

James (Part 1)

Apparently, Martin Luther called this letter "The Epistle of Straw" because, unlike Romans, James is a very simple, practical book for daily living, rather than containing theological concepts and arguments as the book of Romans does. Besides, James talks a lot about works – good works – rather than faith. Or does he? James' letter actually mentions "works" 18 times – **and** it mentions "faith" 18 times! So it is both **faith and works** to which we, as Christians, are called – a faith that is demonstrated by works, and works which are inspired and empowered by faith in God.

Trials and temptations 1:1-4

We need to clearly distinguish between "trials" and "temptations", which, while similar, are not the same.

A trial is a test in order to examine something or someone. It does not imply any evil. See John 6:5-6.

Temptation is also a test – a test as to whether or not we will give in to the thought or desire to do something wrong.

e.g., Matthew 15:22-28. The Canaanite woman's faith was **tried or tested** three times as Jesus appeared not to answer her request – indeed it appeared as though He was trying to turn her away. When she passed these tests Jesus said, "Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire".

e.g., When Job's wife **tempted** him to "curse God and die", he refused (Job 2:7-10).

e.g., When Jesus was **tempted** by the devil, He refused each temptation (Matthew 4:1-11). He was "tempted, yet without sinning" (Hebrews 4:15).

e.g., When Peter was **tempted**, he denied the Lord three times, with oaths and curses (Matthew 26:69-75 cf. Luke 22:31-34). But just as Peter denied Jesus three times, so, after His resurrection, Jesus **tried** Peter's faith three times and this time Peter confessed his love for Jesus each time (John 21:15-17). How gracious God is!

When teachers set their students exams it is to **test** or examine their knowledge and ability. No sin is implied. But when a student is **tempted** to cheat, that is a temptation to sin.

Trials and testings teach us patience and endurance, and are for the strengthening of our character and faith. We should rejoice that we are becoming more mature, able to withstand stronger trials and temptations, becoming more perfect and complete so that nothing is lacking in our faith or character.

1 Peter 1:6-9; 4:12-14 This is not easy, but every victory, every test we pass, glorifies God and shows increasing Christ-likeness in our lives.

Testing leads to, or produces, patience; and patience leads to, or produces, perfection, completeness, and maturity. This is God's desire for us all.

1:12-18

God promises the crown of life to those who endure various trials and, in His strength, come through to victory.

God does not tempt us to sin, though He may test us. We are tempted by our lower, fallen nature ("the flesh") which is weak (Matthew 26:41), and we may be tempted by the devil also.

But we can't even say, "The devil made me do it" for, while the devil tempts us to sin, we can refuse. The devil never made anyone do anything in that sense; unlike hypnotism, where a person yields their will to the will or spirit of another person. This is wrong, because Romans 6:12-16 says, "When you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are the slaves of the one who you obey ..." This is why we are called to yield or give ourselves totally and fully to the Lord only, to obey Him and Him alone.

Besides, if we call on the Lord He will give us victory over the temptations of the devil, just as Jesus resisted the evil one and was victorious over him (Matthew 4:1-11).

How do we overcome the flesh? By dying to it! Paul said, "I die daily" (1 Corinthians 15:31). Jesus said, "Take up your cross daily" (Luke 9:23). We need to learn to daily commit our ways to the Lord (Psalm 37:5) and call on His Name whenever we need help. "Watch and pray!" Jesus said (Matthew 26:41).

There is always a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). We need to get out of the situation where we are being tempted. Don't "sit in the seat of the ungodly" (Psalm 1:1-3). E.g., A person might say, "I can't stop stealing" but they don't steal when a policeman is there! "Flee from temptation (e.g., fornication)"; don't play with temptation – **run from it!** (1 Corinthians 6:18).

Wrong fleshly desires (e.g., thoughts, lusts) lead to sin; and sin, when there is no repentance, confession and forgiveness, ultimately leads to death.

In stark contrast to the ways of the flesh and the devil, God gives good things to those who love Him and who ask (Luke 11:13). He knows what is best for us; He wants what is best; He is able to give us the best – ASK HIM, and refuse all else! Why accept a poor "second best" when God wants us to have the best?

Wisdom 1:5-8

Wisdom is making the right choices and doing the right things ("right' in God's eyes, not necessarily in ours!)

Wisdom is much more than knowledge – we can know what is right but still not do it!

Hence we need Godly wisdom which comes down from above – not earthly, fleshly, human wisdom.

We need to pray and ask God for wisdom: He gives it freely, generously, unreservedly and without reproach, if we will pray, ask and receive by faith.

If we have doubts then there is no point in asking! Faith comes by hearing (or reading) God's Word (e.g., verse 5), remembering it, confessing it, praying it, believing it, and acting on it. Romans 10:17.

If we doubt, then we try to believe both the truth and a lie at the same time. Such wavering or indecisiveness is not acceptable to God.

We were saved through faith; therefore let us exercise the same faith in other areas too! We believed, prayed for, and received our salvation; therefore let us believe, pray for, and receive God's wisdom too!

3:13-18

Wisdom is shown in our lives (not just talked about!) by:

living a Godly life (it is foolish to be sinful and evil) + **meekness** (humility)

Jealousy (envy) and selfish ambition in our heart indicates that we are not being true to God and His Word. They may "get you places" in the worldly sense (worldly ambition) but they are carnal, unspiritual, devilish. They can lead to all sorts of evil practices.

Godly wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful, sure and certain (secure), sincere, and produces good fruit. Peacemakers sow a harvest of righteousness and reap its good fruit.

- What a different place the world would be if we followed Godly wisdom!
- What a different place the Church would be if we followed Godly wisdom!
- What a different person I would be if I followed Godly wisdom!

Here is some Godly wisdom: Matthew 5:3-16.

QUESTIONS

1. Can a true Christian have faith without good works, or good works without faith?
 2. What are the differences between trials and temptations?
 3. How do we overcome (a) the flesh, and (b) the devil?
 4. Why do we disobey God when He knows what is best for us and wants what is best for us?
 5. What are the differences between wisdom and knowledge?
 6. What are some of the fruits of Godly wisdom?
-

James (Part 2)

Humility 1:9-11

A humble spirit is very important. If we are (or believe we are) poor or weak; not overly intelligent, skilled, good looking or popular, etc., then it is not so hard to be humble!

But the rich, famous, intelligent, popular, successful and good looking need to be humble too – for everything they have is a gift from God and all they have (in a physical, material sense) will one day pass away.

We all need to give thanks to God for all His gifts, and remember that "Much will be required of those to whom much is given" (Luke 12:48).

Besides, if we don't humble ourselves, God may well have to humble us, for God resists the proud but exalts the humble (1 Peter 5:5-6).

Some practical points for Christian living

(a) Hearing and speaking 1:19-21

Be quick to hear – what is true, edifying, good and Godly.

Be slow to speak – make sure it is true, kind, loving, fair and encouraging.

Be slow to anger – there is such a thing as "Godly anger" but most of our anger probably comes as a result of pride, self-centredness, greed, frustration, etc. Jesus was righteously angry in the Temple but He never lost His temper – He was in total control. "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger; and do not give room for the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27).

We must make sure that the righteousness of God is in everything we listen to (not evil gossip or slander), and in all we say and all we do. We must "lay aside" everything that is filthy (unclean), wicked and evil, and instead humbly receive the Word of God into our hearts, minds, and lives.

(b) Doing – not just hearing 1:22-25

Matthew 7:24-27 The wise person does what he hears the Lord tell him!

If we hear, believe and know, but do not do, then we end up in deception, making excuses for our disobedience.

Blessing comes as a result of obedience, not just an intellectual acceptance of the truth. The blessed servant is the one who does his Father's will, not the one who says "I go", but doesn't go! (Matthew 21:28-32).

See also what James has to say about Faith and Works (below).

(c) True faith 1:26-27

If we think we are a good Christian, then we need to make sure we bridle (control) our tongue.

Pure, undefiled religion is this:

- visit orphans and widows in trouble – practical, physical, social; *and*
- keep ourselves unstained by the world – moral, spiritual

This is faith and works!

People often have a tendency to go to one extreme or the other – all "faith" (head knowledge, intellectual belief, all the right words and beliefs) or all works (humanism – but devoid of God). James says we need **both** faith and works – in balance, and both inspired by God!

Faith and works 2:14-26

Martin Luther was brought up on "salvation by works". In some parts of the church today there is still a strong emphasis on getting to Heaven by our good deeds: "If you are good enough you will get to Heaven"!

Probably most non-Christians in the Western world today believe that, if there is life after death and there is a Heaven, then they will get there because they have basically lived "reasonably good" lives.

The revelation that came to Luther, from reading the book of Romans, was that "the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17).

Sadly, in some parts of the evangelical church today, salvation by faith has been so emphasised that some people think that intellectual belief in the correct dogma, signing a creed, and joining a good evangelical church will get them to Heaven. They live like saints on Sunday but are as worldly as non-Christians for the remainder of the week. Their so-called "faith" has little influence on their daily lives.

Both salvation by works, and salvation by intellectual beliefs, are unbalanced extremes, giving some people false hope of salvation.

Salvation is centred on Christ and His atoning death for us on the Cross. And nobody can have a true encounter with Christ without their daily lives being transformed. E.g., Zacchaeus, Paul.

Balance

People have a tendency to go to extremes, but the Scriptures are so balanced! Jesus was the most perfectly balanced Person Who ever lived, because He **believed and practiced** the truths of Scripture.

Two equal and opposite forces hold things in balance. If there was only one force, or one force was stronger than the other, it would go off balance.

Often in Scripture there are two counter-balancing truths which may seem to contradict one another. In actual fact they hold each other in balance! For example:

- faith and works
- the evangelical Gospel and the social Gospel
- free-will and election
- God's grace and His wrath
- the physical world and the spiritual world
- the Man Christ Jesus and Jesus the Son of God

So, "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only ..." (James 1:22).

QUESTIONS

1. How do we “humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God” (1 Peter 5:5-6)?
 2. James 1:19-27 speaks about (a) hearing and speaking; (b) hearing and doing; (c) true and false religion. Sum up in a sentence or two what James says about each of these pairs.
 3. What is “righteous anger” and how can we tell if our anger is righteous or unrighteous?
 4. What does Ephesians 2:8-10 say about the places of Grace, Faith, and Works, in our salvation?
 5. Why do many people live “like saints” on Sunday but “like the rest of the world” for the rest of the week?
 6. Why is balance so important in the way we live our Christian lives?
-

James (Part 3)

Some examples of faith and works

Abraham (Hebrews 11:8-19). Abraham believed and acted! His faith in God's promise that through Isaac the nations of the world would be blessed, was so strong that he believed that God could raise his son from the dead if necessary; so he was prepared to sacrifice his son in obedience to God.

Ezra (Ezra 7:10). "Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, **and** to do it, **and** to teach it in Israel". Ezra not only studied the Law – he obeyed it, and then taught it! We need a balance between "theology" and "doing" – neither can save by themselves!

James 3:1. "Let not many of you become teachers ..." We need to be very careful of **knowing**, **teaching**, but not doing!

The wise man "hears these words of Mine and does them", Jesus said. The foolish man hears but does not heed (Matthew 7:24-27) – in fact, does he really hear?

What we **do** shows what we really believe. "Don't tell me – show me!" "Actions speak louder than words." "Your actions speak so loud that I can't hear what you are saying!"

Jesus. "... all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). Jesus not only preached – He practised what He preached. That is the true preacher and a true example – living daily what He preached! E.g., Why did Jesus' disciples say "Lord, teach us to pray?" Because they saw Him praying! (Luke 11:1). It wasn't because they thought it would be good to have an intellectual discourse on the theology of prayer!

Paul. "What you have ... heard and seen in me, do" (Philippians 4:9). Paul followed in the steps of his Master.

A lot of what Jesus did would not be regarded by many Christians today as being very "spiritual" – He fed the hungry, raised a widow's son from the dead, healed the sick, gave Peter money to pay taxes. But Luke 4:18-19 is **both** physical (practical) and spiritual: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor; He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free those who are oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

We have (wrongly) separated the spiritual and the secular. E.g., clergy and laity; church and home or work; our spiritual lives and ministries versus our secular activities. This is not Scriptural. All I have, and all I do, belong to God. Every minute, every dollar, is a gift from God. He is always Lord; I am always His servant and the steward of His gifts. I am just as responsible for the way I spend my Friday and Saturday nights as I am for the way I spend my Sunday mornings! I am just as responsible for the way I spend "my" 90% of my income" as the way I give my tithe!

It is not faith versus works; it is a FAITH THAT WORKS!

Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father Who is in Heaven" (Matthews 7:21).

Jesus really showed up spiritual hypocrisy in Matthew 23 (e.g., verses 1-12). What do our lives show?

Ephesians 2:8-10 shows very clearly the place of both faith and works in our lives:

1. We are saved by God's grace
2. This grace is received through faith
3. It is a gift of God
4. We are not saved by our good works
5. We are created in Christ Jesus for good works

Good works and good fruit, follow as a result of God's saving grace flowing through our lives (cf. John 15:1-8).

True faith leads to good works, done by the Holy Spirit, through us. Thus God gets the glory (see Matthew 5:16; 2 Corinthians 4:7).

To put it another way: good works are the *fruit* of faith –

- no faith implies mere human effort
- no works implies "dead" faith (if such a thing exists!)

Actually, faith is ACTING on the Word of God; it is not a passive, mental acceptance of fact.

Faith and works are like the two wheels of a motorcycle:

- like the front wheel, *faith* steers and provides the direction
- like the rear wheel, *works* powers the motorcycle

One without the other is useless!

Partiality 2:1-13

Partiality is favouring some people over others, thereby treating "the others" as inferior. Why is partiality so wrong?

(a) Because it elevates some people, leading to pride and having to maintain an often-false image, so that they are not natural. Pride leads to a fall.

(b) Because it puts other people down, making them feel inferior, inadequate and that they cannot achieve things for God (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-26).

(c) It encourages wrong motives: we do things, not out of a pure desire to bless and help someone, but because of what we hope we will get in return.

Luke 14:12-14. As Christians we are encouraged to give rather than to lend. To give is not to expect repayment; to lend is to expect something back, perhaps with interest!

We are called to give to those who can never repay us – the poor, the handicapped, the lonely, the unlovely, the elderly, the weak, the sick, the disadvantaged.

(d) Partiality helps to destroy unity. If we favour some people and not others, then pride (on the one hand) and jealousy (on the other), come in, and unity is destroyed. It also breeds competition between people – competition to be one of the favoured ones!

(e) It is dishonouring to God. God did not make everyone the same and He never intended to. The rich, "fortunate" though they may be, will find it much harder to enter the Kingdom of God:

- because of their riches (Matthew 19:23-24)
- because the Kingdom of God is entered humbly – like a little child (Luke 18:17)
- because more is required of those who have more (Luke 12:48)

- because often their riches have been gained at the expense of the poor, and they will have to answer to God for this (James 2:6)
- because it is usually the poor (in this world's goods) who are rich in faith (James 2:5). e.g., Where are revivals occurring in the world today? Africa, Asia, Latin America, China, etc., not in the rich West!

We are called to unity, humility, equality; to help and love people from pure motives, no matter who those people are!

The tongue 3:1-12

Watch your tongue; guard your lips. What many people have said has got them into much trouble!

The tongue is small, but powerful. Like fire, it has great potential for both good and evil, but it must be controlled if it is to be used for good and not evil!

Jesus said we will be judged by every word that comes out of our mouths (Matthew 15:10-11, 17-20; 12:33-37). One of the greatest evidences of self-control is the ability to control what we say. If we can do that, then self-control in other areas should not be much of a problem!

One of the great hypocrisies in the church is that we use our tongues to bless God – worshipping, witnessing, praying – great acts of FAITH; but then we go out and slander, use filthy talk, gossip, lie, swear, or hurt other people with our words – bad WORKS!

There should not be such gross inconsistency!

Rather, let us, in word and deed, by faith and works, bless the Lord and all those who He has created, and give no place to the devil in our lives, our thoughts or our words.

In the book of Romans, Paul gives the balance:

Romans 1:17 "The just/righteous shall live by **FAITH**".

Romans 2:13 "It is not the hearers of the Law who are just/righteous before God, but the doers of the Law (those who do good **WORKS**) who will be justified". And good works includes speaking what is good, true, edifying and pleasing to God!

QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is your life a good balance between faith and works?
2. How is your *faith* demonstrated? How are your good *works* demonstrated?
3. What is meant by "a faith that works" and by "works that show faith"?
4. In what way are faith and works like the wheels of a motorcycle?
5. Is there partiality in the church? What have you seen?
6. Why is it so important to "bridle (tame, or control) the tongue"?

James (Part 4)

How to be content in God

'New Age' teaching is full of ways to find inner peace, health, contentment, fulfilment, happiness, prosperity, security, etc – but it is devoid of the One True God Who can bring these things about in the right way!

James tells us how we can find true contentment and fulfilment in God! It is summed up in six words in James 4:7 "Submit to God ... resist the devil". First the positive – "Submit to God", then the negative – "resist the devil".

If we would truly do this, we would find all the inner peace and joy the human heart could long for.

"I delight to do Your will, O my God ...", the Psalmist said in Psalm 40:8.

"His commandments are not burdensome", John echoes (1 John 5:3).

Submission (surrender) to the Lord and His will is the most sensible thing that anyone can do, because God knows best! He loves us and wants the best for us. He knows what is best, and has the power to bring it about!

The problem 4:1-10

Wrong desires, greed, covetousness, selfishness, wrong ambition, wrong motives, worldliness! If we want friendship with God, then we need to die to these things! Is it worth it? **YES!** "Godliness, with contentment, is great gain", Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6).

God longs to give us good things (Matthew 7:11; Luke 11:13, James 1:5).

God's desire is to fellowship with us. He wants to be our God and for us to be His people (v.5; 2 Corinthians 6:14 to 7:1). God's desire is to pour out His grace into our hearts (v.6). God's desire is to draw near to us (v.8).

But before this can happen, we need to come to Him in true repentance. We need clean hands and a pure heart (v.8; Psalm 24:3-6). When we realise our own unrighteousness, when we weep and mourn over our sins, when we humble ourselves before God in true repentance, then forgiveness, cleansing and peace will come. God will exalt us – lifting us up out of our sin to sit with Him in heavenly places (v.9-10; 2 Corinthians 7:8-11).

Judging one another 4:11-12 (cf. Matthew 7:1-5)

It is the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin (John 16:7-11). He does this primarily through the Word of God and through our conscience.

He may use us to show another Christian their error (James 5:19-20) but:

- (a) we must be sure that we are right with God before we try to correct someone else!
- (b) it must be done in the right spirit, with love, gentleness, humility, compassion, and wisdom.

It is not our job to call down fire from Heaven (Luke 9:51-55).

If, and only if, we can help someone in the right spirit, then, as the Lord leads, we may do so. But remember that "man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Also, our knowledge is very partial, and it is very easy to misjudge a person or situation (cf. marriage counselling – hearing only one side of the story, even if everything they say is true!)

The brevity of life 4:13-17

Life passes very quickly. Therefore: get to know God, learn His Word (memorize it, study it, live it). Find your calling and place in God's Kingdom. Love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Worship Him. Serve Him. Live every day for Him and His glory. Make every moment count for His Kingdom.

We should so live that if today was our last day on earth it would all have been worthwhile, and we would have done all that God required of us.

Let us live with eternity in our hearts and minds. Like Abraham, we "look forward to a city which has foundations (a permanent one!), whose Builder and Maker is God ... having seen and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that we are strangers and exiles on earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that

is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city." (Hebrews 11:10, 13-16).

Always keep Heaven in your sights – it is your Home!

The danger of riches 5:1-6

It is not wrong to be wealthy. Abraham was wealthy; so were Job and Solomon. But it is how we handle those riches that is important, for we will all be judged according to how we live, and how we use the gifts and good things God has given us.

1. More is required of those to whom much is given.
2. People will be judged if they exploit others to get their wealth.
3. Do not set your heart on riches. Materialism can lead to idolatry. Rather, lay up treasures in Heaven (Matthew 6:19-34). Besides, materialism can be like chasing the elusive end of the rainbow – you can never quite reach it! You always want more, and it never really satisfies.
4. With the tremendous needs all around us in the world today, from those who are starving to death on the one hand, to the needs of the Church and Christian ministries for financial support on the other hand, how can we say we have faith and love if we do not give sacrificially to help others? Faith and works! Loving and giving! Giving and receiving!

Patience, endurance, steadfastness 5:7-12

If there is one word that people seem loathe to hear today, it is surely the word “patience” – we want everything instantly! And advertising and today’s gadgets certainly capitalize on the desire for this; we want everything at the flick of a switch or by pressing a button – “instant” this, and “instant” that!

“Lord, give me patience; and give it to me quickly!”

Commitment, faithfulness, steadfastness are another three words that many people do not want to hear these days. They want to be free to do their own thing, to change their minds whenever they feel like it. But many things will get done only if people will faithfully commit themselves to them, and patiently work things through to the end.

God's call is to patience, commitment, and faithfulness, and these are certainly needed in the Church today!

Repentance and healing 5:13-20

Everybody wants a miracle of instant healing – it’s so easy! God does it all; it’s so quick and costs nothing!

But often sickness comes because of sin (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:27-32). James puts it very clearly:

- If you are suffering – pray.
- If you are cheerful and happy – praise the Lord!
- If you are sick – call for the elders of the Church, and
 - confess any unforgiven sins, and
 - let the elders anoint with oil and pray

Finally, the great and eternal value of restoring someone to the Lord is spelled out in James 5:19-20. Many people are anxious to see people saved, and that is good; restoring back-slidden Christians is just as important! This requires great wisdom, as well as grace, humility, and love. Remember that “Mercy exalts over [legalistic] judgement” (James 2:13) and the aim is to restore the person back into a relationship with God. We have all sinned, and all need God’s grace and mercy, so we must extend grace and mercy to those we seek to restore. It needs humility because we are no better than others

who have also sinned. It needs Godly love and patience. Our aim is repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation (just as this is God's aim for *us!*); not revenge, punishment and separation.

QUESTIONS

1. How can we find true contentment and fulfillment in God?
 2. Who can "ascend the hill of the Lord", which leads up to His Temple; and "stand in His Holy Place"? (Psalm 24:3-6)
 3. What are some things we need to be careful about, if we feel we need to show another Christian their error?
 4. What does it mean to "live with eternity in our hearts"?
 5. In view of the brevity of life and the uncertainty of life, how should Christians live?
 6. What are the dangers of riches, and how can Christians avoid or overcome these dangers?
-

James (Part 5)

James on Prayer

In Part 1 of this study on James, it was mentioned that Martin Luther called the book of James "The Epistle of Straw" because, unlike Romans, for instance, it deals a lot with what could be called good Christian **works**, as distinct from **faith**. However it was also pointed out that faith and works are *each* mentioned 18 times in James! Also, James deals a lot with the subject of Prayer – and if anything involves **faith**, prayer certainly does!

Seven Prayer Principles in James

1. Ask and keep on asking (James 1:5; 4:2)
2. Ask in faith (James 1:6; 5:15)
3. Ask with right motives (James 4:3)
4. Ask and work (James 2:17, 26)
5. Ask and ... submit to God
 - resist the devil
 - draw near to God
 - (James 4:7-8a)
6. Ask with clean hands and pure hearts (James 4:8b; 5:16a)
7. Ask fervently, sincerely, and from the heart (James 5:16b-18)

Martin Luther felt that the epistle of James lacked substance because it dealt more with works, than with salvation by faith! The following study on James' teaching on Prayer will show that faith and works go hand in hand – we live by faith and that faith is demonstrated by the good works that the Holy Spirit inspires and energizes in our lives, to the glory of God!

"Whoever knows what is right to do, and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (James 4:17)

1. Ask ... and keep on asking (1:5 and 4:2)

Why pray? Very simply: "We do not have because we do not ASK!" (Matthew 7:7-11). Also, prayer involves or requires relationship with the Father (see Luke 11:9-13). God is a good and loving and wise Father who loves to give good gifts to His children who come and ask Him. Note that in Matthew 7:7 the call to "ask" is in the continuous tense – "ask and keep on asking", for God wants us to "persevere in prayer" and not give up (Luke 18:1).

2. Ask ... and ask in faith (1:6-8 and 5:15)

"If any of you lack wisdom, ASK God who gives generously and without grudging, and it will be given to you. But ask in FAITH, without doubting, for those who doubt are like a wave of the sea, driven and

tossed by the wind. Doubters are double-minded and unstable; they cannot expect to receive anything from the Lord.”

Not only do we need to ask God, but we also need to ask in faith – faith based on a word from God, and a knowledge of God’s character, His ways, principles, and purposes.

Faith is not merely a wish, or a “hope for”, or for something we would like or want. God has promised to supply all our needs so we can pray in faith for all we need (Philippians 4:19)

Wisdom is referred to in the above verses, and how we need wisdom from above! (3:17). Wisdom involves both knowledge and the right application of that knowledge! So we can always pray, in faith, for God’s wisdom in every situation we face. Wisdom is something we all need. Godly wisdom leads us in Godly ways.

James 5:15-16 also refers to “the prayer of faith” when praying for the sick. Repentance, confession of sin, wisdom, and the prayer of faith combine to “save” the sick – both physically and spiritually, so that the Lord will “raise them up” and their “sins will be forgiven”.

3. Ask ... with right motives (4:3)

Why do we sometimes pray and there is no answer? “We ask and do not receive because we ask wrongly” – we ask with wrong MOTIVES, such as asking in order to satisfy our:

- pride
- greed
- selfishness
- laziness
- impatience
- anger (wrong anger: “Be angry but do not sin” Ephesians 4:26-27)
- revenge
- bitterness
- wrong opinions or ideas – e.g., cultural not Biblical; prejudice or bias
- fear
- anxiety

4. Ask ... and work (2:14-26)

Prayer is an act of faith. But with our prayers we also need to do whatever God asks us, in order that our prayers may be answered.

There is an old saying, “God helps those who help themselves.” Is this true? Is it Biblical? Like many such questions, the answer is both Yes and No! God helps those who **cannot** help themselves, but who call on Him and ask for His help. He also expects us to do what we can to be part of the answer to our prayer. He is not going to encourage us to be lazy; He is not going to do what we can do, but can’t be bothered doing! Answers to prayer may be miraculous. Many, perhaps most, are a combination of doing what we can to be part of the answer, and seeing God direct, empower, give wisdom, etc., for what we cannot do.

Without prayer we may be unable to do something; without works God may not do it. There is power in **faith + works** acting together! Regarding salvation, Ephesians 2:8-10 says that we are saved by *God’s grace*, which we receive by *faith*. The outcome being that we do *good works* which bring glory to God!

Another example is prayer and evangelism. Evangelists need intercessors who will support and pray for them and those they are sharing the Gospel with; but intercessors also need evangelists who will reach out to people with the Good News – intercession alone may not bring people to Christ; a messenger is also usually needed!

5. Ask ... and submit to God (4:7-10)

These verses tell us both to:

- SUBMIT to God and His will – “Thy will be done” (which implies listening to Him and praying as His Spirit leads us), *and*
- RESIST the devil (and his attempts to hinder the answer), and he will flee – **spiritual warfare** may be necessary before prayers are answered!

Both submitting to God and resisting the devil are important!

This may apply, for example, to temptation, frustrations, discouragement, depression, sickness, wrong relationships, etc. Note that the order is important: before getting into a battle with the enemy, always submit yourself to the Lord for His protection, guidance, power and authority, first!

These verses (4:7-10) also tell us to:

- Draw near to God (wait on Him; sense what He wants)
- Cleanse your hands so there is no hindrance to the answer coming
- Purify your hearts (examine your motives)
- Grieve over sin (especially your own!)
- Humble yourselves
- Be patient (5:7-8)

QUESTIONS

1. What did Luther mean by saying James' letter was “an epistle of straw”? Was he right?
2. Why does God sometimes “take a long time” to answer our prayers?
3. Why does God sometimes not answer our prayers the way we hoped for?
4. Faith and works are *both* important for answered prayer. Why?
5. What is spiritual warfare? Why may it be necessary before our prayers are answered?
6. What are “clean hands” and “pure hearts”? Why are they so important for answered prayers?

James (Part 6)

James on Prayer (continued)

6. Ask ... with clean hands and a pure heart (4:8b and 5:16a)

We need clean hands, which speaks of being washed from “outward sin”, and also a pure heart, which speaks of being washed from inner, hidden, secret sin (see Psalms 24:3-5 and 19:12).

If we want God to hear us as we pray, we need to come to Him cleansed from all sin by the Blood of Jesus.

When praying for people for their healing, James 5:16 says we need to confess our faults or sins to one another (that is, get cleaned up first), and then pray for healing.

7. Ask ... with powerful, effective prayer (5:16)

The prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective, and accomplish much. So we need to pray effective, fervent prayers from a righteous life.

“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Those who have clean hands and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3-5)

Then, as Jesus said, “If you ask anything according to My will, it shall be done for you” (1 John 5:14-15; Matthew 7:7-11). Waiting on God in prayer and meditation is one of the ways in which we can know God's will, and hence know how we should pray.

FINALLY ...

A few further points from what James says about prayer:

When and how to pray (5:13-18)

- When suffering – pray
- When joyful – sing praises
- When sick – call for the elders to pray
- When there are unforgiven sins, which have not been previously dealt with – repent and confess them
- When God needs to intervene in a situation – we need to pray fervently. This may involve floods, droughts, earthquakes, epidemics, or other disasters.

Thus James covers all the major types of prayer:

Praise + worship + thanksgiving + confession + supplication + intercession + spiritual warfare + meditation

Bless and do not curse (3:1-12)

The tongue can praise, worship, bless, confess, intercede, make declarations, give thanks and so on. Or, it can speak negatively, curse, lie, gossip, hurt and be used in other ways by the devil.

We need to watch our words and make sure that we make positive confessions and proclamations, and not negative, unbelieving, “cursing” statements, even about ourselves! e.g., “I’m no good.” “I can’t do it!” “I’m a failure”, etc.

This is not referring to:

- “name it and claim it”, or to
- making untrue statements “in faith”, or to
- “the power of positive thinking”

but we do need to confess God’s Word and be careful not to say negative, unbelieving words which bring a curse rather than a blessing. After all, it is the same tongue which is trying to pray for right things, which has already said wrong things! This should not be so!

When Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord, he said, “Woe is me ... for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” And the angel took a burning coal off the altar and touched his lips and said “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out” (Isaiah 6:5). Do we need our lips purged from unclean words, words of condemnation, words of unbelief or words which bring a curse rather than a blessing – to someone else, or even to ourselves? “Lord, cleanse my lips from all such things!”

We need to make sure that what is in our heart is pure, for out of the heart the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34; Luke 6:45). The tongue is loosened by alcohol, and when we let our guard down, for example, by foolish jesting, anger, pride, or jealousy.

Sincerity and truth need to fill our hearts if our words and our prayers are to be heard and answered – that is, if our prayers are to be effective.

Elijah and us (5:17-18)

Elijah was like us: he ran away, discouraged, fearful, and lonely (“only I am left” – but in actual fact there were 7000 others; Romans 11:2-4), but when “he heard from God” (8 times in 1 Kings chapters 17-19), and prayed, he was bold; his prayers were powerful and effective, and he saw miracles. We can too!

Hearing and doing (1:22)

“Be doers of the Word, not hearers only, *deceiving yourselves!*” What God has taught us to do through His Word, we must apply to our lives daily if we are to pray effectively and see God’s answers to our prayers!

Learn how to pray, and then PRAY! (James 4:17).

SUMMARY

- Ask and ask correctly – watch your motives!
- Ask in faith
- Balance faith and works
- Watch your tongue – bless and do not curse
- Submit to God and resist the devil
- Confess anything which might hinder your prayers from being answered
- Pray powerful, effective prayers from a righteous life
- Be like Elijah – hear from God and pray
- Hear and do

QUESTIONS

1. Why are “clean hands and a pure heart” so important before we pray for other things?
2. Why is it important to wait on God, in prayer and meditation?
3. James covers all the major types of prayer. Which, if any, of these types of prayer are often lacking in your prayer life?
4. What does James say about “the tongue” (the things we say) and how it relates to our prayer lives?
5. In what ways does the life of Elijah illustrate some of the principles of effective prayer? What can we learn from him?
6. “Faith and works”, “hearing and doing” are all important in James’ letter. How do faith, works, hearing and doing all relate to an effective prayer life?