perfection." The common characteristic of both movements is that, in either case, to sin or not to sin is not a choice.

The Bible, by contrast, teaches that all sin is choice. Just as Adam and Eve chose to eat of the forbidden fruit, so their descendants sin when they choose to follow the ways of darkness rather than to walk in the light. And the New Testament affirms that all categories of sin that can be committed by a Christian are sins of choice.

- **Sin of commission** — "Sin is lawlessness," affirms the apostle John, or, as the King James Version translates, "Sin is transgression of the law" (I John 3:4). Such transgression is what condemns the individual in the first place; when he breaks one of the commandments, he *commits* his first sin. To commit such a sin, the resident of earth must make a choice. "All have turned aside," is Paul's quotation (Romans 3:12). Such turning is the result of conscious action by each individual, and God is therefore "just" in exercising His eternal punishment (Romans 3:26).
- **Sin of omission** — Another type of sin is failure to act; that is, *omitting* to do that which should be done. James explains: "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). Once again, this is a sin of choice; it is a sin of *knowing*, but failing to follow through. It is also clear that there is no sin when the individual does not know the right thing to do.
- **Sin of motive** — The terms of the new covenant also require that the saint have the proper motive for his action. "Whatever is not from faith," adverts the apostle Paul, "is sin" (Romans 14:23). If a Christian performs the right action, but it is not fueled by the faith of the New Testament, that action is still sin. Consider, for example, a person of Jewish background newly converted to Christianity. Let's say he was eating a pork roast at a gathering with other brethren because everyone else was, but he personally was not sure whether he could eat pork and be pleasing to God. Then his eating was sin because it was not done with the understanding of New Testament faith. Once again, this is a sin of choice.

Calvinism has crept back into churches of Christ. It is openly affirmed, for example, that a person can sin at four or five years old without knowing it, obviously denying that sin is a choice. It is openly affirmed that the body was meant to sin, that it was made to sin; such statements also deny that sin is a choice, affirming that the body is going to sin no matter what.

But the faithful word of God places the responsibility for sin on the individual, making it clear that all sin is choice. Choose, then, this day whom you will serve. Will you serve sin, or will you serve God?

Gems From James

Earth or Heaven?

Picture the rich. With their wealth they can purchase the influence of the media to pursue their economic and political agendas. Men of ambition arrange themselves in lines to genuflect before men of substance; together they weave their plans for the subordination of lesser humans. Whole families of little brown men work in their mines, never seeing the light of day, destined to perish in darkness so that the rich can have their silver, gold, or precious stones. Whole nations are reduced to serfdom, bowing their backs in the intense labor of working the fields, sharecroppers at best while the rich skim the cream of their toil off the top. Unaware that earthly life is “a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away,” the rich and famous have their short moment in the sun, the tinsel of these *glitterati* flashing for a flicker, then gone. Choosing earth, they have ignored heaven; they have gotten their earthly gain, but will pay an awful eternal price.

- **Weep and howl** — The mirage of mammon is strong, pulling even Christians into the quagmire of its lakebed of dry promises. Earlier in the epistle, James thus had to warn the brethren against showing favoritism to the rich who would drop into the assembly. From there he had to chasten those who would pursue profit to the neglect of considering God’s will. He then escalated into an invective against the rich, and in this fashion both called the wealthy sinners to repentance and gave the saints the proper picture of earth’s tugs and treasures. “Come now, you rich,” he called, “weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you” (James 5:1). This weeping and howling calls to mind Jesus’ recounting of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man, described Jesus, “habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day” (Luke 16:19). But the gaiety came to a sudden stop when he found himself in the fires of Hades. “I am in agony in this flame,” was his cry (Luke 16:24). It is impossible to make more graphic the horrible cost of choosing earthly wealth and position above the call of the courts of heaven. James used the expression, “your miseries which are coming upon you.” Those miseries would be the result of the individual’s choice, and would come for no other reason!
- **Rotten riches** — What a waste it would be to have planted a large garden, weeded and watered it, only to have all its produce rot because of a sudden killer frost. This is the picture James paints for those who have clamored and clambered all their lives for creature comforts and selfish security: “Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten” (James 5:2). The chance of a killer frost is comparatively small where people plant their gardens; the chance of killer loss is 100% for those who do not turn to the Lord.
- **Rusty gold** — Iron rusts, copper gets a patina, and silver tarnishes. But gold is called the noble metal because it remains basically untouched by corrosion. James, however, portrays the permanency of gold differently. “Your gold and your silver,” he asseverated, “have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you ...” (James 5:3). That which once was valuable has turned to worthless powder; all the getting and getting proved to be in vain.

The passing pleasures of sin and the riches of an earthly Egypt have their appeal. For those who can never get past the power of tangible existence, those things have their life-directing allure. But for the saint of God, called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light, these have no pulsating glimmer or attractive glow; they are seen for what they are, that which rusts, rots, or becomes moth-eaten. The Christian, then, is able to focus his attention on what is eternal, following the footsteps of Christ to the crown of glory yet unseen.

Gems From James

Calling the Witnesses

God is able to call witnesses. “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today,” spoke the Almighty to Israel, as they prepared to cross the Jordan, “that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Quite a Judge, who can subpoena heaven and earth, and force them to testify!

The reason for the testimony is so that God can establish the reasonableness of His purpose, to give credibility to what He wants man to believe. “The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish,” stated Jesus, “the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me” (John 5:36). Those miracles of Christ were necessary to establish that He was the Son of God. The testimony of the apostles likewise is a key ingredient in proving that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. “This Jesus God raised up again,” affirmed Peter, “to which we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:32). The Lord, the righteous Judge, then has witnesses which He will call on the Day of Judgment.

- **Rust as witness** — One of the tendencies of man is to clutch tightly to his coins as he meanders through the maze of life. Trusting in mammon rather than in the Almighty, he hoards his gold up through his dying breath, trying perhaps to take it with him into the life beyond the grave. “For we have brought nothing into the world,” is Paul’s quick response, “so we cannot take anything out of it either” (1 Timothy 6:7). So to the rich, James pours out his preachments: “Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure” (James 5:3). Not only did the hoarded wealth — which should have been used for the glory of God and distribution of the gospel — turn to worthless rust, the rust itself is called as a witness by God to testify to the foolishness of the hoarder. And after testifying, the rust, in the word picture painted by James, starts to burn into the person’s flesh like a consuming fire!
- **Withheld wages as witness** — The wealthy have often built their base by ripping off the poor. “Behold,” is another allegation, “the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you ...” (James 5:4). All that transpires on earth is recorded in the books of heaven. And the Lord, champion of the poor and contender for the downtrodden, will not allow that recorded oppression go unpunished. The cry of withheld wages will be called as a witness when the “Lord arises to contend, and stands to judge the people” (Isaiah 3:13).
- **Cries of the harvesters** — God is able to call a third witness against the rich who oppress. “The outcry of those who did the harvesting,” avers James, “has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth” (James 5:4). The Lord of Sabaoth, the great God who commands all the spiritual hosts of heaven, who directs the armies, the horses and chariots of fire, is the One who hears the outcry. “The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people,” adverted Isaiah, “ ‘It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people, and grinding the face of the poor?’ declares the Lord God of hosts” (Isaiah 3:14,15).

“In these last days” the rich of the earth had best cease to fix their attentions on their pursuits of the flesh. Those who live daily in splendor would do well to repent and turn to the Lord, to cease their oppression of the poor, and to use their accumulated treasures to spread the gospel. The Almighty has His witnesses to call, and will call them to testify against those who have not arranged to have Jesus as their Advocate.

Gems From James

“In the Last Days”

“For as in those days which were before the Flood,” the Lord Jesus informed us, “they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark” (Matthew 24:38). But God entered into judgment with them, and the world of that day was destroyed by water. As the descendants of Noah began their decline, God intervened with the scattering at Babel and the selection of Abraham. Thus 2500 years or so of history occurred in earth before the age of Moses was introduced. It then required 1500 years of time before the stage was set for Jesus to appear on earth and inaugurate the final stage of earth’s existence. “But when the fullness of the time came,” annotated Paul, “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law” (Galatians 4:4). It required the death of Jesus as testator and His ascension as mediator or executor of the covenant to bring about what the Bible calls *the last days*. “In these last days,” asseverated Hebrews’ author, God “has spoken to us in His Son” (Hebrews 1:2). This, then, is the most important of periods in earth’s history, the epoch in which the complete revelation of God has been given to man. Saints of the new covenant therefore are described by the apostle Paul as those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (I Corinthians 10:11).

- **Double condemnation** — Not only is it wrong for the rich to hoard their silver and gold on general terms, but it is especially wrong when those resources should be used for the spreading of the good news in the final epoch of earth. These are words of double condemnation: “It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!” (James 5:3).
- **Feasting and fattening** — The only reason for earth’s existence is so that the gospel of God might reach and rescue every possible human being. “I have placed You as a light to the Gentiles,” was Paul’s quotation of Isaiah, “that You should bring salvation to the end of the earth” (Acts 13:47). Instead, the wealthy of the world focus their attention on fulfilling the flesh to the destruction of considering the world hereafter. “You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure,” James emphasized, “You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” (James 5:5). The fat of the heart insulates against the call of heaven; the feasting and fattening produces a spiritual lethargy that allows the gorged one to wallow contentedly at the hog trough of earth’s pleasures.
- **Death to the disrupter** — Occasionally a true follower of Christ will come into the orbit of the participant in wanton pleasure. By example and by speech, the disciple will bring to the attention of the wallower the importance of faith in Christ. “Righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” are subjects of this discussion (Acts 24:25), and the rich and influential eliminate those who disrupt their self-created comfort zones. “You have condemned and put to death the righteous man,” are the charges issued, and adding to the weight of the citations, “he does not resist you” (James 5:6).

Those who look for improvement in the human race in general in “the last days” are going to be disappointed. “But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come,” was Paul’s exhortation to Timothy. “For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (II Timothy 3:1-5). The saint needs to recognize that is how it is “in the last days,” and not get discouraged about it, but rather get excited about the prospects of running a salvage operation on the mass of humanity. Lights shine out most clearly in a dark place!

Gems From James

Be Patient!

The Lord Jesus is coming! Many have made their predictions over the years, whether it was 1844 or 1917, or whether the 1980's were the "countdown to Armageddon," but they have all been wrong. That they have all been wrong, however, does not negate the fact that Jesus is indeed coming, and that by His standards His coming is soon.

In the meantime, the saint has to be found faithful. "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes," were Jesus' words (Matthew 24:46). But if the Master comes and finds the "slave" unfaithful, He will "cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 24:51). The pressures to falter before the finish are strong; otherwise the scripture would not have its warnings. The rich, for example, according to James, oppress the Christian and drag him into court, blaspheming the "fair name" by which he has been called (James 2:6,7). They condemn and put to death the righteous man (James 5:6). But the holy ones of God are to wait for the Lord to act, maintaining their good attitudes in the face of opposition, knowing that He "will bring about justice for them speedily" (Luke 18:8).

- **Waiting for the harvest** — When the rich position themselves to put to the death the righteous because the presence and preaching of the righteous pricks their consciences, they do not come like petty thieves or cheap "hit men." No, they come with all the trappings of respectability and legality. Warrants are issued, judges sign them, and police or military come to make the arrest. For this reason, the righteous, says James to the rich, "does not resist you" (James 5:6). So what are the brethren to do? "Be patient, therefore, brethren," is the encouragement, "until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains" (James 5:7). It is not possible to hurry the harvest along; the grain will be ready when it is ready, and not before. In the same vein, then, the saint has to be patient while the earth is being prepared for its reaping by the Lord. Implicit in the waiting is that the God of justice will right the wrongs, and reward the saint for his faithfulness. "Child," Abraham said to the rich man in Jesus' recounting, "remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony" (Luke 16:25). Lazarus was definitely the long-term winner, and that encourages the saints to be faithful also.
- **Strengthen your hearts** — Just as the farmer is patient after sowing the seed, knowing the crop has to have both the early and late rains to develop and mature properly, so the saint has to be patient in the midst of suffering and oppression. "You too be patient," was James' preachment, "strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:8). One of the Biblical expressions connected with encouragement is "strengthen your hearts." The physical heart needs to be strengthened through conditioning; in a similar fashion the spiritual heart needs to be conditioned to be upbeat, trusting in the Lord, and ready for a long, patient haul until the Lord comes again.

One of the big challenges facing the brethren, and obviously a major danger to their eternity, is the oppression which comes from the rich. The same type of people who conspired to put Jesus to death also persecuted the early church. And the same type of people will continue to oppose the gospel, and use every possible means to block the dissemination of God's word. This can be discouraging, especially when the Christian analyzes the considerable earthly resources the rich have available for engaging in their oppression. But the saint is to strengthen his heart, trust the Lord, and be patient until everything gets straightened out at the second coming!

Gems From James

Good Attitudes!

It is comparatively easy to maintain good attitudes when everything is rolling along smoothly. But when challenges mount, then attitudes can falter, tempers can flare, and complaining about everything can break out.

God so composed the body of Christ such that it has to work as a team. “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,” instructed the apostle Paul, “so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:4,5). In order for good teamwork to occur, there has to be a lot of communication and cooperation between members of the body. Satan, disrupter and destroyer that he is, will do everything in his power to wreck that communication and cooperation, including oppression from the rich. Saints need to be aware of the ultimate source of their challenges, and work diligently to keep their attitudes positive, their focus forward, and their teamwork intact.

- **No complaining** — God has never liked His people’s complaining about adversity, or about one another. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their grumbling and grouching, and those who complained about God’s ordained leadership were eliminated when the earth opened and swallowed them up. “Do not complain, brethren,” is James’ New Testament warning, “against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged ...” (James 5:9). When situations or people are less than ideal, opportunity for criticism or complaining is there. But complaining accomplishes nothing positive, it is destructive, and it causes a black cloud of negativism to descend on the whole operation or project. Complainers need to repent, or they themselves will be judged, and that judgment will not be pleasant!
- **At the door** — The Christian can get so caught up in the affairs of his physical existence that he loses consciousness of God. When this happens, he is liable to drift into any sort of behavior, a self-delusion where closed doors or darkness somehow cover his activity, or where he so forgets the existence of God that he openly engages in slander or complaining against a brother. James has a little reminder: “... behold, the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:9). What a great picture! The Judge of all is standing in the doorway, listening in on every conversation, and watching every activity. The message is pretty clear: quit yer complainin’!
- **More patience** — Pressures do indeed mount, and situations do become tense. That these develop is never regarded by God as justification for degenerating into complaining about the brethren. “As an example of suffering and patience,” recommended James, “take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (James 5:10). The first century Christians were encouraged to look to the prophets as victors in suffering, just as today’s Christian can look to those of the first century. The stories of Jeremiah in the cistern or Isaiah’s being sawn in two while they continued to call the people to repentance and look to the coming Christ were offered as reminders of the necessity of patience with others. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her!” was Jesus’ cry (Luke 13:34). The great Prophet Himself is the ultimate example of suffering and patience, as He noted, “Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem” (Luke 13:33).

“And we know,” the apostle Paul affirmed, “that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). There is no accidental suffering; there are no accidental slanders or slights; all are to some degree designed by God to produce His patience in those who are being conformed to the image of His Son. Jesus did not complain or lash out on His way to the cross, and His brethren are not to complain either.

Gems From James

The Outcome

This world is pictured as hostile to God. “We know that we are of God,” the apostle John encouraged the brethren, “and the whole world lies under the power of the evil one” (I John 5:19). Christians must really recognize that they have been born again to suffer at the hands of this hostile and rebellious world. “For you have been called for this purpose,” emphasized Peter, “since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example to follow in His steps” (I Peter 2:21). This suffering is necessary as a means of driving sin out of the saint and enabling Him to take on the character of Christ. “He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,” commented Peter, “so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God” (I Peter 4:1,2). As the disciple of Christ contemplates these things in general terms, he is conscious that he needs to train his mind to be able to accept the suffering as Christ did, rather than running the route of compromise to avoid the trial. “Consider it all joy, my brethren,” James had opened this epistle, “when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:2,3). And he keeps the theme throughout, bringing it to a close in the final chapter.

- **The prophets’ example** — The names of the prophets are familiar to Christians, and seers such as Samuel, David, Elijah, and Isaiah are properly venerated. But the prophets suffered, and only a small portion of their tribulation is recorded in the Old Testament. Saints of the new covenant, then, are exhorted to profit by the precedent set by the prophets. “As an example, brethren,” James says, “of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (James 5:10). The patience the prophets had was the patience necessary to suffer while preaching the Lord’s word and trusting in His judgment as to the outcome. The Jewish exiles to Babylon certainly knew that the prophet Ezekiel had been among them, and Daniel certainly was victorious in coming out of the lions’ den! But the false prophets, who did not speak by the authority of the Lord, came to a wretched end. For instance, Zedekiah, son of Chenaanah, who made iron horns to show how “victorious” King Ahab would be against the Arameans, had to hide himself when the words of Michaiah the son of Imlah came true. But their most disastrous end will be when they meet the Lord on the day of judgment.
- **The blessed ones** — Followers of Christ have the opportunity to see the Old Testament prophets from the perspective of inspired history. “Behold,” exclaimed James, “we count those blessed who endured” (James 5:11). Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah and Zechariah the son of Berechiah suffered for their proclamations, but they stand as heroes of the faith for us, and their example is worthy of emulation.
- **Endurance of Job** — Job also, who prophesied that the Redeemer would eventually take His stand upon the earth, is held up as a positive model. “You have heard of the endurance of Job,” intoned James, “and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful” (James 5:11). The Lord used Job for His purposes, and then gave Job back double what he had before to illustrate His compassion and mercy.

Endurance is what the book of James is all about. “The testing of your faith produces endurance,” he had stated in his opening (James 1:3). And the endurance of Job and the other prophets are touted as positive examples to the suffering saints. “Blessed,” James had noted in his opening remarks, “is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life” (James 1:12). The trials are necessary to produce the blessed qualities of endurance and perseverance. For this reason the saints excitedly say, “Bring them on!”

Gems From James

Watch Your Language

Teaching about the tongue is one of the major threads of James' epistle. "If anyone thinks himself to be religious," he had written in what has been categorized as the first chapter, "and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless" (James 1:26). The unbridled tongue is evidence of self-deception! And it renders a man's religion worthless! This is strong language, and therefore strong warning to every saint. The next chapter follows with a discussion of someone's claiming to have faith, but not backing it with action. "Faith," he said, "if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17). The third chapter engages in an extensive commentary on the tongue, pointing out that the tongue directs the course of the life. The thrust of the commentary is that the Christian's tongue is to be tamed through the assistance of God, so that the pattern is no longer one of blessing God and then turning around and cursing men. And in the fourth chapter, disciples are warned against speaking against one another, placing themselves as judges of the law. As if that were not enough, the saints are also warned about "boasting in their arrogance," making big talk about their plans for profit, but not considering the will of God. "All such boasting is evil," he stated (James 4:16). So it is not surprising to find that the letter closes with imprecations against those who make oaths, pointing the brethren to the positive purposes of the tongue instead.

- **High priority** — The subject of "oaths" or "swearing" has always been of major importance to God. When an oath was given, it was to be kept; oaths were not to be taken lightly. The judge Jephthah, for example, ended up sacrificing his only daughter because of a rash vow. Over a period of time, oaths became mere expletives, empty of meaning and inserted in sentences as filler words. James therefore exhorts the brethren: "But above all, my brethren," he emphasized, "do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath..." (James 5:12). It is of major importance, then, under the terms of the new covenant, that the holy one of God not punctuate his statements with empty oaths or swearing.
- **Say what you are going to say** — Two individuals can say the same thing; other people listen to one, and they pay no attention to the other. The one who is not listened to tries to garner attention for what he is saying by interposing oaths; this is an attempt to avoid the work necessary for the development of good character by doing something quick and easy. Both James and Jesus said, "Let your yes be yes, and your no, no." The Christian therefore is to say what he is going to say, and let the substance of his character in Christ give weight to his words.
- **Avoid condemnation at judgment** — Jesus had noted, during the time of His earthly sojourn, that "every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36). He had also emphasized that anything beyond "Yes" or "No" was "of evil" (Matthew 5:37). James is consistent when he warns the brethren to let their "Yes" be "Yes," and their "No," "No," "so that you may not fall under judgment."

It is clear that control of the tongue is vital to anyone's desiring to have the good side of eternity. The scripture is not kidding when it tells each saint to "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). The injunction on the cessation of using oaths is prefaced by the words "above all!" The serious saint will tame the tongue and let his character do more of the talking. It takes longer, it requires disciplined effort, but it is many times more effective.

Gems From James

Watchword of the Hour

Sentries on patrol peer into the darkness of the night. Crossing paths, they exchange greetings, and pass along information as to the status of the watch. “All’s quiet,” may be the exchange, or “There’s something out there.” And there may be a codeword used for identification; the expression, “Blue Moon,” for example, could be used as the watchword of the hour, the password by which access to the compound may be granted.

The use of the watchword naturally extended to rallying the troops for battle. It is easy to see the Scots, having laid their plans for a secret strike on the hated English, spreading the watchword “Blue Moon,” a signal that would gather the fighting men at Bannockburn on the second full moon in January. “Blue Moon” would spread from village to village, from hut to hut, and on the 29th of January the men would assemble on the bank above the Firth River plain.

Finally, the meaning would extend to the name of a campaign. “Operation Blue Moon” would apply to the Scots’ plan to drive the English south of Hadrian’s Wall, beginning with the battle on the 29th of January. At the beginning of every battle, the cry of “Blue Moon, Blue Moon, Blue Moon,” would erupt from the lips of the men as William Wallace, his face painted with blue war paint, rode his charger to the forefront and led the warriors into the fray against the English regulars.

Such is the meaning and significance of a watchword. So what is the watchword of the hour for the soldier of the King? What word will rally his soul for the next battle in the campaign against the forces and territory of the dark lord?

- **“Let him pray”** — Suffering is the welcome lot of every child of God. Even of the First Born, it was written, “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). So, what is the watchword of the hour for those who undergo trials and tribulations? “Is anyone among you suffering?” queried James. The watchword: “Let him pray” (James 5:13). “Keep watching and praying,” Jesus told the special disciples Peter, James, and John in the Garden of Gethsemane, “that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). Watching and praying go together, so that disciples can make it through the night of suffering to the morning of joy!
- **“Let him sing”** — What should those in good spirits do? What exhibition of exultation in some victory over the minions of those in Satan’s service should take place? What sideline celebration should there be? “Is anyone cheerful?” James asked. The watchword: “Let him sing praises” (James 5:13). “Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above,” James had stated, “coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Therefore the psalmist said, “It is good to sing praises to our God” (Psalm 147:1). The overflow of a glad heart should result in singing the praises of Him who makes it all possible!

What, then, can the saints of God do that none of the other residents of this planet can, and have their exercises felt in the courts of heaven? “Pray and praise!” What watchword of the hour can be passed from disciple to disciple, from hut to hut, in preparation for the coming of the final stage of the great spiritual war? “Pray and praise!” As the Almighty King preps His white charger and rallies His forces for the final stages of the campaign against the gates of Hades, what is the watchword of the hour? “Pray and praise!” And what then is the watchword of every hour? “Pray and praise!”

Gems From James

James on Sickness

From the time that briars and brambles first grew in the Garden of Eden, disease and death have been a part of human physical existence. With the exception of Enoch, who walked with God before the Deluge, and Elijah, the praying prophet, all who have lived on earth have succumbed to the sting of death. Those who were not martyred, murdered, or mangled died as a result of some sort of disease or organ failure, and colds, influenza, measles, mumps, and general crud wreak their occasional vengeance on all classes of the human race.

Christians themselves are not exempt from sickness. Epaphroditas, associate of Paul, commended by the Lord, “was sick to the point of death” (Philippians 2:27). Paul, whose handkerchiefs brought healing to many in Ephesus as signs of the truthfulness of the gospel, was not able to bring release to his beloved brother in the Lord. “Erastus remained at Corinth,” was one of Paul’s newsy notes to Timothy, “but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus” (II Timothy 4:20). The All Wise apparently allows Christians to become sick just like everyone else, so that those who obey the gospel do so for spiritual reasons rather than the blessing of temporal earthly health.

- **Anyone sick?** — James is about to guarantee healing at the hands of the elders of the local congregation. “Is anyone among you sick?” he asked. This sickness has to be some sort of special sickness brought on by a spiritual problem within the church, because even Paul could not heal faithful brethren who were struck with natural sickness. This calls to mind a situation that existed in the church at Corinth where there was division and destruction caused by those who had a political agenda in the congregation rather than a desire to please the Lord. Those who did not “judge the body rightly” were in a state of condemnation. “For this reason,” said Paul, “many among you are weak and *sick*, and a number sleep” (I Corinthians 11:29,30). For those who slept, their judgment was sealed; but, for those who were sick, there was hope for their reconciliation.
- **Call for the elders** — If this sickness were brought about by errant behavior, the only way reconciliation could be brought about would be through the existing leadership, the elders. “Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord ...” (James 5:14). Christianity is a religion of intelligent submission (as contrasted to blind submission). God therefore has so structured the church that when elders are functioning according to scripture, no errant individual can be restored to fellowship with God apart from being restored through the eldership.
- **“In the name of the Lord”** — The expression “in the name of the Lord” means “by the Lord’s authority.” Just mumbling the words “in the name of Jesus” does not make the action done by His authority; the action has to be directed by scripture by those who are authorized by scripture, and then the words have power. The anointing with oil has to be done by qualified elders who are functioning within the guidelines of the New Testament, and willing to restore the one who is sick.
- **Restoring the sick one** — “The prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up ...” (James 5:15). The elders themselves do not have the authority to act without prayer; they must call upon the Head of the church for Him to accomplish the final action. This will result in the physical healing of the sick one as well as his restoration to the august fellowship of the holy ones.

Physical sickness sometimes can get an individual’s attention when nothing else will. The purpose in this case seems to be to accomplish the restoration of fellowship with God and with the brethren — “and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.”

Gems From James

Prayer and Healing

Prayer, especially in conjunction with its twin, *fasting*, is the most powerful force operating on earth. The prayer of the solitary saint, in wisdom offering his petitions to the Ruler of the heavens, can sidetrack the most powerful armada ever assembled. The supplication of a godly woman, wearing the name of Christ and having bold and confident access to the throne of God, can alter the course of history. The petitions of faithful congregations, drawing near to the Personage of the Almighty through the new and living way, can move mountains and open whole nations to the progress of the gospel. Prayer, however, requires a Biblically directed faith in an unseen God, and a willingness to pray irrespective as to whether the results are or ever will be visible.

- **Offered in faith** — Our man/woman has been struck with sickness. Upon sober and honest reflection he realizes that the illness is as a result of running contrary to the will of God; he through jealousy or envy has been causing strife and division, creating factions to carry out a selfish agenda. Having been brought low, he now, as scripture instructs, calls for “the elders of the church.” The elders come, investigate and analyze the renewed desire of the sickly one for fellowship, and then they have to follow their instructions. They are to “pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him” (James 5:14,15). These dedicated men, so confident that they are doing the will and work of the Lord, know in faith that when they offer their prayer for the sick, he will be healed.
- **Restoration** — The earthly body is for a short time; James earlier had said that it was “just a vapor.” What is important is a person’s eternity, and that depends upon whether he is in fellowship with God. While there is physical restoration or salvation that takes place in the healing, the more important part is the spiritual restoration or salvation that is accomplished through the anointing in the name of the Lord.
- **Forgiveness** — Sin is so destructive. Many of the “deeds of the flesh” referred to by the apostle Paul are bombshells in the realm of personal relationships and the ability of the church to carry out the directives of King Jesus. “Enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying” are tremendously destructive attitudes and actions, and “those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21). A person who has been habitually guilty of these is in major need of forgiveness; the prayer of faith on the part of the elders, who have been called for by the sickly one, will now confer forgiveness on the guilty party.
- **Mutual confession** — Before things escalate to the point that the elders have to be called in, smaller developments can be solved with a prayer partner. “Therefore,” says James, “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). The Bible does not teach that sins should be confessed to a Catholic priest who has power of forgiveness or retention of sins, but rather to a trusted brother in Christ for mutual encouragement and edification. God is the One who has promised to forgive the repentant, and the One who has the power to heal.

Prayers offered in faith by scriptural elders and believing brethren exert powerful influences in the court of heaven. Forgiveness of sin, healing of the body, and restoration of the soul are accomplished through these prayers! These are but small things in the sight of our God, but what big blessings and what powerful participation accrue to the saints of the Most High through His allowing their prayers to ascend to His ears.

Gems From James

Effective Prayer

The faithful follower of Christ knows that his prayers are heard and acted upon by God. By contrast, those who are outside of Christ do not have their prayers heard at the throne of the Almighty, since no one can come to the Father except through Jesus Christ. Cornelius, an example of the God-fearing among the Gentiles, had his prayers ascend as a memorial to God, and one prayer heard that resulted in the coming of Peter with the gospel; but his example shows that only those who are truly in Christ have their *prayers* heeded.

What a blessing it is for the disciple of Christ to know that His prayers are attended to by the great God and Sovereign of the universe! Some of the blessings James has already commented upon in this epistle are: 1) The saint can pray for wisdom; 2) He can ask and receive; 3) He can pray for strength in suffering; 4) The elders can pray over the one who is sick and in need of restoration; and 5) The brethren can confess their sins to one another and pray for one another, that they may be healed. To which he adds, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16).

- **Effective prayer** — It is easy to draw the conclusion that there are effective prayers and ineffective prayers. One example of ineffective prayer has already been mentioned: "You ask and do not receive," James had observed, "because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3). Vain repetitions, according to Jesus, are ineffective. And, by Peter's accounting, the Lord does not attend to the prayers of those who do evil. Effective prayer, by contrast, is rendered by those who are righteous, whose motives are pure, whose hearts are humble, and whose praises and thanksgivings regularly ascend to the ears of God.
- **A righteous man** — When a person is immersed into Christ, he is clothed with the righteousness of Christ. God's intention, however, is not that the His child should remain in the same failed lifestyle as he maintained before he was in Christ. The writings of the New Testament are replete with exhortations to lay aside the old self, corrupted by the lusts of deceit, and to put on the new self, renewed in the image of Christ in glory. On this basis, then, "the one who practices righteousness is righteous" (I John 3:7). While God hears the prayers of all saints, it is the prayer offered by him who practices the righteousness of faith that calls into action all the considerable resources of heaven.
- **Can accomplish much** — The writings of the Old Testament likewise are replete with examples of the great things God did when His people prayed. Through prayer, the counsel of those who rebelled against David was thwarted, Hannah gave birth to Samuel, the fires stopped burning in the camp of Israel in the wilderness, and the wall of Nehemiah was built. Because the Old Testament was more physically oriented, the answers to the prayers tend to be more tangibly graphic. But the prayers of the New Testament saints can move mountains, cause kingdoms to rise and fall, and especially open the doors for the spread of the gospel. Thus saints are encouraged: "First of all, then," adverted the apostle of Gentiles, "I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (I Timothy 2:1,2).

Do you want your prayers answered? 1) Get your life in order so that you are defined by God as a righteous Christian. 2) Learn to praise and thank God in a Biblical fashion so that your prayers are effective. 3) Pray the prayers that are going to accomplish much for the kingdom.

Gems From James

Elijah's Example

Abraham was a great example of faith. Unlike any who walked with God before him, he held fast his belief in what God had promised even though the promise would not be fulfilled in his lifetime. "A father of many nations," was what Abraham would be, looking to the Gentiles' coming into the fellowship of God through Christ. "In hope against hope he believed," it was written, "in order that he might become a father of many nations" (Romans 4:18). This extraordinary man, guiding his life and making his decisions based on a distant and unseen promise of God, became the "father" of all who believe from the ranks of the uncircumcision as well as those of the circumcision. Once Abraham's example was in place, it served as a foundation for all who would come after him; if he could believe God, so could each of them.

Indeed, then, the record of the Old Testament greats is there for the foundation of faith of those who could come "in these last times." By faith they "conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Hebrews 11:33,34). These became the "great cloud of witnesses surrounding us," proving to us that the will of God can be accomplished by us who function under the terms of the more glorious new covenant.

- **A nature like ours** — When the residents of Lystra tried to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, their response was "We are also men of the same nature as you" (Acts 14:15). As those who walked in earthly bodies, they were to be regarded by the Gentiles as men and therefore not worthy of worship. Even Jesus, who was worthy of worship, had an earthly body subject to all the challenges of being encased in flesh: weariness, hunger, temptation, etc. In similar fashion, one of the Old Testament greats is introduced to James' audience. "Elijah," he averred, was a man with a nature like ours" (James 5:17). Thus the great praying prophet is presented as one who could serve as an example for the new covenant saints, who would then match his dedication and effectiveness in prayer.
- **Elijah's prayers** — At one point, Elijah called down fire and destroyed, successively, two captains and their fifties. Later, in a challenge to the prophets of Baal, he once again called for fire from heaven which consumed the sacrifice and even the altar of the sacrifice. James, however, directs our attention to Elijah's petitions in regard to the weather and its purpose in bringing Israel to repentance. "He prayed earnestly that it might not rain," he noted, "and it did not rain for three years and six months." The first notice of Elijah in the Old Testament comes with these words: "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1). But, as James records, it took the earnest prayer of Elijah to have that happen.
- **Prayer for rain** — "Then he prayed again," says James, referring to the passage of three and one-half years, "and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit" (James 3:18). Seven times the prophet prayed with his face between his knees for rain, and at the seventh petition the Almighty granted his request; none of this was quick and easy, without fervent faith on the part of this one who had "a nature like ours."

Elijah's faith stands as an encouraging example for those of the faith of the New Testament. If Elijah could call fire from heaven, saints can call for the judgment of God. If the praying prophet could call for the withholding of rain to bring the nation to repentance, followers of Christ can petition for circumstances to bring the lost to a sense of their need for the Lord. If the seer could pray for the heavens to pour rain, then disciples of Christ can pray for open doors for the gospel. "The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

Gems From James

Saving a Straying Soul

There are those who believe that once a person is “saved,” he cannot be lost. This is based on the false theology of Calvinism, wherein an individual does not have a choice to be saved in the first place, and therefore cannot be lost by his own choice in the second. The Bible is pretty clear, however, that from the time that Eve first ate of the forbidden fruit through the time that the gospel was preached, that each of mankind has a choice to make. Sin is a choice, and obedience to the gospel is a choice. Thus, on the Day of Pentecost, 30 AD, the audience was exhorted by the apostle Peter, “Be saved from this perverse generation” (Acts 2:40). But the choice to serve God must be made on a continual, day-to-day basis. The apostle Paul therefore exhorted the *Christians* in Rome: “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” (Romans 6:16). “Take care, brethren,” was the exhortation of Hebrews’ writer, “lest there be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart *in falling away* from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). It is possible for a Christian to fall away, and by his own choice, spend an eternity in hell.

- **Straying from the truth** — There is a narrow way that leads to life. Precious few find it, and even fewer stay on it. “My brethren,” encouraged James, “if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back ...” (James 5:19). The idea of straying from the truth is that the individual once was on the right track, then started drifting further and further into the rough. Clearly stated also is the concept that there is such a thing as “the truth.” “Wrath and indignation,” affirmed Paul, will come upon all “those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness” (Romans 2:8). Hence it is that sincere saints are rightly concerned when they see a brother straying from the straight and narrow way.
- **Turning someone back** — Brethren require a lot of labor and attention; without good shepherding, the sheep fall prey to the savage wolves that are always on the prowl for the lambs, the weak, the struggling, the unattended. Therefore the brother who is involved in rescuing a fallen Christian is commended in these terms: “... let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20). Turning the erring one is a major project; much prayer will be required, much patience, much time, much compassion, and much unyielding pressure to do right. But the final effect is that, if the straying member of the body can be turned back, his soul will be saved from eternal death!
- **Covering a multitude of sins** — The only time those who are immersed are called sinners is when they are double-minded (James 4:8) or when they have strayed from the truth; it is only when the fellowship with God is so broken that the present, positive, affirmative image of “saint” is no longer conferred. When the strayer comes to realize just how serious his condition is, he may experience doubts as to whether he really can be forgiven and welcomed back into the council of the holy. The consoling and encouraging news comes: his soul will truly be saved from death if he turns back to the Lord, and the whole multitude of his sins will be covered.

All who are physically descended from Adam are creatures of free will. They are lost because of their choice, they are saved by choosing to be obedient to the gospel, they can lose that salvation by straying from the truth, and they can be turned back to the way of righteousness again. Bringing people through these steps takes a lot of work and coordinated effort by the edifiers in the body of Christ. But the love of God will overflow as His tender mercy is acknowledged by all who are willing to submit or resubmit to His generous government.

Gems From James

Synopsis of the Book of James

Human nature exhibits the same weaknesses and perversities over and over. And because time is involved in a process in which the saints, by the Spirit, are putting to death the deeds of the flesh, these same weaknesses and perversities often manifest themselves inside the church of the living God. The writings of the New Testament, therefore, will occasionally list these characteristics so that they are more easily identifiable. Paul, for example, in writing to the congregation of saints at Corinth, wrote that he was afraid that he might find “strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances” in the church when he arrived (II Corinthians 12:21). James, elder in the congregation at Jerusalem, was well acquainted with all these manifestations, and wrote his epistle to the church in general to assist saints on their road to victory over sin, self, and circumstance.

- **The trials** — By the second verse of the epistle, James is already instructing the brethren to be joyful in the midst of their trials, “knowing,” he said, “that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:3). The brethren are encouraged to persevere under the trials of persecution and to fight their way through the concomitant temptation. The rich would oppress the humble brethren, and drag them into court. They would condemn and put to death the righteous man. Saints of the new covenant were to hold up as positive examples the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord, who endured unspeakable suffering. But through it all, disciples are reminded to trust in the Almighty, knowing “that the Lord is full of compassion and merciful” (James 5:11).
- **The tongue** — When there is trial and temptation, then the tongue tends to become uncontrolled. The tongue, said the elder, “sets on fire the course of our life” (James 3:6). The saints therefore are not to use the tongue to cause disorder and every evil thing. “Do not speak against one another,” he exhorts (James 4:11). “Do not complain, brethren,” he says also, “against one another” (James 5:9). “But above all,” he contends, “do not swear” (James 5:12). Rather, this “small part of the body” is to be used for praying, praising, and turning the errant brother back to the truth. “So speak and so act,” James exhorts, “as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty” (James 2:12).
- **The toughness** — James emphasizes, “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). And to produce consistently the works of faith, a real spiritual toughness has to be developed. This, then, is the “endurance” that is to be produced through a tested faith. Desire to be a friend of the world has to be turned back, and fellowship with God through the Spirit is to be zealously pursued. The suffering connected with being a righteous disciple of Christ in the midst of a perverse and wicked generation is to be successfully endured. “Strengthen your hearts,” the elder encourages, “for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:8).

The brother needs to recall that it is his faith that is being tested. God is not desirous that the saint fail the test; rather, “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us” (James 4:5). Through the trials, through the testing, through the troubles with the tongue, brethren in the churches are reminded, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” The conclusion is pretty clear: “Submit therefore to God.” So serious is the Almighty about the success of the saints that they are given power over the prince of darkness. “Resist the devil,” is the instruction, “and he will flee from you.” But then comes the great positive and comforting promise, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:6-8). Move forward, then, brethren, in the triumphant walk of tested faith!