

FAITH BY DESIGN

BY DESIGN

design thinking
for your faith



FAITH



Faith By Design: Design Thinking For Your Faith

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WEEK 1

JAMES 1:1-12 (NLT)

Greetings from James

1 This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the “twelve tribes”—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings!

Faith and Endurance

2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. **3** For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. **4** So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

5 If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. **6** But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. **7** Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. **8** Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

9 Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. **10** And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. **11** The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James has not always been a popular book. Rather, it has often been derided as a “letter of straw” (Martin Luther). It has been relegated to a second tier in the NT, and modern theologians sometimes feel it has been a judaistic holdover that does not really express the essence of Christian faith. Yet, in quite the opposite way, it has always been quite popular with the everyday Christians. Some have said it is “probably one of the two or three most popular NT books in the church.”

Why is this book so popular? While it is practical, it is concise and it uses metaphors and illustrations to make it easy, I would like to posit another reason. This book is written for design thinkers. What is design thinking? Design Thinking is a methodology used by designers to solve complex problems and find desirable solutions for clients... Design Thinking draws upon logic, imagination, intuition, and systemic reasoning, to explore possibilities of what could be—and to create desired outcomes that benefit the end user (the customer).

Think about an architect. How do they accomplish the task of creating a well-designed house? Simply, they create the drawing of how they want it to look and then they spend a great deal of time doing the hard work of engineering, working with numbers and systems, in order to create the underlying infrastructure that would create a functional and livable home from their initial design. Design thinking “starts with the ending” and creates the roadmap to get there. It includes innovation, systems,

and adherence to the plan, while being flexible enough to iterate new approaches to a problem.

But this doesn't sound much like what we do when it comes to our faith. It seems great for software design or creating an experience for someone at a restaurant, but does it make sense as a way to think about our faith? Our faith is something more organic than something that can simply be designed. Or is it? Should we consider some of these principles when we think about our faith, and particularly is there a book in scripture that lends itself to this kind of thinking? James seems to be a great place to start.

The author of James seems to be interested in how you are experiencing your faith, your obedience, and how your faith allows you to handle the ins and outs of life in a way that glorifies God and creates a better life for you. His view of what a Christian life should be just might be the goal for us to take a look at and begin to design our own lives of faith. He sees opportunity in pain and problems, has a plan for dealing with temptation, understands how faith can lead to change, believes our mouths cause us a lot of trouble, and wants us to be a praying people.

It is with this in mind that we will take a look at how we can begin to look through the book of James in order to begin to design our faith.

1 – Have you ever been frustrated by your experience of faith?

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2 – Have you ever tried to create consistency in your faith with a hoped-for outcome?

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3 – What would your well-designed life of faith look like?

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1 This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the “twelve tribes”—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings! 2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.

Interestingly, this letter is one of those letters, like 1 and 2 Peter, 3 John, and even Jude, that is sent out, but not to a particular church. In fact, James simply says that it is for the 12 tribes living in the Diaspora (or dispersion, when the Jewish nation lost their homeland). If you notice, it is sent to the Jewish believers scattered abroad. This letter had a particular audience, and therefore it has a bent toward the chosen audience. There are definitely “Jewishisms” in this book, but he makes it clear who he is writing for. Now, does this mean there is nothing for us in this writing as we are not from the Jewish tradition?

Of course not! We can gain a great deal of insight, but we need to always remember the primary audience to which James was writing in order to correctly understand the cultural and religious context to which he was speaking.

And who was James? This could be a long discussion, especially with the neglect this book saw in the early history of the church. However, for our purposes, we are going to settle on the fact it was a relatively famous early church father by the name of James. Many propose that it was the brother of Jesus, and there is a great case for this. The question of authorship we will leave for another time, but it is an interesting conversation that can be

traced through Christian history, even to the time of the reformers.

There is a positive tone to the second verse of this book. James jumps right in to tell us that in any bit of trouble, there can be great joy to be found. This is of particular importance for us in 2020, a year we will look back at as unprecedented in its troubles for the world. Pandemics, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanoes, and the general desperation of a human population seeking to find its footing amongst these experiences. (I am writing this from my garage, converted in this pandemic to my office, as we are still under a shelter-in-place order due to Covid-19).

The first admonition in the book is to find opportunity for great joy in crisis. One could even say this book is relatively clear in the assumption that stress and hardship in our lives are predictable. This may be new to many of us who have been living relatively blessed and trouble-free lives. However, let us be careful equating our lives as blessed if they are struggle free. If we do this to its logical end, then those who are wealthy and have no real problems are somehow seen as more blessed by God. Biblical examples show us that a trouble-free life does not equate itself with blessing. Rather, see the book of Philippians to see how Paul considered himself

blessed in the midst of trouble.

This book begins knowing there is a way that Christians should consider their lives, and hardship and troubles are not to be seen as anything more than an opportunity for great joy. I understand how this sounds. Sort of “Pie in the sky” type of thinking. However, what have you found to be the joy that came to you and your family in this year’s troubles? My family

was able to be together again, which is a great joy—but there were many more. Our church grew, our network of churches grew, we learned new skills, and we came together as a people with a greater desire to worship and connect.

Was this trouble worth it? That is a question for the history books, I suppose. But there is joy in trouble, of that we can be sure.

1 – What Joy did you find in your troubles so far this year?

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2 – How can you look at blessing differently than simply having things go well?

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3 – If you could tell people about 2020 in 20 years, what would you say changed in your life for the better and for the worse?

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2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.

Let us spend another day talking about this idea of Joy in the midst of troubles. One of the striking things about this text is the assumption of trouble. I don't know if this is how we look at life, or at least how we have traditionally looked at it. I think, perhaps, we have approached life as if troubles were an anomaly rather than the rule. This was probably not the case for the early Christians to whom this letter was written. They had internal struggles (like we do in the church—see Acts 15), they were having external troubles (persecutions, being fed to lions, that sort of thing), and they were probably having internal faith struggles as well (it is simply hard to believe at times). So the assumption the author takes into this sentence is simple; struggles and troubles will come, you have to learn to make the best of them. (This is design thinking; anticipate the situations, then you can iterate around them).

His use of the word “troubles” is a translation from the Greek. I won't worry you with the Greek word and its cognates, but it is a word that has two distinct meanings in the NT. They can mean either an outward trial or a process of “testing,” and they can denote the inner enticement to sin, what we would call “temptations.” This same word is used in 1

Peter 4:12—“dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” It is the same word used in the “Lord's Prayer” and some scholars think we should not translate the phrase “Lead us not into temptation” as “do not bring us to the time of trial” (NRSV), which would really mess with the way I have been saying that prayer over the years, and would even change what it means in some respects. This is why language is so important; words mean things and set us on a trajectory of understanding that is helpful or harmful if we are not careful.

So why did we title this day as “stress is problematic”? Simply because of the assumption that trials and troubles are to be assumed in our lives. There was never a promise in scripture of an easy life for the believer. Actually, I am not sure there has ever been a promise of an easy life for anyone in scripture, and believers are no different. However, we have been promised a purpose (Matthew 6:10), promised the Holy Spirit (John 16) and promised a savior (Genesis 3:15). That should be enough for us to look at any trial we have and realize that we will be okay if we can remember the above three things.

1 – What trials are you going through right now?

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2 – How are you going to get through them?

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3 – How can purpose, the Holy Spirit, and a Savior help?

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3 For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. 4 So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

This sounds like a training manual for running a marathon or working out. (I may have just gotten up from my writing to work out a little...)

Why is it that we, as believers, can look at and react to our troubles in such a way? Because we know that God uses our trials and troubles to perfect our faith, grow us as stronger Christians, and to build an endurance in us that is not only unexpected, but unusual.

I have a friend who is an ultra-marathoner. It is just ridiculous. His training regimen begins at like 3 am and goes until 7-8 in the morning. He runs marathons as his warm-ups. His capacity for pain is unusual and incredible. He lives in a climate that allows for him to run all year round, and he is uniquely in shape. Of course, he didn't begin as an ultra-marathoner; rather, he began by going on a small run and worked his way up. He told me his goal was never to run an ultra-marathon, but rather to simply keep going. Every time the trail got hard, he kept going; when his legs were tired, he kept going; when he was hungry, he kept going. His ability to keep going made him into the runner he is today. One more step each day was what he was going for, and he got there. He does races with names like "Survival Run," "Mountain Masochist," "Graveyard 100," and titles like that.

Sounds fun!

Wait; Sounds fun?

While we all probably define fun in different ways, what we can understand is that the growth of his endurance has played a great part in his ability to run. In that same way, we grow through our testing, through our trials. The scripture says that at the end of this, we will be needing nothing. How can that possibly be true? Who would have designed our lives to be like this? Why is it that we must suffer through troubles in order to be perfected?

Let's be clear, the troubles are not promised either; however, they are expected. One of the reasons is that we are not really in this world anymore. We react to things differently, we act differently in the face of so many things. At least, this is what is to be expected. If we are to be strong in our faith, if we are to be perfected in our thinking and acting, if we are to grow strong endurance in the face of suffering, then we need training. No one gets their goals without pushing themselves. And spiritual goals are the same way. Remember, our lives are not bifurcated, meaning that our lives are not separate. Our struggles are not separated from our spiritual lives in any way. What affects us practically affects us spiritually as well. We are whole beings, created as flesh and spirit.

1 – How do your struggles make you stronger?

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2 –Where do you find your strength to endure?

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3 – Can you endure a bit more each time?

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3 For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. 4 So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. 5 If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. 6 But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. 7 Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

When has your faith been the most acute? When has it been the most refined and robust? What does it take to make faith bigger and bolder than it usually is? How can we be sure we are growing in faith? And in what ways does God use trials and troubles to make our faith develop into all that it can be?

That's a lot of questions for one day, but in verse 4 we see that when our endurance has a chance to grow, we become as those needing nothing. And wouldn't it be nice to need nothing! I will admit it, I got just a bit caught up in the great toilet paper run of 2020. Well, by that I mean I had a great deal of anxiety around the idea that we needed a certain amount of TP. I went to my wife and was encouraging a quick run to the store in order to get what I thought we needed as a good amount of TP to fill our lives and our cupboards, and to really, simply alleviate my anxiety. My wife kept telling me that we had all we needed, and I finally took her word for it.

Over the course of the next 6 weeks, I would go to a drawer, a cupboard, a shelf, and I would realize there were a few rolls of the blessed material here and there. Then, about 5 weeks in, I opened a cupboard I seldom look in and, lo and behold, I saw about 30 rolls of the stuff. I couldn't believe it! I went to my wife and she explained that before this whole "shelter-in-place" order had begun, we had taken a shipment of our online bamboo-based TP, which is like 60 rolls. We get a few of these a year, and we store the rest. Apparently, we rarely get through a shipment before the next one comes. We had all we needed, and there was comfort in knowing this. While she hadn't explicitly told me where it all was, she had simply admonished me to trust her. I should have believed her much sooner and with much more commitment. She was right, but wanted me to find it all on my own. (Just for the record, I don't think she was teaching me a lesson so much as she couldn't be bothered with my anxiety!)

I tell you this story to illustrate that just because you don't know a thing, it doesn't mean that God doesn't know it. We have to ask God for wisdom and then trust in the knowledge and truth he will reveal to us. Sometimes he reveals it all at once, and sometimes he reveals it slowly to us, through our trials and troubles. It is not up to us how God will disperse his wisdom, but it is up to us how we will receive it.

What we can be sure of is this: our faith is refined in the waiting, in the hoping, and sometimes, in the silence during the trials. We shouldn't be concerned that we are growing our endurance. We should look at it as an opportunity to lean more deeply into a faith that believes God will give us everything we need—all the wisdom, grace, protection, and love we could ever imagine.

1 – When have you felt tested and troubled? What did it do to your faith?

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2 – How can we know when we are leaning into the wisdom of God?

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3 – How can we know God's timing? Can we at all?

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9 Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. 10 And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. 11 The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements. 12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

This seems like God doesn't like people who are wealthy. But this is in no way true. The problem which sometimes happens with wealth is people begin to believe in their own competency as a salvation schema in their lives. God wants them to realize he has given them all they possess, and this should humble us. Both circumstances, rich and poor, should view themselves as God views them. Each is exhorted or encouraged to take pride or boast, but to boast in Christ.

I was listening to a podcast with Malcolm Gladwell as the guest, and he said something that has resonated a great deal with me. He said he used to chase fame, recognition, and money. But after a while, when he realized his work had provided a roof over his head and food on the table, he realized the pursuit of all the rest—fame, recognition, and money—were just vanity and ego. When he was able to let the pursuit of those things go, or at least place them in the correct position in his life, he was finally able to simply focus on the work. Good work, said Gladwell, was

reward enough on its own. (He also said he was surprised that from the good work, the other things eventually flowed.)

In a similar way, the author is pushing both situations to recognize what is from God and what they have done themselves, and to differentiate between the two on their own. In this way, they can both "boast" as to their "high position" but realizing this position comes from God and not from their own achievements or their own lack, but because of the position they find themselves in because of the grace and protection of God. What we have and what we lack does not make our identity. That comes solely from Christ alone.

Just to be clear, the language is not pitting the rich and the poor against one another, or saying one is better than the other. Rather, one who is rich who is a Christian should take as much pride in his low position as the poor brother (or sister) can take pride in their high position in Christ. The author is pointing both of these people to their identity in Christ to be the thing giving them significance, and giving

them hope. Maintaining such a perspective can be hard both for those with little and those with a lot.

Interestingly, James may see wealth as a bigger trial and trouble than poverty poses to the believer. Again, the myth of competency can be an alluring identity. Pride in achievement must always be tempered by the understanding that nothing we do, nothing we accomplish and nothing we gain is close to what Christ has done for us.

By including verse 12 in this pericope (section), we allow James to return to the

opening topic of the paragraph—trials. He is reminding the believing Christian that our accomplishments pale in the face of the Crown of Life that is promised to those who love Christ. This, not so much a reward as a gift from God for leaning into faith in Jesus, is a much greater accomplishment than what we have worked so hard to gain through our efforts or our trials. In this way, James gives each of us, wealthy and poor, accomplished and failed, a reminder of where our identity and accomplishments are ultimately held.

1 – When people ask you what you “do,” how do you answer them? (In some ways, this is where you have placed your identity, and sometimes, your value).

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2 – What can you do to readjust what you are proud of in your life? Of what do you boast?

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3 – How can you remind all of those around you of your identity in Christ?

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James is building a case for our struggles and their efficacy in the face of our faith. As well, he is building our identity in Christ as the most valuable and important thing in our lives. He is doing this because his ultimate goal is to build our faith by helping us understand how we are refined, how God designs us into the believers he would have us be, and how we can continue to grow closer and lean more clearly into him.

As we look at these texts, we have to recognize that trials and troubles are not something to eschew or avoid, but rather, we are to understand that from every trial, from every trouble, we can be made into stronger believers, with the ability to endure more and more for our God. The point is not so much that we should look forward to suffering, but rather, that suffering can be used to great advantage in our lives of faith. The design of our faith comes from God, and as we tap into it, we begin to understand that everything can be used to grow us, refine us, and teach us lessons that will

build our faith and our lives of faith.

For James, the idea of “our lives” and our “faith lives” are not bifurcated; rather, they are seen as a whole. We are not people with lives of faith, we are faithful people, living lives and lives of faith that are interconnected and even one. This means that every trial and trouble is a faith issue, and every faith issue is a life issue. I will say it again: “Every trial and trouble is a faith issue, and every faith issue is a life issue.”

And the author wants us to remember that trials and troubles can take many forms. He even mentions the idea of wealth being a trouble we might have to live through. Of course, we would all love to have those particular issues in our lives, it seems. However, to have too much is just as much a problem as to have too little. While it may not seem as such, wealth has not proven to be a source of happiness. This has been proven too many times over the years and centuries of human existence.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1— Are you prepared to put your identity completely in Christ?
- 2— Are you willing to see the opportunity in the trials and troubles you will inevitably have to endure?
- 3— If you put your identity in Christ, what would that mean to you every day, every hour, every minute?
- 4— Is there someone you greatly admire in faith that you would like to echo in your life?
- 5— Can you reach out to them and ask for mentorship?
- 6— What is the design you would like your faith to take?
- 7— How can you be explicit in identifying what that ultimate design looks like in your life so you can begin to engineer your path to it?
- 8— Who are examples from scripture you would like to emulate?
- 9— Why is faith so hard sometimes?
- 10— What sort of trials and troubles are you currently experiencing and how is it growing you closer to Christ?

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Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes, spanning the width of the page.

WEEK 2

JAMES 1:13-17 (NLT)

13 And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. **14** Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. **15** These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. **16** So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. **17** Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.

What is temptation? This is a pretty common question to ask ourselves both for our lives of faith and for how we look to design our faith in a direction that is beneficial. So let's ask the basic question first: What is temptation?

According to the narrative we have accepted as our identifying narrative, it began in the Garden of Eden; there was a conversation between a snake and a woman. The snake promises the woman something she had already been given (to be like God—See Genesis 1:26-28), and she took the bait, as did her husband. When the distrust was later discovered, while grace was extended and then rejected by the couple, God had to let the effects of this distrust play out, and the edenic existence of the first couple was lost to us until Jesus would come and make things right again.

But Jesus was not immune to temptation; rather, he had to suffer through a much greater temptation than we will ever have to experience. If you remember the story (Matthew 4) Jesus was led into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights, which is the Bible saying "forever. . ." He was gone for a great long while, and scripture tells us he was "hungry," which may have been the most obvious statement

in Scripture. At just the worst time, the enemy appears to Jesus and tempts him thusly: "Turn these stones to bread!"

I want to take a moment and recognize something here, and it is pretty obvious, so I apologize. The enemy only uses that which is tempting to us to tempt us! I know this is an obvious statement. But in this way, the temptations Jesus had to endure are much greater than the temptations we have to endure. They were much greater because he had access to all the power that would have made these temptations a reality. For instance, the temptation to make bread from stones is no great temptation for me. Why? Because I CAN'T DO THAT! If I can't do it, it's not a temptation.

Another example; Reeses Peanut Butter Cups are not a temptation for me. I simply don't like them. You can wave them under my nose as long as you want, but they will never really bother me. I can't be tempted by those things. However, put Oreos in front of me, and I'm in trouble. Oreos just might be my "stones to bread" temptation. I will sit and eat a whole sleeve if I am not watching myself.

Again, temptation is always going to come as something that is tempting to you. And what that is for you, I can't say. But you can...

1 – What is tempting to you?

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2 – How can the enemy use that to his advantage in your life of faith?

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3 – How can you begin to design a process from which to expunge that particular temptation?

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13 And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. 14 Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away.

Do Not Say "God is Tempting Me..." This is important. God is never the one who is tempting you. To think this is to misunderstand God in his entirety. God has no interest in enticing you to anything that would separate you from him. That would not only be anathema to him, but would put you in a situation where God is the accuser and the distracter. Not only is there nothing to gain from this for God, but it would be a great misdirect of his character. God does not find any joy in tripping you up. God is not in the "stay out of heaven business"; rather, he is in the "how can we get you into heaven" business. That seems to be the misnomer that so many people think is the way of God.

In fact, it is the devil who is interested in tripping you up. When Jesus was being tempted, Satan used the exact things that were available to him in order to tempt him. He seemed to have an intimate knowledge of the savior, in order to use his power and strength against him. In the same way, our evil desires, according to James, are what puts us in compromising situations. Our own desires can be used against us, and they are twisted into something that is not of God. We either become bound to them, or

we are so afraid of them that we worry all the time about falling into temptation, and that is another kind of bondage in itself. When we are slaves to our temptations and to our sins we cannot experience the freedom in Christ he has promised us.

James does not use the idea of Satan, which is a particularly Jewish thought process. He calls to his aid the Jewish teaching on the evil impulse in man, and that allows James to keep the responsibility squarely on the individual. While this may not be what you believe, before we see Satan behind every temptation, perhaps we should take a quick stock of that with which we find ourselves struggling. I wonder if there is a great deal of effort that Satan would need to put into most of us as we are so preoccupied with our own issues that we cannot be a force for good for the kingdom of God. So many of us are so self-oriented and behavior-focused, we cannot get out of our own heads for very long. This makes us almost useless for the Kingdom.

There is a great deal more to say, and we will deal with more of it tomorrow.

But today, answer these questions to begin to clarify where you are.

1 – What is it that you find yourself tempted by on an ongoing basis?

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2 – How can you begin to design your life so you may be able to move away from this issue?

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3 – Pray today for clarity and for courage. Clarity to see where God can work in your life and courage to make moves to design your life differently.

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15 These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

James is warning us against allowing these desires to rule in our lives. Now, I know what this begins to do in our hearts. It seems that we are being admonished to be STRONGER when it comes to our behavior and our actions. And of course, there is some of this. However, if you are like me, these kinds of admonitions become frustrating, as we are trying to be as strong as we can, and asking us to be stronger seems like putting salt on an already open wound.

It would seem that James is using a metaphor here of desire giving birth to sinful actions, and those actions then becoming full-blown death. Some commentators have said this is an allusion to Eve, but that is arguable at best. What seems to be in play here is the idea that Temptation is not sinful, nor are desires, but giving into them leads us to a place that can end in death. This seems like the sermon Jesus gave on the mount in Matthew 5, where he takes things like “you shall not murder,” and moves the line back to “you should not be angry.” What is the efficacy of this? It is taking us closer to the source.

Here is a silly illustration I used when teaching High School Bible courses. I used

to ask a student to stand at the back of the class, and then have them run as fast as they can toward the wall at the front of the classroom. The only caveat was that they should not slow down before they hit the wall; rather, they should stop immediately before the wall, with no slowing. Of course, this was relatively impossible. However, there was always a student who would try it, and I believe it only caused one student a bloody nose. (This, by the way, was when I realized I probably shouldn't be teaching Bible on the Secondary level.)

The point I am trying to make is that both Jesus and James were making the same argument. Perhaps we should try to nip sin in the bud, when it is still temptation, rather than trying to get it to be something we stop as we are careening headlong into a mistake. Rather than having to redirect behavior, which is difficult, let's get to the source and redirect our energy into dealing with temptation and desire rather than behavior and consequence. While it seems like a simple switch, of course it is not. So we have to begin to design our life in a way that can recognize when temptation is coming around, and we have to know what our desires really are.

1 – When was the last time you were tempted and you knew it was happening? What was the temptation?

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2 – Why is it that James and Jesus are so concerned at getting to the source of the problem, rather than the behavior?

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3 – How can you move your attention closer to the source, and how can you begin to shift some of your thinking upstream toward the temptation, rather than the behavior?

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16 So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.

Simply, when you begin to believe that the author of temptation is God, then you have been misled. But of course, if God is sovereign, then how is he not responsible for these temptations in your life? How can a God who is all loving, all powerful, all knowing, and everywhere, not be in charge of what is happening in your life?

These questions are called Theodicy, and it is how we look at God in the face of suffering, and of course, temptation is suffering. We are not going to get into this today, as there is simply too much to unpack with those questions. For a great overview I suggest you go and listen to the Today's Presence podcast with Sam Leonor and myself (Season 1, Episodes 11 & 12) as we unpack these concepts, the arguments which are out there, and where we ultimately land. It will take about an hour and ten minutes to listen to them, but it might be worth your time.

Suffice it to say, that as the Scripture continues into verse 17, it is goodness that is attributed to God. Anything that is good in your life is what is coming from Christ. The metaphor of light is used here, and what is clear is that God is the source of all good things. It means that God is wanting to give us good, right and true things so that we might thrive in our world.

This also means he is the author of

the good we have to fight temptation, and gives us the impetus to create and design systems and processes that will move us away from thinking about only behavior, and begin to address the temptation at its source. These gifts are good because they never culminate in evil or in a desire to sin. Rather, they are perfect as they seek to help people do His will in the world, in amazing ways.

I was having a conversation with a young man who was/is an atheist, and he was very bothered that anyone would say he was "blessed" by the life he found himself living. He mentioned it was he who had made good and healthy choices, that he was the one who worked hard to get to where he was financially, and that his character was something he had cultivated, even though he came from a very broken and abusive home. I asked him where he thought he got the motivation to be who he was, and he did not have a good answer. I know I didn't convince him to believe that the impetus came from the Holy Spirit; however, he is still a regular attendee at church with his family, so God is not done with him yet.

As I reflect on our conversation, I recognize the hard work and effort he has put into creating the life and becoming the person he so desired; but I also believe there is a God at work in his life that was

revealing to him all he could be. He is an incredibly gifted young man, and eventually, I believe he will see the foundation the Holy Spirit laid for him that catapulted his thinking beyond the circumstances he

found himself in to begin with. That is how it is with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes he is willing to give us great things before we will give him credit for them.

1 – What do you have in your life and in your character that is good?

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2 – Where did those things come from? Who is the author of the good things in your life?

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3 – What can you do to encourage someone else to recognize the goodness in them today, and also how can you point them to who that goodness came from?

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18 He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.

Who is James speaking about when he says “us”? Is it just those who believe? Or is it all of mankind? I think the text is speaking to the way that God gives “birth” to believers. However, that is not an exclusive statement, as all have the opportunity to become new believers and experience this “birth.” While some choose not to believe, the opportunity comes to all. However, this is where the collaboration with God, in the great Co-Mission, is truly phenomenal. We are the tool God uses in order that the world should know who he is. We are often that great revealing, that great apocalypse the world sees of God.

What is your most prized possession? If you have kids, it is probably those amazing creatures you are blessed with. It might be your spouse, or it might be something you worked hard in order to be able to own. God sees us as his most prized possession, and this should be something we understand. It gives us identity, and it gives us purpose. As well, since we know that only good things come from God, we can count ourselves among those good things. If you have ever felt unworthy of God’s grace, if you have ever felt that you were not good enough to be loved by others, take comfort in the fact

God sees you as one of his most valuable possessions. He loves you and would not give you up.

But how are we born? According to the text it is by giving us his “true word.” This is not just seen as him giving us scripture, while that is included. But his true word is Jesus Christ, to which the scriptures give testimony. John 5:39 tells us “You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!” So the scriptures are only as good as they testify to who Jesus is, was, and will continue to be. And the good news is that all of the scriptures testify to that one true word, Jesus.

Remember, if you are going to scripture in order to simply find yourself, you are missing the point. Scripture points us to the revelation of Jesus in every word and space between the words. The Holy Spirit can use your study to reveal the greatness and goodness of Jesus to you on a daily basis, but you have to be willing to put aside your bias and your insecurities to see Jesus in every word. I like to call this “chasing Jesus” through Scripture.

1 – What are you looking for when you go to scripture? Is it a greater revelation of Jesus?

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2 – How can you use that which you find about Jesus to help you in your everyday life?

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3 – What is the most profound truth you have found about Jesus? Write it down!

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Let's go back and spend a moment talking about temptation. We seem to think temptation is a bad thing. However, it is possible that by being tempted we are becoming aware that we are becoming a threat to Satan. I don't think he bothers with anyone who is too wrapped up in their fear and in their misunderstanding of who they are in Jesus. What I mean by this is when we are busy worrying about ourselves and how we are doing, we can rarely become a force for good in the kingdom of God.

We begin to become a threat to the work of the enemy in the world when we begin to focus on Christ, his goodness, and how he interacts with the world. When this happens, there is an awakening to your effectiveness in the world for the kingdom, and that bothers those who would have you be silent. It is no coincidence that when you begin to sort out that this is all about Jesus, your life is sometimes thrown into tumult. As you are awakened to the greatest gift God has ever given us, his son Jesus, there are spiritual powers that are awakened to thwart your growth and understanding. While we have the greatest protector there is, we also become a target.

Now, I know there are some of you who no longer believe we are in a cosmic conflict. There are many Christians who find it hard to believe in the great controversy themes. The meta narrative of a great war between good and evil in the world is the stuff of movies and great books, but it can't be the way we see our spiritual lives. It is too "us against

them," too much of us falling into the old tropes of "a devil around every corner."

I understand this mentality very well. But I also have to believe in scripture, so I am at a decision point. Scripture speaks of Jesus praying to God to not "take us out of this world" but to protect us from the "evil one" (John 17:15). Perhaps this is an antiquated idea, but I find some truth and some veracity in the prayer. When things are growing at Crosswalk, when things are lining up in my walk with Jesus, it is usually when things become tough in another section of my life. We can chalk it up to coincidence, but I have been doing this for a while. There seems to be a direct reaction when strides are made for the kingdom of God.

You don't have to believe me, for sure. However, I challenge you to become that weapon in the arsenal Jesus has against the evil one, and see if I am wrong. I would love to be wrong, honestly, I would. I would love it if there was only good in the world, and any inconvenience was simply coincidence. And, if I end up in heaven, and my conversation with God proves me wrong, I am happy to concede I don't know everything. However, as I look to scripture, I see a battle and a war that was waged. I also see victory over the enemy. So while I might be inconvenienced and even troubled by the work of the enemy in my life, I also have a triumphant Savior who supersedes any attacks on my life. My hope and strength is in Jesus, without a doubt.

1 – Have you ever experienced trouble in your life just when it felt you were becoming closer to Jesus?

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2 – Did that upheaval derail your spiritual walk, or did it make it stronger?

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3 – How can we be sure Jesus has our backs in this struggle with evil? What texts give you strength?

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This week we have looked at a small portion of scripture, but an important one. We have learned that every good thing comes from God. We have learned that God never authors temptation in our lives, but that is often a response of the enemy to our making strides for the kingdom of God. We have also learned there is no power that is greater than the power of Jesus in our lives.

However, none of this takes away the potency of the temptation many of us feel. It burns inside us, distracts us, and creates a kind of subtle anxiety in our hearts. It is disconcerting, even when we are not falling into that temptation. To constantly have to deal with this is hard on our hearts. And we all have to find ways to live beyond these constant thorns in our sides.

The good news in these texts is Jesus is never the author of our temptations, which can ultimately lead to sin and then to death. Rather, all the good things in your life, those things we often don't give enough time to, those all come from God. What grace has been given to you this week, even in this crazy year we have been living? (2020 will go down in the history books as the strangest and toughest year in a long time!) How has God blessed you and kept you as you and your family are getting through this time? Is there

something tangible you can think of that God is doing, right now, that will remind you of his goodness and grace?

We have talked about designing our lives with the intent of getting ahead of the temptations in our lives. I understand that this is not the simplest of concepts. But by thinking backwards from when we have been successful in changing the way we live to accommodate a more clear and concise victory over these things, we can probably reproduce those decisions in our lives. Remember, we don't do this alone, but we do this with the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, deep reflection on how we need to set up our spiritual practices in order to create a healthier response to temptation is important.

Here is a "for instance": If you are struggling with lust, and yet you find yourself without any accountability when it comes to what you view either on your phone, television, or computer, perhaps it is time to design a system of accountability (Support Group, Software, Accountability relationships without judgment but with great help) in your life so you will not have to deal with the temptation by simply "being stronger."

Here are a few questions for you to ponder this week:

- 1 – How can you tell when a temptation is coming your way?
- 2 – What processes and structures have you put into place in order to deal with them before they become a reality in your life?
- 3 – Where do you go for accountability in your decisions?
- 4 – Who is your support group you can go to in difficult times?
- 5 – What do you do to maintain accountable relationships with safe people in your life?
- 6 – What is the hardest thing you deal with right now?
- 7 – What do you think your life would look like if you could be a little more intentional about dealing with temptation?
- 8 – What has God given you that you can be thankful for?
- 9 – How can you create a new appreciation for the good and perfect things God has placed in your life?
- 10— How can you share your blessings with others?

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WEEK 3

JAMES 1:18-27 (NLT)

18 He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.

Listening and Doing

19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. **20** Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. **21** So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. **22** But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. **23** For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. **24** You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. **25** But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. **26** If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. **27** Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. 20 Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. 21 So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

We could spend a week on the first verse of these texts alone! How many of us are good at any of these things? I know I am pretty bad at them. Let's break them down as quickly as we can.

1 – Quick to listen. How many of us listen mostly to respond? We often find ourselves formulating responses to parts of sentences without listening to the whole thing. I know I am guilty of this at times.

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2 – Slow to speak. Every once in a while, someone suggests I should exercise the "Ministry of Listening" a little more than I do. As someone who speaks for a living, it does me well to be reminded of the opportunity to listen rather than to speak.

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3 – Slow to get angry. This is a good one. How many of us have the patience we need in order to continue to continue our relationships?

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22 But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. 23 For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. 24 You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.

Sometimes, the frame is as important as the picture. And in these texts, there is a frame that we have seen before. James uses it, much like Jesus did in the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). There is a simple call in these texts to "Go and do." James says it this way : "You must do what it says." Some translations say we must be "Doers" of the word. This, of course, means just knowing the word of God is only a part of what you must do in order to be living a full and meaningful Christian life.

Why is the "doing" so important? It is simple. The idea that we "know" something is useless in the face of "doing" something. When I was working at Loma Linda Academy as their Chaplain (2001-2007), I had a colleague who was in the peak of his physical health. He was much older than I was, but he was also much more fit, and was clearly focused on his health and how he could shape his body. We had a conversation one day where I was commenting on how he stayed so fit and trim. He told me something interesting.

"Anyone can look like this..." he said.

I was astonished. I made some joke about how I couldn't ever look like that, I didn't have the right body shape, and I never could really gain mass except in my belly; he then started to become incredulous.

"That's not true, anyone can look like this..."he said, more emphatically this time.

I took the bait. "How?" I asked.

He said, "All the information is out there. You just have to take that information and do it!"

"AAAAH", I said, there's the rub. "I don't want to do it. It seems hard."

"That's another issue..." He replied.

You see, the truth is, I was not interested in "doing" the hard work; rather, I was only interested in getting some of the knowledge in hope of getting more fit. But knowledge doesn't quite get us there. Rather than simply understanding something, it is imperative that we do the thing we are beginning to understand. Perhaps this is why so many people with great theological understanding are not helping the kingdom grow. They have heard the word of God, and they have even understood the words; however, those words never made the journey from their head to their heart to their hands.

1 – What do you “know,” but you don’t “do”?

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2 – How can you begin to integrate that knowledge into your practice?

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3 – Is there an expert you know that you can consult to help you design this integrative aspect of your life? (It could be health, theology, compassion, finances, etc.)

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25 But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

It might be easy to feel as if James is some sort of “perfectionist,” believing that keeping the law is what saves you. However, this couldn't be further from the truth. While James is using some pretty common hellenistic idioms (words and phrases that were around in the vernacular of the time, some of which were influenced by Roman thought, Stoic philosophy, and of course, Jewish tradition), he is thoroughly Christian in his approach. Coming from a Jewish background, he would think the law is perfect, but would understand that it was perfected in Jesus. Also, he understood there was a redefinition of the law through Jesus in his exposition on the mount in Matthew 5. While some of the language certainly sounds a bit like stoic philosophy, it is rooted deeply in the newly defined Christian understanding of the law.

James wants us to take the law seriously as an ethical and practical approach to life. In some respects, finding the boundaries of the law allows for a freedom in which to live. The idea that freedom is living a life without boundaries has been found to be false time and time again. Every time we see someone who has decided to live life with no boundaries, it seems to become a bit of a mess.

I have a friend who has chosen to live his life outside the constraints of society. Most would call him homeless, but as he

chose this life, I have a hard time using that term. When we talk about him entering back into society in a meaningful way, he always reminds me that he is truly “free.” He doesn't pay taxes, own anything, have a schedule that has to be kept, and doesn't answer to anyone. He believes that a life unfettered with boundaries is truly the best life one can live.

I, of course, take issue with this. This gentleman has spent time in prison, is often hungry, has no connection with family, and has had significant issues with alcohol and drug use. The boundaries that Scripture sets for us, especially when it comes to ethical and moral living, are important for us and do serve a function. However, that function is not to save, nor has it ever been to save, but rather, to help us live with one another more profoundly and with greater propriety.

The blessing of God mentioned here can be seen as practical outcomes to living a moral and ethical life. As well, God is glorified in your life when you live in a way that not only pleases God, but blesses others. When you are seen as someone who has a deep sense of morality, is honorable and has integrity, the name of Christ is lifted up through your actions. There is not a one-to-one blessing formula here, as if God has to bless your actions, but there are some pretty practical outcomes from living a life that is honorable both to God and to man.

1 – What is the function of law, according to Paul? (See Romans 3:19-20)

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2 – What can the law help you with today?

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3 – What is the best thing the law has taught you?

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26 If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. 27 Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

This is a great summary of what has gone before. True religion tames our basest desires and creates a deep compassion for those who are in need. And lastly, it rebukes the world that would drag us down. While the modern word that we use for religion is probably not the best word here, perhaps a better translation would be, "if you think you are following God. . ." We have often made religion the point, rather than the relationship. However, we might be able to do some work here.

There is a phrase that I have heard a ton over the last few years. Maybe you have heard it too: "I'm spiritual but not religious." This phrase is pretty common for those who still want to recognize the power of God, but are not happy with the religion they have grown up with, or are sometimes struggling with what seems to be the exclusivity of their faith of origin.

You've heard this before, but the word "religion" comes from the root "religare," which means to "bind too." So the question becomes, to what are you bound? I don't mind saying I am religious, as I am bound to Jesus Christ, and this binding is a blessing and privilege. Paul would go even further when he states that he is the "bondservant" of Jesus. To bind yourself to

something is not a bad situation, as long as you trust that to which you are bound.

And that becomes the problem. When we bind ourselves to the religious structure, we might be bound to a sinking ship. However, when we bind ourselves to Jesus, we can only be lifted up. Then, those institutions to which we identify become simply vehicles. I know so many people who left Jesus because of the vehicle they were bound to. I think being a part of a religious structure is important, but it is not the point. The point will always be Jesus, and eventually you will understand you need a community, and religion structures often provide that.

James seems to be saying there are some things that are deeply embedded into what he would call "true religion." If this is true, our religion must have those three ingredients he mentions. Personal piety, a true and rich compassion for the least of these, and a desire to live differently and have a different worldview than those who don't know Christ. James also seems to think these are things we can incorporate into our lives in powerful and possible ways. With some organization, with some intention, and with some trial and error, these can be the values we live in our religious lives.

How often have you found yourself wishing you were “better” at this spiritual stuff? How many times have you gone to bed wishing you didn’t have so many sins to confess, or pleading with God to not let you fall into temptation again? We are often our own worst enemy, often feeling like we are not making the grade or missing the mark. Perhaps James is trying to set us on a course that doesn’t seem so

trepidatious, one that might feel like we are getting a little control of our lives and our spiritual understanding. I think this might have been why he is giving us a clear path forward, helping us understand the work that needs to be done in our lives to attempt to design some structures in our lives that can help us feel the grace of God more powerfully in our lives.

1 – Have you ever experienced True Religion as James defines it?

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2 – How does your faith community connect you with these three things mentioned?

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3 – What kinds of structures do you need in your life in order to make space for these three things?

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It seems that we should spend a little more time on these ideas that James has introduced for us to understand “True Religion.” We have already made the case that our only “binding” should be to Jesus, but the religious structures in our lives should help us enact compassion, strength, and grace into the world. If they don’t allow or encourage this, then it is probably time to find another place to honor God.

I also think we should think about the fact there were no doctrinal expectations, beyond that of an understanding of the gospel. We are not told that “true religion” believes this doctrine in a certain way or not. It seems that the measure of true religion always comes back to love and obey God while taking care of other people. So why do we make it so difficult?

Perhaps it is because of our love of being right, or our desire to be involved in an exclusive club. We all like the way we feel when we are able to get into a restaurant as a VIP, or when we can be whisked through the TSA line at the airport because we are a CLEAR member (flexing, not going to lie, but I guess it doesn’t matter much anymore!). We all have this desire to be a part of the “in” group, and sometimes, the way we define “truth” allows for that. It allows us to create an “us against them” mentality, rather than allowing the truth of the gospel to be the thing that binds us together.

So this begets the problem. We want to be in the “in” group, or the “true religion” group, but we have set very different definitions of this group than God has. God’s “measure,” if you will, is how people love one another, and how they love God in the midst of loving one another. With these being the measure of love, and true religion being an expression of these principles, which also has a profound effect on our own lives and ability to give us courage in the face of temptation, we see that God is playing a very different game than we find ourselves playing most of the time. We are already in the “in” crowd, we are the VIP’s, so now, we should busy ourselves not with chasing the continual affirmation of our “in-ness” but rather, doing the work that God would have us do.

1 – Have you ever had VIP anything? What did you like about it and how did it make you feel?

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2 – Do you believe you have true religion as James defines it?

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3 – How can you share this true religion with others?

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22 Abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

It seems we have gone through a lot of ground this week, but I want to get back to a concept that is important for us as Christians to understand. At the beginning of the pericope (the section) we see that anger is an issue. I wanted to come back to this because in today's deeply divided world we seem to see anger becoming the common response to so much. I don't know if this is something the internet and social media has exacerbated, or if the simple anxiety of living in today's world is creating this issue. Maybe people have been angry forever and I am just finally paying attention.

In Christians, anger often takes the form of being deeply offended by so many things. Christians have, at times, made it their purpose and sole goal to remind the world how much it is doing wrong, and then have been deeply offended that the world did not agree with them. The vitriol I see being vomited by Christians on the internet is concerning to me. The deep sense of offense that is then responded to with anger seems at odds with the way that Jesus communicated. Were there times when Jesus was angry? Of course, but he did not stoop as low as many do today, thinking that if they can just get their point across, all the anger will be worth it.

I won't belabor this point, but I want to

ask you a question: Is there any anger that you can see that is appropriate for Christians to have? And if you say "righteous anger" I want to remind you that there is only one who is righteous, and his name isn't the same as yours. The righteous anger that Jesus showed came from a much greater perspective, a better understanding of what is truly happening. His anger never comes from misunderstanding, but rather, it comes from a true understanding of the hearts of man. We don't have that same perspective, vantage point, or insight.

As we design the faith life we are interested in living, we have to figure out what to do with this emotion. Anger is a festering blister that hurts us a great deal more than it hurts the object of our anger. It is a poison that will always hurt the container more than anything else it comes in contact with. What can we do to mitigate our feelings of anger?

The beauty of this is that James has already pointed to some really practical things we can do to understand how to deal with our anger. We have to listen more, slow down a bit more, and get rid of the negative things in our lives. This doesn't mean we don't have the opportunity to be critical at times, but don't let it fester. If you can help someone with critique and can do it with a god-given benevolence, by all means, do

that, but only if you have a relationship that can grow through the interchange.

While I could go on and on, suffice it to say that God's anger is not ours, so let's be

angry only about that which God is angry; injustice, usury, lack of compassion, and a lack of care for others.

1 – Have you ever had an anger issue? How did you get over it?

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2 – What is the best way to slow your anger? What has worked for you?

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3 – When you read scripture, what do you see that angers God?

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James has given us some great practical advice about anger, about following God, and about what true religion actually looks like. So my first question to you is this; does your religion look like what James has proposed? Have you been living your life of faith in this direction or have you been living it with a different target in mind. Many of us believe there is this "perfect" Christian out there, no one knows him/her, but they are out there, and we are sure we are not that person. We sometimes partake in what seems like an exercise in futility, never being able to hit the mark, and understanding that these mistakes are really sin.

While the word for sin literally does mean to miss the mark, I am wondering if we have had the wrong target to shoot for. While I have absolutely no issue with us trying to direct our behavior and our actions toward Christ, these things come as a response for what Jesus did for us. He did "hit the mark" for us, so that we can live without being bound to our sin. However, what bullseye did Jesus actually hit?

You see, while we can focus on the behavior of Jesus, it would behoove us to focus on the love of Jesus, as this was the mark the the hit bullseye after bullseye in his life. His love was expansive, beautiful,

winsome, full of life and verve, and simply beyond what the world had seen before. His target was not obedience, which did come with the love he espoused, but it his target was actually the people to which he could express that love. By healing, teaching, sharing, and preaching, he was able to make everyone he came into contact with understand the depths of God's love for them. This means that when our target is the same as Jesus' target, we will be the best expressions of love.

All this to say that true religion is the best expression of love that could ever be. When that is the target we are reaching for, we can begin to see the incredible expanse of love that God provides for us who give it away. Obedience becomes a symptom of a greater love. Your behavior conforms because your first thoughts are of Jesus and how you can payback that love he has given to us. The only way to pay it back is to give it away, and to give it away more each day. The love of Jesus is a never-ending resource of grace, healing, and relationship. We are deeply blessed by the love we have received and the love we have to give.

Give more away, there is more waiting. This is a target you can hit every day.

Notes

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Notes

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WEEK 4

JAMES 2:1-13 (NLT)

A Warning against Prejudice

1 My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others? **2** For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. **3** If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor"—well, **4** doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives? **5** Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? **6** But you dishonor the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? **7** Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name[c] you bear? **8** Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself." **9** But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law. **10** For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. **11** For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law. **12** So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. **13** There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

1 My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?

We are moving into the next phase of this book, and it seeks to explain some of the principles that were expressed in the first chapter. To make it practical, James is going to talk about prejudice against any certain group of people. Discrimination in the community is simply wrong. Regardless if it is a bias against race, class, gender, or any people group, it has no place in the kingdom of God. James is serious about this because he has exhorted us to be “doers” and not simply “knowers” when it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Taking care of the most vulnerable has been a hallmark of faith in God since the Old Testament, take a look at the minor prophets and you will see this without a doubt.

It is important that we understand that James will never lead us somewhere he is not willing to go himself. Christian compassion, particularly in the early years of the faith, separated people of faith from those who espoused no christian God. Interestingly, it was in the pandemics and plagues where the idea of Christian compassion became the most clear and expressed in those ancient communities. There are a great number of stories of how the Christians were willing to take care of the sick, feed the homeless, and make sure suffering was alleviated, often to their own detriment. They were willing to get sick in order to take care of the sick. This

has always been a Christian virtue.

James will spend some time on this thought. He is explaining the practicalities of what “true religion” really can be. The NLT translates this as a question, while some translate this text as an imperative, or a demand. I like the way the question is put back on us. We love the label of Christian, but are we ready to take up the implications. Ask yourself a question, are there those you struggle with? Is this because of a bias you brought into your Christian walk, or was it cultivated after you accepted Christ? And how can that be? How is it that we could cultivate a bias once we are Christians?

The fact that James, the author, is spending so much time on this particular issue makes us think that perhaps there was an issue in the church he was writing for. This is possible, but he leaves us a little in the dark about how true to life this might be. Regardless of the historicity of the problem, we can see it still playing out in today’s world. There is bias in the church and it is as deadly as it is in the rest of the world. As I write this we are in the aftermath of the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery here in the United States. This was a senseless shooting that was nothing more than white supremacy being covered up with the baseless explanation that they were “protecting” their neighborhood. Remember, the Klu Klux Klan has always

called itself a Christian organization. Bad exegesis and theology has been the root or at least the cover for so much hatred and bias, and this was no exception. It sickens me to think that we can use scripture to allow for hatred, violence or oppression, but yet we do.

Here, James is clear. There is no place for bias in the kingdom of God. True religion doesn't do that, can't do that, and God is not honored through it. Have I made it clear enough? James did, go read it again if you need a reminder. I will always love the book of James for this.

1 – How can you work to get rid of your bias?

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2 – Reach out to someone you might not normally reach out to today, and begin to tear down those walls.

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3 – Do you need to apologize to someone for the way you have acted in the past. This would be a good time.

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2 For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. 3 If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, “You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor”—well, 4 doesn’t this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?

Today’s text gives us a solid practical example of what we are dealing with. James’ use of the wealthy and the poor is particularly poignant at any given point, as we are often blinded by our desire to keep our ministries running, and we sometimes fall into the practice of taking care of the greatest givers in ways we don’t for the least in our congregations and lives. So for James to bring this to the forefront is super applicable to our understanding of bias and how it has no place in the church.

There are some interesting discussions about whether or not James was making this case about their worship services, or about another type of meeting in the synagogue. He uses the term “your synagogue” to the church, therefore we can assume we are talking about the Christians, not the Jews who might still be using the synagogue at the time. However, there is perhaps not enough evidence to suggest it is some sort of judicial meeting, as some commentators have suggested, and therefore we are left with a bit of uncertainty as to the nature of the meetings. However, it does not change the focus of the text, as it remains an emphasis

on not letting your bias get the best of you.

Do you have any wealthy friends? Do you treat them differently, even if it is unconscious? We sometimes do this unknowingly, but it is something that is noticed within a congregation. We have to guard ourselves from creating a second or third class of citizens in our congregations. Many of these people have been treated poorly in other places, and to have them treated poorly in the church says very little about how the kingdom of God is different from the rest of the world.

So what are we to do?

We are to create communities of belonging that recognize the esteem that all people deserve, regardless of socioeconomic standing, race, culture, religion, or anything else. Whether they come in looking like they are coming from a wedding, or from the beach; tattoos or bare skin, smelling great or smelling bad, we are to treat them all as brothers and sisters. While this sounds good on paper, it is somewhat more difficult in real life. It means that we have to, at times, become deeply uncomfortable to welcome those

that are so different than us, we might feel threatened. To be uncomfortable is often to be in the will of God, even if just for a moment.

**1 – Have you ever discriminated against someone because of how they looked?
When and where did this happen?**

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2 – Where you ever wrong about the person you discriminated against?

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3 – How can we be sure not to do this in our lives?

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4– Are there some limits we should have on our hospitality?

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5 Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? 6 But you dishonor the poor! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? 7 Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?

Let's break this text down. It begins with an imperative, or command, "listen!" It is a pretty forceful declaration, but it is softened by the familiar "brothers and sisters." (It would have been understood as "fellow believers, so we include both men and women.) He then asks the question; "hasn't God. . ." because he wants to continue the argument as to why his readers shouldn't simply flatter the rich and ignore or despise the poor. The author is really wanting to drive his point home.

Have you ever been in a conversation where, even though you agree, the other person seems to want to continue to try and convince you? It's as if you have said yes, but they want to make sure they drive their point home? This is what the author is doing. He has made his case, but he wants to reiterate the point to those reading. This could be because of what was happening in this church, or that he felt this so strongly he wanted to emphasize this teaching again.

He then reminds them that it is the poor who will inherit the kingdom, as Jesus said in Matthew 25. As well, those who are poor in this world were chosen by God to be "rich in faith." What does it mean to be rich in faith? A couple of things to think about here.

1) To be rich in faith is to recognize that God has a very different view of what makes someone wealthy or poor. Is it possible to have nothing, but own everything. A hearty yes is the answer to that question; Jesus had nothing, but as the heir to this world, he owned everything, but in a very different way than we think of it. Ownership is all about stewardship. Ownership is not simply possession, but responsibility. God seems to view ownership and value as something very different than humans have traditionally understood things.

2) God seems to find value in different things than we humans do. While we appreciate riches, money, and wealth, Jesus sees wealth as an abundance of faith. To be rich in faith transcends. And of course, we understand the phrase: "You can't take it with you..." to be the limitation of our financial wealth. Money means nothing to God, but faith means everything.

So, the purpose of this text is to remind everyone that God has a different metric system by which he works. We have a tendency to spend too much time on searching for what makes us rich, and Jesus has just shown us that wealth is not riches, rather, faith makes one rich.

1 – How rich are you today?

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2 – Do you find yourself chasing money too often?

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3 – How can you change what you find valuable in your life?

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8 Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 9 But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.

Have you heard the term "the royal law" before? I am always struck by the term. But I guess the law is "royal" in the sense that it comes from God. The truth is, the entirety of the law is summed up in the two phrases of "love the Lord your God with all of who you are," and "love your neighbor as yourself." This is the complete and perfect law of God. We can spend time breaking down the law to its many components, but this summary was good enough for Jesus, so it should be good enough for us as well.

James is making sure we understand the elevation of keeping this law of love and that the transgression of this law is really what sin is. As I write this, we live in the aftermath of George Floyd being murdered on the street, yelling that he could not breathe. This was an unconscionable act of violence and racism. At some point, the royal law was forgotten. It was discarded. As Christians, can we really say we are following Jesus if we hold one group above another group? While the illustration James chooses to use is rich and poor, it could have been Hellenistic/Jewish, or believer/unbeliever. There is no end of binaries that we can place against one another.

While we all have prejudices that we need to recognize and work against, the call of James is that to lift up one group

above another is the breaking of the law that was handed to us by Jesus in Matthew 22. Now, this is particularly acute for some of us when we see such a tragedy online. However, for many of us, it is simply an everyday occurrence. Some of us experience bias in such a different way than others of us. I want to admit that I don't always understand what others are going through, but I want to. If you don't feel that you have ever experienced real bias/racism/disregard, then you need ears to hear as well. I never want to be insensitive to my brother/sister who has a different perspective.

It is easy for us to live in our bubbles, never reaching out to the voices that differ from ours. As Christians, I think we have to seek other voices to understand what our brothers and sisters of all kinds are going through. And there can certainly be no place bias in the kingdom of God. To hold on to our previous grudges, our past hatreds, or our fear of the "other" is in no way Christian, it does not honor God, and it continues to sully the good name of Jesus in all circles. Now is the time to step out from under a culture that vilifies someone who doesn't look like us, or act like us, or is in our circles. The gospel only spreads when it spreads to people outside of our circles. So if you are uncomfortable, you are probably heading in the right direction.

1 – Where are you bias's? Be honest about this.

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2 – Do you think you have ever contributed to racism, classism, or bias by your words or actions?

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3 – How can you change those behaviors or attitudes?

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10 For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. 11 For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law.

All of these things go together. I have this strong belief that God is really interested in the trajectories of our lives and behaviors, as opposed to being hyper-focused on our particular choices each day. Are you growing, are you seeking the kingdom, are you facing your bias, your fears, and your desires to do things that hurt the name of God?

We had a moment in our church a few years ago, some of you may remember. There had been some incidents in the U.S. that week, and I brought a friend of mine in to talk about what it's like to be an African American male in America. My friend was a Baptist pastor and community organizer. He had a strong and profound answer, using words that my ears were unused to hearing in these circumstances. He wasn't cursing, he was telling us the truth as he experienced it.

It was a hard day. Not everyone agreed. In fact, a conversation ensued with one of our church members that was confrontational, and for moments it felt as if conflict would ensue. However, both of these men hold Jesus as their highest authority, and therefore things did not fall into any sort of anger, although there was tension. Rather, these men decided to have a conversation, in front of a very

diverse audience, to talk about what was happening in both of their communities. There was pain acknowledged from both sides, and there was a moment of prayer and community at the end.

I think we were all shaken to our core. I was proud of this conversation, and proud of these men. Not everyone was happy about the conversation, or the way it occurred. Some people were angry with me for letting something like this happen in church, and some wrote very angry letters to me to let me know they would never come back to fellowship as long as I was pastor at Crosswalk. Of course those letters hurt, but I don't think the church should ever back down from hard conversations.

The point James wants us to understand is simply this; you don't have to do the worst, to be breaking the law of God. Our lives are whole, not divided. When we exercise bias against one group or another, the whole of the law of God is broken. So we have to be continually building an infrastructure against bias in our lives. How do we do that?

As you check your bias, make sure you check your ignorance. Does some of what you think about a certain group of people come from not understanding that group? What would you need to do to

understand them more? Have you listened to their voices, read their books, listened to their music, eaten their food? What can you do to bring them into closer proximity to the circles in which you run?

1 – Are you concerned about the Law of God?

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2 – What are some action steps you can take today to become more inclusive in your worldview?

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3 – What people or groups do you need to start getting to know better?

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12 So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. 13 There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

These “cause and effect” texts always worry me. The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35) has always been hard for me. The reason being that I am not always forgiving, and I am not always merciful, and I am not always compassionate. Truly, I want to be these things, but I often fall flat when I am trying to be and do those things mentioned above. There is a reality that I live each day, one that many of us live, continually falling short of what I want to be. But the other reality that I live, is that the God of the Universe has made a way for me. (Romans 3:23-24)

However, there seems to be a direct connection from my willingness to love in ways that involve justice and mercy, and the way that I am judged as well. I think that when we receive the Grace of God, we become deeply interested in the love that we can give to others. Without that recognition of how much I have been saved, it is hard to even want to continue in mercy and grace to others. However, once I understand how good and complete the grace of God is, I find myself striving for a deeper expression of love in the world.

A deeper expression of love means that I go beyond the niceness of being pleasant and move toward the deeper

expressions; mercy, compassion, justice, advocacy. Those are the things that truly show the love and grace of God into the world. Without these characteristics being expressed in my faith journey, I can be a great and sweet lover of Jesus, but I have missed those things that set me free. My freedom from oppression comes from Jesus, the compassion showed to me is the same compassion that I must show. And by the way, the road to that compassion was paved with blood and crosses, why would me showing compassion to a brother and sister be any less of a sacrifice?

I think we get too comfortable. We get used to sitting in churches and singing and having a great time. However, I wish I had the same number of people showing up on Thursday nights for our homeless feeding as I do coming to worship at church on Sabbath. This is not an indictment, it is a dream. I understand how important worship is, but I also understand how important it is to serve. In the moments where we can't meet corporately, the way we worship is by giving of ourselves to the least of these, in order to continue the work of the kingdom. Will we worship soon, of course, but the moments to serve are fleeting, and the need intense.

1 – How do you serve mercy and compassion to your fellow human being?

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2 – How can you get involved in the various ministries of compassion and mercy at your church?

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3 – Do you spend more time in worship or compassion?

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This is a week where we have taken a look at what happens when we hold bias against one another and what God thinks about it. There are some tough words in these passages. And perhaps there should be. The illustration of the rich man versus the poor is salient at this point, and can be

expanded to deal with the issues we have of bias in our present reality. As this guide is being written, it has been a hard week in the US for our black communities, and it is a hard week for those of us who want to advocate and empathize with the plight of our brothers and sisters.

Bias runs deep. Some of us have it, and can't even really pinpoint where it came from. Family systems, social groups, and even language embed our worldview into our hearts and from there our mouths speak, and sometimes our fists clench, and tragically, this week, a knee bent to extinguish the life of another human being. (#georgefloyd)

As Christians, I think it is paramount that we address these social ills, as well as addressing the bias we carry in our own hearts. We all have it, but what we do with it is what makes the difference. When we come to the seat of grace, and we realize that the gift that has been given to us is not exclusively for me and those that look

like me, it should galvanize us to become advocates, protectors, and table-mates of everyone that God has made in his image. We cannot back down from love; we should be intentional in our words, direct with our actions, and deeply gracious in our conversations. But deep love requires risk. Advocacy requires risk. And standing in front of those being oppressed will require risk.

I don't doubt that the majority of people have great intentions, and can't imagine doing something that would hurt another person or group. However, sometimes, our small inconsiderations, things that we have simply not experienced from another point of view, add to the perceived or actual bias. This is why a church should have people from all over, from different worldviews, and from different ethnicities and cultures in order to create a much deeper understanding of who we are, how we act, and how it is perceived. The beauty of the Christian life is that it is a life of learning. We grow, we adapt, we learn more about God and ourselves and that helps make the world a better place for everyone.

Here are some questions to go along with this week's sermon:

- 1 – What can you do, today, to alleviate any bias you have in your heart?
- 2 – How many times have you been the object of bias?
- 3 – How did that experience make you feel?
- 4 – How can you teach others who might not have that same experience how it felt and how to stay away from it?
- 5 – What do you think God feels about racism?
- 6 – What can you do in your community to make sure bias is being addressed?
- 7 – What does a world without bias look like?
- 8 – What does a church without bias look like.
- 9 – How does addressing bias in your heart lead to greater spiritual maturity?

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