THE LETTER OF JAMES

The King's Wisdom

James, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Wisdom: The Letter of James, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. James might be the most practical book in the Bible, and he'd probably say: fine, but now go get something done.

James doesn't waste time. His letter is short, five chapters, and it hits like a series of punches. Do you say you have faith? Show me. Do you say you love God? Watch your mouth. Do you treat rich kids better than poor kids? Stop it. Are you going through hard times? Find the joy in them. Are you making big plans? Remember you're a puff of smoke.

Some people find James uncomfortable, and that's kind of the point. He's not interested in religion that stays in your head or only shows up on Sunday. He wants faith that changes how you talk, how you treat people, how you spend your money, and how you handle pain.

The writer was very likely James, the brother of Jesus. He grew up in the same house as Jesus, didn't believe in Him at first, and later became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. You'll hear echoes of Jesus' teaching all through his letter.

So get ready to be challenged. Not to feel guilty, but to grow. James believes your faith is meant to be real, and real faith works. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all five chapters of James, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what James is saying in plain language and adds background about the early church in Jerusalem and the world of the first readers.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains which James wrote this letter, what we know about him and his death, when the letter may have been written, and how closely it echoes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes James sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, and Hebrews, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through James chapter by chapter. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

James 2:14–26, on faith and works, has been discussed for centuries, especially alongside Paul's letters. I've explained the apparent tension fairly, including Martin Luther's famous criticism, and described how Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions understand the relationship between faith and works, without endorsing one tradition's view. You may want to talk with your teen about your own church's teaching.

I've also described the debates over which James wrote the letter and when, and the different traditions about how James was related to Jesus. The instructions about anointing the sick in 5:14–16 are explained with the main views, and with a clear statement that

prayer and medical care go together; no reader should take this book as a reason to avoid medical treatment.

Several passages are highlighted as especially relevant for teens: joy and wisdom in trials (1:2–5), hearing and doing (1:22), favoritism (2:1–13), the power of words, applied to social media and gossip (3:1–12), drawing near to God (4:7–8), and holding our plans loosely (4:13–15).

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will discover a faith that is real enough to change Monday morning.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Which James?

James was one of the most common names among Jews in the first century. In Hebrew and Greek, it's actually the name Jacob; the English form James came later through Latin and French. The New Testament mentions at least four men named James. There was James the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles and the brother of John, who was executed by King Herod Agrippa around AD 44 (Acts 12:1–2), probably too early to have written this letter. There was James the son of Alphaeus, another apostle we know almost nothing about. There was a James who was the father of an apostle named Judas, not Iscariot (Luke 6:16). And there was James the brother of Jesus.

The writer simply calls himself James, a servant of both God and Jesus. He doesn't explain which James he is, which suggests he was so well known that he didn't need to. Since the early centuries, most Christians have believed he was James the brother of Jesus.

The Brother Who Didn't Believe

The Gospels tell us that Jesus had brothers named James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and also sisters (Mark 6:3). During Jesus' ministry, His brothers didn't believe in Him (John 7:5). At one point, His family even tried to take Him home, thinking He had lost His mind (Mark 3:21). Imagine growing up with Jesus, and then thinking your big brother had gone crazy.

But something changed. Paul says that after Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). After that, James is with the believers in Jerusalem, praying with the apostles (Acts 1:14). Within a few years, he had become one of the main leaders of the Jerusalem church. Paul calls him one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9). When the early church met to decide whether Gentile believers had to follow the law of Moses, it was James who summed up the decision (Acts 15:13–21).

Brother, Half-Brother, or Cousin?

Christians understand Jesus' brothers in different ways. Most Protestants believe that James was a younger son of Mary and Joseph, born after Jesus, and so a half-brother, since Jesus had no human father. Orthodox Christians, and many in the early church, believe that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, and that James was a son of Joseph from an earlier marriage, making him an older stepbrother. Catholic tradition, following the scholar Jerome around AD 400, has often understood brothers in a wider sense, meaning close relatives such as cousins, since the words for brother in Hebrew and Aramaic could include relatives. Whichever view is right, James knew Jesus as family, and that makes his faith in Jesus remarkable.

James the Just

Early Christian writers remember James for his deep prayer life and his commitment to living rightly. They called him James the Just, or James the Righteous. A second-century writer named Hegesippus, quoted by the historian Eusebius, says that James spent so much time on his knees in prayer that they became as hard as a camel's. That may be an exaggeration, but it shows how he was

remembered. He was respected even by many Jews in Jerusalem who didn't follow Jesus.

The Death of James

We know how James died from a surprising source: Josephus, a Jewish historian who wasn't a Christian. In his Antiquities of the Jews, written in the 90s AD, Josephus describes what happened in AD 62. The Roman governor Festus had died, and his replacement, Albinus, hadn't arrived yet. During this gap, the high priest Ananus called a meeting of the Jewish council and brought before it the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, along with some others. He accused them of breaking the law and had them stoned. Josephus says that many people in Jerusalem were upset by this, and that Ananus was removed from office as a result.

Hegesippus tells a more dramatic version, in which James was thrown from the temple and then stoned and beaten to death, while praying for his attackers. Historians generally consider Josephus' account more reliable. Either way, James was killed for his faith around AD 62. Josephus' passage is also one of the earliest references to Jesus outside the New Testament.

When Was It Written?

Scholars disagree about the date. Many who believe James the brother of Jesus wrote the letter date it early, possibly in the 40s AD, before the church council in Acts 15 around AD 49. If so, James could be the earliest book in the New Testament. They point to the letter's very Jewish feel; it even calls the church gathering by a word usually used for a synagogue (2:2). It doesn't mention the debates about circumcision and Gentile believers that dominated the late

40s and 50s. Others who accept James as the author date it later in his life, closer to AD 62, perhaps in response to people who had misunderstood Paul's teaching about faith.

Some scholars think the letter was written after James' death, by someone writing in his name, perhaps late in the first century. They point to its polished Greek, which seems unusual for a Galilean villager, and to the fact that it took a long time to be widely accepted; the historian Eusebius, in the fourth century, still listed it among the books some people questioned. Others answer that Galilee was a bilingual region where Greek was widely spoken, that James had decades to improve his Greek, and that he may have used a skilled helper. Christians on all sides agree that the letter belongs in the Bible. In this book, I call the author James.

Who Were the Readers?

James addresses his letter to the twelve tribes, scattered across the world. That phrase originally described the Jewish people living outside the land of Israel, the Diaspora. James probably means Jewish believers in Jesus who lived in many different places. Acts says that after Stephen was killed, many believers fled from Jerusalem and scattered to other regions (Acts 8:1; 11:19). Some of them may have been among James' first readers. Many were poor, some were being exploited by wealthy landowners, and they were facing many kinds of trials.

The Proverbs of the New Testament

James doesn't read like Paul's letters, with long, carefully built arguments. It reads more like the book of Proverbs, a collection of short, punchy sayings about how to live wisely. In just 108 verses, James gives around fifty commands. He jumps from topic to topic,

but keeps returning to a few big themes: trials, wisdom, words, wealth and poverty, and faith that shows up in action. He also uses vivid pictures from everyday life: waves, flowers, mirrors, horses, ships, forest fires, springs, fig trees, mist, moths, rust, and farmers waiting for rain.

James and the Sermon on the Mount

James mentions Jesus by name only twice (1:1; 2:1). But his letter is full of Jesus' teaching, especially the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Here are some of the echoes. Joy in trials: Matthew 5:11–12 and James 1:2. Ask, and God will give: Matthew 7:7 and James 1:5. Hearing and doing: Matthew 7:24–27 and James 1:22. The poor inheriting the kingdom: Matthew 5:3 and James 2:5. Mercy: Matthew 5:7 and James 2:13. Peacemakers: Matthew 5:9 and James 3:18. Don't judge: Matthew 7:1 and James 4:11–12. Treasures destroyed by moths and rust: Matthew 6:19 and James 5:2–3. Let your yes be yes: Matthew 5:34–37 and James 5:12. James doesn't quote Jesus word for word. He seems to have absorbed His teaching so deeply that it comes out naturally, the way you might use your parents' sayings without thinking about it. Maybe he heard some of it at the family dinner table.

Why James Matters

Some people have struggled with James because it says relatively little about Jesus' death and resurrection, and because it seems to disagree with Paul about faith and works. We'll look at that question carefully in chapter 2. But James fills an important place in the Bible. He reminds us that the gospel isn't just about what we believe. It's about who we become. Grace changes everything,

including how we treat the poor, how we speak, and how we handle money and trouble.

The Map

Chapter 1: Joy in trials, wisdom from God, where temptation comes from, and hearing versus doing.

Chapter 2: Favoritism toward the rich, and why faith without deeds is dead.

Chapter 3: The power of the tongue, and two kinds of wisdom.

Chapter 4: Where fights come from, drawing near to God, and making plans with humility.

Chapter 5: A warning to the rich, patience in suffering, and the power of prayer.

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CHAPTER 1

Joy, Wisdom, and Mirrors

James 1

James introduces himself in just a few words. He doesn't mention that he's Jesus' brother, or that he leads the church in Jerusalem. He calls himself a servant, or more literally a slave, of God and of Jesus, whom he calls the Lord Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Humble Brother**
>
> Think about this. If your older brother were the Son of God, you might be tempted to mention it. James doesn't. He calls himself a servant. Maybe he remembered how he had once doubted Jesus. Maybe he understood that being related to Jesus didn't make him more important than anyone else. Jesus Himself said that whoever does God's will is His brother and sister (Mark 3:35). And notice that James calls his own brother the Lord Jesus Christ. That's an amazing thing for a sibling to say.

Then James jumps right into a surprising command. When you face all kinds of trials, he says, count it as pure joy. Why? Because when your faith is tested, it develops endurance. And when endurance has done its full work, you'll be mature and complete, missing nothing.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Joy in Trials?**
>
> This sounds crazy at first. Be happy when bad things happen? James isn't saying that pain is fun, or that you should pretend you're fine when you're not. He's talking about a deeper kind of joy that comes from knowing God is

using even hard things to make you stronger. Think about training for a sport or learning an instrument. The hard practices are where you grow. James says trials are like that for your faith. The pain is real. But it isn't pointless.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When It's Not a Trial, It's Trauma**

Some hard things in life aren't just tests or challenges. They're deep wounds: abuse, the death of someone you love, serious illness, a family falling apart, or depression. James isn't telling you to smile through those. The Bible is full of people who wept, grieved, and cried out to God in pain, including Jesus. If you're going through something that feels overwhelming, it's okay not to be okay. Talk to God honestly, and talk to a trusted adult or counselor. God can bring good out of the worst things, but He doesn't ask you to pretend they don't hurt.

Next, James talks about wisdom. If you don't know what to do, he says, ask God. He gives generously to everyone who asks, and He doesn't scold you for asking. He'll give you wisdom.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ask for Wisdom**

Wisdom isn't the same as intelligence. You can be smart and still make foolish choices. Wisdom is knowing how to live well, how to apply what you know to real situations. James says God loves to give it. He doesn't roll His eyes or make you feel stupid for not knowing. When you're facing a hard decision about friends, school, relationships, or your future, ask God for wisdom. Then read the Bible, listen to wise people, and pay attention to what you learn.

But when you ask, James says, trust God. Don't be like someone who's constantly unsure, tossed back and forth like an ocean wave pushed by the wind. Someone like that is divided inside, unsteady in everything.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Double-Minded**

James uses a word that literally means two-souled. It describes someone who's split inside, wanting God and wanting their own way at the same time,

trusting God and not trusting Him. That's different from having questions or doubts. Honest questions are normal, and God welcomes them. James is talking about someone who keeps one foot in and one foot out, never really committing. Picture a surfer trying to stand on two boards at once. It doesn't end well.

Then James addresses rich and poor. Believers who are poor should celebrate their high position, because in God's eyes they're honored. And the rich should celebrate their humiliation, because their wealth won't last. Like a wildflower that dries up in the scorching sun, rich people will fade away, even in the middle of their busy lives.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Upside Down**

James is turning the world's values upside down. Our culture says that rich, famous, and good-looking people are the most important. James says that in God's kingdom, the poor are lifted up and the rich are brought low. That doesn't mean money is evil or poverty is good. It means that money can't buy what matters most, and it won't last. Whatever your family has or doesn't have, your worth comes from God.

God blesses the person who keeps going under pressure, James says. When that person has passed the test, they'll receive the crown of life, the reward God has promised everyone who loves Him.

Then James turns to temptation. When you're tempted, don't say that God is tempting you. God can't be tempted by evil, and He doesn't tempt anyone. Instead, temptation comes from inside us. Our own desires drag us away and lure us, like bait on a hook. Desire gets pregnant and gives birth to sin. And when sin grows up, it gives birth to death.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Trials and Temptations**

In Greek, the same word can mean trial or temptation. The difference is in where it's going. A trial is something God allows to make you stronger. A temptation is a pull toward sin, and it comes from your own desires, not from God. The same situation can be both. Losing a friend can be a trial that teaches you to trust God, or a temptation to become bitter. James wants you to see that God is always on your side. He never sets you up to fail.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Sin Grows**

James describes sin like a life cycle. It starts with a desire. Then the desire hooks you. Then it produces an action. Then, if it's left to grow, it leads to death. Think about how that works. A little curiosity turns into a habit. A little resentment turns into hatred. A little lie turns into a web of lies. The best time to deal with sin is at the beginning, before it grows. Ask God for help the moment you feel the pull.

Don't be fooled, James says. Every good thing in your life comes from God, the Father who made the lights in the sky. Unlike the sun and moon, which move and cast changing shadows, God never changes. He chose to give us new life through His true message, so that we would be the first of His new creation, like the first fruits of a harvest.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Good Gift**

Look around at the good things in your life: friends, family, laughter, music, food, sunsets, a warm bed. James says every one of them is a gift from God. That's worth remembering when you're tempted to think God is holding out on you. He isn't the problem. He's the source of everything good. A thankful heart is one of the best defenses against temptation.

Then James gives some of the most practical advice in the Bible. Be fast to hear, careful to talk, and slow to lose your temper. Human anger doesn't produce the kind of right living God wants.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Quick, Slow, Slow**

Most of us have this backward. We're quick to speak, quick to get angry, and slow to listen. Think about the last argument you had, in person or online. How much of it was listening? James' advice works everywhere: with parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and in comment sections. Before you reply, listen. Before you post, pause. Before you blow up, breathe. Anger isn't always wrong; Jesus got angry at injustice. But most of our anger isn't like that. It's selfish, and it makes things worse.

So get rid of all the moral filth and evil around you, James says, and humbly welcome the message God has planted deep inside you, the message with the power to save.

Then comes the heart of this chapter. Don't just listen to God's word, James says, and fool yourself. Do what it says. Someone who hears the word but doesn't do it is like a person who looks in a mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what they look like.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Mirror**

Imagine looking in a mirror and seeing that you have food stuck in your teeth and your hair is a mess, and then walking away without doing anything about it. That's ridiculous. But James says that's what we do when we read the Bible, hear a sermon, or go to youth group, and then don't change anything. God's word shows us who we really are. The point isn't just to look. It's to act.

But the person who looks carefully into God's perfect law, the law that sets people free, and keeps at it, not forgetting but doing, will find God's blessing in their actions.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Law That Sets You Free**

James calls God's law the perfect law of freedom. That might seem strange. Don't laws restrict freedom? Think of it this way. A train is most free when it's on its tracks. A fish is most free in water. People are most free when they live

the way God designed them to live. God's commands aren't a cage. They're a guide to the kind of life that actually works.

Finally, James says that if you think you're religious, but you can't control your tongue, you're fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. The kind of religion God the Father accepts as pure is this: caring for orphans and widows in their trouble, and keeping yourself from being stained by the world.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Real Religion**

James' definition of religion is short and practical. It has two parts. One is looking outward: caring for the most vulnerable people around you. In the ancient world, orphans and widows often had no one to protect or provide for them. The other is looking inward: keeping your heart clean. Some people focus only on the first and forget personal holiness. Others focus only on the second and forget the poor. James says you need both. Who are the orphans and widows in your world? Maybe a kid without a dad, an elderly neighbor living alone, or a family new to the country.

KEY VERSE

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.
Do what it says.

James 1:22 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's a trial you've been through that made you stronger? How did you see that at the time?
2. What's a decision you need wisdom for right now? Have you asked God about it?
3. Are you more often quick to listen or quick to speak? How could you change that?
4. What's one thing you've heard from the Bible recently that you haven't done yet?

TRY THIS *Each day this week, read a short passage of the Bible and write down one thing it asks you to do. Then do it that day. At the end of the week, look back at what you did.*

CHAPTER 2

Faith That Works

James 2

James starts this chapter with a scenario. Suppose two people walk into your church meeting. One is wearing expensive clothes and gold rings. The other is poor and wearing dirty, worn-out clothes. You give the rich person the best seat and tell the poor person to stand in the back or sit on the floor. James asks: haven't you just made yourselves into judges with evil motives?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Best Seat**
>
> In the ancient world, where you sat showed how important you were. People expected the rich to get the best seats at dinners, in theaters, and even in synagogues. James says the church must be different. There's no VIP section in God's family. That's still a challenge today. Do we treat people differently because of how they dress, what they drive, how popular they are, where they live, or what they look like? At school, it might look like making room at the table for the popular kid, but not for the new kid who doesn't fit in.

Listen, James says. Hasn't God chosen people who are poor in the world's eyes to be wealthy in faith and heirs of His kingdom? But you've insulted the poor. And isn't it the rich who are oppressing you, dragging you into court, and slandering the name of Jesus?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God's Heart for the Poor**
>
> All through the Bible, God shows special care for the poor and vulnerable. He commanded Israel to leave the edges of their fields for the poor to harvest

(Leviticus 19:9–10). The prophets condemned people who got rich by crushing the poor (Amos 5:11–12). Jesus was born to a poor family and said He came to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). Many of the first Christians were poor, and some wealthy people were mistreating them. That doesn't mean all rich people are bad or all poor people are good. It means God doesn't measure people by their bank accounts, and neither should we.

James says that if you truly obey Scripture's royal law, which tells you to love the people around you the way you love yourself, you're doing well. The NIV footnote traces it to Leviticus 19:18. But if you play favorites, you're sinning, and the law convicts you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Royal Law**

Why does James call the command to love your neighbor the royal law? Maybe because it's the law of the King, Jesus, who said it was the second greatest commandment (Mark 12:31). Or because it's the law that rules over all the others. Every command about how to treat people is really an application of this one. If you love the people around you as you love yourself, you won't lie to them, steal from them, gossip about them, or look down on them.

James explains that if you keep the whole law but fail at one point, you're guilty of breaking it all. The same God who said not to commit adultery also said not to murder. If you don't commit adultery but you do murder, you're still a lawbreaker.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Broken Link**

Think of the law like a chain holding you up over a cliff. It doesn't matter whether you break one link or ten. Either way, you fall. James' point is that nobody can say, I'm basically a good person, I only struggle with one thing. Favoritism might seem small, but it's still breaking God's law. Everyone needs mercy.

So, James says, speak and act like people who will one day face judgment under the law of freedom. Anyone who refuses to show mercy will face judgment with no mercy. But mercy wins over judgment.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Mercy Wins**
>
> This is one of the most beautiful sentences in James. Jesus said the merciful will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7), and that we should forgive others as God forgives us (Matthew 6:12–15). James says that people who receive God's mercy should show mercy to others. When you're merciful, you're showing that you understand how much mercy you've received.

Then James turns to one of the most famous and debated passages in the New Testament. What good is it, he asks, if someone says they have faith but has no actions to show for it? Can that kind of faith save them?

He gives an example. Suppose a brother or sister in the church doesn't have clothes or enough food. And you say to them, have a nice day, stay warm and eat well, but you don't actually give them anything. What good is that? Faith works the same way. On its own, with no action, it's dead.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Thoughts and Prayers**
>
> James' example sounds a lot like people today who say, I'll be praying for you, and then do nothing. Prayer is powerful, and James will say so in chapter 5. But if someone is hungry and you can feed them, praying isn't enough. Real faith rolls up its sleeves. It shows up with a meal, a ride, a coat, or a helping hand.

Someone might say, you have faith, and I have deeds. James answers: try showing me faith with no deeds at all, and I'll let my deeds do the showing. You believe there's one God? Great. Demons believe it too, and they tremble.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Demons Believe Too**

James is making a point that might sting. Believing that God exists isn't enough. Even demons know God is real. In the Gospels, they recognized Jesus before almost anyone else (Mark 1:24). But they don't love Him or follow Him. Real faith isn't just agreeing with facts about God. It's trusting Him with your life, and that always shows up in how you live.

Then James points to Abraham. Wasn't Abraham declared right with God because of his actions, when he placed Isaac on the altar? His trust and his obedience were a team, and his obedience brought his faith to completion. That fulfilled the Scripture about Abraham trusting God and being counted righteous, and he became known as God's friend. The NIV footnote traces the quote to Genesis 15:6.

James draws his conclusion: "You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone" (2:24). He gives another example: Rahab, who welcomed the Israelite spies and helped them escape. She was counted righteous for her actions too. Then he ends with a picture: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (2:26).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul and James**

Here's the puzzle. Paul writes that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28), and uses Abraham as his main example, quoting Genesis 15:6 (Romans 4:1–5). James uses the same verse and the same Abraham, and says the opposite seems true: works count, and faith alone doesn't. Do they contradict each other? Many readers have thought so. Here are some things to notice. Paul and James seem to use key words differently. When Paul says works, he usually means the works of the law, especially things like circumcision and food laws that marked people as Jewish, and any attempt to earn God's approval. When James says deeds, he means acts of love, like feeding the hungry. When Paul talks about faith, he means a living trust in Jesus. The faith James criticizes is mere belief, the kind

demons have. And Paul points to Genesis 15, when Abraham first believed God's promise, while James points to Genesis 22, many years later, when Abraham's faith showed itself in action. Paul himself says that what matters is faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:6), and that we're saved for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Many readers conclude that Paul and James are fighting different problems: Paul is fighting people who try to earn salvation, and James is fighting people who think belief without a changed life is enough.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Epistle of Straw?**

Martin Luther, the German reformer who started the Protestant Reformation in 1517, struggled with James. Luther's great discovery was that we are justified by faith alone, through God's grace, not by our works. James 2:24 seemed to contradict that. In the preface to his German translation of the New Testament in 1522, Luther called James a right strawy epistle compared with books like John, Romans, and Galatians, because he felt it didn't preach Christ clearly. He even placed it near the end of his New Testament. But Luther never removed James from the Bible, he preached and quoted from it, and the strawy comment was dropped from later editions of his preface. Many Lutherans and other Protestants today value James highly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Christians Put It Together**

Christian traditions explain the relationship between faith and works in different ways. Here's a brief, simplified summary of each, in its own terms. Many Protestants teach that we are justified, declared right with God, by faith alone, but that the faith that justifies is never alone. As the reformer John Calvin put it, it always produces good works. In this view, James is talking about how true faith is shown and proven, while Paul is talking about how a person is made right with God. The Catholic Church teaches that justification is God's work of grace, received in faith and baptism, by which God both forgives and inwardly renews a person; that faith working through love is what justifies; and that good works done by God's grace are real and necessary, though no one can earn the first gift of grace. In 1999, Catholic and Lutheran leaders signed a joint statement saying they share a basic

understanding that we are saved by grace alone, through faith in Christ, not because of our merits, while noting remaining differences. Orthodox Christians often describe salvation as a lifelong journey of being united with God and transformed into His likeness, in which God's grace and human response work together, and they tend to see Paul and James as two sides of the same truth. All three traditions agree on a lot: salvation is God's gift of grace, faith in Jesus is essential, and real faith changes how we live.

KEY VERSE

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see favoritism at your school or church? Have you ever been on the receiving end of it?
2. What does it mean that mercy wins over judgment?
3. How would you explain the relationship between faith and works to a friend?
4. What's one way your faith could show up in action this week?

TRY THIS *Find a practical way to meet someone's physical need this week. Donate clothes, help with a food drive, buy lunch for someone who can't afford it, or help a neighbor. Then notice how it affects your faith.*

CHAPTER 3

Taming the Tongue

James 3

James opens this chapter with a caution for anyone eager to be a teacher. Only a few of you should take that role, he says, since God holds teachers to a higher standard. Every one of us trips up, over and over. A person who never once said the wrong thing would be mature enough to rein in everything else about themselves too.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Teachers Beware**
>
> In the early church, teachers were highly respected. Some people wanted the title without the responsibility. James says that teaching is serious, because teachers shape what other people believe and how they live. That's true for pastors and youth leaders, but also for anyone with influence. If you have followers online, younger siblings who copy you, or friends who listen to your opinions, you're teaching too. Your words carry weight.

Then James paints three pictures of how powerful our words are. First, a bit in a horse's mouth: a little strip of metal lets a rider guide an animal many times their size. Second, a ship's rudder: even a massive vessel driven by fierce winds goes wherever the captain points that small rudder. Our tongues are tiny too, James says, yet they brag about huge things.

Third, a wildfire. A single spark can burn down an entire forest. Speech works the same way, James says. It's a flame, a little universe of wickedness sitting inside us. It can stain someone

through and through, setting the whole course of a life ablaze, and the fire itself comes from hell.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Spark**

Anyone who's seen news footage of wildfires in California or Australia knows how fast a small flame can become a disaster. A campfire left burning, a spark from a power line, or a single cigarette can destroy thousands of homes. Words work the same way. One comment can wreck a friendship. One rumor can ruin a reputation. One post can go viral and follow someone for years. James isn't exaggerating. Words can destroy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gehenna**

The word James uses for hell is Gehenna. It comes from the Valley of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem, where in the Old Testament some kings of Judah had sacrificed children to false gods (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31). Later, Jewish writers used its name as a picture of God's final judgment. Jesus used the word often (Matthew 5:22). James is saying that destructive words get their fire from the worst possible source.

People have tamed all kinds of animals, James says: birds, reptiles, sea creatures. But nobody can tame the tongue. It's restless and evil, full of deadly poison.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Can't Be Tamed?**

If no one can tame the tongue, should we just give up? No. James is being realistic. You can't control your words by willpower alone. You need God's help. Jesus said that what comes out of the mouth reveals what's in the heart (Luke 6:45). So the best way to change your words is to let God change your heart. Pray about your words. Ask God to set a guard over your mouth, as the psalmist did (Psalm 141:3).

James notices something strange. We use one mouth to bless God our Father, and then use that very mouth to curse human beings, who were made to look like God. Blessing and curses come pouring

from one place. That's not okay, he says. Does a single spring gush both sweet and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? A salty spring can't give fresh water either.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sunday Praise, Monday Trash Talk**

James points out something many of us do without noticing. We sing worship songs at church on Sunday, and then we trash-talk people at school on Monday. We pray before lunch, and then we gossip during lunch. James says that doesn't make sense. Every person you talk about is made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). When you insult them, you're insulting someone God made and loves. It's like saying you love an artist while ripping up their paintings.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Tongue Online**

James never saw social media. But everything he says about the tongue applies to keyboards and phone screens too, maybe even more. Online, it's easy to say things we'd never say in person. We can hide behind screens or anonymous accounts. Words spread faster and further, and they can last forever in screenshots. Some questions to ask before you post, comment, or text: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Would I say this to their face? Would I be okay with my parents, my future boss, or Jesus reading it? If someone is being bullied online, you can refuse to join in, report it, reach out to the person being targeted, or tell a trusted adult. And if you're the one being targeted, please tell someone. You don't have to handle it alone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gossip**

Gossip is talking about people behind their backs, especially spreading things that are private, unkind, or untrue. It can feel harmless, even fun. It makes us feel included, and it's interesting to know what's going on. But Proverbs says gossip separates close friends (Proverbs 16:28). Here's a simple test: if you wouldn't say it with the person standing next to you, don't say it. If someone starts gossiping to you, you can change the subject, say something kind about the person, or just walk away. And remember that anyone who gossips to you will probably gossip about you.

In the second half of the chapter, James describes two kinds of wisdom. Do you think you're wise? Then prove it with a good life, he says, with actions done in the gentle, humble spirit that real wisdom produces.

But if bitter envy and me-first ambition fill your heart, stop boasting and stop covering up what's true. That kind of cleverness isn't from God above. It belongs to this world. It's unspiritual and even comes from demons. Where envy and selfishness live, chaos and all sorts of evil live too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jealousy and Ambition**

Jealousy and selfish ambition are everywhere, especially when we spend hours seeing everyone else's best moments online. Someone has better clothes, a better phone, more followers, better grades, or a better relationship. It's easy to become bitter. Selfish ambition is wanting to get ahead no matter who you push down. James says these attitudes create chaos in friendships, families, teams, and churches. Ambition isn't wrong in itself. Working hard to do your best is good. The problem is when it's selfish, when it's all about me.

Heaven's wisdom is different. Its first mark is purity. Then it loves peace, it's gentle, it listens to reason, it overflows with mercy and good fruit, it plays no favorites, and it doesn't fake anything. People who make peace are like farmers sowing peace, and what grows from those seeds is righteousness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Kinds of Smart**

James describes two kinds of wisdom. One is the world's: clever, competitive, and self-focused. It might win arguments and get you ahead, but it leaves a trail of broken relationships. The other is God's: pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason, merciful, and sincere. It might not always win, but it makes life better for everyone around it. Look at James' list again. It's a good

description of Jesus. It's also a good list to check yourself against. Which of these qualities do you already have? Which do you need to ask God for?

KEY VERSE

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

James 3:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Can you think of a time when a few words, said by you or to you, caused a lot of damage?
2. Which is harder for you: controlling what you say in person, or what you post and text?
3. How can you tell whether someone has worldly wisdom or God's wisdom?
4. Which quality of heavenly wisdom (3:17) do you most want to grow in?

TRY THIS *Go on a gossip and put-down fast for one week. No gossip, no insults, and no sarcastic put-downs, online or in person. Each time you catch yourself, stop and say something kind instead. At the end of the week, notice what changed.*

CHAPTER 4

Come Near to God

James 4

James opens this chapter with a question. Why do you people keep fighting and arguing? Isn't it because of cravings that are at war inside you? You want something and can't have it, so you're ready to kill for it. You're jealous of what others have and can't get it, so you start battles.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Where Fights Come From**
>
> James says conflicts on the outside come from conflicts on the inside. When we fight with our parents, siblings, or friends, it's usually because we want something and aren't getting it: attention, control, respect, our own way. When James mentions killing, he might be talking about actual violence among his readers, or he might mean that anger and hatred are like murder in the heart, as Jesus taught (Matthew 5:21–22). Either way, the next time you're in a fight, ask yourself: what do I want right now that I'm not getting?

You don't have what you want, James says, because you don't ask God. And when you do ask, you don't receive, because you're asking with wrong motives, wanting to spend it on your own pleasures.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Wrong Motives**
>
> James says God answers prayer, but not prayers that are just selfish wish lists. God isn't a vending machine. Prayer isn't about getting God to do what we want; it's about bringing what we want to God and trusting Him. It's okay to

ask God for things you want. Jesus taught us to ask (Matthew 7:7). But it's worth asking yourself why you want them.

Then James uses strong language. You adulterers, he says. Don't you know that being friends with the world means being an enemy of God? Anyone who chooses to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy. The NIV footnote explains that James is using a picture of unfaithfulness to God, the way the prophets described Israel, comparing them to a spouse who cheated (Hosea 3:1).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Friendship with the World**

What does James mean by the world? He doesn't mean the earth, or people. God loves the world (John 3:16). He means the way of thinking and living that leaves God out, that's all about pride, selfishness, and pleasure. Being friends with the world means making those values your own. James says you can't be loyal to God and to the world's values at the same time. It's like trying to date two people at once.

Next comes a verse that's hard to translate. James says that Scripture speaks of God's jealous longing for the spirit He placed within us. The NIV footnotes offer other possible readings: that the Spirit God sent to live in us is the one who yearns jealously, or that the human spirit God put in us is prone to envy. Either way, James goes on to say that God gives even more grace. Then he quotes Proverbs 3:34, which says, as the NIV puts it, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble" (4:6).

BACKGROUND CHECK **More Grace**

After all the warnings, James gives this wonderful promise: God gives more grace. Whatever you've done, however far you've gone, God's grace is bigger. But grace flows to the humble, like water flowing downhill to the lowest place. Pride says, I don't need help. Humility says, I need God. That's the only posture that can receive grace.

Then James fires off a string of commands. Put yourself under God's authority. Stand up to the devil, and he'll run away. Move toward God, and He'll move toward you. Sinners, scrub your hands clean. Split-hearted people, make your hearts pure. Be sorry, grieve, and cry. Let your laughing turn to tears and your happiness to sorrow. Get low in God's presence, and He will raise you high.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Resist and Come Near**

James 4:7–8 is one of the most encouraging passages in the Bible. It has two halves. First, resist the devil. The devil is real, and he wants to pull you away from God. But you're not helpless. When you say no to temptation and stand firm in God's strength, the devil runs. Second, come near to God. Every step you take toward God, He takes toward you. Think of the father in Jesus' story of the lost son, who saw his son a long way off and ran to meet him (Luke 15:20). God doesn't wait with His arms crossed. He runs toward you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mourning?**

Why would James tell people to stop laughing and start crying? He isn't against joy. He began this letter talking about joy. He's talking to people who were laughing off their sin, not taking it seriously. Before we can receive God's grace, we need to be honest about our need for it. That can mean real sorrow. But the sorrow doesn't last. James promises that God will lift up the humble.

Next, James warns against slander. Stop tearing each other down, he says. When you trash a fellow believer or condemn them, you're really putting God's law on trial. And if you sit in judgment over the law, you're no longer obeying it. You've appointed yourself judge. But God alone writes the law and judges by it. He alone can rescue or ruin. So what makes you think you can condemn the person next to you?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Are You to Judge?**

James echoes Jesus' teaching, do not judge (Matthew 7:1). That doesn't mean we can never say that something is wrong. James himself says plenty of things are wrong! It means we shouldn't put ourselves in God's place, condemning people, assuming the worst about them, or speaking about them as if we were better. Only God sees the whole picture. Our job is to love people and leave final judgment to Him.

Then James turns to planning. Pay attention, he says, those of you who announce your plans: this week or next we'll travel to some city, stay twelve months, run a business, and get rich. You have no idea what tomorrow will bring. "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). What you should say instead is, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (4:15). But you're proud of your big plans, and bragging like that is wrong. So whoever knows what's good and right, and still fails to do it, is sinning.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Plans and Mist**

James isn't against planning. Thinking ahead about college, a job, or your future is wise. He's against planning as if God doesn't exist, as if you're in total control. You aren't. Life is short and unpredictable, like the mist from your breath on a cold morning. That's not meant to scare you. It's meant to help you hold your plans with open hands. Some Christians say, Lord willing, when they talk about the future. The words matter less than the attitude: God, my life is in Your hands.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Knowing and Not Doing**

The last verse of chapter 4 may be one of the most uncomfortable in the Bible. James says that sin isn't only doing wrong things. It's also failing to do right things you know you should. Theologians sometimes call these sins of omission. Not standing up for someone being bullied. Not helping when you could. Not apologizing when you know you should. Not speaking up when

you know the truth. Is there something good you know you should do, but haven't?

KEY VERSE

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

James 4:7–8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Think about your last argument. What did you want that you weren't getting?
2. What does friendship with the world look like for teens today?
3. What's one way you could come near to God this week?
4. What plans do you have that you need to hold with open hands?

TRY THIS *Each morning this week, before you check your phone, take one minute to come near to God. Tell Him your plans for the day and say, God, if You want this, help me do it. Then each night, ask yourself: was there something good I knew I should do but didn't?*

CHAPTER 5

Patience and Prayer

James 5

James opens this chapter with a fierce warning. Pay attention, he says to the wealthy. Start crying and howling, because terrible trouble is on its way to you. Your riches are rotting. Your fancy wardrobes are full of moth holes. Your gold and silver have rusted, and that rust will be evidence against you. It will burn your bodies like fire. You've piled up treasure, even though the end is near.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Is James Talking To?**
>
> This passage reads like an Old Testament prophet speaking against injustice. James probably isn't speaking mainly to rich Christians, but to wealthy landowners outside the church who were exploiting poor workers, many of whom were believers. It's a warning of God's judgment, and an encouragement to the oppressed that God sees what's happening. But it's still a warning for anyone with money, including Christians. Wealth isn't the problem. Gaining it unjustly and hoarding it selfishly is.

James gets specific. The pay you cheated your field workers out of is shouting against you. God, the Lord of heaven's armies, has heard the harvesters crying for help. You've lived the high life, spoiling yourselves, stuffing yourselves like cattle fattened up for the butcher. The NIV footnote offers another reading: like people feasting on a holiday. You've condemned the righteous and killed them, and they didn't fight back.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Unpaid Wages**

In James' time, day laborers were paid at the end of each day. Without that pay, their families might not eat. The law of Moses commanded employers to pay workers before sunset (Deuteronomy 24:14–15). Withholding wages was a serious sin. Today, this passage speaks to issues like fair pay, the treatment of workers, and how the products we buy are made. You might not own a business, but you're a consumer. Christians have different views about economics, but they can agree that God cares about how workers are treated.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Innocent One**

Who is the innocent one in 5:6? Most interpreters think James means poor righteous people in general, who were being crushed by the powerful, sometimes literally to death. Some early writers saw a reference to Jesus, the Righteous One (Acts 3:14; 7:52), who didn't resist when He was killed. Interestingly, James himself would later be called the Just, and would be killed without resisting.

Then James turns to his struggling readers. Hang in there, brothers and sisters, until Jesus comes back. Think about farmers. They wait for the ground to give them a precious harvest, and they wait patiently through the seasons for the fall and spring rains to come. Be patient like that. Make your hearts strong. Jesus' return is close.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Waiting for Rain**

In Israel, farmers depended on two rainy seasons. The early rains in the fall softened the ground for planting. The late rains in the spring helped the crops grow before harvest. Farmers couldn't make it rain. They just had to wait. James says Christians wait like that for Jesus' return. We can't make it happen, and we don't know when it will happen. But we can be sure it will, and we can keep working faithfully until it does.

Stop complaining about one another, James says, or you'll face judgment yourselves. Look, the Judge is right outside, ready to walk in! If you want a model of patient suffering, think of the prophets,

who brought God's message. We honor people who hold on. You know the story of how Job endured, and you know how God brought his story to a good end. God is deeply kind and merciful.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Patience of Job**
>
> Job lost his children, his wealth, and his health. He didn't always handle it calmly. He complained, argued, and asked God hard questions. But he never gave up on God. In the end, God restored him (Job 42:10–17). Job shows us that patience doesn't mean never struggling. It means hanging on to God, even when you're confused and hurting. James reminds us that the story ended with God's compassion and mercy.

Most important of all, James says, don't make oaths, whether you swear by the sky, the ground, or anything at all. Just say yes when you mean yes, and no when you mean no, so that you won't face judgment.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Yes Means Yes**
>
> James repeats Jesus' words almost exactly (Matthew 5:34–37). People in James' time often swore oaths to prove they were telling the truth, and found ways to wriggle out of them. Jesus and James say that your word should be enough. You shouldn't need to say, I swear, or I promise, for people to believe you. Christians differ on whether this forbids formal oaths, like those in a courtroom. Some groups, like Quakers and Mennonites, choose to affirm rather than swear. Others believe Jesus was talking about everyday speech. Either way, the point is to be honest and reliable, every time.

As he wraps up, James talks about prayer. When you're going through hard times, pray. When you're cheerful, sing songs of praise. Then he gives instructions for sickness: "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven" (5:14–15).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pray, Sing, Call**

Notice that James has a response for every situation. In trouble? Pray. Happy? Sing. Sick? Call for help. Prayer isn't only for emergencies. It's how we stay connected to God in every season of life, the good and the bad.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Anointing the Sick**

Christians understand James 5:14–15 in different ways. The Catholic Church sees it as the basis of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, in which a priest anoints a seriously ill or elderly person with oil and prays for their healing and forgiveness. The Orthodox Church practices a similar sacrament called Holy Unction, often celebrated with several priests. Many Protestant churches have elders or pastors anoint sick people with oil as they pray, seeing it as a sign of God's presence and the Holy Spirit's work. Others understand the oil mainly as a symbol, or point out that olive oil was also used as medicine in the ancient world (Luke 10:34), so James may have had both prayer and medical care in mind. All of them agree that God cares about sick people, and that the church should pray for them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith and Medicine**

Praying for healing doesn't mean refusing to see a doctor. Throughout history, many Christians have seen medicine as one of God's good gifts. Luke, who wrote a Gospel and Acts, was a doctor (Colossians 4:14). Paul told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23). Many hospitals were founded by Christians. Faith and medicine go together. If you're sick, pray, and also follow your doctor's advice and take your medicine. Never stop a treatment without talking to your doctor. Sometimes God heals through medicine, sometimes in ways we can't explain, and sometimes not in this life. But He's always with us, and He promises that one day every sickness will end (Revelation 21:4).

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Healing Doesn't Come**

What if you or someone you love prays for healing, and it doesn't come? That's one of the hardest experiences in the Christian life. Paul prayed three times for God to remove his thorn in the flesh, and God said no (2 Corinthians

12:7–9). Timothy had frequent illnesses (1 Timothy 5:23). Godly people get sick and die. The raising up James promises may happen in this life, or it may ultimately happen at the resurrection. Unanswered prayer doesn't mean you didn't have enough faith, or that God doesn't care. It's okay to be sad, confused, and even angry. Bring those feelings to God and to people who love you.

So, James says, admit your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you'll find healing. When a person who lives rightly prays, those prayers have real power and get real results.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confess to Each Other**

James says that confession isn't only between you and God. It's also something we do with each other. Christian traditions practice this differently. Catholic and Orthodox Christians have the sacrament of confession, with a priest. Many Protestants confess to a pastor, small group, or trusted friend. Either way, there's something powerful about saying our sins out loud to another person. It breaks the power of secrecy and shame. Choose someone safe and mature, who will keep your confidence, pray for you, and help you change. One important note: if you've been hurt by someone, what happened to you isn't your sin to confess. And if someone tells you they're being harmed, or might harm themselves, that's a secret you shouldn't keep. Tell a trusted adult.

James gives an example of powerful prayer. Elijah was human, no different from us. He prayed hard for a drought, and the land stayed dry for three years and six months. Then he prayed once more, the clouds opened, and the ground grew crops again (1 Kings 17–18).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Just Like Us**

James says Elijah was a person just like us. That's encouraging. Elijah wasn't a superhero. Right after his greatest victory, he got so depressed and afraid that he asked God to let him die (1 Kings 19:4). God didn't scold him. He let him sleep, gave him food, and spoke to him gently. If God heard Elijah's

prayers, He hears yours too. You don't need fancy words or a perfect life. You just need to pray.

Then James ends his letter abruptly, without a greeting or goodbye. Brothers and sisters, he says, suppose one of you drifts away from the truth, and someone helps them return. Know that the person who leads a sinner back from their wandering rescues that person from death and covers over a great many sins.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bring Them Back**

It's fitting that James ends his letter by talking about people who wander from the faith. Maybe he was thinking of his own story. He once didn't believe in his brother Jesus. Then Jesus came looking for him. You probably know someone who has drifted from God. You can't force them back, and it's not your job to fix them. But you can love them, pray for them, and stay in their life. Sometimes the person who brings someone back isn't the one who argues best, but the one who never gives up on them.

KEY VERSE

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

James 5:16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does James' warning to the rich say to people today, including us?
2. What are you waiting for right now? How can you wait patiently, like a farmer?
3. Do you have someone you can confess to and pray with? If not, who might that be?
4. Who do you know who has wandered from God? How can you love them this week?

TRY THIS *Make a prayer list with three columns: people in trouble, people who are sick, and people who've wandered from God. Pray for them every day this week. If you can, reach out to one person from each column to let them know you care.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read James, the letter of Jesus' brother. James knew Jesus as a big brother, didn't believe in Him, and then met Him alive after He rose from the dead. That changed everything. James spent the rest of his life as His servant.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God is good, and He made you.

God made you, and every good thing in your life comes from Him. He wants you to know Him.

> *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.* **James 1:17 (NIV)**

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. James admits that every one of us trips up. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus came for you.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He didn't wait for us to get our lives together first.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus. And real faith shows up in a changed life.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then let your faith get to work.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King.

Give me wisdom, help me watch my words, and make my faith real in everything I do. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read James straight through. Then read 1 Peter, the next letter in the New Testament, written to believers facing hard times.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Do something. James would want you to put your faith into action. Help someone in need this week. Then talk to God about it. He loves to hear from you.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Ask God for wisdom; James says He gives it generously. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if James is right, his big brother really did rise from the dead, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James 4:10 (NIV)