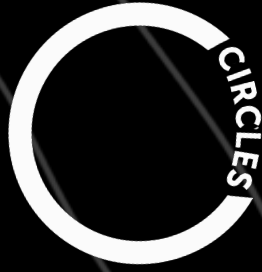


**INTEGRITY:  
THE BOOK OF JAMES**



#### **CIRCLE 01/04: WHAT DO YOU DO IN SECRET?**

I watched out the window as my mother's van disappeared into the distance.

"Freedom," I gasped as I turned on the television and slid a DVD out of my backpack. My mom was gone for the whole day, so I decided to watch an R-rated movie that she forbid me from seeing. I was alone. I was unsupervised. I was foolish.

"I am basically an adult," my thirteen-year-old brain gloated. While looking over my shoulder, the DVD loaded, and I hit play. Within seconds the movie began playing content not suitable for much of anyone, let alone a middle-schooler. There was blood, violence, and combinations of swear words that I couldn't even comprehend. I was hooked, glued to every frame of the film.

My entertainment was interrupted by the sound of someone unlocking the front door. I ran to the remote, but it was too late. My mother walked in during the worst possible scene. Busted. She snapped, "You're coming with me."

Like a criminal in a cop car, I sat in the back of her van while she drove me to visit with her sister. "I am so sorry, mom!" I exclaimed. "I didn't know it was going to be so bad." She didn't buy my excuse since we had just talked about this movie a week before. "I am disappointed that you would disobey me the moment you were left alone," she explained. My worst fears were confirmed. She wasn't mad; she was hurt. I probably wasn't going to be allowed to stay home alone again until my twenty-third birthday.

Why was she so mad? I apologized, didn't I? I may have even cried a little. Wasn't that enough?

Here's the harsh truth. I only apologized because I got caught. If she didn't come back home to get her purse, I wouldn't have felt bad. I would have just carried on as if nothing happened. It's a slippery slope when you only feel remorse if your flaws are exposed.

It doesn't matter if you seem perfect in public if your private life is full of secrets. Honesty is important, not just with your words, but with your lifestyle. Your well-being will rise and fall on your integrity. It'll be the source of your success and the spark of your setbacks. So, what is integrity? And how do we develop into people of integrity? My sixth-grade teacher had a sign behind his desk that said, "Integrity is doing the right thing when no one is watching." That hits the nail on the head. Your true self isn't

your performance. Actually, it's much more personal. Integrity is tested in private. It's what you do when you're alone in your room, inside the privacy of your phone, or hidden within the thoughts of your own mind.

### **READ: James 1:2-4**

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James knew Jesus longer than any of the other Apostles. Why? Because he was Jesus' brother. James became the lead pastor at the world's first mega-church located in central Jerusalem. As thousands of members listened to James preach, he used his platform to teach about faith in action. Similar to Solomon, James shares short, practical proverbs to help Christians develop a faith that works. His short sayings give us the keys to living a life of integrity.

In chapter one, James says, "consider it pure joy" when you face trials. According to Jesus' brother, we should be thrilled when we face temptation. Not because the temptation is fun, but because it will strengthen our faith. Every time you face temptation, you are given an opportunity to grow stronger. Your response to temptation reveals your true colors. The more you fight temptation, the greater your integrity grows.

If you want to live an honest life, you must learn to fight temptation. In this passage, James lays out the ABC's of integrity:

### **Acknowledge Your Habits**

Your integrity is the sum of your habits. Your entire life hinges on the habits you hold. If you want to become healthier, then develop a habit of health. If you want to be smarter, then develop a habit of learning. If you want to grow closer to God, then develop a habit of spiritual discipline.

Your good habits help you, and your bad habits hurt you. Temptation rears its ugly head through the habits and routines you already have. Do you regularly return to dangerous relationships? Do you over-indulge to the point of addiction? Do you have angry outbursts that hurt the ones you love? You must become aware of the habits infecting your integrity.

Work It Out: Write down 3-5 good habits that are helping you develop integrity. Write down 3-5 bad habits that are getting in the way of your integrity.

### **Break the Chain Reaction**

Breaking a habit is hard because it takes many steps. An invisible chain reaction leads you towards your sinful mistakes and shortcomings. Your environment, coping mechanisms, and behavioral patterns all trigger your bad behaviors. A trigger tells your

brain, "okay, now is the time to do that thing." Do you know what "that thing" is for you? What triggers you to go there?

Every one of your habits is attached to a trigger.

Stress often triggers overeating.

Loneliness can trigger inappropriate text exchanges.

Embarrassment often triggers anger.

Sadness can often trigger bad habits like smoking, vaping, and drinking.

Don't just focus on the habit or action you want to stop; focus on breaking the chain reaction that takes you there. You may need to remove certain friends from your life. You may need to delete a number from your contacts. You may need to put parental controls on your phone. You may need to remove the stuff you're hiding under your bed.

You will never achieve a life without emotional triggers, but you can break the chain. You need to let that trigger send you down a different path. When you are feeling stressed, go for a run. When you are feeling lonely, FaceTime a good friend. When you are feeling sad, turn on some worship music. You cannot always change your emotional and environmental circumstances, but you can change how you react to them. Your commitment to breaking the chain reaction will "produce perseverance," like James promises.

Work It Out: What triggers you to act on your bad habits?

(Examples: When I feel bad about myself, I stop eating. When I feel lonely, I text my ex. When I am at a party, I give in to peer pressure.)

### **Call Out for Help**

You cannot do this on your own. You will inevitably fail, fall, and flounder. You need supernatural help when it comes to overcoming destructive habits. God invites you to "Call to me when trouble comes and I will save you" (Psalm 50:15). Invite God to join you in your struggle. The Holy Spirit will empower you to overcome. If you do fall short, God's grace will pick you up again and again.

Make an action plan before you face temptation. First, call out to God. These fights are too big for you to tackle on your own. Second, call out to your friends. It's tragic that so many people choose to struggle without support. Tell someone you trust about your destructive habits today. Ask them to pray for you, encourage you, and check on you. When the temptation is too much to bear, share the burden with your friends.

Work It Out: How can you reach out to God when you need help fighting temptation? Who is a friend you can trust to ask for help?

A life of integrity is a life of fulfillment. As you follow this process, you will form good habits and break bad habits. It'll be hard, but it will be worth it. Don't give up. With God, you got this.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Q1: Think of someone who is full of integrity. What are they like?

Q2: Why is integrity honoring to God?

Q3: What are some good habits that contribute to the development of integrity?

Q4: What are some common habits among your peers that may be harmful to integrity? What are potential triggers leading to those habits?

Q5: Once those habits are acknowledged, what can be done to stop the chain reaction?

Q6: When you find yourself struggling with temptation, who can you go to for help?

Q7: What's one temptation that you'd like to acknowledge right now and begin asking God and a trusted friend to help you fight this week? You don't need to share with the group, but you should share it with God and one trusted friend.

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Proverbs 1

Proverbs 2

Proverbs 3

Proverbs 4

Proverbs 5

Proverbs 6

Proverbs 7

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## CIRCLE 02/04: **TAMING YOUR TONGUE**

The Apostle James uses his most intense imagery to depict an unexpected topic. He discusses the "fires of hell" not in the context of wrath, murder, cheating, blasphemy, or dipping pizza in ranch. This extreme language is used to discuss one of the smallest parts of your body — your tongue.

Has a heated conversation ever made you wish you had a time machine? Sometimes, right as words spill out of our mouths, we wish we could take them back. Our words have the power to wound the people we love most. Conversations have the power to change the direction of a relationship. How many times have you said something you regret? A dozen? A thousand? It's time to tame our tongues.

### **READ: James 3:3-6**

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

The tongue is tiny, but its impact is enormous. Words declare wars. Words spread love. Words break hearts. When discussing the significance of our words, James employs three practical metaphors to illustrate their power.

**First, our tongue is like a bit in a horse's mouth.** James leverages the metaphor of a bit within a horse's mouth. Using a tiny piece of metal, riders can control 1,300 pound steeds. A bit is merely the size of your hand, but it moves one of the most muscular mammals on earth with relative ease. This metaphor means that small things can make a big difference. Your tongue, while small, has the power to make massive changes. It's one of your smallest organs, but it can have the strongest impact on your life.

**Second, our words are like a rudder.** James continues by comparing the tongue to the rudder on a ship. It's hidden beneath the surface, but it creates major visible outcomes. A cargo ship the size of four football fields is directed by a rudder the size of a jet ski. Like a rudder on a ship, your tongue is small, but it steers your path in life. A single phrase can destroy a relationship. A rant can revoke a scholarship. A lie can shatter trust. Your words can change your direction.

**Lastly, James compares our words to a spark in the middle of the forest.** It starts small, but it grows into a blaze that engulfs everything in flames. A rumor is a spark, but a ruined reputation is the wildfire. An angry rant on Twitter is a spark, but your revoked scholarship is a massive inferno. A little lie is a spark, but it may burn your trustworthiness to the ground.

An uncontrolled tongue is dangerous to your relationships. From malicious lies to anger-fueled arguments, your words make a massive impact. When you use words of criticism, sarcasm, gossip, or discouragement, your words become weapons. They strike people with brutal force and leave them hurting. Sometimes people are left healing from hurtful words years after the attack. We must find a better way to live.

**READ: James 1:19**

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

In the first chapter of James, we receive three valuable tips to help us tame our tongues.

**Be quick to listen.**

Do you want to use wiser words? Speak less and listen more. When you listen with intention, you will begin to understand where the other person is coming from. When you feel conflict arise, focus on hearing the other person. Ask yourself, "What are they feeling?" When you understand what someone is feeling, you understand what you need to say. (Sometimes, more importantly, how you need to say it.)

**Be slow to speak.**

No, we don't mean literally talk slower. (While that certainly doesn't hurt during a tense talk.) We must slow down to think before we speak or become angry.

Don't be mean. I know this sounds like advice you'd give to a child at recess, but it's true. When we slow down before we speak, we tend to put down our defenses. Whether you're speaking down to someone, insulting someone, critiquing someone, or bringing up their past, strive to replace meanness with kindness.

Don't manipulate. We are all guilty of manipulation. Simply put, this is when you weaponize your words to get your way. People manipulate by lying, screaming, gaslighting, flattering, or leveraging the silent treatment. If you see manipulation playing out in your own life, break free. There is a better way to live. Use your words to heal, not harm.

Don't make excuses. When you hurt someone, apologize. Even if what you said was true. Even if what you said was out of emotion. Even if you had a tough day that put you on edge. Those are all excuses. Fight the urge to defend yourself. The moment you make a mistake, own it so you can move forward.

**Be slow to become angry.**

So many of the world's problems can be cured by kindness. The same is true in your personal life. Being mean may feel good for a moment, but that will quickly change. Saving a relationship is much more important than winning an argument. Use your words to build up, not beat down.

When you feel the temptation to weaponize your words, run your thoughts through this filter that I borrowed from an elementary school bulletin board. THINK before you SPEAK. Hold your tongue until your words answer "yes" to all five of the following questions:

T - is it True?

H - is it Helpful?

I - is it Inspiring?

N - is it Necessary?

K - is it Kind?



## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Q1: Think of someone you know who has great integrity. How do they usually speak?

Q2: How can our words honor God and build our integrity?

Q3: Why do you think James talks about our words in such a powerful way?

Q4: Have you ever said something to somebody that you regret? If you had slowed down to listen and respond out of kindness instead of anger, how might that conversation have gone differently?

Q5: List 3-5 God-honoring ways you'd like to use your words this week. Think specifically about relationships that may be in need of helpful conversations.

Q6: What can you do this week to focus on filtering your words like James suggests?

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Proverbs 8

Proverbs 9

Proverbs 10

Proverbs 11

Proverbs 12

Proverbs 13

Proverbs 14

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## CIRCLE 03/04: **THE INTEGRITY TEST**

"Not even God can sink this ship," a proud sailor said to a journalist. They were standing in front of a huge steamship before its maiden voyage from the United Kingdom to the United States in 1912. The USS Titanic was a modern marvel. It could hold nearly three-thousand passengers and give them an unimaginably luxurious vacation in the middle of the ocean. The world watched in wonder as the enormous cruise ship set sail, then watched in terror as it sank.

The Titanic struck an iceberg off the coast of Newfoundland. The impact caused the ship to rapidly fill with water until it snapped in half before sinking to the ocean floor. The sinking of the USS Titanic remains the most tragic cruise ship disaster in human history. Over fifteen hundred people died during their luxury vacation. The real horror lies in the fact that it could have been prevented. People used to claim that the iceberg left a massive hole in the side of the ship. Shipwreck explorers and scientists discovered that the damage was actually surprisingly small. The collision caused six small fractures to form on the side of the boat. These slits appeared on the seams where builders cut corners during the manufacturing process. Its external appearance was flawless, but its internal design was flawed.

The problems were already present. They were just exacerbated by the impact of the iceberg. Small fractures sunk the massive ship. They were invisible, but they were powerful. When the Titanic sank, its reputation went down with it. Small, nearly invisible, problems can bring down even the biggest reputations.

### **READ: James 4:17**

"If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them."

As the Apostle James concludes his collection of proverbs, he ties a bow on the previous four sections by proposing a filter for everything we do. Yes, every single thing. James shifts his focus from our specific behaviors to our overall lifestyles. Throughout the letter, James discusses words, wealth, arguments, and arrogance. His church was probably asking questions like, "Is it sinful to do this, even if it doesn't hurt anyone?" What's his answer? He writes, "If you know the right thing to do and don't do it, that, for you, is evil" (4:17; MSG). This short passage gives us an integrity test.

Before sinning, most people think "Is anyone going to know I did this?" James proposes that instead, we ask, "Is this the right thing to do?" If your primary concern is being caught, then you have already failed the integrity test. When you live with integrity, then your character remains constant. It is the same at church as it is in your room. It is the same on Friday night as it is on Sunday morning. It is the same in your group chat as it is in small group. James calls us to live a life of character, not to play a character.

Watch out for small secret sins. Like the Titanic, little hidden fractures can sink you. Solomon taught, "Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever takes crooked paths will be found out" (Proverbs 10:9). This passage promises that secrets

will eventually catch up to you. They may cost you a career, relationship, scholarship, or friendship. God's not saying this to control you; it's quite the opposite. God wants to keep you safe. This proverb is an expression of God's affection and protection for us. He is a good father who wants good things for His children. Our loving Father knows that secret sins are little fractures ready to bring you down.

How do you apply the integrity test to your daily life? Whenever you're making a decision, ask yourself: "Is this the right thing to do?" It doesn't matter if no one will find out. It doesn't matter if it's just a little white lie. It doesn't even matter if it's protecting you from consequences. Do what is right, even if it's hard.

Filter all of your decisions through the integrity test. Ensure your daily decisions affirm the following:

### **Is this what's best for me?**

Jesus encouraged us to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" (Luke 10:27). You, as a person, are made up of three distinct parts — body, mind, and spirit. Your decisions should be good for all three, as they are deeply connected. Just as exercise benefits your physical body, it also releases stress from your mind. Prayer and meditation benefit your spirit, while also releasing tension from your body and worry from your mind. Just as rest is good for your mind, it'll also benefit your body. Make healthy decisions that develop every fiber of your being.

### **Is this what's best for others?**

Your decisions don't just affect you. They can dramatically affect those around you too. Your actions should never intentionally hurt someone or cause them harm. Whether it's a harsh word or a harmful tone, focus on how you make others feel.

### **Is this what's best for my relationship with God?**

If something is not benefiting your connection with God, then you need to cut it out. Small daily decisions can make a massive difference in your overall relationship with Jesus. As you end each day, ask yourself if you are closer or further away from God than you were the day before. If you feel further away, then strive to identify why. I can assure you that God isn't the one who moved.

If you feel as though this is a struggle for you, then you are not alone. We all face the temptation to conceal the bad parts of our character. Fortunately, Romans teaches, "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ" (Romans 8:1). If you are a Christian, then God is not mad at you or condemning you. He just wants something better for you. If you've fallen short, let God pick you up and put you on the right path. Then, with every step, pray for God to show you the way.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Q1: What questions do you typically ask yourself when you are trying to decide whether or not to do something?

Q2: How do people tend to justify making small, bad decisions that seem to go unnoticed?

Q3: James encourages us to do the right thing. How can you know if an action is the right thing to do or not?

Q4: What if you know the right thing to do, but still don't want to do it? How can you begin choosing integrity over doing the wrong thing?

Q5: What's one small, daily action in your life that may reveal you are not doing what is right? How can you change this action or decision to pass James' integrity test?

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Proverbs 15

Proverbs 16

Proverbs 17

Proverbs 18

Proverbs 19

Proverbs 20

Proverbs 21

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## CIRCLE 04/04: **THE PATH TO HEALING**

Frank Warren had a crazy idea. In the early days of social media, he asked people to mail him postcards that contained their deepest, darkest secrets. You heard that right. He encouraged strangers to mail their secrets directly to his doorstep. How many do you think he received? A dozen? A hundred? After twelve years, Frank has received over two million postcards.

These cards contain shocking, gut-wrenching statements. Some will make you uncomfortable and others will make you want to cry. Submissions include:

- At my job, people have asked me for help and I tell them I don't work there.
- I am terrified that I will try my hardest and not be good enough.
- People think I've stopped drinking, but I've just gotten good at hiding it.
- I play piano in church, but I don't believe in God.

Where does the mass-success of this postcard project come from? My theory is that people crave confession. It feels good to get something off your chest, doesn't it? Secrets make us feel stuck -- spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. We've all encountered the "weight on our shoulders" type of guilt. It turns out that there is actually some science to back that up. A Princeton researcher, Martin Day, discovered that test subjects literally perceived a heavier sense of weight and discomfort when recalling memories associated with guilt.

Guilt is a sickness. Confession is the medicine. A crucial step in the journey of integrity is honest, open confession.

### **READ: James 5:16**

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.

Sin and guilt work together in secret. They weigh you down, burn you out, and keep you up. That is why James offers a life-giving action toward emotional healing -- confession. I hear you. Yes, it's hard, but it's healthy. Confessing your sins to someone, even a trusted friend, is uncomfortable and awkward. It requires vulnerability, trust, and humility. However, as we push past the discomfort, healing is on the other side.

Here are three steps to help you head towards healing.

### **Admit the sin.**

James is specific. He calls us to confess our sins. Whether you struggle with an action, addiction, thought pattern, or behavior, it's crucial to admit it specifically. We must fight the urge to sugar-coat or tone-down the true nature of our transgressions. Confession cannot exist without the admission of wrongdoing. This means that the first step to healing is acknowledging the sin.

**Accept the blame.**

It's so easy to project or reject the blame. People are tempted to recite, "I am sorry you feel that way" instead of "I'm sorry for what I did." Do you see the difference? The first rejects blame while the second accepts it. You must own up to your wrongdoing. Don't try to minimize it. Don't try to rationalize it. Just admit the sin and accept the blame. Then, you are ready for the final step.

**Ask for forgiveness.**

Whether you are seeking forgiveness from a friend or from God, actually ask. After you've come clean, ask for forgiveness. It is a chance to start fresh without the weight and hassle of guilt. Freedom is found in those simple words, "I forgive you."

You have admitted the sin, accepted the blame, and asked for forgiveness. What's next? Here is the good part. This passage contains a promise. James explains that we do this so, "that you may be healed" (5:16).

Regardless of what you've done, healing is possible. Are sinful secrets making you feel like you're carrying a barbell around your neck? Maybe what you said shattered someone's heart. Maybe you've allowed a lie to become your lifestyle. Maybe you've fibbed, cheated, or stolen. Whatever the sin, it's time to seek healing and forgiveness.

Confession leads to restoration. Honesty leads to healing.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Q1: Have you ever tried to hide something because you knew it was wrong? How did that make you feel?

Q2: How does confessing our sins help to relieve feelings of guilt?

Q3: What prevents people from accepting the blame for their sinful actions? How can we overcome those barriers as we pursue healing from guilt?

Q4: What's the most challenging part of healing from past mistakes for you: Admitting the sin, accepting the blame, or asking for forgiveness?

Q5: Is there anything you want to confess so you can begin healing from past mistakes? You can share something with the group, or you can commit to reaching out to a friend privately this week.

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Proverbs 22

Proverbs 23

Proverbs 24

Proverbs 25

Proverbs 26

Proverbs 27

Proverbs 28

**Bonus: Proverbs 29, 30. & 31**

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.