

Introduction: There is great spiritual risk for believers who imagine they are better than other Christians and so to judge them and put them in their place. James gives simple rules for avoiding that problem.

James 4:11-12: *“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”*

Danger from Unrestrained Desire: At the beginning of this chapter, James wrote that unrestrained desire is the chief cause of quarrels and fights. Unrestrained desire is in fact the source of many evil words and actions. Desires, if not controlled, become passions driving behavior. Desires to acquire things tends to make people covetous. Covetousness leads to viewing people as tools to help get what is desired. If person is not useful in satisfying desires, the inclination is to let that relationship die. Unrestrained desire disturbs our relationship with God. Unrestrained desire can even convince a person that following Christ need be no hindrance to pursuing worldly desires.

Danger in Speaking Evil About Other Believers: Having warned of the general danger inherent in an unbridled tongue, James cautions believers to not speak evil against other believers. James implies that if you “speak evil against one another” you act as a rebel like the people of Israel who spoke against God in their complaints about conditions in the wilderness (Numbers 21:3). Speaking against a fellow believer and judging them, or slandering and condemning them is wrong.

Jesus in Matthew 7:1-5 said, *“Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly*

to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” Paul in Romans 2:1 said, “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.”

Self-serving, malicious judgment is wrong. Wise, righteous discernment is what is needed. In John 7:24 Jesus said, ***“Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.”***

Slander and doing anything that defames the character of other believers is a direct attack on relationships within the family of God. Repeating rumors and lying are common ways of defaming character. When hearing a claim of wrong-doing about a person, if we think a response is necessary, we should go only to that person, try to determine the truth, and help them if we can. Otherwise, say nothing to anyone else unless legal testimony is required.

Other Christians are our brothers and sisters in Christ, joint heirs of salvation. All Christians were formerly dead in trespasses and sins. All were saved by the same precious blood even though all deserved God’s wrath. How do we dare defame a fellow believer, one for whom Christ died?

James says, regard other Christians as neighbors under the royal law. Refusing to obey the law sets one above the law, acting as a judge of the law rather than a doer of the law. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge. The law reflects the nature of God. To devalue the law is to devalue the Lawgiver. Who are we to judge our neighbor? We know our sin and unworthiness before God. But for God’s grace, we would yet be dead in sins. How can we turn to criticize and judge another believer?

James 4:13-17: “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

The Arrogance of Presumption: This is obviously an important issue to James. What root problem is he thinking of? Does he believe planning ahead is wrong? Does he think commercial activity to make a profit is wrong? No! Planning ahead is a necessary life activity. It's the only way to avoid living a disorderly life. Commercial activity, making a profit, is quite OK when carried out in integrity, honesty, and an intention to help and not harm.

So what is the real problem? James uses his comments on planning ahead as a way to illustrate the serious problem of falling into a way of thinking that habitually ignores "the sovereignty of God." If we declare in advance what the result of a planned activity will be. That is a presumptuous act that assumes we are in total control of our life and circumstances. It assumes that what we choose to do will happen as we will it to happen, and when we intend it to happen.

James reminds that such presumptuous statements are arrogant boasting and evil because they ignore the truth of God's sovereignty. God is in control, not us. Plans must be tentative, and their outcomes are always uncertain. Our lives are like a mist. We have no clue what tomorrow will bring, not even whether or not we will live to see tomorrow. We are ignorant of the future, we are frail, here today and gone tomorrow, and we are totally dependent on God. Believers are to be constantly on guard against ill-conceived presumptuousness. It not only leads to sins of commission, but can cause sins of omission (knowing the good and not doing it).

James argues you must not think you can with certainty set your own schedule (today or tomorrow), select your own path to your goal (go into such and such town), assume you will have a specified amount of time to complete you goal (spend a year there), do whatever you plan to do (trade), and predict the outcome of your activities (make a profit). James says, "***yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.***"

In planning ahead it is proper to say, "this is what I plan to do, if the Lord wills." BUT the thing that is important is not saying the words "if the Lord wills." These words are merely to remind us and those who hear us that God is sovereign. The important thing is that our attitude recognize and act on the truth of God's sovereignty. We live by God's grace and mercy. We must plan and act, but we do so acknowledging that our future is in God's hands.

James concludes this section with “*So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*” Know the right thing to do (that takes effort) and do the right thing (that takes commitment.)

James 5:1-6: “*Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴ Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*”

Danger in Misusing Wealth: James points out the problematic destiny for unbelievers who abuse others to obtain riches, or in inappropriately using their riches or both. Covetousness of things is a threat to everyone, believers and unbelievers, rich and poor alike. These verses seem to be particularly aimed at describing people who are rich in material things but poor spiritually, people who do not live a godly life. Everyone can abuse the use of physical things. James’ message of warning applies to anyone who actually abuses the use of physical things, and that includes the rich, those who yearn to be rich, and the poor.

An Example of the Danger of Wealth: Chuck Swindoll in his commentary on James (pp. 104-105) gives an interesting example of the instability of wealth. He says, “*In 1923, an elite group of businessmen met at the luxurious Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. The roster included some of the most influential, famous, and wealthy moguls of the early twentieth century. These men were among them: Charles M. Schwab – president of Bethlehem Steel Cooperation. Richard Whitney – president of the New York Stock Exchange. Albert Fall – Secretary of the Interior under President Harding. Jesse Livermore – Wall Street tycoon. Ivar Kreuger – head of a global monopoly of match manufacturers.*

These heavy hitters controlled more wealth than the total assets of the United States Treasury at the time. Surely these men would become models of the

entrepreneurial spirit and stellar examples of financial success. But fast-forward about twenty-five years or so and look back on the courses of their lives. Schwab – died \$300,000 in debt in 1939. Whitney – served time in Sing Sing prison for embezzlement. Fall – served time for misconduct in office, leaving behind a ruined reputation. Kreuger – shot himself in 1932 after his global monopoly collapsed.”

Great intelligence, hard work, and fortunate circumstances can bring a person wealth. Only God-given wisdom and super-natural humility enable a person to manage wealth, power, and influence properly and successfully.

A Rebuke to Wealthy People Who Abuse the Use of Their Wealth: James begins with a general rebuke. He follows the general rebuke with four specific points. Covetousness can lead to hoarding (an unwarranted degree of storing things up for the future), perhaps even storing of large amounts of food when a neighbor is hungry and in great need. James reminds his readers that hoarded wealth loses value. Food spoils, clothes get moth eaten, and metals rust. This is not a condemnation of prudent saving but of undue accumulation. Elsewhere in Scripture, believers are told to provide for their family. Provision requires prudent use of God-given resources.

Covetousness can lead to dishonesty, as when a laborer is hired and then his wages or a portion thereof are inappropriately withheld. It can also lead to excessive self-indulgence, living on earth in luxury beyond reason. Finally, it can cause a two-faced mistreatment of the innocent who happen to get in the way of something passionately coveted.

Whether rich or poor in worldly things, believers are to fix their hope on the Lord and be rich in good works. Excessive focus on self and the pleasing of self leads to all kinds of problems. Strive to please God.

James 5:7-12: *“Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained*

steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.¹² But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.”

Genuine Faith Produces Real Patience: The exhortation to be patient guides the remainder of this chapter. Be patient until Jesus comes again. Establish your hearts. Farmers invest in planting a crop and cultivating it. They must wait patiently for the harvest, knowing that rains must come at right times and other factors beyond their control must be right. So it is with our faith, planted in us by God. While the Holy Spirit works within us, we are to patiently work out the implications of our salvation. We cultivate those good things God works in us. We are to continue to do so until we die or until Christ comes again. Don’t grumble against one another.

How can a believer “do right” when they have suffered under “wrong-doing”? The answer is in the form of four commands that also have other implications. (1.) Be patient. (2.) Establish (or strengthen) your heart. (3.) Don’t grumble or complain. (4.) Don’t swear.

Patience in Suffering: Patience in suffering is driven by hope. The prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord, and in the hope of His unfolding plan, often suffered for their ministry. They endured with patience continuing to speak on behalf of the Lord. With wisdom from above, believers are to face and endure the tests and temptations of life. As they do, they grow in faith and maturity of character. Hope, grounded in the promises of Christ, keeps believers on course.

Believers are to be obedient to the guidance of God’s Word. When tested they are to display constancy. Believer’s hope is in the Lord whose return is “at hand.”

Times of stress cause people to be impatient. Impatience shows up in their speech. There is a tendency to exaggerate situations and to grumble and complain both against circumstances and other people. Believers should avoid grumbling and complaining. Believers are to keep their speech simple, accurate, and truthful.

God is full of compassion and mercy for those who persevere. A believer is to constantly cultivate an attitude of honesty – honesty so transparent they need only

say yes or no, never needing to bolster an answer with an oath or other proof. A believer should be believed because people know he can be trusted to tell the truth.

Believers are not to swear by heaven or earth or any other oath. Their yes is to be yes, and their no is to be no. In responding in this way, they will not fall under condemnation.

James 5:13-18: *“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? 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. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”*

The Prayer of Faith: James has given examples of abuses of speech, but speech can and should be used for high purposes like preaching, teaching, or just talking about the Word of God. Confessing sins and praying are vital ways in which speech can be used correctly.

To correctly understand the lesson found in these verses, some foundational truths should be kept in mind.

(1.) The distinction between original and personal sin. Original sin refers to the sin nature we inherited from Adam (Romans 5:12). Personal sin is the daily, moment by moment, disobedience so familiar to each of us. It arises from our fallen nature (Romans 7:14-23). Original sin is the root, personal sin is the fruit.

(2.) Original sin brought spiritual and physical sickness and death to the human race (Romans 5:12).

(3.) Scripture shows us there can be a direct connection between personal sin and sickness. Recall the sin of David with Bathsheba which David refused for a time to acknowledge. In Psalm 32:3-4 David reveals the physical suffering he experienced while refusing to acknowledge his sin. After rebuke from the prophet Nathan, David

confessed and repented. The story is in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12, but Psalm 32 is David's personal journal of that period of his life.

(4.) Although some sins certainly lead to illness, Scripture shows there may be sickness which bears no relationship with personal sin. An example is provided in John 9:2b-3. Jesus disciples asked who sinned to cause the blindness of a man they were just passing. Jesus response was "no one."

(5.) We see in Scripture, it is not God's will that everyone be healed. Paul had the gift of supernatural healing (see Acts 20:7-12; 28:7-9). Yet he left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). Epaphroditus almost died while ministering to Paul (Philippians 2:25-27). Timothy, Paul's spiritual son, had a stomach problem and frequent ailments (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul asked God three times to remove his "thorn in the flesh," but God said, "***My grace is sufficient for you***" (2 Corinthians 2:9b).

Keeping these thoughts in mind, what does James say in the current passage? He says, are you in trouble? Then, pray! Are you happy? Then, sing songs of praise!

The common denominator of prayer and praise is "glad acceptance of the will of God." In praise, we say to God, your will is good, perfect, and acceptable; I rejoice in what you have done for me. In times of trouble, we try to pray as our Lord prayed in Gethsemane – "***Not my will, but Thine be done***" (Luke 22:42). So in both prayer and praise we say – Thy will be done.

In addition to the "physical ministry of the deacons" in the local church, there is to be a continuing ministry to the sick. This ministry is vested in the elders, not in a specific "faith healer". The sick person must desire this ministry and call the elders. There is a spiritual dimension of healing in addition to the physical healing of the body. "***If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.***"

When the elders come at the invitation of the sick, they anoint with oil in the name of the Lord. Only God can heal. The ministry of the elders is to pray subject to God's requirements that govern prayer. In particular, "***Thy will be done.***" Notice the prayer of faith James mentions is the prayer by the Elders. The faith of the sick person is demonstrated in their calling the Elders.

James says, "***Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.***" This appears to refer to healing the spirit. There is to be no prying curiosity on the part of the listener. There is to be no confession by

those who have sinned without the determination to be healed of the spiritual problem which led to their sin. Confession means striving, with God's help, to rid oneself of the sin confessed. Where the motives are right, this mutual ministry of praying friends is a powerful and gracious thing which God honors.

James illustrates the power of prayer through the example of Elijah. ***“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”*** James reminds his readers that the prophet Elijah was a man of like nature to us, with frailties like our own, sinful, inconsistent, imperfect, but forgiven and transformed by the heavenly gifts accompanying saving faith. Elijah, being a righteous man committed to God, knew what to pray for. The Holy Spirit enabled Elijah to discern God's will and pray for specific miraculous weather events to get the attention of the rulers of Israel causing them to pay attention to his call for repentance. Elijah's prayer led to supernatural withholding of rain and later when he asked for relief, the rains came again. Such prayer from a faithful human agent brings a supernatural result.

The Christian church is to be a fellowship of mutual, loving concern. Each person is to act toward others as God in Christ has acted toward them. If someone is wandering from the truth, out of care for the wanderer's soul, we are to run and help.

Prayer is a dominant mark of genuine faith. Prayer grounded in faith should show patient endurance as the one who prays turns in to God for His help in dealing with life's struggles in God's timing and in accordance with His promises.

James 5:19-20: Dealing with a Believer Who Strays: ***“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”***

James has argued in this letter that “if you claim to have right belief in Christ, your behavior should demonstrate it.” These last 2 verses concern how a believer is to deal with a brother who has strayed and behaves sinfully. James is not talking about leading nonbelievers to salvation.

The overarching instruction in dealing with believers who stray is to be patient and approach with a right attitude. Some people enjoy criticizing, delighting in pointing out minor flaws of others, even when their own life is in shambles. Jesus

and James both condemn that kind of hypocritical judgment of others. Paul in Galatians 6:1 has this suggestion: *“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”* One who intervenes in the life of a wayward believer must be spiritual, gentle, wise, and humble.

If you are inclined to get involved in the life of someone you think is straying, you should first look carefully at your motives. Make certain you will act out of genuine love. Prayerfully consider your plan, seeking wisdom from God. Have patience, any success may take a long time. Watch yourself and your reactions each step of the way. Don't let temptation draw you into a jam.

Conclusion: James has provided excellent instruction on how to properly deal with trials, frustrations, and challenges. A genuine faith exercised in helping others, developing wisdom, and gaining knowledge of the things of God will carry us trials that confront us and on to glory. Faith is by grace alone through faith alone. But genuine faith is never alone. Genuine faith always produces good works. Blessed be the name of the Lord. He is faithful and true.