

MEDITATIONS FROM ORIOLE-YORK MILLS UNITED CHURCH



The Letter of James: Practical Christian Living

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This is one in a series of selected sermons and resources from Oriole – York Mills United Church. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith. We hope readers benefit from the insights they provide.

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Act on What You Hear *James 1:19-27 (James 1)*

When it comes to living, James is a very practical man. When he looks at life, he does not philosophize or see through rose-coloured glasses. He tackles life's challenging situations head-on. When he thinks of the [Jewish] Christian believers to whom he is writing, he sees a scattered people – literally scattered geographically among the world's nations but also scattered in their relationships with one another. Because James majors on the realistic rather than the idealistic, his writing centres on the practical matters of life he knows his readers need to hear. So what will he put first? What is at the top of the list of things he perceives these believers need to hear before anything else?

To answer this question, it's helpful to look at the letter of James as a whole. Throughout the five chapters, James essentially focuses on one topic: relationships – relationships with one another in the church and with the community at large. For example, here are a few of them:

- In 1:27 he calls his [Christian] readers (and that includes you and me) to care for orphans and widows – those who are homeless and alone.
- In 2:1 he calls us to be impartial in our courtesy and care of others – not letting public opinion sway us to be prejudiced.
- In 2:8 James emphasizes the duty of love for our neighbour, speaking of it as “the royal law” or “rule”

- of the Scriptures. I imagine James is remembering Jesus' second great commandment: to love our neighbour as ourselves.
- In 2:15-26 James scorns a profession of faith that fails in love and compassion.
- In 2:25 he applauds the life of a woman who risked herself for the sake of others who were at risk.
- In 3:14 James warns against the feelings of jealousy, bitterness and mean-spiritedness that jeopardize relationships with others.
- In 4:11 he warns against words that hurt and damage the reputation of others.
- In 5:4 he warns against exploiting and abusing and cheating others.
- In 5:9 he says we are not to grumble against or criticize one another.
- In 5:14 he encourages us to care for those who hurt or sick.
- In 5:16 he says we are to pray for each other and share with those who are distressed.
- And he ends his letter with the urgent plea: "My dear friends," James writes to the church, "if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God."

This brief letter contains a remarkable catalogue of practical matters concerned with the way we [Christian believers] need to live with each other.

But I am intrigued James doesn't begin his letter with these practical ways. It takes him 25 verses before he starts to talk about helping someone else. Like many letters, he first says hello and then tells his audience who he is. He wants us to know he is a servant – a slave literally – of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ or “Master” Jesus as Peterson says in *The Message*. Then James takes the next 24 verses to focus not on how we relate with others but on ourselves as individuals and how we relate to God. Practical and down-to-earth, James wants Christian believers to understand that, unless we take care of our personal relationship with God first, then the practicalities in our relationships with each other may be awkward at best and uninviting at worst. So at the top of the list of things he perceives his Christian audience (and that includes us) needs to hear is: we need to take care of ourselves in the way we relate to God first. Then we can properly care for others.

The kind of people James is writing to in Chapter 1 sound a lot like us. And he writes both encouraging and challenging words to them:

- In verse 4, James encourages Christian believers to learn from the tests and challenges of life and become mature followers of Jesus with a strong faith in God.
- In verse 5, if they don't know what to do when it comes to handling those tests and challenges, James urges them to pray to God who loves to help.
- In verses 6 to 8, James cautions them not to live their lives riding on top of wind-whipped waves of the latest
- opinions or newest philosophies -- never totally committed to God but always adrift and keeping all

their options open. God can't seem to get the attention of those kind of people. And by living that way, those people can't expect to get anything from God either.

- In verses 9 to 11, James reminds his readers to cheer when those who are down and out finally get a break in life and to cheer again when the arrogant rich, whose greed and power take advantage of others, are finally brought down to size. Prosperity should not be the primary focus of a Christian; besides, prosperity is fleeting.
- In verse 12, James says those who mature in their faith through their trials and challenges will find their reward is abundant life in relationship with God in Jesus – a more joyful, hopeful and loving life than they could ever imagine – both now and in the life to come.
- In verses 13 to 15, James tells believers not to blame God when they are tempted to give in to wrong. God is always holy and always good. God is not out to trick or trip anyone up. Giving in to temptation isn't God's fault. It is ours.
- In verses 16 to 18, believers are encouraged to stay the course -- keep doing what is right and keep holding onto their faith in God. God is good. They can depend on that. God is a giver of good gifts; God is not the author of the evil that they face. There is nothing deceitful in God's character, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. God brought them "to [new] life using the word of *truth*."
- In verses 19 to 24, James instructs believers to "lead with their ears" rather than their tongues! They are to listen to God first and let God be the gardener of their

lives -- welcoming the word the Holy Spirit plants in their lives, letting it take root in them so they will know the truth about God's love and forgiveness and live God's way. Hear God's word of hope, love and truth and act on what you hear, James says. *The Message* says it this way: "Let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life." And James challenges those early believers not to be fooled into thinking they are listening to God if they don't take what God says to heart and act on what they hear in God's word.

All of this instruction indicates that our individual relationship with God is critical. Before we care for others we must get right with God ourselves. We must consider what our relationship with God means to us. The ever practical James puts his finger right on this spot and wants his Christian readers to face God clearly and personally as the first priority of their lives. Then their relationships with others will have a chance to succeed.

At some point in his own life, James responded to God in Jesus in such a personal way that he identified himself as a slave of God *and* of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is amazing when you realize that James was one of Jesus' brothers who did not believe in him or follow him until after he saw Jesus risen from the dead. He doesn't say anything more about this but what he has said is enough.

Being a slave implies absolute obedience, humility and loyalty – no more and no less. But in this case, James's loyalty and obedience to Jesus was willing – not coerced. His audience would have understood what James meant

by calling himself a slave of Jesus. Noted commentator William Barclay wants us to understand that the word of a slave “is the word of [a person] who has no interests of his own, because what he does, he does for God. His own profit and preference do not enter into his calculations; his loyalty is to [God].”

So to acknowledge Jesus as Lord is to serve him – willingly and out of love for him. When did James become a slave? When Jesus showed himself to him and his brothers after his resurrection, he certainly became a follower. Then, at some point along the way, he no doubt asked, “What should I do now, Lord?” And James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Saul, who later became the Apostle Paul, also called himself a servant of Jesus. Though he was a persecutor of Christians at first, he too met Jesus in a personal way on the road to Damascus. “What should I do now, Lord?” he asked. And we know that Paul’s life was never the same from the time forward.

Reading James’s letter tells us his life was never the same after seeing the Risen Christ either. And what about our lives?

- What should I do, Lord, when I know there are people in my city who are homeless and without anyone to take care of them?

- What should I do, Lord, when someone from the other side of the tracks wants to become part of my church?
- What should I do, Lord, when a friend has fallen on hard times?
- What should I do, Lord, when my anger gets the best of me?
- What should I do, Lord, when I feel like saying words that could drag someone's reputation through the mud because he has been mean and nasty and deserves every word.
- What should I do, Lord, when we both know I say one thing but do something else.
- What should I do, Lord, when I find the trials and challenges in my life are so overwhelming I feel as if I am drowning?
- What should I do, Lord, when someone tries to convince me you are not good or wise or even that you may not exist?
- What should I do, Lord, when I struggle with trusting your word of truth?
- What should I do, Lord, when I hear your word and do nothing about it?

As we read his letter over the next few weeks, I think we will discover that James answers that question of “What should I do now, Lord?” time and again – certainly for

himself. He can't answer for us but he does point the way for us to find our answers as well.

That's why James begins with God – with Jesus. That's why he takes virtually the whole of the first chapter to show how practical and life-giving it is to put our relationship with God at the top of our to-do list.

When we take the time to think about the ways we relate to God, to Jesus, we will sense our own answers to the question “What should I do now, Lord?”

- When we take the time to hear God's love for us in the Scripture, I pray we will respond as Jesus said and love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. I pray we will connect hearing with doing -- that what we hear in faith, we will not forget to do in our living. I pray that we will act on what we hear.
- When we take the time to read the Scripture, I pray we will read and listen with a desire to be open to God and to willingly obey what we hear, I pray we will not be distracted by other agendas but be people of action in serving God. I pray we will find delight and affirmation in what we do.
- When we come to worship God, I pray we will not merely talk a good game but also act on what we hear and reach out to those who are literally and spiritually homeless and without anyone who cares.

I pray you will find yourself asking, “What should I do now, Lord?” And then act on what you hear.

Treat Others With Favouritism – Not!

James 2 (The Message)

Every so often I meet someone who tells me that the hypocrites in the church are the reason he doesn't come to

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church. I suppose there is some truth to what he is saying – times when we say one thing and do another. But more than once I have wanted to say in return: “Well, come along and join us. We always have room for one more.”

I hope I’m not being defensive but I have this hunch most of us, when we are honest with ourselves, would admit to having some admirable principles and yet, at some time or another, we behave otherwise. I think many people have difficulty with the church because we make high moral claims and then sometimes behave badly. And if any Christian leader or minister is charged with immoral or unethical behaviour, well, the judgment of public opinion on the whole church is pretty harsh, isn’t it?

The writer of the letter of James – believed to be Jesus’ brother James -- was a very practical man. He wanted his readers to understand that faith is not a nice bunch of beliefs or some exciting emotional experience merely to make them feel good. (Although knowing God and experiencing God’s love does give a believer a new and different sense of acceptance and love and hope and peace from God.) But saying they have faith is meant to impact the way they live. Having faith in God also means they are to *do* good. That’s why James wrote in the last verse

of Chapter 1: “Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”

James challenges his readers – and us -- to make the connections between our faith and our actions – between what we say we believe and how we act out that faith. So at the beginning of Chapter 2, James essentially asks: How can you hold faith in Jesus Christ and behave in a way that discriminates against people? Different translations bring out this question quite clearly:

“My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favour some people over others?” (*NLT*)

“My brothers and sisters, do *you* with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” (*NRSV*)

Other translations make a statement rather than asking a question:

“My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.” (*TNIV*)

“My brothers [and sisters], show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” (*ESV*)

And from *The Message* Bible printed in your bulletin:

“My dear friends, don’t let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith.”

James wrote to people who were early followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus had actually lived among people they knew.

They believed Jesus, who had been crucified on a cross, had died for their sins and the sins of the world. But Jesus was raised from the dead and the grave by the power of God! Now, although he had ascended to his heavenly Father, he was also with them in the person of the Holy

Spirit. Because Jesus was now the risen Saviour, these members in the Early Church believed they too had a new life with God. Their faith was clearly centred on the Risen Jesus Christ.

But it seems James saw something in their behaviour – in their place of worship of all places – that caused him to say: “Don’t let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith.” James wanted these followers of Jesus and members of his church to connect how they lived out their faith in Jesus Christ and not be influenced or intimidated by what others said or thought. But that’s easier said than done, isn’t it? James used a very concrete illustration to make his point. We might think showing more attention and special favour to a person who is rich clearly contrasts with the way Jesus acted and hardly needs explanation. It doesn’t seem difficult to determine the intent of James’s observation. We are not to discriminate between people based on what they wear or their obvious wealth or lack thereof. But our western society focuses strongly on physical appearance and, quite frankly, that can be a subtle or maybe not-so-subtle point of pressure to conform.

I find it intriguing that, even at the very beginning of the Church, attention was directed on how we welcome people when they join our gatherings! Of course , we all

agree we shouldn’t show favouritism and, of course, anyone is welcome. But I wonder if we sometimes tend to exaggerate our claims of friendship and welcome. We’ve got the friendliest church in the world but we’ll walk by the stranger in the narthex. We love one another, but

we're also just as likely as the next person to whisper criticism about someone. So maybe we should dig a little deeper here into what James has to say.

Maybe you have a story to tell of favouritism or discrimination that you have experienced – or someone you know. It may not have much to do with being rich or poor but with something else – perhaps colour or culture or gender or class or education or position. The “so-called important people,” as *The Message Bible* describes them in verse 9 of Chapter 2, are sometimes very obvious even within the Church.

Recently I was talking with someone who once worked as an administrative assistant for a Christian organization. She was using the copier when one of the important executives hurried up to her and asked “Can I butt in because of my position?” She looked straight at him and said “No.” But then she added quickly with a smile, “But if you are in a hurry, you can butt in!” Intriguing, eh?

I think one reason Jesus got into trouble with the so-called important religious leaders in his time was because he did not take their self-importance seriously enough for their satisfaction. He was not out to impress them because of who they thought they were. So he was not solicitous toward them in any way. Their particular position and status didn't really matter to him -- or to God. What did matter was their love for God and their love for others. Did they have the kind of faith that showed they loved God with all their heart and their neighbour as well? That's the kind of faith James was talking about when he said: “You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of

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the Scriptures: ‘Love others as you love yourself.’ But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against [God’s] Rule and stand convicted by it.”

I wonder if North American Christians think of social class as an issue in connecting their faith with how they live with others. How comfortable are we when encountering people who clearly belong to a different social class? Do our networks of friendships run primarily along the lines created by income levels, education and professional status? My guess is we do not say to someone who looks poorer and is different socially, “Sit in the back row,” but we may well leave them by themselves and ignore them.

One of the things James tries to do is challenge or contradict the unspoken assumption that the wealthy person is worthy and the poor person is unworthy. Here is how he puts it in verse 5 of Chapter 2:

“Listen, dear friends. Isn’t it clear by now that God operates quite differently? [God] chose the world’s down-and-out as the kingdom’s *first* citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to *anyone* who loves God.”

It’s those who are called the poor of the world who are rich in God’s attention. Now this does not mean that

poverty automatically means virtue and wealth inevitably means vice. Throughout Scripture, it is clear God does not ignore those who are poor or oppressed. God’s attention is closely focused on them – and on those who take advantage of and abuse them or those who walk by on the other side. And remember how God operated in the New

Testament: shepherds heard the announcement of Jesus' birth and women were the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Shepherds and women – among those people looked down on in those days.

But the real issue James is emphasizing is that *anyone* – whether possessing little or possessing much – can be a person of faith who loves God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength and who also loves their neighbour as they love themselves.

Presbyterian minister Billy Strayhorn, in a sermon he titled “Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief,” tells the story of two men – one a former thief and the other a judge of the Supreme Court of England. At a Communion service one Sunday, the pastor of a downtown church in London, England, saw the former burglar kneeling at the Communion rail beside the judge. This judge had sent the burglar to jail for seven years. But after his release, the burglar became a strong Christian and Christian worker. As they knelt beside each other, neither the judge nor the former convict seemed to be aware of the other.

After the service, as the judge walked home with the pastor, he asked the pastor, “Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?”

“Yes,” the pastor replied, “but I didn't know that you noticed.”

The two walked along in silence for a few more moments and then the judge said, “What a miracle of grace!”

The pastor nodded in agreement. “Yes,” he said. “What a marvellous miracle of grace!””

Then the judge turned and asked, “But to whom do you refer?”

“Why, to the conversion of that convict,” the pastor replied.

“But I wasn't referring to him,” the judge said. “I was thinking of myself.”

The pastor was surprised. “You were thinking of yourself? I don't understand.”

The judge explained: “It did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him and, when he saw Jesus as his Saviour, he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help.

“But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman, that my word was to be my bond, that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take Communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge.

“Nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that burglar. It took much more of God's grace to forgive me for all my pride and self-deception and to get me to admit that I was

no better in the eyes of God than that convict I had sent to prison.”

James said: “Listen, dear friends. Isn’t it clear by now that God operates quite differently? [God] chose the world’s down-and-out as the kingdom’s first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to *anyone* who loves God.”

Whether we consider ourselves rich or poor, in God’s eyes none of that matters. What really matters is that we live out our “Christ-originated faith” by loving God, loving one another and loving our neighbours wherever they live in this world. And this love is evident not only in our words but also in what we do to meet the various needs of others. As James says our God-talk requires us to do God-acts.

Avenues to God’s Wisdom

James: 3:13-18, Psalm 119:97-104

Wise sayings come from different sources. Children sometimes give us pearls of wisdom.

“Dear God, I didn’t think orange went with purple until I saw that sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool!”

And how about these wise statements about love from the mouths of young children:

“When someone loves you, the way they say your name is always different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth. That’s love.”

“When my grandma got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my granddad does it

for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love."

And this statement:

"If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend you hate."

Jesus had his good reasons to declare: "Let the children come to me. Do not prevent them. For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14).

Few people do not know the name of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was born in 1869 and died in 1948. He once wrote, "My life is my message." Few would disagree with that statement. Most would call him a wise man indeed. E. Stanley Jones, a well-known Christian missionary in India, once asked Gandhi a searching question: "How can Christianity make a stronger impact on your country?"

In his thoughtful manner, Gandhi replied that three things would be required:

- First, Christians must begin to live more like Jesus.
- Second, the Christian faith should be presented without any adulteration. [In other words, the truth of the Christian faith should be presented without watering it down or adding to it what is not in Scripture.]
- Third, Christians should emphasize love --which is at the heart of the gospel.

Words of wisdom from one of India's revered political, social justice and spiritual leaders in the 20th century. [August 10, 2009, *Our Daily Bread*]

I believe that James, one of Jesus' brothers and the writer of the letter of James, would agree with Gandhi's assessment. In Chapter 1, verse 1 of his letter, James self-identified as a servant or slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. James taught that taking care of those who are poor and homeless, especially orphans and widows, was evidence of a genuine Christian faith. A friend of mine, on her Facebook page on the Internet, sums up James's teaching this way:

“Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

James says that when we do this we are fulfilling the Royal Law of love or what Jesus called the second great commandment: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Today is Week 3 of our series in applying our faith in practical and life-giving ways. We are using James's teaching. One of his key themes is learning to be wise in all we do and say.

Then how should we define wisdom? We do seem to recognize wisdom when we encounter a wise person. Perhaps that's why James asks the question: “Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom?” Or another version of saying the same thing: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Then he answers his question.

James wants his readers to understand that wisdom or lack thereof comes from the central focus of our lives and is evident in the way we live our lives. Wisdom is knowing the Source of true wisdom and making decisions about

our lives in relation to that Source. We can make decisions on how we live our lives by obeying the wisdom from above (from God) or we can decide to follow the worldly wisdom from below (from a fallen or sinful human society). *The Good News Bible* says in verse 15 of Chapter 3: “Such [worldly] wisdom does not come down from heaven; it belongs to the world, it is unspiritual and demonic.” The wisdom of the world, or from below as James describes it, is seen in jealousy, bitterness and selfishness. But the wisdom from above is characterized by a holy life -- being peace-loving, considerate, gentle and overflowing with mercy toward others. The wisdom from below twists the truth, boasts about being wise, tries to look better than others and produces confusion and all sorts of evil. The wisdom from above produces justice and decency.

So how does wisdom from above -- that is, wisdom from God -- come to us? The Scripture identifies four specific avenues along which God’s wisdom travels to us:

The **first** is **reverence or respectful awe for God**. Again and again throughout the Bible, we hear that fear (that is, deep reverence) for God is the beginning of wisdom (Job 28:28, Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 15:33). When we see God for who God is -- awesome, loving, holy, good and sovereign -- and embrace a proper reverence for God’s greatness, we are at the doorway of wisdom. And we step through that door when we acknowledge our own finiteness, our limitations and our inability to direct our own lives wisely. There can be no wisdom apart from a loving, reverential vision of God and our own contrasting littleness.

Parker J. Palmer is an author, educator, founder and senior partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal. He has a deep desire to help teachers, physicians, clergy and others renew their passion for their work, reclaim their vocation's basic values and deepen their service to others. In his book *To Know As We Are Known* [HarperOne, 1993, pp. 25 and 40], this is how Palmer contrasts human wisdom and the beginning of true wisdom:

We want a kind of knowledge that eliminates mystery and puts us in charge of [the] world. Above all, we want to avoid a knowledge that calls for our own conversion.... Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden because of the kind of knowledge they reached for -- a knowledge that distrusted and excluded God. Their drive to know arose not from love but from curiosity and control, from the desire to possess powers belonging to God alone. They failed to honour the fact that God knew them first, knew them in their limits as well as their potentials. In their refusal to know as they were known, they reached for a kind of knowledge that always leads to death.

But isn't our desire to seek the wisdom that leads not to death but to life?

The **second** avenue along which wisdom comes to us from God is **the way of conversion**. We don't use the word very often but maybe we should. In its simplest meaning, when someone is converted, he or she has a change of mind and a change of heart – a change from one direction of living to another. When we become Christians, we become what the Scriptures describe as “in
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Christ.” Being “in Christ” describes a believer’s relationship with God through Christ. The Apostle Paul uses the phrase 161 times! In 1 Corinthians 1:30, listen to how being “in Christ” connects to the wisdom of God. Paul writes that believers are “in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God.” Since Scripture teaches all God’s wisdom resides in Jesus Christ, when we come to be “in Christ,” we are truly in touch with God’s wisdom! Being a believer in and a follower of Jesus means we are in touch with the practical and life-giving wisdom of God. Amazing, isn’t it!

Conversion – change -- is a lifelong process. The more we intentionally live this Christian life with Jesus, the wiser we will become. The more we live in relationship with Jesus, the more we will trust him and his love for us and for others. The more we live in relationship with Jesus, the wiser we will be in handling the difficulties, challenges and troubles of life that inevitably come our way. That’s why James told his readers in Chapter 1, verse 5: “If anyone lacks wisdom, let them ask God, who gives generously to all without making them feel guilty about asking, and the wisdom [the help] will be given to them.”

Here is a true story.

A Christian leader was talking with a woman who said to him: “When I was 22, I was in a serious car accident, and my boyfriend was killed. I have gone through a lot of surgery and am now doing well. [But] when that happened, I lost my faith.”

What do you say to someone like that? Here was this leader's response:

“You know, when they built the *Queen Mary*, the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *QE2*, they did not test the ships in dry dock. They didn't leave them in dry dock and point big hoses on them to see if they would leak. They launched those ships out onto the open ocean to put them through sea trials. These trials were not intended to sink the ship! These trials were to prove that the ship was seaworthy. The only way you can know whether your faith is real or not is when the pressures of life come, when you go through trials. Then you know if you are seaworthy or not.

He then asked the woman a direct question but with great compassion and understanding and without being judgmental: “Can I ask you, honestly, did you lose your faith or did you find you [really] had no faith?”

It's fair then to ask another question: “Have you begun to trust Jesus Christ with your life?” If the answer is yes, we can praise God together. If the answer is “not yet,” then perhaps it is also fair to ask, “Why not begin to trust Jesus Christ with your life now?”

The **third** avenue along which wisdom travels to us from God is **the way of prayer**. As *The Message Bible* puts it so memorably in Chapter 1, verses 5 to 8: “If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who “worry their prayers” [or doubt God is there to hear their prayers] are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything

from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.”

The very heart of the wisdom James is offering is skill in living. It is a way of living that centres all our thoughts and actions and relationships in our life with God. God wants us to seek him and his wisdom in our day-to-day living and God answers our searching prayers by giving us the wisdom we need. Remember, God loves us and, despite God’s greatness, God does not speak down to us. But God does want us to be believing and, therefore, confident of him in our praying so that we are not holding our options open -- that maybe there is a God or maybe there is no God. Or maybe God is the source of true wisdom or maybe there is another way to be wise. True wisdom comes to us from God. And by praying, we both nourish our relationship with God and learn to be wise in all our actions and in our relationships with others.

Finally, the **fourth** avenue God uses to help us be wise is **through the Scripture**. The 119th Psalm repeatedly affirms that wisdom comes from God’s Word. Verses 97 – 102 speak passionately of this:

“Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for [your commands] are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts ... for you, yourself, have taught me.”

The Apostle Paul understood this Psalm and says clearly in the New Testament: “Christ’s message in all its richness must live in your hearts. Teach and instruct each other with all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16).

Without regularly reading and pondering the meaning of the Scripture – the stories of Jesus in the Gospels and the interaction of the Risen Jesus with his followers throughout the rest of the New Testament – we will not receive the wisdom God has for us to live our lives as mature followers of Jesus Christ. But we do want to be counted wise, do we not?

The avenues of God’s wisdom are available to everyone:

- Deep reverence for God is the beginning of wisdom.
- Changing the direction of our focus and thinking and living to trusting God with our lives means believing in Jesus Christ, who is the very wisdom of God.
- Praying with believing confidence in God’s goodness brings wisdom – and much more -- to our living.
- Reading and pondering the Scripture, then applying its truths to our lives and following God’s direction, will make us wise.

May we be known as people who live wisely, who live well and who live humbly with our God -- the Author and Giver of all good gifts, including wisdom.

When Is Jealousy OK?

James 4 (The Message), 2 Corinthians 11:1-4

When is jealousy OK? If we define it according to Webster’s dictionary -- that being jealous is feeling hostile toward a rival or someone we believe is enjoying an advantage over us -- then we would probably say jealousy is never a good thing.

A father was taking his three-year-old son, David, and his infant brother, Andrew, to an air show near

Washington, D.C. When he said they were going to Andrew's Air Force Base, David, who was a little jealous of his baby brother, snapped indignantly, "It's David's, too!"

This year is the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth. Calvin was a major church Reformer in a time when the church needed desperate transformation. Once when Calvin was sending a letter to a close friend by one of his students, he noticed that this student's friend was a little jealous at not being the messenger. Calvin quickly wrote another letter to his friend and sent it by the other student. The second letter contained only the request that Calvin's friend pretend it was a valuable letter.

We recognize that children feel this kind of jealousy and we might even dismiss it as normal sibling rivalry. We call it human nature. If we have brothers and sisters, we might recall similar feelings when we were young. If we look at our own children, we might remember times when they acted out their jealous feelings – over small issues in our judgement. But, then, we may also wonder, when we look at ourselves, why we still sometimes struggle as adults with jealous feelings toward others. Why haven't we totally overcome such jealousy? Shouldn't we know and act better? Even clergy sometimes have feelings of jealousy. Although I know you find that hard to believe!

Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, once conducted a workshop for 200 pastors. They quickly pointed toward greed and selfishness as the

reason the church never had enough money to assist others creatively.

Fuller then asked this seemingly innocent question: "Is it possible for a person to build a house so large that it's sinful in the eyes of God? Raise your hand if you think so." All 200 pastors raised their hands.

"OK," said Millard, "then can you tell me at exactly what size, the precise square footage, a certain house becomes sinful to occupy?" Silence from the pastors. You could have heard a pin drop.

Finally, a small, quiet voice spoke up from the back of the room: "When the house is bigger than mine."

We are looking at the Letter of James this month and discovering that James, the brother of Jesus, has some practical insights into living wisely and well. James opens up Chapter 4 with a thought-provoking question for which most of us would like a clear answer:

“Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from?”

James is straightforward in his assessment of human behaviour. He calls it as he sees it. So he asks another frank question:

“Do you think [these appalling wars and quarrels] just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are

willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it.”

I wonder if we really believe this is the primary source of all fighting -- whether between siblings, other family members, neighbours, church members and even countries. There may be economic, social, employment, racial, gender and educational inequalities that require examination and putting right. (Our church strives for such social justice to be achieved in every culture and society throughout the world, and rightly so.). But I wonder: even if our governments could legislate the most equal, honest and just political, economic and social system possible, would our inner human inclination to be envious of someone else really be eliminated from our feelings and also our actions? And who decides what that best-of-all systems looks like and how do we bring it about – without more wars and quarrelling?

I think it must be very difficult for many people to believe they are potentially capable of terrible behaviour. On the whole, we consider ourselves decent, wholesome individuals who would not (some might insist, could not) do what some others have done. *We couldn't* be like Abdel Basset al-Megrahi, who was convicted in the 1988 Lockerbie airplane bombing when almost 300 people died. He was released from prison on compassionate grounds this past week to return to Libya because doctors said he will die of cancer within three months. *We couldn't* be accused of murder like the Alberta murder suspect this week, Ryan Jenkins, who had everything going for him -- a private school education, an accomplished, affluent and visionary family, and a

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millionaire -- by the age of 30. *We couldn't* be a Bernie Madoff or his Canadian counterpart disgraced Montreal financial adviser Earl Jones. We might be accused of a few white lies and *little* jealousies but never the kind of behaviour exhibited by an al-Megrahi or a Jenkins or a Madoff or a Jones. Or could we?

Every so often, I like to read a good murder mystery. Murder mystery writers assume, as many of us learn by experience, we all seem to have in us capacities for fury, fear, envy, greed, conceit, callousness and hate that, given the right provocation, could make killers out of us. I am intrigued by G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown detective series. It has been awhile since I read one of those stories. Father Brown is a short, stumpy fictional Catholic priest with shapeless clothes and a large umbrella. But he possesses an uncanny insight into human evil. Father Brown explained his method of detection by saying, "You see, it was *I* who killed all those people." He could look within himself to find the mentality that would produce the crime he was investigating. And he did in fact discover it there – within himself. Chesterton lets Brown moralize:

“No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; till he's realized exactly how much right he has to all this snobbery, and sneering, and talking about 'criminals,' as if they were apes in a forest ten thousand miles away ... till he's squeezed out of his soul the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees ... ”

James would agree with Father Brown's assessment of human nature. Remember, James was actually writing to

Christians in churches scattered around the known world – not to bad people living on the other side of the tracks! Theologian and author James Packer of Regent College in Vancouver, writes: “When the fathomless wells of rage and hatred in the normal human heart are tapped, the results are fearful.”

So is jealousy ever OK? Never, we might say, because of the potential hurt and destruction that could result from such feelings. So what do we do when we read James saying “God is a fiercely jealous lover?” Now God is not envious to have what anyone else has – certainly not in the manner we have been describing. Rather, God’s jealousy is like that of a jilted lover. Those for whom God has a deep and proper love – us! – have been lured away and captured by something else or someone else.

I asked some people this week: “When is it OK to be jealous?” A minister friend of mine responded:

“When you are God. Jealousy is the fitting desire to retain what is properly yours (the love of your wife, for instance). Envy is a different matter and it’s neither a divine trait nor a particularly nice human one! Envy wants to take (or destroy) what someone ELSE has so you don’t feel so bad not having that trait (or talent or whatever) yourself! Not nice, that!”

I appreciated my friend’s statement that “jealousy is the fitting desire to retain what is properly yours (the love of your wife, for instance).” Perhaps that’s why, in the Ten Commandments, God told his people: “I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5). “You shall worship no other god, for the Lord whose name is Jealous

is a jealous God” (Exodus 34:14). Jealous here contains the idea of burning heat. The idea is that God loves all humanity with such a burning passion that God cannot bear seeing humanity love any false god or any untruth or go in any direction that takes them away from God.

When is it OK to be jealous? When you are God and your love is so passionate for those whom you love that you will go to the ends of the Earth for your beloved. Or when you are God revealed in Jesus and give up your life for those you love. Or when you are God and seek out those you love no matter where they live, no matter their circumstances or situation or need. *The Message Bible* puts it this way in verses 4 to 6 of Chapter 4:

“You’re cheating on God. If all you want is your own way, flirting with the world every chance you get, you end up enemies of God and his way. And do you suppose God doesn’t care? The proverb has it that “he’s a fiercely jealous lover.” And what he gives in love is far better than anything else you’ll find.”

God *does* care when his people allow their passions, their envy for what isn’t rightfully theirs, their pride and their disregard of God’s will to get in the way of his love for them. That’s why James reminds the early Christians that God is passionately jealous about them – that what God wants to give them in love is far better than anything else they will find.

What does it mean for God to be a jealous lover? I think it means at least the following:

- God is so passionately in love with us that God sent Jesus to live among us, to teach us about love and mercy and trust and justice.
- God is so passionately in love with us that, ultimately, Jesus showed us the love of God meant he would allow himself to die for all that is wrong in our lives – for our sins.
- God is so passionately in love with us that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was raised from the dead and wants a mutual give-and-receive relationship with us now (read Revelation 3:20). If only we could “grasp,” as Paul wrote to the Ephesians (3:18-19) “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.” This is what James is really talking about.
- God is so passionately in love with us and jealous for our love that his love is available to help us no matter our situation or need. “What God gives in love is far better than anything else you will find” is how *The Message* Bible translates what other translations call “grace” – God’s grace in verse 6. The *King James Version* that most of us grew up with says: “But [God] gives more grace.” The writer of Hebrews focuses God’s grace for us when he writes: “Let us have confidence, and approach God’s throne, where there is grace. There we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when we need it (Hebrews 4:16).

Do we need help to overcome **personal weaknesses**? Areas such as pride, self-centredness, anxiety and worry, showing favouritism, a lack of wisdom, not controlling our tongues, lusting for what we don’t have -- not acting

on what we know is God's will? God's grace – God giving in love -- is available to us for all this and more.

Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, wrote about how we might open our lives from what he calls the “the small-minded world of self-help to the large world of God's help.” He wrote:

“Two commands direct us.... First, "Come, behold the works of the Lord" [Psalm 66:5]. Take a long, scrutinizing look at what God is doing. This requires patient attentiveness and energetic concentration. Everybody else is noisier than God. The headlines and neon lights and amplifying systems of the world announce human works. But what of God's works? They are unadvertised but also inescapable, if we simply look. They are everywhere. They are marvellous. But God has no public relations agency. He mounts no publicity campaign to get our attention. He simply invites us to look ...

“The second command is "Be still, and know that I am God" [Psalm 46:10]. Be still. Quit rushing through the streets long enough to become aware that there is more to life than your little self-help enterprises. When we are noisy and when we are hurried, we are incapable of intimacy -- deep, complex, personal relationships. If God is the living center of redemption, it is essential that we be in touch with and responsive to that personal will. If God has a will for this world and we want to be in on it, we must be still long enough to find out what it is (for we certainly are not going to learn by watching the evening news).”

Do we need help for seemingly **insurmountable obstacles** we might be encountering?

As your pastor, I am privileged to know some of the personal circumstances of people in this congregation. You know what they are: caring for a loved one in the midst of great difficulty, caring for your own physical issues, struggling with unspoken situations. You wonder what the future might bring. Let me encourage you: God's grace – God giving in love -- is available to you for all this and everything else that will come along.

One final note about God's grace, love and jealousy. Someone once asked if there were any conditions to receiving God's grace. Yes -- a very small condition for some people but a Niagara gorge condition for others. James quotes Proverbs 3:34 when he observes in verse 6: "It's common knowledge that 'God goes against the willful proud; God gives grace to the willing humble.'"

A proud life is usually too hard for God's grace to permeate – because God only enters people's lives when they are open to God. Pride somehow is an attitude that is so self-imposed that unless people admit to being proud and admit their need for God and then open themselves to God, love and grace can't seem to find even a crack to get through.

Denzel Washington has always intrigued me as an actor and as a person. When promoting his film *The Great Debaters* a year or so ago, Washington was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. Midway through their conversation,

Washington noted the encouragement his mother had given him throughout his life. He also shared this story of his mother's reprimand over his budding pride:

I walked into the house one day and -- feeling full of myself, a movie star -- I said to my mother, "Did you ever think this was all going to happen?"

She was like, "Please. First of all, go wash the windows for me. You have no idea how many people have been praying for you when you were being a knucklehead."

God loves us so passionately that God wants us to let God love us – and give us grace. And God's grace is far better than anything else we'll ever find anywhere. Oh, and God loves us so passionately, God is also hoping we will love him too – passionately!

May this be so for me and for you.

Rev. Chris Miller
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