

A BELIEF THAT BEHAVES - THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Study 1

An Unruly Member

Read James 3

In this lesson we are going to consider the use of the tongue. The language of the chapter is tough and direct. All that James has to say is most practical, and if you really take the teaching of this chapter to heart, you will undoubtedly save yourself from many pitfalls. Ask yourself now, how many times you have said the wrong thing? Right speaking is essential to right living. There is a lovely old saying in the book of Proverbs **“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver”**. (Proverbs 25: 11) Let us look carefully at what James has to say.

Notice to begin with the starting point in **verse 2**. **“If any man does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.”** Not one word spoken out of place! Is this possible? James is holding up before us the ideal. If there could be such a man, then he would be perfect or mature and he would be able to control his whole body - all his actions. It is good to know that there has been one man who fulfilled this ideal - the Lord Jesus Christ. They said about Him, **“no man ever spoke like this man”**. (John 7: 46) We can be sure that He did not, at any time, say anything that He regretted. He was the PERFECT MAN. As we look at some of the perils of the wrong use of the tongue, we must keep this ideal before us. It is possible for those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ to find grace to control the things that they say, and thus bring help and happiness to others, rather than distress.

This passage is full of illustrations. Each of them is used to picture some particular aspect of the effect of the tongue. There are two which show how the WAY we live can be controlled by the tongue. A bit in the horse's mouth will ensure obedience by the animal. A great ship as it ploughs its way through the sea is guided by a very small helm or rudder. The contrast in both cases is between the smallness of the guiding influence and the greatness of that which is directed. James points out that the tongue is a small member; one of the smallest organs of the human body; yet it boasts great things. Man's course through life can be set by the way he uses it. We will realise this if we consider the respective results of good or bad advice.

If we want to help a friend to go the right way we can share good counsel with them. All of us can be thankful for good advice given to us in times of crisis. It could be that, like the horse, this has been as a bit in our mouths. It has stopped us in our tracks and turned us in the right direction, with the result that we have been guided along a good path leading to worthwhile things. Our aim and desire should be to help others by what we say. Think of the sadness of leading people in the wrong direction by giving bad advice. If we listen to the counsel God gives in His Word we shall have good advice and counsel to give to others.

Now we look at some illustrations of the WORK of the tongue. James says that it is as UNCONTROLLABLE as a fire. (verses. 5 & 6) It is a world of iniquity polluting our whole being, ignited by hell itself. There is no doubt that here James has in mind the effect of evil speaking upon a community of Christians. Gossip and malicious talk can spread like fire. Sometimes a word among friends, wrongly spoken, can destroy happiness and harmony. As a young Christian I was given some very good advice by a godly friend. It was this, ‘When you are tempted to pass on some piece of gossip, or a story about another person, however harmless it may be, first ask yourself these three questions! Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? If your story does not pass these three tests, then do not repeat it. What wise counsel that was! We should be careful what we say about others!

Then James tells us that it is more UNTAMABLE than the wild beasts. An untamed tongue is destructive in its effect upon others, and is as deadly as poison in its power to harm anything which is pure and clean and wholesome. Can you see the practical approach the apostle has to the working of evil? He is not exaggerating; he is stating the truth. Watch your tongue! **“Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt.”** Colossians 4: 6 - having a saving salt of grace about it.

Lastly, James uses two illustrations which show how WICKED the tongue can be. He speaks of the fountain and the tree. It is significant that he uses these to illustrate the HYPOCRISY of speech in a Christian life. He imagines a Christian blessing God in worship and singing praises unto the Lord. Wonderful expressions of adoration come from his mouth. But then afterwards, out of the same mouth, and with the same tongue, men are cursed. **“Out of the same mouths proceed blessing and cursing, these things ought not to be so.”** (verse 10) Yet how often we are guilty of doing just this. **“Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?”** (verse 11), James argues. Is it possible for a tree to yield both good and bad fruit, or fruit that is not of its own kind? ‘Impossible’, says James. So it should be with the Christian's speech. There is nothing more terrible than hypocrisy of speech. Regarding the Pharisees, the Lord Jesus had to say that what they said sounded alright but what they did proved their hypocrisy and so they could not be trusted.

It is a sobering thought that in **Proverbs 6: 16-19**, where the writer is enumerating the seven things which are an abomination to the Lord, that three of these have to do with the use of the tongue.

We have had here a very clear lesson from this chapter and it is a lesson that we all need to constantly take to heart. Make it your daily habit to ask the Lord to set a watch over your lips, for words once spoken can never be recalled, see **Psalm 141: 3**. They can cause damage beyond repair to other lives. Let us also pray with the Psalmist, David, **“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer”**. (Psalm 19: 14)

Study 2

Answer to Strife

Read

James 4: 1-12

The passage we are to study does not make pleasant reading. In fact, you would be quite justified in asking if these people that James was correcting were really Christians at all. The main subject of the passage is concerned with STRIFE. It links onto the closing verses of **chapter 3** where in **verses 14-16** the writer speaks about envy and strife. Notice where this begins - **"in your hearts"**. (**verse 14**) This is something to consider carefully. The outward confusion which such strife brings is the outcome of the inward condition of the hearts of those who quarrelled.

Let us pause before we go on to further study, and just remind ourselves of the seriousness of strife among Christians. There is no excuse for it, and no useful purpose can be gained by it. A divided church, a company of believers who quarrel and fall out, are of no use to God, to others, or to themselves. We shall see in this passage how dreadful such a condition is. There are four ways in which James exposes their evils.

1. WARS AND FIGHTING

Notice this was not a question of just a few cross words. Here was bitter hostility caused by unsatisfied desires. (**verse 2**) Burning within them were desires which could never be satisfied. With these fierce desires came the determination to 'have at all costs', even to the extent of harming others. Using prayer in their aims to obtain selfish ends, naturally failed. To desire these things that they might satisfy their own lusts could never be fulfilled by prayer. (**verse 3**) To make the aim of life the satisfying of physical or material desires, can never work for a Christian. The things that should come first in a Christian's life must be spiritual - those things which are pleasing to the Lord Jesus. No wonder there is trouble when other things become the main purpose of living. Someone has said, 'The point in dispute! - don't argue about it, don't wrangle over it - tackle it the Prayer Way'. It is quite wonderful how true PRAYER always produces PEACE!

2. WORLDLINESS

James now puts his finger on a very serious cause of strife and division among Christians. He describes it as **"friendship with the world"** (**verse 4**) Notice that he calls them **"adulterers and adulteresses"**. Strong words! It suggests that the behaviour of these people was a betrayal of their relationship with God. They were breaking faith with a God they professed to love. **"A friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God"**. This is very serious. So often we think of 'the world' in terms of those who practice smoking or drinking, dancing, gambling or other questionable pleasures. This is true, of course, but it is much more than that. It is the growth of the spirit in a Christian which is linked more closely to that which the world stands for, than with the things of God. The world crucified Jesus; they would not have Him to reign. They hated Him and the things He represented. Can a Christian then be one with such a world? The answer is of course "NO" - always "No". Compare **1 John 2: 15-17** as you study this.

3. CONCEIT

It is obvious from these verses that there was a definite element of PRIDE in the behaviour of the Christians to whom James wrote **"God resists the proud"**. (**verse 6**)

This is a truth which so many of us find difficult to appreciate. Because of their conceit and refusal to submit to each other, there was bound to be strife and trouble. The answer to this problem is easy to give: **"Submit to God"** (**verse 7**) **"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord"**. (**verse 10**) It is not so easy to put into practice. To be humble seems at all times contrary to our nature. Yet God gives grace to the humble - He gives more grace. Above everything else we have the example of the Lord Jesus who said, **"Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart"**. (**Matthew 11: 29**) See also **Philippians 2: 5-8**. This is a vital lesson we need to learn if we are to know anything about God's power and blessing in our lives.

4. CRITICISMS

Our study ends with a look at another very common cause of strife. **"Do not speak evil of one another; brethren"** (**verse 11**) This is not just a question of saying unpleasant things about each other. There is far more than that involved. James is here rebuking the practice of deliberately harming the reputation of another by what we say about them, even to the point of slander. Now we find that in doing this we speak evil of the LAW. **"Who are you to judge another?"** (**verse 12**) Let us consider this a little deeper. If I pass judgment on some other Christian, there are many dangers. For one thing, I do not know everything about him. I cannot read the motives that prompted his actions, and at the very best my judgments are biased and imperfect. How much more useful our friendships and fellowship would be if we did not criticise and discredit others.

As we conclude this study, let us remember **chapter 1: 19**, **"Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath."** This is good advice. We often speak before we think, or speak, when we should be listening. In **verses 7-10** of the chapter we have the cure for all these evils of which we have spoken. Study these verses carefully,

"Submit to God"; "Resist the devil"; "Draw near to God"; "Cleanse your hands"; "Purify your hearts"; "Lament, and mourn, and weep!"

"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."

If we turn again to **Philippians 2: 3** we will read of God's answer to strife. The lowly mind will always consider others better than themselves. This is Christ's way.

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," says the apostle. (**verse 5**) How much envy and strife would be avoided if we daily asked God for the mind of Christ for every situation.

Study 3

According to the Lord's Will

Read

James 4: 13 - 5: 6

The subject of this lesson may seem rather strange to you. These days young people very rarely have time to think about TIME. There is very little of the past behind them, but there is much of the future on before. The majority of them have little reason to think particularly seriously about life and its passing. Yet James here, in his usual practical way is calling for a careful treatment of all our lives.

'TOMORROW'. What does it mean? He writes to those who are planning their lives for the immediate future. They are conducting their business affairs with great skill. To further their aims to sell and get gain they are going to put their roots down for a year. All is carefully considered and designed to advance their cause. Is this a wise policy? Of course, James is not condemning buying and selling, or even the acquiring of wealth. Business must go on, and we should do whatever we have to do with all the power at our disposal. The mistake however, is summed up in **verse 14** - **"You do not know what will happen tomorrow"**. So this is lesson number 1. Tomorrow is an unknown quantity, and it is not ours to claim. We cannot boast about it or say that it is ours to enjoy. Tomorrow belongs to God - only today is ours.

"YOUR LIFE". Now James asks an important question. **"What is your life?" (verse 14)** It has been said that many are so busy LIVING that they never take time to ask what LIFE is all about. Here we find a description of life which on the surface is very strange. Have you ever watched steam coming from the spout of a boiling kettle? It is visible for a matter of moments, then it vanishes. Where does it go? It is absorbed into the atmosphere, **"it appears for a little time, and then vanishes away"**. (verse 14) James tells us that life is like that. Just a puff of smoke! Those to whom he wrote tended to view life as lasting for ever. How foolish this was! Yet this is often man's general attitude. We plan for the future without even thinking that there is a chance of failure - like the man in **Luke 12**. When fortune seems to smile upon us, and things go our way, we relax and say some of the things that this man said, **"take your ease - eat, drink and be merry"**. But we must relate these things to another factor altogether if we are to be safe in our reckoning.

THE LORD'S WILL. **"You ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that". (verse 15)** James is saying here that every arrangement we make should have reference to the Lord's Will. When we do this we are saying that we acknowledge that God has time in his hands. He could stop things happening, although He could also allow things to take their course. The point is that we must always defer to His AUTHORITY. But also, as we say this, we confess that we would not do anything without His APPROVAL. Do we want to please Him? This is the point. It is possible, even as Christians, to make all our plans without considering that our actions may not be pleasing to God. **"If the Lord wills"** means that we want Him to be pleased with what we do.

So, if we genuinely want God's will to be done in our lives, ALL that we do will be controlled by the awareness that He shall be first in our lives. Many have made great plans for their future, thinking of years ahead. God perhaps has said to them, **"You fool! This night your soul will be required."** (Luke 12: 20) Notice the stress James puts on the words, **"You ought to say"**. (verse 15)

KNOWING AND DOING. (verse 17) This verse is very serious indeed. The stress here is upon knowledge - knowing to do good. Within the context of the chapter, it means that to make the best use of the time we have, we should do those good works of which we are aware. It might appear as though James is stating the obvious, but in fact it goes deeper than this. It is easy to be guilty of knowing that our time should be used to please God, to serve Him in bringing good to others, for this is the aim of every true Christian life and the natural outcome of following Christ. But to fail to do this - what then? James says, **"IT IS SIN"**.

So that to fail to do good when the opportunity arises, is as much a sin as some of the evils condemned in the previous chapter. How serious this is! Therefore not only should I say, **"If the Lord wills"** in my planning, but I should see that His Will is done in my pursuits. A useful Christian life is one in which KNOWLEDGE and ACTION run together. Think carefully about this!

We can end this lesson by considering the materialism of **chapter 5: 1-6**. Here we have the tragic results of lives in which, instead of the Lord's Will being done, there was selfishness, oppression and corruption. Not only was the Lord dishonoured, but other people were being harmed. James gets quite heated in his direct accusations! By reading this we can learn an important lesson. If we choose to follow the dictates of our own will, using our goods and abilities for our own selfish ends, then every evil is possible. We shall discredit the Name of the Lord and deprive our fellow Christians of much blessing. The only safe course for us as believers to take, is to choose, and to do the Will of the Lord at all times.

Study 4

Asking and Faith

James 5: 7-22

James has quite a lot to say about asking. We find in **chapter 1: 5-7** that he speaks about the possibility of finding wisdom through prayer. **"If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask of God"**. God is ready to give liberally to those who ask. Significantly too, faith must be there to condition the asking, **"Let him ask in faith, with no doubting."** So you find asking in faith is the basis for receiving that which God delights to give. Having stated this, James leaves the subject and deals with a number of others before he returns to it again.

In **chapter 4: 2-3** we noticed the wrong attitude to asking. In an atmosphere of strife and selfishness, prayer in its true character is impossible. There is no doubt that Christians must be right with God and their fellow-Christians if prayer is to be answered. This is an important lesson for you to learn.

So, as we come to this last section of the letter we find some interesting things said about PATIENCE and PRAYER. Two men are given as examples of each respectively: JOB and ELIJAH. Perhaps this is a fitting end to a letter that all through it insists on the need of PRACTICE. To build a practical Christian experience is essential. This is not achieved quickly, there are no short cuts. It has to be a consistent day by day experience. So it is that patience and prayer must lay the foundation. This could well be the reason for the way in which James ends his writing.

Think first of all about PATIENCE, **verses 7-12**, which is here presented to us in two ways. First, James thinks about SERVICE. He pictures the husbandmen and his work; he first plants the seeds and then patiently waits. Many factors continue to govern the character of the harvest - factors over which he has very little control. He waits for the produce to mature in growth. He needs patience. Notice how twice James mentions the coming of the Lord - the Master. To all Christians who serve the Lord, the coming of the Lord is important and precious. When He comes the quality of service done for Him will be reviewed.

Questions

We need to bear this in mind, so that we serve Him patiently and well. Secondly, James relates patience to SUFFERING. Job is the man in the Bible who is always remembered for his pain and suffering, and for his patience - **“the patience (or perseverance) of Job”**. (verse 11) Everything seemed to go wrong for him. He lost all that was dear to him, even his health and very nearly his life, yet he endured it patiently. He is an example to us of enduring adversity with patience and faith.

Looking at these two ideas, we realise that it is not easy to SERVE or SUFFER patiently. Yet in both cases James takes us to the Lord. This is wonderful - see that you make a note of it! For service he offers the hope of His coming, and for suffering He offers the help of His kindness and mercy. To serve with patience we need INSPIRATION; to suffer with patience we need CONSOLATION; and both of these can be found in Christ.

Now look at PRAYER, **verses 13-20**. It is said that James, the writer of this letter, was nick-named ‘camel- knees’ because his knees were as hard as those of a camel! This was due to the fact that he spent so much time upon them in prayer. And it is obvious, as we read this letter, that James knew what he was talking about. Remember, you cannot talk about prayer unless you PRAY. We are not dealing with theory here; this is practice.

WHAT do we pray for? Notice especially the link between prayer and sickness. From **verse 15** it is clear that prayer with faith does bring healing. It is obvious too that SIN is a hindrance to answered prayer; and that personal sin can SOMETIMES be the cause of sickness. **“If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”**. (verse 15) Prayer covers a very wide area of need. It is good to ‘take everything to the Lord in prayer’.

HOW should we pray? Here Elijah is brought into the picture. Notice that he was not a special case - a favourite with God. Practical James reminds us that he was **“a man with a nature like ours”**. (verse 17) But he was a RIGHTEOUS man and we must be right with God if we are going to reap blessings from prayer. Yet it is not only righteousness but earnestness that should mark prayer. **“Earnest prayer”** is effective. It means that we must be sincere and real in our prayers.

WHEN should we pray? James says that Elijah prayed earnestly, (verse 17) and then says that **“he prayed again”**. (verse 18) It is worth underlining, **“prayed again”** in your Bible. So often we pray once, or maybe twice, and then give up. But the apostle Paul tells us that we should **‘PRAY WITHOUT CEASING’ (1 Thessalonians 5: 17)**, or as someone else put it - never give up praying.

We end our studies in James here. One final lesson comes over to us from the tone of his letter. A Christian life must never be just a matter of THEORY, it must always be worked out in PRACTICE. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, **“If you know these things, happy are you if you do them”**. (John 13: 17) I am going to leave you to think this over. I hope that you have enjoyed your studies in James and that they will help you to work out in your own life the meaning of practical Christianity.

Study 1 AN UNRULY MEMBER

1. What kind of man is he who does not offend with his tongue?
2. What does the rudder of a ship illustrate with regard to the tongue?
3. **“The tongue is a fire!”** Explain in your own words what this means.
4. How does James illustrate hypocrisy in speaking?
5. How can we best guard our tongue and its use?

Study 2 ANSWER TO STRIFE

1. Why can purely physical and material things never satisfy the Christian?
2. Why is **“friendship with the world enmity with God?”**
3. What great lesson do we need to learn before we can know anything of God’s power and blessing in our lives?
4. Why should we not **“judge”** our fellow-Christians?
5. How can we daily safeguard our minds and hearts against enmity and strife?

Study 3 ACCORDING TO THE LORD’S WILL

1. Why should we not plan even for tomorrow, without taking God into our thoughts?
2. Say, in your own words, why James describes life as a **“vapour”**.
3. What do you understand by the words, **“If the Lord wills?”**
4. What should be the aim of every true Christian life?
5. Which do you consider to be the most important verse in our reading today? Give your reasons for your choice.

Study 4 ASKING AND FAITH

1. Why is the coming of the Lord important to Christians?
2. In what way is Job an example of patience?
3. To whom does James direct us when we need patience in service and suffering and why?
4. Say, in your own words, what you understand is the connection between prayer and sickness in this chapter.
5. Give three practical lessons which you have learned from the study of James’ epistle.