

*He who turns a sinner from the error of his way*

If we have no concern for our fellow-believers, our faith is dead (2:14–17). We must also be concerned for the backslider. We all have a tendency to wander away from the Lord, and in these verses, this is linked with deviation from the truth. You may be asking, ‘If we are eternally secure and cannot lose our salvation (John 10:27–29), how are we to understand verse 20?’

- ‘Death’ may refer to judgment through chastisement (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:30 – *and many sleep*).
- We must not take for granted the salvation of any backslider. The Lord knows those who belong to him but there are false conversions. The ‘backslider’ may not have been truly saved.

We must not forget those who have strayed from the Lord but continue to pray for them and seek to lead them back to the Lord. It will not do for us to say that if they are the Lord’s, then he will surely restore them. These verses in James make it clear that we are not to be idle onlookers! *He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins* (20). **Think about those known to you who have backslidden. Do you still love them and long for their restoration? When did you last pray for them or seek to encourage them to return to Christ?**

*Lord speak to me, that I may speak  
In living echoes of thy tone;  
As thou hast sought, so let me seek  
Thy erring children, lost and lone.*

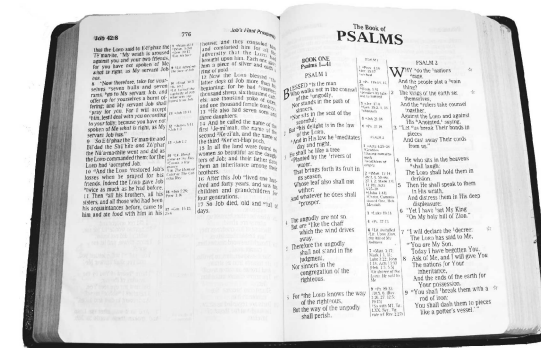
*O lead me, Lord, that I may lead  
The wandering and the wavering feet!  
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed  
Thy hungering ones with manna sweet!*

(F. R. Havergal).

*The notes for 31 July are included with those for August*

# PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



**July 2014**

Bible readings from Psalms 32 to 35 and James

*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven*

There are many blessings in the Christian life, but surely the greatest blessing is that of God's forgiveness. *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven* (1) Without forgiveness of sin we would be under God's condemnation, separated from him, without peace or hope. Paul quotes the first two verses of this psalm in Romans 4:6–8. David uses three words to describe his sin: 'transgression' is the breaking of God's law; 'sin' is falling short of God's standards, and 'iniquity' means crookedness. There are also three words which describe God's dealing with sin:

- 'Forgiven' means that sin is taken away, as a burden lifted from our shoulders. *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us* (Psalm 103:12).
- 'Covered' indicates that sin is hidden from God's sight. We cannot hide anything from God, but when God forgives us, he also covers our sins. The devil loves to remind us of our sins but we should always remember that they are covered; he has no right to accuse us (Romans 8:33–34).
- 'Impute' means that sin is not put to our account – the debt is paid! One wonderful aspect of the gospel message is the truth that our sins were imputed to Christ and his righteousness has been put to our account (Romans 4:6, 22–25; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

To receive God's forgiveness, we must acknowledge our sin and confess it to him (5). If you are miserable, could it be that you have sin to confess? How foolish to continue in spiritual drought (3–4) when you could be surrounded *with songs of deliverance* (7) and with the mercy of God (10). **Such is the joy and rejoicing of the forgiven sinner (11) that he wants to instruct others in the ways of God (8; cp. Psalm 51:12–13). He wants them to know the blessings of forgiveness which he enjoys.** *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven.*

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*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much***Additional reading: Matthew 5:23–24**

What should we do when we sin? We must acknowledge our sin before God and seek his forgiveness (cp. Psalm 51:1–4). When that sin has been against others, we must confess it to them (16). We must seek their forgiveness and prayers, that we may be healed (the healing here is from sin and its harmful effects in our lives). This is not easy! It is very humbling to say, 'Sorry' and to acknowledge that we have been sinful but if this were practised more often, our churches would be spared much trouble and division. There is also a place for seeking the help and prayers of our fellow believers as we face up to our sins and weaknesses. We must be sure that those in whom we confide are godly, mature Christians who can be entrusted with our confidences.

There is a great encouragement here for us to pray. *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much* (16). The Greek verb translated *effective* carries the idea of energy. This has nothing to do with fanatical, worked up frenzy such as that of the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:25–28). Prayer must be energetic, fervent and linked to a righteous life. If we are not righteous, our prayers are useless (Psalm 66:18). Elijah, *a man with a nature like ours*, with the same weaknesses, gave himself to prayer and he trusted in a great God to answer his prayers (17–18). **He was an ordinary man who obtained extraordinary results through prayer!** Do persevere in prayer, especially when the answer seems so long in coming. How can you improve your prayer life?

- Discipline yourself to have a set time for prayer each day and regard it as precious.
- Be determined to be at the prayer meeting(s) of your church.
- If you do not feel like praying, confess your coldness of heart to God and plead with him to lay on your heart the desire to pray. You will soon find that he is answering your prayer.

*Is anyone among you sick?*

These verses are misunderstood by many. The Roman Catholic church claims that they teach the ‘sacrament’ of extreme unction (a ritual of anointing and prayer for the dying). This practice has no warrant here or anywhere else in Scripture. The verses are about sick people recovering, not dying. Some believe that oil was applied to soothe the afflicted part of the body because the Greek word translated, ‘anointing’ can be used to mean ‘rubbing in oil’. The text indicates that healing comes through prayer, however.

Some extreme charismatics claim that Christians should always enjoy good health. That is not true! James asks, ‘*Is any among you sick?*’ Christians do suffer illness. Some teach that if believers are ill, it is because of sin in their lives. That is nonsense! Notice the words, *But if he has committed sins* (15). The Lord may send sickness as chastisement for sin (1 Corinthians 11:29–30), but Timothy lived with poor health and there is no indication that this was because of sin (1 Timothy 5:23). Others teach that it is always God’s will to heal us and that if we are not healed it is through a lack of faith. Timothy was not healed (see above) nor was Trophimus (2 Timothy 4:20). God is sovereign in our lives and he may choose to heal us, but we must be prepared to accept his will if we are not healed.

What should we do when we are ill? We should seek the prayers of our church and when confined to bed or housebound call for the elders to pray for us. We should reflect on our lives and if we know that we have sinned, we must confess that sin and pray for forgiveness. Prayer must be with faith (*‘the prayer of faith’*; cp. 1:6). Such faith cannot be worked up and it does not depend on feelings. **Faith is a settled confidence in God and it is seen in submission to his will in sickness and in health (cp. 4:15). Do you pray with faith?**

*Praise from the upright is beautiful*

The righteous are called upon to praise the Lord (1–3) and then we are told why we should praise him (4–19). The psalm concludes with an expression of confidence in God and a prayer for his mercy (20–22).

Praise should be a way of life for the child of God. *Praise from the upright is beautiful* (1). We must be reverent in our worship, but reverence does not exclude joy. Spurgeon comments on this psalm, ‘To rejoice in temporal comforts is dangerous, to rejoice in self is foolish, to rejoice in sin is fatal, but to rejoice in God is heavenly’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

The Lord has chosen us that we may proclaim his praises (or virtues – 1 Peter 2:9). What are the virtues of God? Let us consider some of them which are described in our reading today:

- His word is right and *all his work is done in truth. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the goodness of the LORD* (4–5). God is faithful and just; let us proclaim his goodness.
- God is the almighty Creator. He is awe-inspiring in his sovereign power (6–9). He created all things by his word (6; see Genesis 1:3,4,9, etc. – *Then God said ...* ). Those who believe in the theory of evolution rob God of his glory.
- His sovereign purposes cannot be overthrown but he overthrows the counsel of the nations. *The counsel of the LORD stands forever; the plans of his heart to all generations* (10–11).

Let us praise God that he looks from heaven and sees all the inhabitants of the earth, but he looks upon those who fear him with tender concern (13–15, 18–19). When the psalms were written, horses were highly valued on the battlefield just as tanks are today (16–17), but our trust should always be in the Lord. God is glorious in all his ways – *he is our help and our shield*. Let us trust in him at all times, rejoice in him and hope in him (20–22). **When did you last praise God with all your heart? Praise from the upright is beautiful** (1).

*Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good*

This is an acrostic psalm (see notes on Psalm 25). The title shows that David wrote it when he was fleeing from Saul; it was a time when he was in great danger (see 1 Samuel 21:10–15). Despite his distressing circumstances David could not refrain from praising God. *I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth* (1). He urged God's people to magnify God with him (3). If we do not worship God in the company of his people, we miss great blessings.

Why was David so full of rejoicing? He knew by experience the reality of the Lord's hand upon his life. *I sought the LORD and he heard me, and delivered me ... This poor man cried out and the LORD heard him, and saved him* (4–6). God does look after his own. How wonderful that the angel of the Lord encamps around us (7)! That was a vital lesson that Elisha's servant had to learn (2 Kings 6:15–17).

At this time in David's life he had a rough band of four hundred followers (1 Samuel 22:1–2). He had to teach them some vital lessons concerning the fear of the Lord (11–22). Some of them became mighty men of self-sacrificing faith and courage (2 Samuel 23:8–39). *The fear of the LORD* (11) brings stability and godly character to a person's life (12–14).

We will always have trials on this earthly pilgrimage, but the Lord watches over us with great concern and he hears our cry. He is near to us to deliver and to keep us (15–22). Blessed be his name! **This psalm is full of precious promises. Write them down and meditate upon them.** *Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in him!* (8).

*Through all the changing scenes of life  
In trouble and in joy,  
The praises of my God shall still  
My heart and tongue employ.*

(Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady)

*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray*

The words 'pray' or 'prayer' are found in every verse of today's reading. The Christian life is a life of prayer. Just as faith without works is dead, so also faith without prayer is dead. Christians know times of trouble as well as of joyfulness and we must look to the Lord in both situations. *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray* (13). Prayer is a great but often neglected privilege. How should we pray when in trouble? We must recognise that God is sovereign in all our circumstances and commit our way to him (Psalm 37:5,7–8). We should ask the Lord to deliver us but be prepared for whatever answer he gives (cp. 2 Corinthians 12:7–10). We should seek for his grace and help in our need (Hebrews 4:16). David wrote at a time of trouble, *Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to you, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I* (Psalm 61:1–2).

Matthew Henry comments, 'Times of affliction should be praying times. To this end God sends afflictions, that we may be engaged to seek him early; and that those who have at other times neglected him, may be brought to enquire after him. The spirit is then most humble, the heart is broken and tender; and prayer is most acceptable to God when it comes from a contrite, humble spirit' (BIBLE COMMENTARY).

We sometimes give the impression that the Christian life is a grim affair. This does not bring honour to God nor attract sinners to our Saviour. We have plenty to be cheerful about and we should rejoice in the Lord (Philippians 4:4). We have been saved through the amazing grace of God, we have forgiveness and cleansing from sin, we have peace with God, we have eternal life, we know Jesus as our Lord, Saviour and Friend. God is our heavenly Father who lovingly cares for us and we know many blessings from his hand. We have God's word to direct us and to feed our souls. *Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms*' (cp. Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). **Prayer and praise are essential in the Christian's life. Are they in evidence in your life?**

*Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'***Additional reading: Matthew 5:33–37.**

There is a warning here against another sin of the tongue, that of the wrong use of oaths in our speech. Notice how James emphasises the importance of what he is saying. *But above all, my brethren.* Oaths were used for a number of reasons:

- When making a solemn promise (1 Samuel 19:6).
- To emphasise a threat (2 Kings 6:31; Acts 23:12–16).
- To cover up a lie (Mark 14:71).

Some Christians believe that James is here forbidding the swearing by Almighty God when taking an oath in court. I believe that they are mistaken. There is a lawful use of oaths (Deuteronomy 6:13) and Abraham and Paul used oaths (Genesis 24:3; Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:23). God also made an oath when he gave his promise to Abraham (Hebrews 6:13–18).

What is James warning against here? Some people use the name of the Lord thoughtlessly and blasphemously. They use the name of God to add emphasis to their speech, but that is taking the name of the Lord in vain (Exodus 20:7). God's name is sacred and we must always be careful how we use his name.

**We must not only love the truth but also be truthful so that others can rely on our word.** Half-truths, 'white lies' and anything meant to deceive or to mislead are lies and will bring judgment upon us. Oaths are reserved for special occasions (eg. we may be required to swear on oath in a court of law). They are not for everyday conversation. We must say what we mean and mean what we say. *Let your 'Yes,' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No,' lest you fall into judgment* (12).

*Let the LORD be magnified*

David almost certainly wrote Psalm 35 while fleeing from Saul. You will remember that he had not committed any crime, but was the victim of Saul's burning jealousy. The sentiments of verse 12 are reflected for instance in 1 Samuel 24:15,17. Spurgeon points out that the psalm consists of complaint, prayer, and a promise to praise God for the expected deliverance. These three elements are repeated in the three sections of the psalm – verses 1 to 10; 11 to 18; and 19 to 28.

David had been wronged and his life was threatened by Saul and his allies (7). He had done good, but was repaid with evil (12) and those who were against him had no cause to be his enemies (19). What was he to do? He came to the righteous Judge of all the earth in earnest prayer. He cried out, *'Plead my cause, O LORD, with those who strive with me'* (1). The picture then changes to that of a battlefield when David calls upon God to fight for him (2–3). He prayed that *the angel of the LORD* would pursue his enemies (5–6). He returns to the law-court in verses 11 and 23. False witnesses had risen against him and he called on God to vindicate him. He prays for the confusion of his enemies and for the well-being of those who support him (26–27) before closing on a note of praise (28).

**I wonder if this psalm raises a question in your mind? Should we not only pray for people, but also against them as did David?** Didn't the Lord Jesus tell us to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44)? It is important to remember that David really loved Saul and twice spared his life (1 Samuel 24:18; 26:5–25). When Saul was later killed in battle against the Philistines, David was grief-stricken (2 Samuel 1:23–24). He did love his enemies. We have every right to pray against the enemies of the gospel. May God silence the atheist and the scoffer. May he bring down the occult practitioners and Satanists. May he destroy their evil works. May the Lord stop the mouths of false teachers. May God be pleased to bring many of these people to repentance and to faith in Christ. When our enemies become our brothers, we will then say, *'Let the LORD be magnified'* (27).

# JAMES

25 JULY

James 5:6–11

There are three men in the New Testament with the name ‘James’, two of them being numbered with the twelve disciples – James the son of Zebedee, brother of John; James the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:2–3; Acts 1:13). The other one is James, son of Joseph and Mary, half-brother of the Lord Jesus (Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19). Though we cannot be sure which of the three wrote this letter, it is traditionally accepted that it was James, the half-brother of Jesus. James was not a believer before the crucifixion of Christ (John 7:5). The Lord Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7) and he was in the upper room with Mary and his brothers on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). He became a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 2:9).

James wrote his letter to Jewish Christians living outside Palestine (1). He warns us against false religion, stressing that faith must be seen in action and showing how faith is to be worked out in our lives. Faith without works is dead (2:20) and though good works do not save us, they are an evidence of true faith (2:18).

## Outline of James

- |                                    |   |         |
|------------------------------------|---|---------|
| 1. Introduction                    | – | 1:1     |
| 2. Faith and trial                 | – | 1:2–20  |
| 3. Faith and obedience             | – | 1:21–27 |
| 4. Faith and favouritism           | – | 2:1–13  |
| 5. Faith and works                 | – | 2:14–26 |
| 6. Faith and control of the tongue | – | 3:1–12  |
| 7. Faith and wisdom                | – | 3:13–18 |
| 8. Faith and humility              | – | 4:1–17  |
| 9. Warnings to the rich            | – | 5:1–6   |
| 10. Faith and patience             | – | 5:7–12  |
| 11. Faith and prayer               | – | 5:13–20 |

## *Be patient*

Christians are not exempt from suffering (verse 6 speaks of the murder of the just). When we are persecuted, we will face pressures to compromise our stand for Christ so that we may have some peace. When affliction seems to be unending, it is easy to give in to despair. How are we to face suffering and trials?

a. We must *be patient* (7–8). The Greek word translated *be patient* means ‘to be longsuffering’. Matthew Henry describes this patience as ‘a humble acquiescing in the wisdom and will of God, with an eye to a future glorious recompense’ (BIBLE COMMENTARY). The farmer (in the Middle East) must exercise patience as he waits for the early rain to germinate his seed and then for the latter rain to swell the grain. It is pointless to fret or lose patience when the weather is unfavourable. He has to be patient. We too must be patient and look for the coming of the Lord.

b. We must *not grumble* (9). We should not allow things to get on top of us so that we turn on our fellow-Christians with our complaints. God is sovereign over all our circumstances. If we grumble, we are really complaining against God. Paul was imprisoned because of his work for Christ, but even in prison he was content (Philippians 1:12–13; 4:11–12). There was never a trace of self-pity in the apostle.

c. We must persevere (10–11). James reminds us of the suffering of the prophets and of Job in particular. They were blessed for their perseverance.

d. We must remember that *the Lord is very compassionate and merciful* (11). He has a wise purpose in all our trials. Suffering is not meaningless for the Christian (cp. Romans 8:18; 1 Peter 4:12–14).

**Are you having a tough time? Remember, nothing can separate you from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35–39). He will bring you through. Be patient and keep looking to him.**

*Come now, you rich, weep and howl*

In the eyes of the world it is very desirable to be rich, but James has some stern words for those who are wealthy: ‘*Come now, you rich, weep and howl*’ (1). Who are these rich people whom James denounces? They were those who had resorted to exploitation, fraud and even murder in the quest to enjoy a life of ease and luxury (4–6). They could hardly be genuine Christians, but even today there are employers who claim to love the Lord, and yet act unjustly towards their workers. The Lord of Sabaoth (of hosts) does not turn a blind eye to injustice and there are echoes here of the prophecy of Amos (cp. Amos 6:1–6). If we live for pleasure and luxury, we are heading for destruction. We are like greedy animals who do not realise that they are being fattened for the meat-market (5).

Scripture tells us of godly men who were very wealthy, eg. Abraham, Job, Joseph of Arimathea and Philemon. It is not a sin to be rich where wealth is lawfully gained, but it is wrong to live for money, pleasure and luxury. The Lord Jesus warns us about the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 13:22). Riches do not last and we must resist the temptation to hoard money (2–3; Matthew 6:19–21) while there are desperate needs in the work of the Lord. We may not be rich, but it is dangerous to set our hearts on riches. The Bible warns us that *some have strayed from the faith because of the love of money and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows* (1 Timothy 6:9–10). We will never be content if we seek satisfaction in material things. Jesus said, ‘*You cannot serve God and mammon*’ (‘riches’ – Matthew 6:24). **Many a Christian has resisted fierce temptation and has endured persecution, only to be corrupted by money (cp. 1 Timothy 6:10).**

If God has given us an abundance, we should show our love and gratitude to him by being generous in our giving. Thomas Manton reminds us that ‘it is hard to possess riches without sin.’ If God has blessed us with material things, let us remember the words of Psalm 62:10: *If riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*

*Count it all joy when you fall into various trials*

After beginning his letter with a brief greeting, James makes what may appear to be an astonishing statement, ‘*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials*’ (2). How can we consider it *all joy* when persecution, hardship, disappointment, sickness and other trials come upon us?

- We must understand that God is always in control of all our circumstances. Trials belong to the *all things that work together for good* (Romans 8:28). Paul and Silas were flogged and unjustly imprisoned in Philippi, but they prayed and sang praises to God in the prison. The jailer and his family were wonderfully saved that night (Acts 16:23–34).
- The testing of our faith produces *patience* (‘endurance’). This is essential to the process of making us *perfect and complete* (3–4). The word *perfect* means ‘mature’; it has nothing to do with sinless perfection. Maturity does not come from chasing after sensational experiences, but in the school of affliction. Testing and chastening are for our profit, producing godly character (Romans 5:3–5; Hebrews 12:11).
- We must remember that suffering is not for ever. Glory will be revealed in us when Christ returns (Romans 8:18).

**Our attitude to testing is all important! We may not feel full of joy when our faith is being tried, but it will help us if we see it as part of God’s wise and loving purpose for us.** Job was able to exclaim through his grief and tears, ‘*But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold*’ (Job 23:10).

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

(‘K’ in Rippon’s Selection, 1787)

*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God*

We are often very perplexed and distraught when our faith is tested. We certainly need much wisdom if we are to honour God and to be able to deal with the dark whispering of Satan. The advice and prayers of Christian friends are a great help at such times, but we must seek the Lord too. *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him* (5). The Greek of this verse says, ‘Let him ask the giving God.’ What an encouragement this is for us to come to God in prayer when we are in need or passing through trial. The Lord gladly hears such a prayer providing that we come to him in faith and with the right motives (without doubting or being double-minded. Those who do not pray in faith are unstable and they will not receive anything from the Lord 6–8). **Are you passing through a testing time? Have you asked God for wisdom and grace to help you in this trial? Are you trusting in him?**

*Oh, what peace we often forfeit!  
O what needless pain we bear!  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer.*

(Joseph M. Scriven)

Poverty or loss may prove to be a great trial to a believer and there are words of wisdom to the poor and the rich in verses 9 to 11. Poverty makes some people bitter and full of envy but wisdom in poverty teaches us to be content (cp. Philippians 4:11–12; 1 Timothy 6:6). We know that we have a priceless, glorious inheritance in heaven (9; cp. Ephesians 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3–4). The rich Christian must never depend on his wealth but remember that his riches could vanish in a moment (cp. Job 1:13–22). He must have the wisdom to humbly depend on the Lord at all times and to glory in this rather than boast in his possessions. Wealth has its dangers and trials (1 Timothy 6:17–18). If God has blessed us with material comforts and possessions, we must never make a ‘god’ of them. We are not in this world for ever and we cannot take our possessions with us when we die (10–11).

*You ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’*

Another evidence of worldly behaviour is to shut God out of our planning (13). James reminds us, ‘*You do not know what will happen tomorrow*’ and tells us that human life is *a vapour* (14; cp. Proverbs 27:1). The uncertainty of life drives many people to go to fortune-tellers to find out what the future may hold. The Bible condemns such practices (Deuteronomy 18:9–10; Isaiah 8:19). We do not know what will happen tomorrow and neither do fortune-tellers!

It is arrogant and evil to boast of all that we will do. We should always have a submissive attitude to the will of God (16). *We ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’* (15; cp. 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:7; Philippians 2:19). We must be prayerful when we make our plans and carefully ponder the implications for ourselves, our family and our church in our decision-making. Jesus told a parable about a rich man who disregarded God in his future plans. God called that man a fool and told him that he would die that very night (Luke 12:16–21).

Arthur Pink joined his parents for breakfast on a Spring morning in 1902. His father was reading a newspaper which gave details of the forthcoming coronation of the new king. Pink recalled his father saying to his mother, ‘Oh. I am sorry to see this worded like that.’ And she said, ‘What is it?’ ‘Why,’ he said, ‘Here is a proclamation that on a certain date Prince Edward will be crowned king at Westminster and there is no Deo Volente, God willing.’ The words stuck in Arthur’s mind for the very reason that on the appointed day the future King Edward VII was ill with appendicitis and the coronation had to be postponed (THE LIFE OF ARTHUR W. PINK by Iain Murray, page 4. – published by Banner of Truth Trust). *We ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills.’*

If you are not a Christian, these verses are a timely reminder that you cannot be sure of the future. Dare you continue to live without Jesus as your Saviour and Lord? Turn from your sin and trust in him and he will freely forgive you. **You will then find that God will take care of you and your future and that he will never fail you nor forsake you.**



*Do not speak evil of one another*

**Additional reading: Psalm 15:1–3; Ephesians 4:29 to 5:2.**

James has already warned us about the need to bridle our tongues (1:26; 3:1–12) and he now refers to a particular sin of the tongue: *Do not speak evil of one another, brethren* (11). We may be correct in our doctrine, faithful in church attendance and in serving the Lord; we may avoid the gross sins that are so prevalent in the world, and yet be worldly because we speak evil of our fellow believers. We must not disparage or defame other believers or repeat tales about one another (see Psalm 15:3). Such behaviour is an indication of worldly behaviour which God hates (4). We must not look to the world (which loves gossip) for our pattern, but to the word of God.

Why is speaking evil of other believers such a dreadful sin?

- It is a sin against our brethren for whom Christ died and whom he loves.
- It is lawlessness, speaking evil of the law which is fulfilled by love (Romans 13:10).
- It is a sin of presumption. *Who are you to judge another?* (12). It is to do something that we are neither qualified nor permitted to do.
- It is pride. When we put down others, we elevate ourselves.

What should we do about those who need correction because through their bad behaviour they deny their Christian profession? We must not gossip behind their backs, but see them privately and seek to bring them to repentance. We need to be spiritual and gentle to exercise such a ministry (Galatians 6:1). **We must warn about those who cause trouble and divisions (Romans 16:17) but if anyone wants to gossip, close your ears.** When speaking of others, ask yourself, ‘Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary?’ Be an encourager of other Christians, not a gossip. *Do not speak evil of one another.*

*Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’*

The words *trials* and *temptation* (2,12) come from the same Greek word which means ‘a testing’. There is blessing for those who persevere when tested, but they will only receive such blessing if they react to their trials with a godly, positive attitude. If you are hard-pressed and tried, remember, trial leads to great blessings and you will receive the welcome and commendation of our precious Saviour and *the crown of life* when your earthly journey is done (12).

We must distinguish between the testing of our faith (2–3,12) and temptation to sin (13–15). God tests our faith but he does not tempt us to sin. *Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’* (13). The tendency to make excuses for sin and to shift the blame began in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:12–13). Some claim that they would not sin if God prevented them from being tempted. That will not do with God. Thousands of believers have been providentially placed in circumstances where temptation comes upon them, but they resolutely resist it (eg. Joseph; Genesis 39:7–12).

Temptation rises from within ourselves through our sinful nature (14). Satan is also called ‘*the tempter*’ (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5) and he will see to it that sin appears to be an attractive option for us. We must recognise that we may encourage temptation through our own thought life. The Puritan Thomas Manton comments, ‘The soul of man is chiefly and mainly made up of desires; like a sponge, it is always thirsting, and sucking of something to fill itself’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 93, published by Banner of Truth).

May our great desire be to have a closer walk with the Lord. Never forget, though sin may appear to satisfy us, it brings forth death (15; cp. Romans 6:23). **Are you battling with temptation? Temptation is not sin, it is yielding to it that is sinful.** The Lord Jesus was tempted but never sinned (Matthew 4:1–11; Hebrews 2:18). He will give you the grace and strength to overcome if you will but look to him for help (1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 2:18).

*The Father of lights, with whom there is no ... shadow of turning*

James' first readers may have had some mistaken ideas about God because he writes, '*Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren*' (16). This verse links the previous verses (13–14) with those that follow. There is a tenderness in this appeal – *my beloved brethren* (cp. verse 19). James wants us to understand that God does not tempt us to sin; on the contrary, he is the giver of *every good gift and every perfect gift* (17). The best of all those gifts is the gift of his beloved Son to save us from our sins (John 3:16).

God is described as *the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning* (17). The word *Father* is used here to show God as the Creator of the sun, moon and stars which light up the sky (Genesis 1:14–18) and he is the source of light – physical, intellectual and spiritual. *God is light and in him there is no darkness at all*' (1 John 1:5). The heavenly lights created by God have their variations. We are left in darkness when the sun and the moon are eclipsed, but God is immutable. He never changes and he is unailing in his goodness.

God is also sovereign in our salvation. He chose us in Christ before he made the world (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13) and '*of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth*' (18; cp. 1 Peter 1:23). This is also emphasised in the Gospel of John – those who are children of God, are born, *not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God* (John 1:12–13). We owe our salvation with all its blessings to our wonderful God.

The first-fruits of the harvest in Bible times were offered to the Lord with thanksgiving and in anticipation of a good harvest (Numbers 18:12; Proverbs 3:9). We belong to God as *a kind of first-fruits of his creatures* (18). **We owe him so much. Let us be sure to live as those who belong to him.** The hymn 'Great is Thy faithfulness' is based on verse 17 and Lamentations 3:22–25. Read through it and offer your thanksgiving and praises to God.

*Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil***Additional readings: 1 Peter 5:5–9.**

If submission to Christ is an essential part of being a Christian, why does James have to exhort believers to *submit to God* (7)? We continue, after our conversion to Christ, to struggle with the world, with our own remaining sin, and with the devil. James has already warned us about worldliness (4) and he encourages us that God *gives more grace* in all our trials and battles (6). We must, therefore, submit to God if we are to know his grace working in our lives.

Submission to God involves drawing near to him every day, seeking cleansing from sin and purifying our hearts. We must '*lament and mourn and weep*' over those things which grieve the Holy Spirit and repent of them. We must humble ourselves before God and bow down to his will (8–10). If we are to do these things, we must have some discipline in our lives and have a set time each day for personal devotions.

We are to submit to God but we must not submit to the devil. *Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you* (7). Thomas Manton points out that it is the obedient Christian who has most opposition from the devil. He writes, 'Those that have most grace feel most trouble from Satan. He envieth they should enjoy that condition and interest in God which himself hath lost' (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 360, published by Banner of Truth). We are no longer enslaved by the devil if we belong to Christ and we are able to resist him. He is very cunning, however, and he seeks to catch us off our guard. We must be alert enough to recognise his wiles (1 Peter 5:8). Satan wants us to be proud of ourselves, hence the need to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord (10). **Well, how are things in your Christian life? Have you been defeated and discouraged?** *Draw near to God and he will draw near to you* (8). Many Christians are weak because they do not set apart time to worship and pray to God each day. As you enjoy precious fellowship with him, he will lift you up and give you more grace.

*But he gives more grace*

**Additional readings: Proverbs 3:31–35; Isaiah 57:15.**

Some commentators believe that ‘*Spirit*’ (5) refers to the Holy Spirit (the NKJV has a capital ‘s’ in its translation), but others (eg. Thomas Manton) believe that it refers to the corrupt spirit of man (cp. verse 2). The translators of the AV and ESV would appear to favour such a view as they use a small ‘s’ in translation. We have been purchased at great cost and it is true that the Holy Spirit yearns over us when we stray from the Lord. It is also true that we have many battles with the remains of sin and will do so until we reach heaven.

We may be uncertain in our understanding of verse 5 but there is no doubt about the wonderful promise in verse 6 – *But he gives more grace*. The meaning of the word ‘*grace*’ is favour that we do not deserve. The grace of God is marvellous because we deserve judgment for our sins, but he has had mercy on us and saved us. Thomas Manton comments, ‘Grace is nothing else but an introduction of the virtues of God into the soul’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 349, published by Banner of Truth). God gives sufficient grace for every trial and difficulty that we encounter, and enough to meet every need (cp. 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Hebrews 4:16). **His grace is never exhausted and there will be more grace for every future trial of our faith.**

The proud person will not submit to God nor come to him for grace. *God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble* (6; cp. 1 Peter 5:5). The humble believer submits to God on all occasions (7). Are you passing through difficult times? Humbly look to the Lord and confess your own weakness and proneness to sin. He delights to give us freely of his grace and he will never fail you.

*Plenteous grace with thee is found,  
Grace to pardon all my sin;  
Let the healing streams abound,  
Make and keep me pure within.*

(Charles Wesley)

*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*

The Lord uses his word to bring us to new birth in Christ (18) and this should affect our attitude in our hearing, receiving and doing of that word.

- We must *be swift to hear* God’s word and *slow to speak*. Beware of those who are more fond of talking and arguing about the word than of listening to it. They often grow angry in debate and are not *slow to wrath*. Such behaviour does not promote godliness (19–20). Are you eager to hear God’s word preached and to learn from it?
- We are to *receive with meekness the implanted word* (21). The *word* is here likened to a seed planted in our hearts. The ground for that precious seed must be prepared so that it can grow and prosper in our lives. This preparation comes from dealing with remaining sin in our lives. Have you put aside all filthiness and wickedness from your own life, in thought, word and deed? Do you receive God’s word with a meek and submissive spirit?
- *Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves* (22). We must not only believe the Bible but also practise its teaching in our lives! There are two ways of looking in a mirror – with a passing glance or with an intense gaze (23–25). The passing glance does not take in any detail and the man who is not a doer of the word is like one who is content with the passing glance. The word has had little chance to show him what kind of man he is. We must take time over the word of God and discipline ourselves to remember its teaching and to obey it. The word of God is described as *the perfect law of liberty* (25). This does not mean that we are encouraged to live as we please. We must obey its commandments, being *doers of the word*. God’s word points the way to true liberty, to freedom from the power of sin, divine wrath and death. If we do not fashion our lives by the Bible, we are not in a healthy spiritual state. **We must beware of deceiving ourselves into thinking that all is well when it is not.**

*Pure and undefiled religion*

Verses 26 and 27 give a preview of three areas of concern which are highlighted in the letter of James. Without these things our religion is useless and we must question whether we are true believers:

1. We must control our tongues. If we do not control our tongues, we deceive our own hearts if we imagine that our religion is acceptable to God. We will be thinking about this when we read James chapter 3.
2. We must have compassion for those in need.
3. We must lead holy lives.

Verse 27 is not a definition of the Christian faith but it does show how *pure and undefiled religion before God* should work out in our lives. Widows and orphans are very vulnerable and were more so in Bible times. They were (and are) ripe for exploitation by wicked people and the Lord is especially concerned for them (cp. Psalm 146:9).

Where do we begin in our deeds of compassion? We must always give priority to fellow believers (Galatians 6:9–10). \* We must make ourselves aware of needs among those in our own fellowship and to do this we must take the trouble to be interested in others. Do not leave the pastor, elders or deacons to do all the visiting. There are those who need your help and spiritual encouragement. Some who are frail or infirm need jobs doing around their home and children of one-parent families need the love of the whole church.

We may easily be influenced and polluted by the world around us (cp. Romans 12:2; 2 Peter 1:4) and *pure religion* is to keep ourselves untainted from its ways. We can hardly shine in the world around us if it has soiled us (Philippians 2:15). **Happy the person who has died to self-interest, who has a compassion for the needy and who lives a godly life in this dark world! How is your religion before God?**

\* When giving to disaster appeals, be sure that you give through reputable evangelical organisations. In many areas of great need overseas Christians are the victims of persecution. They are often neglected when local officials are used to channel aid.

*Friendship with the world is enmity with God*

**Additional readings: Romans 12:1–2; 1 John 2:15–17.**

If we want to have pure religion, we must keep ourselves *unspotted from the world* (1:27). Worldliness is more than avoiding certain places or indulging in certain sins. It is a whole way of life which refuses to submit to God's rule. It is seen in such sins as self-seeking, covetousness, pride (2,6) and the love of pleasure rather than loving God (1,3; cp. 2 Timothy 3:4). Worldliness stifles spiritual desire and it fails to give lasting satisfaction (2–3). James makes it quite clear that a worldly Christian is guilty of spiritual adultery. The church is the bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7–9). He has purchased us at a tremendous price through his death on the cross and he demands our undivided loyalty. James asks, *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?* (4). J.B. Phillips paraphrases this verse, 'You are like unfaithful wives, flirting with the glamour of this world, and never realising that to be the world's lover means becoming the enemy of God!' If you are worldly and refuse to obey God's word of challenge, you add further to your sin (17).

**What is the answer to worldliness?** It is the enjoyment of Christ through daily fellowship with him. We must resist the enticements of the world (remember Christian and Faithful at Vanity Fair in John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress'). 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould' (Romans 12:2 – J.B. Phillips, THE NEW TESTAMENT IN MODERN ENGLISH). Think much about the greatness of God's love for you. Can you, dare you, be worldly, when Jesus gave his life to save you? *Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (Matthew 6:33) and you will find no joy or satisfaction like that of putting God first in your life. When you do this, the world will have very little attraction for you.

*I thirst, but not as once I did,  
The vain delights of earth to share;  
Thy wounds, Emmanuel, all forbid  
That I should seek my pleasures there.* (William Cowper)

*You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss*

James has contrasted the difference between earthly wisdom and the wisdom that comes from heaven (3:13–18). It is obvious that many of those to whom James first wrote were lacking in the wisdom which is given by God. Sadly, the same is true of many churches in the twenty-first century and ‘wars and fights’ do much harm to the Lord’s work.

What causes strife and division in churches? These things are a symptom of battles going on in the souls of professing Christians (1). If we allow ourselves to be driven by the wisdom of this world, we will be self-centred and envious of others (3:14–17). We will live for our own selfish ambition and gratification which will cause us to lust after position or possessions. *You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain* (2). This does not necessarily mean physical murder. *Whoever hates his brother is a murderer* (1 John 3:15). Covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5) and the covetous heart is never satisfied or contented.

James gives us two reasons for not obtaining the things that we desire:–

- A failure to pray. *You do not have because you do not ask* (2). We all know that we ought to come frequently to our heavenly Father with our needs but so often we do not make them the subject of earnest prayer. How foolish we are when God is so good to us (cp. Philippians 4:19).
- A failure to have the right motives in prayer because our desires are wrong and our hearts not right with God. Wrong praying will get us nowhere! The word of God says, *‘You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures’* (3). Thomas Manton comments, ‘We miss when we ask amiss’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 338). **It is a dreadful thing to be out of touch with God and to lose the enjoyment of sweet fellowship with him because of sin in our hearts.** Ponder the prayer of Proverbs 30:7–9! When did you last pray like that? Remember that *godliness with contentment is great gain* (1 Timothy 6:6).

*Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus ... with partiality*

James pulls no punches in his letter but he is gentle. See how he addresses his readers – *my brethren* and *my beloved brethren* (1,5; cp. 1:2,19; 2:14; 3:1,10; 5:10,12). He now goes on to deal with favouritism in the church, and particularly with showing respect for some who come among us while ignoring others. He writes, *‘Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ ... with partiality’* (1). James is quite clear in his teaching that we must not be nice to the rich and ignore the poor (1–9). Such a worldly attitude does not come from pure religion (1:27).

We must never despise those who are poor, those who are of a different race, or those who perhaps are not very intellectual. If a Christian has a snobbish attitude to certain people, there is something seriously wrong with his faith! Why is it wrong to show partiality or favouritism to certain people?

- It is evil-minded to have such an attitude (4)
- Worldly standing and riches make no difference to the Lord. James asks, *‘Has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him?’* (5). God has not chosen his people on the basis of worldly considerations. How dare we use such criteria in our dealings with others? Let us remember that the Lord Jesus became poor in order to save us from our sins (2 Corinthians 8:9).
- The rich are often the very ones who oppress Christians (there are of course, notable exceptions). Prominent and wealthy people were often the instigators of persecution against the early church (cp. Acts 13:50; 16:19; 19:23–41).

**Do we make everyone who comes into our church feel very welcome and wanted, regardless of social standing or race?**

*The royal law according to the Scripture*

What is *the royal law according to the Scripture* (8)? It is *you shall love your neighbour as yourself*. It is interesting to note that this is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18 and that verse 15 of the same chapter warns against showing partiality. Why is this called *the royal law*? Because it is the law of the kingdom of God to which all Christians belong and we must keep those laws. The Lord Jesus emphasised this law which undergirds the other laws (Matthew 22:36–40; Romans 13:8–10).

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan after he had been asked, ‘*Who is my neighbour?*’ (Luke 10:25–37). Our neighbour is more than the person living next door to us. He is anyone whom God brings to us in his providence. Just think for a moment about those in your church. Do you love them as you love yourself? Listen to the words of Robert Johnstone. – ‘When the icy fingers of selfishness chill the soul, and the whisper rises, “Have I not loved my neighbour, my brother, enough?” the still small voice of conscience answers, “Be not weary in well-doing; hast thou cared for his interests with the same ardour as for thine own? Hast thou shown to him the same devotedness as to thyself, of affection like the love with which Jesus devoted himself for thee?”’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 161, published by Banner of Truth).

*The royal law* stands as a whole. To show partiality is to sin and this renders us guilty in the sight of God just as much as if we were adulterers or murderers (10–11). The word of God is called *the law of liberty* (12; cp. 1:25). It is true that Christ has fulfilled the law for us but this does not mean that we can live as we please. God has saved us to make us holy, not to make us lawless. We are *under law towards Christ* (1 Corinthians 9:21); this is a law of liberty. In our salvation mercy has triumphed over judgment (12). **We are free from condemnation, from the curse of the law, but we are also free in Christ to obey the law.** We have been freed from our natural tendency to disobey God so that we will want to please him.

*The wisdom that is from above*

James asks, ‘*Who is wise and understanding among you?*’ (13). He then goes on to show that there are two kinds of wisdom – there is a true wisdom which comes from above, from God, and there is a false wisdom which comes from below. False wisdom is earthly and lacks spiritual light; it is ‘*the wisdom of this world*’ (1 Corinthians 1:20); it is sensual, seeking to gratify the flesh and it is demonic (15). How does this dreadful wisdom show itself? It is seen in *bitter envy and self-seeking ... confusion and every evil thing*’ it boasts and lies against the truth (14,16).

Wisdom has been described as ‘the ability to make the right use of knowledge’ (Chambers Dictionary). If we are making the right use of our knowledge of the Lord, we will display the lovely characteristics found in *the wisdom that is from above* (17). What are we told about this wisdom?

- It is *pure*; it is not contaminated by the dreadful sins mentioned in verses 14 to 16.
- It is *peaceable*; there is no trace of bitter envy or strife (14; 4:1). It does not seek peace at the expense of truth, however.
- It is *gentle*; this gentleness is not a sign of weakness; it is shown by thoughtfulness and sensitivity to others.
- It is *willing to yield* (*easy to be intreated* – AV). It is shown in having a reasonable attitude and by being approachable; it is not obstinate.
- It is *full of mercy and good fruits* (eg. the fruit of the Holy Spirit – Galatians 5:22–23).

Those who have this wisdom that is from above sow precious seed in peace and it yields *the fruit of righteousness* (18). Are you serious about having this wisdom, about leading a life that pleases God? Have you asked God for this wisdom (see chapter 1, verse 5)? **Think about this ‘wisdom that is from above’ and seek to show it more and more in your own life.**

*No man can tame the tongue*

We may sometimes apologise because we are always ‘saying the wrong thing’. Why do we ‘say the wrong thing’? Because the tongue is *an unruly evil which no man can tame* (8). All kinds of wild animals have been controlled by men but *no man can tame the tongue which is full of deadly poison*. Our problem may be that we have little desire to control this unruly member of our body.

We utter the most sublime words of praise with our tongues when we sing our psalms and hymns; with that same tongue which blesses God, *we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God* (9). This should not be so! James takes more illustrations from nature to show the inconsistency of such behaviour. He asks, ‘*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?*’ (11–12). The lashing received from a harsh tongue is often harder to bear than any physical injury. Many a church has been torn apart and destroyed by unruly tongues. **Have you hurt others with your tongue? Apologise to them and ask them to forgive you and seek the Lord’s forgiveness also.**

*No man can tame the tongue*’ (8) so should we just give up trying? No! Remember that *the things which are impossible with men are possible with God* (Luke 18:27). How can we then, with God’s help, control this unruly evil (8)? We must pause and think before we speak (cp. 1:19). We should remember that the Lord is the unseen listener of all that we say. *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one* (Colossians 4:6).

*If you your lips  
Would keep from slips,  
Of five things please beware —  
Of whom you speak,  
To whom you speak,  
And when, and why, and where!*

(Matthew Mercer)

*I will show you my faith by my works*

The biblical teaching of justification by faith alone brought liberty to the soul of the great Reformer, Martin Luther. He had such difficulty, however, with the teaching in James that works are necessary as an evidence of true faith, that he called it ‘a right strawy epistle’. It is most important that we are quite clear in our minds on this issue. Some people teach that a profession of faith is all that is required for us to be saved and that any looking for works as an evidence of faith is a denial of the gospel. Others say that they are more interested in ‘practical Christianity’ and that what we believe and in whom we believe are not really important. Both are wrong. What James is saying is that faith without works is not true faith. *Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead* (17, repeated in verses 20 and 26).

James presses home his point by giving two examples of dead faith:

- We must not be like the person who is all talk but does not ‘do’. If we see a fellow-Christian in need but only express pious sentiments and do nothing to help that person, our faith is without profit; it is useless to God and to the needy Christian (14–16).
- We must not confuse a belief in God with saving faith which trusts in Christ alone to save us and which owns him as the Lord of our lives. Though most of the religious leaders rejected the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ, the demons confessed him to be the Son of God and the Holy One of God (John 5:18; 7:48; cp. Matthew 8:29; Luke 4:34). *Even the demons believe – and tremble!* (19).

Works without faith will never save us. There are many kind and helpful people who have no faith in Christ. Faith without works likewise falls short. James challenges us, ‘*Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*’ (18). **Do your family, fellow-Christians, neighbours and colleagues at work see your faith by your works?**

*By works faith was made perfect*

Following his two illustrations of false faith James now gives two examples of living faith:

- Abraham believed God's promise that he would have a son and through him millions of descendants, even though Sarah had been unable to bear children and was now very old. He believed God and was justified (23) but years later God told him to sacrifice Isaac. He knew that God must keep his word and if necessary would raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17–19). Abraham proved that he was prepared to offer up his son, but God spared Isaac. Abraham's actions proved the reality of his faith in God. James asks, '*Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?*' (22). Our faith must be perfected (or 'completed') by works.
- Rahab was a heathen woman who came to faith in the God of Israel (Joshua 2:9–11). She showed her faith by hiding the Israelite spies at great risk to her own life (25; cp. Hebrews 11:31). She did not pay mere lip-service to believing in God. She helped his servants and proved that she had a faith that worked.

Some Christians have a very negative view of the Christian life and lay stress on the things that we must not do. This has its place, but our faith must also be seen in compassion for others and in faithful service for the Lord. A corpse has no life and cannot function as a human; faith without works is also lifeless. *The body without the spirit is dead* and if our faith fails to be expressed through good works, it is also dead (26). **How is your faith seen in your life? Never content yourself with an empty profession of faith.**

*If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man*

Pure religion involves not only good works, but also the control of the tongue (1:26–27). There is a word of caution here to those who desire to be teachers in the church. Preachers and teachers, by reason of their office, tell others how they should live, but if they fail to live up to their own words, they *shall receive a stricter judgment* (1). The Puritan, Thomas Manton, does not see verse 1 as a warning to would-be teachers in the church, but to those who judge others, seeking to put them right. This is a very common sin. If you have a critical spirit, beware! The Lord hears your words and sees just how well you live up to those high ideals that you find so lacking in others (cp. 4:11; Matthew 7:1–5).

When we feel ill, the doctor may examine our tongue for an indication of what is wrong with us. The state of the tongue also reveals our spiritual condition. If we can control the tongue, we are able to control the whole body (2). Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23) and this must also include control of the tongue, which though it is small, is a very unruly member of the body. James gives us several illustrations which show how the tongue, a little member of the body, is able to do great damage. A small metal bit is used to control a strong horse and a great ship is turned by a very small rudder (3–4). The tongue is a little fire which can set a whole forest ablaze and hell knows its potential to cause great damage (5–6). **You may be able to control your temper, your sinful desires and passions, but how is it with your tongue?**

*If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man* (2). Many well-meaning Christians measure spirituality by the ability to speak in tongues. That is a great mistake. Our Christian maturity is rather revealed by our ability to control our tongue.