

From Pastor Jeff:

Welcome to this day-by-day study of the book of James! As we walk through this book of the Bible over the next four weeks, let's prepare ourselves for a bumpy ride! James is a blunt, no-nonsense writer who blasts dusty, ethereal religion without hesitation. Ignoring subtlety, he insists that we live out our faith, and turn our backs on fluffy, inconsequential belief. James is the enemy of easy, comfortable Christianity – in fact, by the time he gets done with us, we realize that complacent, indifferent faith is no faith at all.

We'll read through the whole book in a few days first: let's treat this letter as it was intended, as a letter, before zooming in to look at it in a little more detail.

And know this: if we travel together carefully and prayerfully, with open hearts, we will definitely emerge from this book changed. This is dynamite. Let's allow James to attach a detonator to complacency!

God bless you,

Pastor Jeff

Monday, April 30th: Equipped for the Real World

Readings: James 1:1-27, Hebrews 13:2-21

Focus: Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says (James 1:22).

I love Disneyland. I'm grateful for the delightful couple of visits that we've enjoyed there as a family. It's such a happy place, full of grinning attendants (Disney calls them 'cast members') who seem quite besides themselves with joy as they pick up litter, serve ice cream or operate stomach churning rides. I was so taken by it all that I once asked Mickey Mouse for his autograph, realizing as I did so that I was probably requiring a sweating college student in a furry uniform to sign my guidebook – a rather odd thing to do.

I'd like to do my faith in Disneyland, where the only challenge is choosing the next ride, and where the sun always shines. But none of us do. We have to live in the real world, where sin still stalks, temptations still whisper seductively, and where people *do* live happily ever after – but often only after a lifetime of battle and conflict. The people that James writes to were scattered believers, refugees. Many of them were being exploited by rich employers. As Jewish converts to Christianity, they were viewed as outcasts from the wider Jewish community.

Here in the book of James not only will we find reality, but also challenge and encouragement. As James bluntly calls us to live out our beliefs, we realize that we don't need to wait for an easier set of circumstances before we wholeheartedly commit to being followers of Jesus. And there's not a book in the New Testament that is so committed to practically applying all that Jesus taught. Here too we find the unchanging God – His word is as relevant to us today as when James first wrote his letter.

Perhaps life is not providing you with a clear blue sky. Whatever the weather, may you know grace and strength to live as a faithful apprentice of Jesus today.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you because your word is true and applicable to my life, whatever my current circumstances. Amen.

Tuesday, May 1st: In Three Words

Readings: James 2:1-26, Matthew 22:37-40

Focus: If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right.' (James 2:8)

Sometimes I wonder if we've made Christianity excessively complicated, and I'm nervous of those 'deep' teachers who claim to have higher revelation than the rest of us. Without wanting to see faith over-simplified, faith can be defined in a very straightforward way.

William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, was asked to compose a telegram to be sent to all of his 'troops' around the world. He sought to encourage them to be faithful to their mission, and to galvanize them to greater levels of commitment and sacrifice. He needed to summarize his message as succinctly as possible - telegrams were expensive, and priced by the number of words included in the text of the message. At last, he found a way to communicate the heartbeat of how we should all live with but one word: *others*. Booth powerfully captured the essence of what it means to be a servant of Jesus Christ. The telegram was duly despatched. *Others.*

As James insists on down-to-earth, Monday morning faith, he summarizes the heart of it all with similar economy: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' – another way of saying, 'others' and a statement that reflects the core of Jesus' teaching. This is the 'royal law' – an interesting phrase, which could mean 'a law fit to guide a king', but more likely means 'the King of all laws.' Scripture teaches that all the truth found in the law and prophets can be summed up in one sentence: 'do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12). The call to love God and love others is the twofold truth upon which the law and prophets hang (Matthew 22:40). May love be the King and reign in us today.

Prayer: Father, give me that heart. Others. Today. Amen.

Wednesday, May 2nd: The Measure of True Faith

Readings: James 3:1-18, Matthew 3:1-8

Focus: Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness (James 3:18).

I'm easily impressed. Generally, I believe the best of people, and because I'm a fairly emotional type, I can be easily swayed by a moving performance or a persuasive speech. This means that I have been conned a few times, and tend to commit myself to people and projects without checking too closely that they're authentic. My heart can rule my head.

But some people take more convincing – they want to see proof when someone makes a claim. Just today I heard news about a chef at a hotel in Switzerland who lost a finger in a meat-cutting machine and submitted a claim to his insurance company. The company was suspicious, so sent out one of its investigators to take a look for himself. He tried the machine - and also lost a finger. The chef's claim was approved, the proof being absolutely convincing....

John the Baptist looked for convincing proof of true repentance from those who responded to his message. And James was obviously suspicious of claims by so-called 'spiritual' people who insisted that they were strong in faith, and even qualified to teach others (3:1). Godless ambition had crept into the church, and now people were scrambling for position with an unholy haste. James gives us an easy way to tell if God really is at work in our lives: it's proven by what comes out of our mouths, and by the effect that we have on those we encounter. Do we create peace or strife in our daily dealings? Are we spiritually mature? May our claims be proven to be true.

Prayer: May I be true to you, both in appearance and in heart, all-knowing God. May my faith be fruitful. Amen.

Thursday, May 3rd: In Your Face

Readings: James 4:1-17, Matthew 15:1-14

Focus: You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? (James 4:4)

'I really enjoyed the sermon this morning'.

It's always nice to hear those words – we Pastors at Timberline Church *do* want people to find the experience of listening to preaching enjoyable, nourishing and engaging. I'd go as far to say that their good communication should also be entertaining. But there are times when preaching should be painful – and not because it's long and tedious. We must allow God's word to slice into our pride, to bluntly challenge our motives, and to shake us out of complacency.

Listening to a sermon should at times irritate and perhaps even anger us, as we suddenly find our hearts being laid bare by God's Spirit and God's Word.

In this fourth chapter of James, he delivers one knock out punch after another. Without hesitation, he labels his listeners as killers, adulterers and sinners who are double minded. Far from tip-toeing around so that no one will be offended, James grabs his hearers by the proverbial throat and tells them some unpalatable home truths, as he calls us to love *the people* of the world (as of course God does), but not be seduced by the *values* of the world, which much of the time are directly in conflict with God's true verdict on life. But then he calls them, 'brothers' (verse 11). He is blunt because he is part of the family and in the family, you should be able to do some straight talking. Are we willing to be challenged, confronted, irritated and offended by God's word? Don't rush too quickly through James' challenges. Pause and take the punch.

Prayer: God, I am willing for your word to get under my skin, to irritate and confront me. Speak. I'm listening. Amen.

Friday, May 4th: Prayer and Patience

Readings: James 5:1-20, Romans 12:9-12

Focus: Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray (James 5:13).

I'm losing my voice. Perhaps it's the chill of the Colorado weather; I woke up today and began speaking in deep, husky, radio-announcer type tones. It's fading fast.

And sometimes wintry circumstances conspire to rob us of our voice in prayer. Stunned by sadness, we don't know what to say to God. Perhaps we deliberately turn our backs on Him, hoping our sulking will move Him – or maybe we don't care how He reacts.

Without apology, James calls those who suffer to be patient in their pain. But there's more here than just 'hang on.' James calls his friends, who are being victimized by rich oppressors, to use the one gift that no one can take away: prayer.

Whatever our circumstances, we are called to pray. In the face of injustice, poverty, sickness, we talk to God. When we have sinned, we don't draw back, but run to the Lord. Praying is not just private and personal. One of the hallmarks of a great friendship is the ability to pray together without it feeling forced.

Lost your prayer voice? Today, in private, and perhaps with others, let heaven hear your whispers, your shouts, your hopes and even a rant if necessary. Prayer is not our 'last' resort, something we do when all else fails. Prayer is a vital component of faithful, faith-filled, patient Christian living.

Prayer: Father, teach me how to pray. Amen.

Saturday, May 5th: No Name Dropping

Readings: James 1:1, Mark 3:20-21

Focus: James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (James 1:1).

Name dropping – where we mention famous people that we might have met for a second or more – is a particularly unattractive habit. Perhaps we do it because dropping the names of people who are perceived as important or famous adds, or so we think, to our own importance.

Most scholars believe that the man who wrote this letter was James, the half-brother of Jesus. I won't discuss the various arguments for and against this now. Let's assume that it was the case. If that is so, then we hold a fascinating letter in our hands, because James, growing up in the same family as Jesus, observed his half-brother in the closest detail that is the privilege of a sibling. But notice that James doesn't use his relationship with Jesus to impress. He simply announces that he is a servant. There's no mention of the family tie.

Perhaps James did that not only because he was secure as a servant, but also because he knew that he hadn't always done well as a brother to Jesus. Let's not think that Jesus' family always got along fine, and that there were no moments of tension or misunderstanding. As Jesus emerged into public ministry, his family got concerned. Wild rumors were circulating, and they were even worried that he was not able to eat properly, perhaps because of the demands of the crowds.

They planned an intervention, and traveled some distance to forcibly take Jesus back to His home. There's no reason to believe that James was not part of that group who were going to snatch Jesus away – this was not James' finest hour.

Knowing our fragilities should make us content to be known as just this: servants.

Prayer: Save me from the myth of significance by association, Lord. Grant me the security simply to serve and follow you. Amen.

Sunday, May 6th: Making the Most of Now

Readings: James 1:1, Acts 15:1-21

Focus: James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (James 1:1)

An older gentleman came to see me recently. A recent convert to Christianity, there was joy and sadness mingled in his eyes. He was thrilled that, in his eighties, he had found Christ, but

saddened at the years of his life that he felt had been wasted on superficial living. I encouraged him to not look back, and make the most of what he had left. Why clutter his remaining time with regrets?

Some scholars believe that James did not become a confirmed believer until after the death and resurrection of Christ, when Jesus appeared to him personally (1 Corinthians 15:7). If that is the case, he would surely have looked back on how much he had missed. He could have been with Jesus during those three wonderful years of miracles and teaching. He would have enjoyed a front seat view of the raising of Lazarus, and the feeding of the five thousand would have been part of his experience. Yet as we saw yesterday, the likelihood is that James totally misunderstood his brother. But once he had discovered the truth, he wasted no time in fully aligning himself with the church. He was with the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 1:14), and swiftly rose to leadership, becoming the major leader of the Jerusalem church by AD 50 and brokering peace (Acts 15:13–21) and continuing until after Paul's last visit (Acts 21:18).

Don't look back at what you see as wasted time, missed opportunities or made mistakes. Learn from yesterday but don't be paralyzed by it. What matters the most is that we are able to call ourselves servants of Jesus today.

Prayer: Today is your gift to me Lord. Save me from living in the past or in the future. Amen.

Monday, May 7th: To the Twelve Tribes

Readings: James 1:2-18, 1 Peter 1:1-3, 2:9

Focus: To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations (James 1:1b)

'Church?', the man sniffed with disdain, as if the very word brought a bad taste to his mouth. 'Yeah, I did that for years. Waste of time. Don't want to be part of it. Not for me.'

He's not alone. Many people have been burned out, bruised, or just bored out of fellowship. But the church, with all its flaws, is vital. God's plan was never to just save scattered individuals, but to create a lighthouse community that would show the world what life with God could be like. That was the purpose of Israel, a people created not at the *expense* of the rest of the world, but for the *sake* of the rest of the world.

And now, in Christ, we are the people of God. As James writes to 'the twelve tribes scattered', he is using language to insist that those who follow Christ are now the new 'Israel of God' (Galatians 6:26). The church is far more than an information gathering community that listens to sermons. The church is not just a place to engage in a spiritual sing-a-long, or a club of like-minded people. According to Jesus, as He was the light of the world *while He was in the world*, (John 9:5), so now *we* are that light (Matt. 5:14).

We need a loftier view of the church as the people of God. And as we jump deeper into James' teaching now, let's remember that he presents far more than a personal moral code. This is a corporate agenda that declares: this is how the people of God are to live.

Prayer: Maintain in me a sense of clear identity and destiny. Thank you for the people of God, your church. Amen.

Tuesday, May 8th: The Right Thinking

Readings: James 1:5-12, 1 Kings 3:5-15

Focus: If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

What's suffering got to do with wisdom?

As we journey through this letter together, it sometimes seems, at first glance, as if James got distracted as he wrote and that he dives into unrelated subjects without warning. Some people think that, because of the quality of the Greek in this letter, someone else compiled some of James' sayings and put them together, hence the tendency to veer off into what seem to be tangents. That may be true – but look and think again. Suffering has *everything* to do with wisdom, because when tough times come, often the first casualty, (for me at least) is my ability to think clearly and sensibly. I react rather than respond, sulk, go into imaginative overdrive and succumb to paralyzing fear, or drift into other mental cul-de-sacs that only serve to make things worse.

When clouds appear and shroud the sun, we need to ask God to give us the right mindset in order to navigate the storm. And we don't need to feel terrible because of our tendency towards unhelpful thinking – God won't rebuke us for our asking for wisdom.

Part of that right thinking will include the knowledge that God is the God of the rich as well as the poor. Although money *can* bring happiness, at least temporarily, it has limited power to solve problems. Rich and poor alike can come to God in dependency on the day of trial.

Perhaps you're battling right now. Let me ask: is your thinking making your problem worse? Is there a need for us to embrace God's wise perspective? '*Lacking*' wisdom is a banking term. All out of wisdom right now? Ask.

Prayer: Loving Father, order my thinking when chaos surrounds me. Grant me wisdom, and give me your perspective. Amen.

Wednesday, May 9th: Hope and Holiness

Readings: James 1:13-18, Galatians 6:1-10

After a particularly exhausting week of ministry, I ended my day by being insulted by another Christian. No surprise, perhaps, as we are all human – but my reaction to that buffeting was a surprise to me. For a while, I felt like commitment, holiness, making the right choices – all of these virtuous things were a waste of time. My temporary despair had stripped me of my defenses. Trials of all kinds can do that to us; we lose hope and hope is firmly connected to holiness in scripture. Knowing what was wonderfully ahead *beyond* the cross, Jesus was able to stay faithful as He walked resolutely towards it. Hope sustained him and helped him to make sacrificial choices (Hebrews 12:2).

No wonder James talks about temptation in the context of trial, as he addresses those who might feel too exhausted to choose well. Some might have been seduced by the notion that God is the author of their temptation, as if He is playing with them: James firmly dismisses that notion. Is the struggle blinding you to what is right? Are you ‘weary in doing good?’ I pray today that you will have strength to choose well and hope to sustain you.

Prayer: Lord, guard my heart and direct my choices, especially when I am weary or frustrated. Amen.

Thursday, May 10th: Look Closely

Readings: James 1:19-25, Acts 17:10-11

Focus: But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

Yesterday I lost my sunglasses. They are costly to replace because they have prescription lenses fitted. Without those lenses, normal sunglasses would protect my eyes from bright sunlight, but I would bump into solid objects. I dashed around the house, passing a huge mirror as I did, and spent a full 30 minutes looking for them.

Finally, the mystery was solved. The runaway specs were found. They were on my head! I had glanced quickly at the mirror as I dashed by. A longer look would have revealed the embarrassing truth.

We can be tempted to do the same with scripture. We rapid-read it, scanning our eyes over the print in seconds. This especially happens to me when I attempt a Bible reading plan, only to get behind. I’ve been known to ‘read’ thirty chapters of the Bible in fifteen minutes. In reality, I’ve only really allowed my eyes to pass over the print. I couldn’t tell you what I’ve read immediately afterwards, never mind the next day, and as you can imagine, this practice doesn’t exactly help me to apply the truth to my life. As James calls us to ‘look intently’ at the ‘perfect law’, he uses

a word that is used to describe John and Mary's 'stooping over' to look into the empty tomb of Jesus (John 20:5,11). It's also the word used to describe angelic fascination about the wonders of salvation (1 Peter 1:12).

Take a breath. Make some tea. Take time to read scripture prayerfully and carefully. But, as we'll see tomorrow, don't stop at study.

Prayer: Help me to look again, especially at truth that has become familiar, Lord. May I be conformed to your Word. Amen.

Friday, May 11th: Let's Get Spiritual

Readings: James 1:26-27, Isaiah 1:10-17

Focus: If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless (James 1:26).

It's a phrase that I genuinely fear. I've watched as this explosive little sentence has been used by holier-than-thou Christians to write off churches, to dismiss the efforts of dedicated leaders and to generally smear people they simply don't like. Here comes the phrase.

'They're just not spiritual.'

It's a clever little device, because how can anyone so accused defend themselves against the criticism? There's no analysis that we can make, no computer read-out that will declare our spirituality to be at a certain level. And don't forget that James has already announced that self-deception is so highly likely when it comes to faith. Usually those who use this kind of wording follow up their critique by saying that some people are not sufficiently 'deep' in their faith. But what does it mean to be 'deep' and 'spiritual'?

Perhaps there *is* help at hand. Gifted as he is at driving a truck through pompous and hollow piety, James offers us three ways to prove that our religion is authentic. The test is not our ability to quote Scriptures, attend prayer meetings or speak eloquently. Rather James points to self control, especially in our speech; compassion and care for those on the margins; and then a real desire to walk in purity before God. Anything less than this, James insists, is worthless – 'futile' is a better translation. James will return the same negative verdict in 2:20 and 26, writing off as spurious the 'faith' that fails to express itself in works and so is branded as both 'futile' and 'dead.'

Are we spiritual? According to James, the test of that is simple.

Prayer: Produce real lasting fruit in me, Holy Spirit. Fruit that shows my faith to be truly rooted in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, May 12th: Favoritism Forbidden

Readings: James 2:1-13, Galatians 2:10

Focus: Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in (James 2:2).

I recently met a man called Gram Seed and he made me cry. My tears were not of fear or pain because this man is 6'5" tall, with muscles in places where I don't actually have places. I cried because he is now such a gentle giant. His story is one of patient kindness shown to someone who looked like a no-hoper. Gram was a committed member of the British Middlesbrough Frontline, a group of hardline soccer thugs who would schedule terrible fights with the fans of rival teams. His size and strength meant that he was gifted with powers of persuasion, so he became a debt collector. Finally, his life ruined by alcohol and drugs, he ended up living on a park bench for three years. He was in such a state that, when hospitalized, doctors had to surgically remove his socks – his feet had grown into them. But some Christians kept showing up, talking to him about the love of God. They looked past his filthy, unkempt appearance and saw what God sees in every person: someone worth loving.

James insists that we give the impoverished person a royal welcome; the word 'shabby' used here to describe the poor man's clothing literally means 'filthy.' The favoritism that James was confronting was probably being expressed in some church courts. James calls them – and us – to treat every person with the same dignity and respect. The way we treat people can mean the difference between life and death to them. It did to Gram.

Prayer: Lord, save me from prejudice. Amen.

Sunday, May 13th: Faith and Deeds

Readings: James 2:14-26, Ephesians 2:1-7

Focus: As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (James 2:26).

I stood in the harsh glare of the mortuary's fluorescent lights and stared down at the lifeless body. I had been staying at the home of a doctor friend and when the telephone rang and he was summoned to pronounce someone dead, he insisted that I join him. As a minister, I've seen quite a lot of death, but I never cease to be shocked by the stunningly cold emptiness that a corpse represents. The total stillness, the absolute sense of vacancy in a lifeless body seems so unnatural. Limbs were made to flex and move, lips were created to smile; the body was birthed for living and moving. But when death comes and the spirit leaves, we are left staring at a shell. The mortuary photographer snapped away, his flashbulb popping.

So James describes faith that doesn't lead to works. Faith that has no fruit is no faith at all; it's a lifeless shell, a useless parody of the real thing.

Is my faith alive? Once, it most certainly was. But has it gradually, ever-so-slowly, eroded, faded into being little more than a memory, an old habit that I barely maintain, because that's the way I've been used to living?

Does my faith have a pulse? Am I still trusting, risking and exploring? Am I stuck in ruts? (a rut is but a shallow grave) Am I hopeful, bold, sacrificial and loving? Do I pray with any sense of expectation, or do so just because good Christians are supposed to pray?

Does my faith have vital signs – or is it in need of a resurrection?

Prayer: Breathe in me, breath of God; fill me with life, vitality and vibrant faith. Amen.

Monday, May 14th: Taming the Tongue

Readings: James 3:1-12, Proverbs 10:1-21

Focus: Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark (James 5:5).

I don't like being shot at. And I still tremble when I recall the day when the Lucas family came rather too close to a stray bullet. We were breakfasting with friends in Oregon, when the man of the house decided to show us his new .308 rifle. Standing in the kitchen, gun in hand, he thought that it was safe to pull the trigger. He was so wrong. The bullet hit the wood stove and ricocheted across the breakfast table and slammed into the ceiling. The deafening noise and shock meant that we all burst into tears. I literally looked around the table to check that no one had been killed. Overwhelmed with grief, our friend ran into the bedroom, tried to make the gun safe and then shot a hole in the carpet! We learned a sober lesson that day when it comes to guns: always assume that they're loaded.

James teaches us that the same is true of the tongue, which can be like a poison dart or carry the deadly punch of a venomous bite. Numbers were killed, many more were injured and 500,000 acres were destroyed some years ago in the California forest fires – and the tongue can have the same devastating effect as just one spark. Elsewhere the Bible tells us that the tongue can be like a sharpened razor (Psalm 52:2) and a sword (Psalm 64:3). And yet we can be so careless with words, forgetting their power for good – as we build, bless and encourage – or destroy – as we snipe, bicker and snap at each other. Be careful with that tongue. Always assume it's loaded.

Prayer: Only you can tame my tongue, mighty God. Let my heart and its overflow, be refreshing and pure. Amen.

Tuesday, May 15th: The Power of Words

Readings: James 3:1-4, Proverbs 18:21

I don't believe in 'positive confession' – the notion that we can speak things into reality. The idea that as we can use words to declare that we are wealthy, healthy, happy or holy is dangerously close to magic. But let's affirm that what we say does affect the future of our lives, not in some mystical spiritual sense but because our words affect our attitudes, builds or erodes our relationships and strengthens or destroys churches.

James uses an analogy that makes me nervous, because I am not an accomplished equestrian. Horses don't come equipped with a steering wheel or, more importantly, brakes. But a 1500 pound animal *can* be steered by something as small as a five pound bit in its mouth. And something as huge as a ship (and they had large ships in New Testament times – Acts 27:37) can be directed by a small rudder.

Our words will set the course and direction of our lives. Words can make history. A movement was galvanized when Martin Luther King famously declared that he had a dream. And Adolf Hitler's words were used to terrible effect; it's been said that for every word he wrote in his book *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in World War Two. He communicated those terrible ideas in gripping speeches, and carnage came as a result.

Words – they're not *just* words.

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that my words can build or hurt. Amen.

Wednesday, May 16th: Mission Impossible?

Readings: James 3:5-8, John 15:1-5

Focus: '...no man can tame the tongue (James 5:8a)

There are some jobs that I definitely prefer to avoid. A career in battling house infestation wouldn't be my first choice. I don't fancy being a window cleaner who works on skyscrapers. I've never longed to be an embalmer. But one of the jobs I'd least like to do is lion-taming in a circus. Popping my head into a lion's mouth (and fearing that Leo might be giving thanks for the food) is not my idea of a good time.

Taming the tongue is quite a task too. Perhaps that's why, when God gave us tongues, he put them in cages – tucked behind our teeth. The thought is not original. It comes from the

medieval Catholic scholar Estius who described the tongue: 'Though nature has hedged it in with a double barrier of the lips and teeth, it bursts from its barriers to assail and ruin men.'

If you think I'm overstating the power of the tongue, consider James' description of it as 'a world of evil' (verse 6). One of the most difficult biblical statements to understand, some scholars say that it likens the tongue to a spinning firework – rotating at high speed, spitting sparks everywhere.

No wonder James says that no one can tame the tongue. But that doesn't mean that we should give up, using this scripture to insist that we can't help ourselves. Augustine observed that the Greek here says, 'no one of men can tame it' - no *human* can succeed in tongue-taming – but *God* can. With his help daily, as the fruit of the Spirit grows in our lives, (Gal. 5:22-23), the wild beast can be corralled.

Prayer: Mighty God, only by your Spirit's power can my words be controlled. Set a guard at my lips today. Amen.

Thursday, May 17th: That Restless Tongue

Readings: James 3:5-8, Proverbs 29:20

Focus: 'It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison' (James 5:8b).

Thinking yesterday about lion taming, I'm reminded of my largely unsuccessful attempts at training the dog we used to have. He sat when told, went to sit meekly in his basket (mostly) and even gave me his paw, especially when bribed with a treat. But my attempts to train him to do the washing up or fetch the remote control for the television failed miserably.

One of the first things I taught our King Charles Spaniel was to 'stay.' A restless, manic puppy with more energy than should have been legal, it took quite a lot of teaching just to get him to sit still.

And that's the way it is with the tongue. Look again at the words we pondered yesterday: James says that it's a 'restless evil.' Before we have a chance to think, the words come bounding out. That's why slowing down before we talk is a great idea. Earlier in his letter, James encouraged us all to be 'quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry' (James 1:19). When we pause before prattling, we give our brain and heart the opportunity to ponder. We signal to other people that their opinion is worth listening to. There's nothing more demeaning than having a conversation with someone who always completes your sentences for you – and their guess is often wrong. Their impatience lets us know that they don't have time to give us a fair hearing, viewing our contributions to the chat to be an opportunity for them to catch their

breath. So, when tempted to gabble thoughtlessly, pause. Stay. We'll avoid so many embarrassing gaffes if we do.

Mark Twain was right. A closed mouth gathers no foot.

Prayer: Father, give me such poise and inner peace, that I might be calm enough to listen more and speak less. Amen.

Friday, May 18th: The Heart of the Matter

Readings: James 3:9-12, Luke 6:43-45

Focus: With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness (James 5:9).

At Timberline Church, getting in and out of the services can sometimes be a little challenging, especially during busier seasons. Most people wait patiently in line, but very occasionally an irate driver boils over and rants at fellow parking worshippers, at one of our wonderful traffic volunteers, or even at the God of the Universe who apparently allowed a line of cars to develop. Minutes earlier, they were praising God in the service. Now, piety has been sent packing.

James challenges us to be consistent with our words, but then reveals the real source of the problem – what's in our hearts, inevitably spilling over under pressure. He uses an analogy that would have been familiar to his listeners from the land of Israel. At times, in the dry Jordan Valley, a stream would flow down the valley wall on the east side. The parched traveler would hurry to it, hoping for fresh water. Sometimes the water was pure and drinkable – but on other days it was full of minerals and tasted foul. That's because the one outlet was being fed by two different sources – different types of water will not flow out of the same spring. Just as Jesus taught that 'out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45), so our words reveal – sometimes to our embarrassment and shame – what's going on in the inner recesses of our minds. That's why we need to do more than control ourselves. Daily we all need to ask God to cleanse and purify our hearts and motives.

Prayer: Father, purify my heart so that its overflow – my words – are wholesome. Amen.

Saturday, May 19th: True Wisdom

Readings: James 3:13-18, Romans 1: 21-23

Focus: Who is wise and understanding among you? (James 3:13a)

Watching a late night talk show the other night, I felt uncomfortable as I listened to one guest who was handsome, witty and who used the opportunity to launch an attack on Jesus in particular and Christianity in general. With his smooth tongue and perfect timing, he used his considerable intellect to reject the claims of Christ with such persuasiveness, that he had me wondering for a while. For a moment, his rhetoric made such sense. He seemed so wise. Perhaps you've had similar panicky moments, when in seconds, your faith seemed to shrivel up before your eyes.

But not all so-called wisdom is wise. As James continues to explore what's in our hearts and on our lips, he compares true and false wisdom – and insists that we take the right ideas on board. Defining what a sharp cookie really is (a strange term, as cookies aren't usually sharp), James defines what it means to be truly clever. The word translated *wisdom* here is 'sophos', which means 'skillful at living' and is the root word for our English term 'sophisticated.' And his term '*understanding*' refers to intellectual and scientific acumen.

The 'clever' talk show guest was very 'worldly-wise' – and that's exactly the kind of cleverness that James warns us about. That's one very good reason for us consistently getting our hearts and minds into the pure truths of scripture. As we come to the straight edge of God's truth, deception and vacuous notions that float around disguised as wisdom are exposed for what some of them really are: hot air. Because an idea sounds clever and convincing doesn't mean that it is.

Prayer: Father, give me discernment to know what is truly wise; and understanding that I might be wise in your eyes. You are the Truth. Amen.

Sunday, May 20th: Rigid Wisdom

Readings: James 3:17 -18, Acts 15:12-13

Focus: But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (James 3:17)

Why are some Christians so prone to conflict? Why do some churches begin so well, only to disintegrate because of division? Surely one of the reasons is that we can become the victims of our own sense of conviction. We are so used to standing firmly on what we believe that we confuse non-negotiable truths with our very subjective opinions – and while we should hold fast to the first, we should be very open on the latter.

As James lists some of the characteristics of genuine wisdom that leads to peace, he includes being submissive among them. This refers to the ability to be persuaded, to have a change of mind – Matthew Arnold translates this beautifully as 'sweet reasonableness.' When we come to the place where we can no longer learn anything and refuse to admit that we might be wrong,

then we have moved away from true wisdom. That doesn't mean that we have no convictions. James warns us about being double minded (James 1:8) and calls us to be 'impartial' – that means decisive, whatever the popular mood. But let's be uncompromising about the right issues and not confuse our preferences with absolute doctrines. Being 'peace-loving' is included there too. I've met Christians who cherish a perverse appetite for conflict – they relish a good fight.

James called the church to peace and gracious persuasion – and lived that message out. When conflict broke out in Jerusalem, it was James who was able to gently broker a solution. Tradition calls him 'James the Just.' What would your name be?

Prayer: Father, may I stand firm on truth, be flexible on mere opinion and know the difference between the two. Amen.

Monday, May 21: Submit Yourselves to God

Readings: James 4:1-12, Genesis 13:1-8

Focus: What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? (James 4:1)

It was one of the saddest times of my life. As a member of a church, I realized that one person in the congregation (a former friend of mine) had decided that he didn't like the senior minister. Systematically and aggressively, he began to do everything in his power to bring down that leader. He wouldn't let go and seized upon the smallest issue to strengthen his case. This was war.

Conflict in church life is always depressing and destructive – but it should never surprise us. As long as human pride exists, we'll have the capacity to fall out. It doesn't matter how successful, dynamic, effective and progressive a church is... there will still be a capacity for conflict, because human beings are there.

When James talks about 'fights and quarrels' he uses a word that literally means 'to campaign.' Just like the crusading critic that I mentioned earlier, I've met a few campaigning Christians in my time. They are driven by a frightening passion. James puts his finger on the sources of much of that misplaced zeal: pride and selfishness, the obsession to have our way. We can dress up our rage as righteous indignation, we can insist that we are waging a holy war for a godly principle – but so often our conflicts are nothing more than the fruit of selfish envy that even poisons our prayers. Is our concern rooted in an issue that is clearly biblical? Are we upset over a matter of principle – or something that fundamentally matters?

Are you developing an obsession about something or somebody, strategizing and scheming in order to put them right? Your campaign might not be a holy war.

Prayer: Lord, may my zeal never be used for selfishness. Bless my church family and may I be a blessing. Amen.

Tuesday, May 22: Repentance Analyzed

Readings: James 4:7-10, 2 Corinthians 7:8-16

Focus: Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom (James 4:9).

If you're a parent you've probably watched this scenario unfold. The children get into a spat, you intervene and you demand that one child apologizes to the other, having decided that the fight was mainly their fault. But the apology is not exactly overwhelming. They march across the room and, with a face that looks anything but remorseful (just irritated that they've been held responsible) they mutter through clenched teeth: 'I'm sorry.' What is obvious is that they are not sorry at all.

We can do the same with God. 'Sorry' comes out of our mouths but not our hearts. James tells us that to be sorry is important – he calls for some weeping and wailing, a sign that our sinfulness really does matter to us; and also shows that repentance is far more than sorrow. Scripture teaches that godly sorrow *leads* to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9), but is not repentance itself. True repentance involves the restoration of our friendship with God as we draw close to Him (assured that He doesn't sulk or put us on probation – He draws near to us in immediate response). It's an act of submission and obedience, a determination not just to apologize but to obey and to resist the power behind temptation – Satan – as we do so (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

Repentance is about us taking sin seriously. The command that we stop laughing is not a general prohibition of fun (as some sullen Christians suggest) but rather a call away from inappropriate hilarity: sin is no laughing matter. Let's say that we're sorry. And mean it.

Prayer: Deliver me, gracious God, from the deception that sin brings. Keep me genuine and tender hearted before you. Amen.

Wednesday, May 23rd: Don't Judge

Readings: James 4:11-12, Matthew 7:1-2

Focus: There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:12)

Tolerance is the new idol in our culture. Eyebrows go up at speed whenever someone suggests that a behavior pattern is wrong, and that inability to confront can filter into the church. I have often heard the scripture 'Judge not that you be not judged' blatantly misquoted. Many seem

to believe that we must never pass judgement on each other's behavior under any circumstances.

Such a notion is totally wrong. James is clearly bringing judgement about the lifestyles of those who read his letter – in no-nonsense terms, he blasts their inconsistencies. This is a book filled with judgements. Then, we clearly see more widely in the New Testament that judgements *are* made about behavior that is unacceptable. So it is that Paul writes to the church at Corinth and insists that they bring judgement to someone who was living in proud, blatant immortality (1 Cor. 5:13). Jesus judged the Pharisees in their plastic piety, as did John the Baptist with his withering sermons. Justice is obviously a key foundation for a healthy society – and that involves judgement.

What James is calling us away from is hurtful, malicious judgement, where we write someone off because they stumble, or where we gossip and smear each other's reputations – notice his words about slander in these verses. And we can foist our opinions and preferences upon others so that we don't judge them because they are wrong – we just don't like the way they do life. If you have to make a judgement, do so carefully.

Prayer: Lord you are the Judge of all things. Save me from judgement that is unkind, unwarranted or unjust. Amen.

Thursday, May 24: A Mist

Readings: James 4:13-17, Psalm 39:5-6

Focus: Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes (James 4:14).

It was years ago now, but I still remember the day I attended the baptism of a wonderful eleven year girl – her name was Hope, part of an amazing family here at Timberline. She was bravely battling against leukemia. Hope's mom, Diane, stood in the tank with her beautiful, grinning daughter and before immersing her beneath the water, spoke a few words – which turned out to be perhaps the most profound preaching that I have ever heard. Hope nodded quietly as her mom said how her daughter believed in miracles, but that she was utterly unafraid of dying. And then, minutes later Hope prayed, 'God, You are awesome. Thank You for my friends and family. All I want is Your will for me. I love You. Amen.'

In an evening loaded with pain, joy and love, one statement from Diane struck with me with great force: 'Life is just a mist. Technically a mist lasts seven seconds. With that in mind, it won't be long before we're all together with Jesus.'

It's one thing to say we have an eternal perspective when we're theorizing about heaven and Jesus' return and when life now is good and looks long. But Hope, Diane and her family have all learned what James is trying to tell us: this existence is brief and tenuous. Let's not take our

lives into our own hands, because our lives belong to God. We've handed over the ownership of our little walk-on part in the unfolding drama of this planet. We don't grab handfuls of mist but hold on tight to God in trust. Live for Him, whatever your circumstances.

Prayer: Ever living God, may I live my life with the perspective of eternity. And strengthen all who suffer today. Amen.

Friday, May 25th A Warning to Rich Oppressors

Readings: James 5:1-6, Luke 16:1-15

Focus: Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you (James 5:1).

Perhaps you are familiar with it. At the Denver airport, an unmanned train takes passengers from check-in to the departure gates. The state-of-the-art people mover comes equipped with an automatic 'rebuke' system, in the form of a recorded announcer who is very efficient at telling people off in the sternest of tones. 'Please stand clear of the doors – *you* are delaying the departure of this train', she barks acidly, leaving the unfortunate soul who got trapped in the doors not only almost squashed to death but red-faced at such a public shaming.

As James turns his sights on the rich but crooked heavyweights who were targeting poor Christians and hauling them through the court system, his tone is ferocious. Calling them to weep and wail (the Greek means 'burst into tears') he reminds them that they are making 'The Lord Almighty' angry. This term, 'the Lord of hosts', meaning 'the general of the armies of heaven' is only used twice in the New Testament (also Romans 9:29). He is a force to reckon with.

Here James is not condemning wealth, but the misuse of it. Many people misquote the Bible, suggesting that money is the root of all evil, which is not what it says; rather, it's the *love* of money that causes so much trouble (1 Timothy 6:10). The late, great Billy Graham put it well: 'there is nothing wrong with possessing riches. The wrong comes when riches possess us.' The passion in James' teaching is arresting - let's get this issue right.

Prayer: What I have is what you have given me, Lord. May I use money wisely, generously and sacrificially. Amen.

Saturday, May 26: Patience in Suffering

Readings: James 5:7-12, 1 Peter 1:3-12

Focus: As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered (James 5:11).

Okay, I confess, I've done it again. Last night I spent about twenty minutes watching one of those health and wealth preachers on the television. The chap in question was blessed with a smile that could melt an iceberg, knew how to manipulate scripture to back up his ideas and insisted that I could get out of poverty, disease, depression and indeed a host of other maladies if I would just send him \$200. God had told him, he said, that three thousand people were going to respond to his message last night. It was all rather like the day of Pentecost and Peter's sermon, except that those who responded to Peter weren't required to dent their credit cards.

As James helps the church to navigate its way through poverty and oppression, notice what he *doesn't* say. He doesn't tell them that they are in trouble because they don't have enough faith, or because they are slackers when it comes to prayer. He doesn't lash them with a message that their sin is the root of their suffering (which, by the way, is the Hindu message of Karma and one clearly refuted by Jesus in John 9:1-3). He doesn't suggest that God is the author of their suffering; he is not the architect of pain but the Redeemer of it. And he doesn't invite them to 'plant a seed offering' of \$200, which is just as well, because they were very strapped for cash. Suffering is tough enough. Quack remedies make it worse.

Prayer: Strengthen me, that I may endure; enlighten me, that I might understand; sustain me in true hope. Amen.

Sunday, May 27: Concluding Comments

Readings: James 5:13-20, Psalm 68:1-6

Focus: Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise (James 5:13b).

Having been a follower of Jesus for over forty years now, I realized recently that I had forgotten what it was like to not know Christ. Frankly, it was all rather hollow. I was always the first person to get drunk at any party. My life had no direction. And I felt an aching sense of loneliness.

Looking back, there are so many benefits to being a Christian. I'm grateful for the purpose that following Jesus brings; walking His way means that life is far more than survival. The wonder of knowing that there is a God and that He is interested and involved in my life, has never left me. But for me, one of the greatest joys of being a Christian is the true fellowship and friendship that I've found. I don't know how some people manage to negotiate their way through dark times *without* the help and support of the wider family of Jesus that we call the church. So James pens a colorful portrait of the lovely family of God interacting together in prayer, through sickness and health, as well as in celebration and laughter – because fellowship is vital and of value for good times as well as bad. In sticking together and refusing to wander away, the Christian knows the incredible privilege of living a life that is not alone.

Perhaps church life is difficult for you at the moment. It all feels like too much hard work. You're smiling at people that you'd sometimes like to frown at. Hang in there. The alternative is

cold, sterile and lonely. And thanks for being part of the wonderful, in-the-process family that is Timberline - and for joining me in this exploration of the book of James together!

Prayer: Thank you for relationships and for church, Lord. Strengthen our fellowship, that we might be one in you. Amen.