



SERMON NOTES FOR CHURCH LEADERS
FOR USE DURING LENT 2018

40ACTS 2018

WEDNESDAY 14 FEBRUARY TO SATURDAY 31 MARCH 2018

40ACTS THEME 2018: FAITH IN DEED

40acts.org.uk



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page 3
WEEK ONE: FAITH IN DEED v FAITH ALONE First Sunday of Lent: Sunday 18 February 2018	Page 4
WEEK TWO: KEEPING FAVOURITES v WELCOMING ALL Second Sunday of Lent: Sunday 25 February 2018	Page 8
WEEK THREE: SPEAKING FIRST v THINKING FIRST Third Sunday of Lent: Sunday 4 March 2018	Page 11
WEEK FOUR: SELFISH AMBITION v SELFLESS PROVISION Fourth Sunday of Lent: Sunday 11 March 2018	Page 14
WEEK FIVE: HOPELESSLY HOARDING v FREELY GIVING Fifth Sunday of Lent: Sunday 18 March 2018	Page 17
WEEK SIX: SAVING FACE v VULNERABLE FAITH Sixth Sunday of Lent: Sunday 25 March 2018	Page 20
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	Page 23

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WELCOME TO 40ACTS 2018

What is 40acts?

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice. Tradition has it that we mark the 40 days of Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent were to become a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

40acts is a generosity challenge which encourages people to approach Lent differently.

During the 40 days of Lent, 40acts participants are invited to take part in 40 simple acts of generosity which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2018. The acts or challenges are wide-ranging and various but all are designed to explore what it means to be generous in a very practical way.

They can be done by individuals or done in groups but the key is that small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big change to our communities, to our churches and, ultimately, to our world. It's about creating a movement of generosity.

How to use these notes

These six sermon outlines are designed to help your church explore generosity by sharing some of the ideas and biblical principles that underpin the Easter message. Because we know that churches belong to a wide range of denominations, we've chosen not to provide fully scripted sermons. Instead, we have given you the key ingredients, allowing you to combine them in a way that will work best for your congregation.

All biblical quotes are taken from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

About this series

40acts 2018 takes its inspiration from the book of James and the inextricable connection between faith and deeds. While it's clear that we cannot earn our salvation or win God's approval by our own actions,

James sets out a framework for the kind of practical, day-to-day living that springs from hearing God's word, obeying it and acting on it. As the saying goes, it's about 'walking the talk'.

James is a challenging book that places discipleship and deeds at the forefront of the faith, which is why it resonates so clearly with 40acts: 40 days of generous living which requires every bit of the discipline, humility, obedience, patience and love of which James speaks.

Each week the notes explore a particular aspect of living out our faith, focusing on a section of James. The 40acts challenges for each week are designed to complement the theme of that week and become a practical outworking of it. How you choose to engage with the challenges is up to you (more of that in 'Complementary materials' below) but the connection between the two is important.

Complementary materials

These sermon notes can be used alongside the 40acts Together small group resources (tell your small group leaders to sign up at www.40acts.org.uk). In a small group setting, people can examine more closely what 'living out their faith in deed' means and have the opportunity to engage with the daily challenges as a group of individuals, sharing their experiences with each other.

The challenges themselves offer different levels of engagement to allow for individual circumstances, so people can choose what suits them best. There will be a complementary reflection, written by a different author each day, offering their take on that day's challenge, which can be a source of inspiration or insight, and there will be various ways for people to interact with 40acts via social media platforms if that's their preference. However you use these resources, we hope that they are a way for you and your church or group to experience more of what 'faith in deed' means.

Please use these materials in whole or in part, or just as a reference, or not at all. They are a gift from Stewardship, and feedback from churches and their leaders indicates they work well together.

Blessings throughout Lent!





WEEK ONE: FAITH IN DEED v FAITH ALONE

→ Key Bible feature

James 1:22–27

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 2:14–26

Faith and Deeds

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.'

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave

lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

This week the 40acts challenge began. Over the 40 days of Lent we are invited on a journey to consciously and purposefully do something generous every day. And alongside the practical challenges we will spend the next six weeks focusing on the book of James.

The author of this book is generally acknowledged to be James, the son of Mary and Joseph, the human 'brother' of Jesus. His God-given insight on the Christian life, in a letter he wrote from Jerusalem addressed to the Jews that had been dispersed across various places, is intently practical and compelling. James was in a unique position – as the eldest of Jesus' brothers and sisters he would have perhaps had the closest vantage point to observe him as they grew up together.

Deed v. faith

This week we are looking specifically at one of the big themes of the book of James: the question of faith, our belief in Jesus, and how it relates to our deeds – the good and godly things that we do. When we attempt a challenge like 40acts, which has a strong focus on activity, it's a good idea to ask initial questions about what these actions mean – where our motivation comes from and what their purpose is. 40acts is not about striving for approval from God or from other people.

While some may be ready to jump into action without a second thought, others might wonder what the point is of all these small acts. Isn't the most important thing our faith in God, and making sure others know the gospel? Doesn't Paul tell us about the dangers of empty actions, and that it is not what we do that is important but what we believe? These are the questions that we hope to answer as we look into the first two chapters of James today.

Closer look

James 1:22–27

Straight off, James doesn't beat about the bush. He puts it simply and frankly – if you're a Christian and so listen to or read the Word: '*Do what it says.*' To do otherwise, and '*...merely listen...*', he says, actually causes serious harm to ourselves – it is a form of self-deception.



Our reflection

He explains this with the analogy of a mirror. We might hardly be able to avoid catching a glimpse of ourselves several times a day, but in those days a mirror would have been made of polished metal and quite a rarity. We can assume that people probably had a much less clear understanding of what they looked like day-to-day than we do, but the principle remains, that in the moment that we look at ourselves in a mirror, we see a clear reflection that we cannot avoid. Similarly, when we hear or read something from Scripture, at that moment we are convicted and cannot deny what is before us. But how easy is it to listen on a Sunday only to forget everything you heard once Monday comes around? It's a pattern familiar to most of us at one point or another.

Perhaps it's taking James' mirror example a little far, but if you were to draw a self-portrait, you would keep looking at your reflection intently, focusing on reproducing your exact form and trying to keep it in your mind's eye. James encourages us to *'...look intently...'* (verse 25) at God's word – not just listening as a matter of routine but getting into God's Word as much as we can and letting it affect the way we live.

Why is it important for us to do this and why do we deceive ourselves (verse 22) in not doing it?

Our freedom

Well, firstly, James tells us that God's perfect word brings *'...freedom...'*. That might seem totally incongruous – we expect following God's law to be difficult and restrictive, but he claims that it is in fact the opposite. When we follow God's way we are free from the enslavement to our human desires towards sin and selfishness. Jesus spoke about this in John 8:31–36. We have the great privilege of knowing the truth (and are blessed to live in a country where Bibles are readily available and can be read in public). The more we apply it, the more we can experience the freedom that Jesus intended for us.

Our blessing

He also tells us that those who do so will be *'...blessed in what they do.'* (Verse 25). He doesn't say that we will be blessed for doing good, but in doing good. The blessing isn't a reward for keeping God's commands but something we experience in carrying them out (Psalm 19:11). Every year the 40acts team receives so much feedback from people who have been energised and encouraged, and who have experienced more joy and hope from being persistently generous. This bears out Paul's account of Jesus' words in Acts 20:35:

'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

James 2:14–26

Faith with no deeds...

In the second half of chapter 2, James challenges a particular mindset, one that may have been prevalent amongst his intended audience (which was Jews outside of Jerusalem – James 1:1): a claim to faith, but no evidence to back it up. James questions whether the 'faith' that is only spoken about and not evidenced in the person's living in any way is a guarantee of salvation. It makes uncomfortable reading.

James uses another example to illustrate his point. He describes someone who meets a person in need (this use of 'brother or sister' could mean a fellow believer or not), acknowledges them and their suffering but does nothing to alleviate it. The sympathetic words are of no practical use. James uses what could have been a real-life example as a metaphor: words alone can no more help the brother or sister in need than a purely verbal claim to faith can save someone.

This example would have cut to the heart of the matter at the time, as the church in Jerusalem which James led had suffered, and may still have been suffering, from a famine (spoken about by Agabus in Acts 11:28–30). We know that the Gentile disciples had been generous in sending gifts to the churches in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10), but perhaps the Jewish Christians that James is speaking to had not been so forthcoming. The hypocritical well-wisher described here shows a hardened heart – the speaker says, 'God help you', overlooking that we are God's hands and feet. There is a stark contrast when we compare the times that Jesus used those same words *'...go in peace...'*, which were always accompanied by love and action (in these cases healing: Luke 7:50; 8:48).

Faith and deeds together

Just to be clear, James is not pitching faith and deeds against one another – he is saying that they should coexist, like the body and the spirit. When a person is converted they are transformed, not just their head knowledge but their heart too. When he says, *'Can such faith save them?'* he is not disparaging faith in general; he is questioning the genuineness of that faith.

James uses logic to defend his standpoint. It's very hard to demonstrate that something exists if there is nothing to show for it. He asks the person with the purely verbally expressed faith to *'Show me your faith without deeds,'* but he is actually asking something impossible – the only way

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to evidence something is to present it somehow, not trying to make the person prove their faith but merely to exhibit it in some way. The only way to tell the genuineness of a person's profession of faith is to eventually see the fruit of it in their lives.

Faith is the root; good works are the fruits

It reminds us of Jesus' words in John 15:4 about the vine and the branches:

'Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.'

Matthew Henry says, 'Faith is the root, good works are the fruits, and we must see to it that we have both.' The life begins in the root – it was alive before any fruit was visible. Faith has to come first, but the good deeds then grow out of it. The fruit shows that the tree is alive and growing, and without it, the tree may be dead at its very roots and so ready to be cast into the fire (John 15:6). In verse 26, James describes this kind of abstract faith as dead like a corpse. In a living body there is a beating heart, breathing and movement: signs of life and spirit. A professed faith with no action is like a corpse – it resembles a person, but no spirit resides within; the 'faith' is dead.

James 2:19—20

Belief in God and a living faith

In verse 19, James quotes the words of the Shema – a creed that every Jew would have quoted each morning and evening:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'
Deuteronomy 6:4)

The Jews placed great importance on this creed that singled them out from the other religions.

So imagine the shock waves when James points out that even the demons believe in one God. The comparison may be for dramatic effect but it serves to underline his point: belief in God's existence is not the same as a living faith.

Some theologians also argue that because Judaism had emphasised the works and laws, there was a deliberate swing the other way for Jews who heard the gospel. They made the assumption that as works were not effective in gaining salvation, they were not important at all. In Matthew 3:9 John the Baptist speaks against the arrogance of the Jews' claim that just to be a child of

Abraham was sufficient, and Jesus says the same in John 8:39:

'If you were Abraham's children,' said Jesus, 'then you would do what Abraham did.'

James 2:21—25

Abraham's and Rahab's faith

James then brings in two stalwarts of the Jewish faith to redouble his challenge. And they couldn't be more different: Abraham, the revered father of the faith, the marker for where it all began, and Rahab, the converted Gentile prostitute. They believed in God, and that faith was firmly supported by their deeds. In both cases their faith caused them to take dramatic action – there was a huge risk involved for both of them in following through. These were not merely acts of obedience; they demonstrated trust. They went beyond intellectual conviction about the nature of God to show a physical reliance on Him.

Abraham was described as the friend of God and this is the key – his faith involved a relationship with God. A true friendship goes two ways involving trust and pro-activity on both sides. Our works end up strengthening our faith as we see answers to prayer and God's plan coming to fruition. That's what James means by our works *'...making perfect...'* our faith – they demonstrate, increase and strengthen it.

Abraham wasn't saved because he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; he was chosen and simply believed and that was enough (Romans 4:1–3). The story of Abraham and Isaac is a demonstration of faith for his descendants – God knew his heart already. It would have been difficult to see that Rahab's faith was real if she had continued in her former ways. Rahab's new-found faith could clearly be seen in her leaving behind her old life, eventually marrying a Jewish man: a change which led her to become a direct ancestor of Jesus.

These two characters couldn't have been more different. They show that age, gender, or nationality cannot preclude anyone from salvation. It's what happened afterwards that was key: both of them left their familiar comfort zones in order to follow God.

Conclusion

But isn't all this somehow contrary to Paul's teaching in Romans 3:28?

'...a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.'



Not at all. Paul's writings show that although works are no factor in a person's initial salvation, faith has to result in relationship and the visible work of the Holy Spirit transforming us from the inside out.

It is more that James and Paul are addressing different kinds of people with different kinds of problems. Each of us may have a tendency to lean more in one direction or the other: relying on our knowledge of God's grace and forgiveness and running the risk of not taking our Christian living seriously, or relying on what we do in order to try to prove our worthiness. Paul speaks to those who are trying to add to the gospel with extra requirements for salvation, whereas James speaks to those who hold an abstract belief that doesn't affect their hearts or lives.

Application

What this could mean for us...

It's important to say that this passage isn't about making us feel guilty. On our journey to become more Christ-like, we all stumble and experience our ups and downs and James acknowledges this (3:2). James is targeting those whose actions do not show any signs of faith at all. If we end up feeling ashamed or making comparisons with other people, then we've missed the point. There is just as

much danger in empty deeds where the motivation is worry and not love.

What James wants to do is challenge us. Are there times when we are tempted to just say a meagre 'Jesus loves you' and not get our hands dirty to practically provide for someone? When we're tempted to avoid the pain and uncomfortable feeling of seeing another person in need? James wants our belief to transform us and change our lives and the lives of those around us.

As we take up the 40acts challenges, we remember our motivation – God our saviour, who did not choose us because of anything we have done (Titus 3:5) but by grace and through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Like Abraham who was called the friend of God, he also wants a friendship with us that involves trust.

As James encourages, let's keep our eyes fixed on our loving Father throughout the 40acts challenge, intently looking into his Word and letting it transform our hearts and attitudes by his Holy Spirit.

James is just five chapters long – see if you can read it through prayerfully a couple of times this week, making a note of anything that strikes you as significant or throws up any questions for you.



WEEK TWO: KEEPING FAVOURITES v WELCOMING ALL

→ Key Bible feature

James 2:1–13

Favouritism Forbidden

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

There's a well-known story about a scruffy looking young man who once entered a church midway through a service as the pastor was preaching. After walking down the aisle and finding nowhere to sit, he settled himself on the floor at the front of the church. There was an awkward atmosphere amongst the church members and as a stern-looking elderly usher walked towards the man, the congregation held their breath waiting for his reaction. But

instead of chastising the young man, he sat down next to him on the floor and continued to listen to the sermon.

James would definitely approve of this gesture of acceptance. His second chapter is full of challenges and right at the heart of it is one word: favouritism. With the help of James, we're going to look at the subtle ways favouritism can infect our behaviour, and how we can counter it.

Closer look

James 2:1–7

As we saw last week, James is often direct, and he goes straight to the point in the first verse of chapter 2. He starts by addressing his audience as '*...brothers and sisters...*' which immediately reminds us of our equality to one another, based on the fact that we are children of the same heavenly father. Then he specifically mentions Jesus, who experienced poverty during his life on earth, both for himself and in the lives of those he spent time with. As Jesus' brother, James probably knew better than anyone the humble and lowly circumstances in which he grew up. Isaiah 53:2 says:

'He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.'

There was nothing outwardly spectacular about Jesus to draw attention. The only appeal was his perfect godly character. His outward appearance would have been in complete contrast to the man James describes in verse 2, who had all the trappings of success, status and wealth. The gold ring that the man was wearing in verse 2 indicated rank or property and was commonly worn by the rich in first-century Israel. It would have been tempting to see the obvious benefits of this man becoming a church member and treating him with special importance... But what about the poor man in filthy old clothes? Would Jesus have treated him differently?

Jesus was well known for not showing favouritism and spending time with people on the outskirts of society (Luke 5:30), but for us it can be a big temptation.

Proverbs 28:21 says:

'To show partiality is not good – yet a person will do wrong for a piece of bread.'

Our human nature unconsciously attracts us to people who we think may benefit us and ultimately that affects

the way we treat them. None of us are immune to this and the outworking of it can be subtle or sometimes not so subtle.

James goes on to tackle the touchy subject of seating. Anyone who's been involved in organising seating for a wedding or party will understand what a sensitive subject this can be! In the Jewish synagogue, people often sat according to their rank or trade, but James points out that it undermines the good news of the gospel. Those whom God has chosen are our brothers and sisters in faith and, as James reminds us, those who are poor in the eyes of the world are rich in faith. James uses the strong word 'dishonour' in verse 6 to describe the behaviour of discrimination towards those we judge to be less 'worthy' but then goes on to criticise the hypocrisy of showing favour to those who are deemed to be worthy, yet exploit, prosecute and even blaspheme (verses 6–7).

A topsy-turvy message

James 2:5–7

We all know how easy it is to judge based on first impressions; it's part of our human nature. That's why James is so keen to make the point that God's ways are totally contrary to ours. As it says in 1 Samuel 16:7:

'...The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'

We elevate ourselves above others when we judge them too quickly. God would rather we concerned ourselves with being obedient to his Word and leave the judging of others to him. Forming opinions based on godly principles involves a whole change of perspective.

James reminds us that when it comes to material wealth or poverty, God's view is the world's view turned upside down. It can appear to us that those who have a lot and look successful are the most blessed, but Jesus clearly says the opposite in Luke 6:20 and Matthew 5:3. He calls the poor blessed, but the world more likely sees the poor as cursed. When we face difficult financial times ourselves or feel inferior to others, it's a struggle to believe, but God says that the poor and the weak are those he has specially chosen (1 Corinthians 1:28).

Blessings and riches in poverty

But how can there be blessing and riches in poverty?

Maybe greater awareness of our needs leads to a greater trust and reliance on God. Maybe it strengthens our faith and intimacy of relationship with him. Or maybe without

material preoccupations we become more aware of the riches of faith that we have as children of God: the reality of forgiveness and eternal life. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says:

'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.'

It is a holy mystery, but James is clear that the poor are heirs to the kingdom and assures that those who suffer trials in this life will receive their crown in the next (1:12). Jesus famously said that it was easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24). Now we start to get a sense of how we dishonour God when we judge others based on status and wealth.

The law brings freedom

James 2:8

Midway through the chapter, James changes tack and turns his attention to the law. The Jewish Christians that James is writing to would have known the Levitical law:

'Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.' (Leviticus 19:15).

But he also reminds them of Jesus' teaching: the second most important commandment is to love our neighbour as ourselves.

James 2:12–13

These verses echo Matthew 7:1–2:

'Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.'

Verse 12 tells us that we will all face judgment, by a God who knows all the secrets of our hearts, but we can be comforted that he is merciful above all. And so, in the same way, we should show mercy in the way that we speak and act towards others, rather than judgment.

Matthew 5:7 says:

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'

And in James 2:13, the other side of this is expressed; if we don't show mercy to others, where does that leave us?

What does it mean to show mercy in our daily lives? Using the example James gives, it means acting with compassion despite what our own prejudices may tell us.



We may make assumptions based on somebody's appearance or manner or avoid certain types of people. But when we turn away from them, we dishonour God. Sadly, church can sometimes be a place where many different people feel judged, even to the point of leaving the faith. That's just one reason why James is so emphatic that we show mercy.

The same idea that came up last week reappears: *'...the law that gives freedom.'* This phrase isn't found anywhere else in the New Testament, but Jesus expresses this idea in John 8:31–32:

'To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."'

Freedom and obedience

Freedom may not be the first thing that comes to mind when we consider obedience to God's law, but when we consider obedience to the teaching in this passage, there are many things that we receive immediate freedom from. In showing mercy and honouring the poor or the social outcast we are free from the pressure to earn approval, free from the desire to impress others, free from the need to make friends in high places, and so on. We can rest in the assurance that we are all God's children, free from all those worldly pressures that have no lasting value (Romans 8:21). As we touched on last week, we anticipate restrictions in following God's way, but paradoxically that isn't the case. There is a weight lifted

from our shoulders, but we need to stand firm in it (Galatians 5:1).

Conclusion

This whole passage displays the topsy-turvy nature of God's kingdom. The world thinks rich = good and poor = bad, but God reverses it; the world thinks obeying God's law brings restriction rather than freedom, but once again the reverse is true.

Application

What this could mean for us...

Philippians 2:5–7 says this:

'In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.'

Jesus never tried to appear superior and, like him, we're here to serve, not to impress. We can pray for a Christ-like humility in how we present ourselves as well as how we treat others. There are many people craving that acceptance and understanding that Jesus showed. During 40 acts, we can let our actions speak to others, rather than our appearance. We have an opportunity to go out of our way to honour those whom the world rejects but God deeply treasures.

WEEK THREE: SPEAKING FIRST v THINKING FIRST

→ Key Bible feature

James 3:1–12

Taming the Tongue

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways.

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

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

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

This week we are looking particularly at our speech and how we can use our words generously to bless others. There are a lot of figures of speech which suggest how damaging words can be when used negatively. Anyone who's ever had a 'tongue lashing' from someone will know exactly how that feels. James focuses a good portion of his letter on this topic, using many illustrations to describe the overwhelming power of the tongue and its inherent dangers. He acknowledges how much of a struggle it is for

each one of us to control what we say – suggesting that 'taming the tongue' is perhaps more difficult than any other discipline.

Before James launches into his many metaphors for the tongue, he begins this section with a warning. At this time, the Jews greatly respected and aspired to the position of 'Rabbi'. But James points out that '*...we who teach will be judged more strictly.*' (Verse 1). In Paul's first letter to Timothy he includes a similar concern about those who wish to become teachers:

'They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.' (1 Timothy 1:7)

James wants to make sure that anyone with teaching ambitions understands that with greater power comes greater responsibility, especially when you are handling something as precious as the word of God, and as he goes on to say: '*We all stumble in many ways.*' (Verse 2). As we look at everything that James will warn about the tongue in the next few verses, we can understand this warning. As there is already so much power and potential in the tongue, those that are given a platform to use it must be even more careful. We will see how James describes the tongue like fire, and in that position, there is even more fuel given to the fire, so it needs to be handled with greater care and not taken lightly. As a teacher himself, James makes sure he is included in this – we shall receive greater judgment, he says.

Closer look

Before anything else, James accepts just how difficult it is for us to keep our speech in check (verse 2). In fact, he suggests that to use our words in a consistently godly way, without falling foul of its many hazards, is the most difficult form of self-control. The original Greek word 'teleios', which translates as 'perfect' here, has more of a sense of reaching fullness or maturity. The inference is that if we could master our tongues, we could also control ourselves in every other way.

Out of the mouth...

In this next part of the letter, James uses a string of analogies and metaphors to illustrate his point. But let's start by taking a quick look at why the tongue is so powerful and how the way we use it reflects our character. Luke 6:45 says:

'A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the

evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Our words give expression to the thoughts and passions of our hearts, and so are very revealing. Some versions say that what we speak comes out of the overflow of our heart, and Proverbs 10:11 has a similar water-based image:

'The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.'

It's as if what is in the heart can't help but bubble up and spring out of our mouths.

The tongue and the heart are linked together again in Proverbs 10:20:

'The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value.'

The writer of this proverb seems to be speaking about totally different things, but it actually shows how closely they are linked.

Now let's take a closer look at each of the images James uses in verses 3–8.

The bit

A horse is a large and strong animal, but by controlling its mouth, a rider is able to gain control of the whole animal. This demonstrates James' previous point, that if we are able to tame our unruly tongues, we will have better control over our whole bodies.

The rudder

In verse 4 we have the image of a ship controlled by the seemingly small and insignificant rudder. In comparison to the rest of our bodies, the tongue is small, but it is very effective. The pilot in the passage could perhaps be likened to the will, the mind or heart – controlling the tongue and steering its course.

The fire

In verse 5 the tongue is described as making *'...great boasts...'* – this means that the tongue (although small like the rudder) is a great force, capable of achieving much, whether for good or evil. As in the case of a small spark having the ability to obliterate an entire forest, it doesn't take much for a few short words dropped at random (or even on purpose) to cause untold damage.

There are so many things that have the potential to be destroyed by a few words: relationships, reputations, views of ourselves or of God replaced by lies... Just as fire's nature is to spread very rapidly, so lies, gossip and scandal travel quickly by the power of the tongue. Proverbs 26:20 says:

'Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down.'

James uses very strong language in his depiction of the tongue as a fire – he calls it *'...a world of evil...'* (verse 6). It's as if the tongue is a microcosm of all the different harmful thoughts and emotions that may be hidden in our hearts.

There are many reasons why we might be tempted to use hurtful words: we're lashing out in revenge; we're angry, jealous, bitter, frustrated; or we're simply not thinking before we speak. No doubt we've all experienced these.

Fire is an effective illustration, because it is also something vital to us. It brings warmth, comfort and light – similar effects to that of the tongue – but fire when unguarded can quickly get out of control. The same can be said of the tongue.

James also mentions that the tongue *'...is itself set on fire by hell...'* (verse 6) – what does this mean? It could mean it is the enemy that works through the evil of our human tongues, or perhaps it's a warning about what can happen if the whole course of one's life (verse 6) ends up being guided by it.

Restless, like a wild animal; a deadly poison

James compares the taming of the tongue to the taming of wild animals – and in this case, the wild animals are more likely to yield. And like an animal resisting to be tamed, the tongue is described as *'...restless...'* in verse 8. That restlessness is a familiar feeling to anyone who's ever tried to attempt a sponsored silence or hold in a secret at a vital moment.

In Psalm 140:3 David speaks of the evildoers with similar imagery:

'They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips.'

And Romans 3:13 quotes this verse again. The poison contained in vicious words is just as deadly as the real thing. Proverbs 18:21 says:

'The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.'



Final images: figs and olives; fresh and salt water

In the final verses (9–12), James deals with the hypocrisy of praising God yet at the same time cursing his creation:

'Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing' (verse 10).

Once again, he holds a mirror up to the incompatibility of the two things. Firstly, if we praise God yet curse his creation, we are holding God's creation in contempt.

James uses the same language as in Genesis 1:26:

'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...'

A reminder that when we speak badly of other people, we are insulting the children of God.

Twice James uses the phrase *'...brothers and sisters...'* in this short segment, making clear the point that we are all children of God.

Secondly, James tells us that it's the source that defines what comes from it. A fig tree can't bear olives, nor can fresh water come from a salt spring. If we find ourselves consistently using words that harm rather than build up, it's our hearts that need examining.

Jesus says to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34:

'You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.'

If we open up our hearts to God and allow him to work in us, then our tongues will eventually reveal that change.

Application

What this could mean for us...

We've understood from James how powerful the tongue can be – and so we have an immense opportunity to use that power for good! Proverbs 16:24 says:

'Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.'

Our words should be sweet to the soul but that doesn't mean that we have to be 'mealy mouthed' or 'sickly sweet' with our words. There may be times when a situation calls for us to speak truthfully, knowing the truth may be difficult to receive, but this should always be out of love (1 Timothy 5:1–2). Words spoken out of anger as punishment or retaliation are like the deadly poison James speaks about. Instead, as it says in Ephesians 4:29:

'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.'

Our actions and our words

James argues strongly against the idea that 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me'. We understand how wrong this often is and can probably all recall cases where just a few words spoken to a child can cause scars that last a lifetime.

There is so much potential for blessing and encouragement in what we say and this week 40acts provides the perfect opportunity to intentionally put it into practice. You may decide to tell someone how much you appreciate them, or go out of your way to thank someone. You may decide, instead of saying the negative thing, to find the positive to say about a situation. Or, to put it another way, instead of giving them a piece of your mind, give them a piece of your heart. However you choose to approach it, keep in mind the words of Psalm 19:14:

'May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.'





WEEK FOUR: SELFISH AMBITION v SELFLESS PROVISION

→ Key Bible feature

James 1:27

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 3:13–4:10

Two Kinds of Wisdom

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Submit Yourselves to God

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.'

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

We've passed the halfway point of 40acts – if you're taking part in the challenge, well done! This week is a good point to pause and examine how our hearts affect our actions and the importance of humility in everything that we do.

We are also homing in on one of the most well-known verses from James, which reroutes our approach to worship and explains why generosity plays a fundamental part in living out our faith. We will see in this passage the difference that humble generosity can make in our relationships with people. The first part of these notes looks at the problems of living without godly wisdom, and the second part focuses on the benefits, and the application of James' practical instructions to our lives.

Closer look

Two kinds of wisdom

Time and time again in James we see how God's way and the world's way are opposites. In this passage the contrast is between what the world thinks of as knowledgeable and wise, and the wisdom that comes from God.

James makes it clear in this passage that true wisdom is humble and shows itself in a person's character and the way they live their life, rather than how well they can articulate themselves.

As always, James is intently practical. He is concerned with what drives the way we live. Without God's teaching to guide us and give us purpose, discontentment and selfish ambition creep in. It's a recipe for conflict (4:1–2).

James 3:13–15

Humility is the product of true wisdom (3:13). The less we lean on our own understanding, and the more we trust that God knows best, then he will make our paths straight (Proverbs 3:5–6). As we've looked at in previous weeks, God perceives everything perfectly, including the state of each person's heart (1 Samuel 16:7). He is the perfect omniscient judge, and in contrast, our human knowledge is extremely limited.

Two human conditions

James goes on to describe two feelings that can undermine wisdom: *'...bitter envy and selfish ambition...'*



(3:14). He tells us that their product is *'...disorder and every evil practice.'* (3:16).

Paul talks on a similar theme in Philippians 3:19:

'Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.'

There's disorder because without God's wisdom guiding our lives, we have no real purpose or ultimate goal, other than trying to fulfil our own needs and desires. The word used for 'evil' that James uses is 'phaulos' in Greek, which also includes the idea of worthlessness and triviality.

What is behind the envy and selfish ambition that causes all this chaos? Later on in verse 1 of chapter 4 James asks a similar question about the root of arguments. He answers it with another rhetorical question: *'Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?'* 'Battle' is a strong word – but Paul speaks about similar struggles in Galatians 5:16–18:

'So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.'

This struggle is part of our humanity – we want to do good but constantly fall short. But as it says in 4:6, God gives us more grace and shows us his favour if we are humble. If we put God first, all other things fall into place.

Earthly motives v. godly wisdom

We might think we can keep our desires under wraps but whatever is harboured in our hearts will come out sooner or later if cherished, dwelt on and encouraged rather than rejected and replaced by truth.

James insists that to live driven chiefly by our own wants and desires is short-sighted. It is based on earthly motives that serve earthly purposes, whereas godly wisdom is concerned with eternal purposes. James doesn't pull any punches, calling this attitude *'demonic'* (3:15). He's saying that when we try to follow our own purposes it gives the devil a foothold and it ultimately only serves him – not us and not God.

James' reference to adultery (4:4) would have been familiar to his Jewish audience, as many times in the Old Testament God likened his people, the Israelites, to an unfaithful spouse (for example, Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2:2–

23). Too close a friendship with the world will only increase our desires for what it can offer us here and now. A focus on building up things for ourselves, be that possessions, experiences or relationships, is the antithesis to godly wisdom and might be described as playing with fire. This is why James tells us here that the best way to become wise is to serve others.

In the book of Job (chapter 28), Job works through the question 'Where does wisdom come from?' And the conclusion is that it cannot be found on earth. James repeats this, saying real wisdom comes from heaven (3:17). He lists out the different qualities that are products of godly wisdom which shows itself to be: *'...pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.'* Like the fruit of the Spirit, godly wisdom demonstrates itself in a person's behaviour. Purity comes first, perhaps because all the other things stem from a pure heart, one that has been cleansed by Christ.

James 3:8

Here, James particularly singles out the peacemakers which link back to the Beatitudes:

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.' (Matthew 5:9)

The harvest of righteousness that James says the peacemakers will reap is both for the present and the future – it is an everlasting reward. James' Jewish readers prized 'shalom' as the highest form of blessing.

'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives.' (Proverbs 11:30)

Application

What this could mean for us...

So how can we keep on track, following God's wisdom instead of our own? Thankfully, James gives specific guidance.

Pray

Firstly, when it comes to our unmet desires, James's first instruction is to pray (4:2): God has to be our first port of call rather than our last resort. Sometimes the wanting takes over and pulls us away from God, and if our motives are misplaced, then our prayers will go unanswered. Proverbs 16:2 says:

'All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord.'



Instead our prayers should be rooted in an understanding that our Father knows and wants the very best for us as Jesus did in Luke 22:42:

'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'

He's not always going to give us exactly what we want when we want it, because he loves us and understands us better than we know ourselves. Sometimes it might just be a 'not yet'.

Submit ourselves to God

In chapter 4, verses 7–10, James gives a series of instructions about how to avoid the pitfalls of friendship with the world and instead enjoy a close relationship with God. First, he says to submit ourselves to God (verse 7). The starting point is to acknowledge that God is a good and loving Father with a perfect plan and with our best interests at heart. It means not struggling to gain control ourselves. It sounds simple, and it is simple, yet it's a constant struggle to fully surrender. However, the more we get to know and understand God's character, the easier it becomes to entrust our lives and hopes to him.

Resist the devil

After submitting to God the other side of the coin is to resist the devil. Once we understand that the devil is a liar (John 8:44), the best way to resist him is to counter our temptations and worries with God's truth.

Come near to God

The beginning of verse 8 is as much a promise as it is a command: *'Come near to God and he will come near to you.'* Just like the Father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, God is always waiting to meet us with open arms, no matter how far away we are (Luke 15). Likewise in this verse, we can come near to God in whatever state we are in, but we also need to be ready to wash our hands and purify our hearts, when we come into his presence, repenting when we realise how undeserving we are of his love.

Humble ourselves

At first glance, verse 9 doesn't make a lot of sense. Why would God want us to be wailing instead of laughing? James uses these extreme contrasts of emotion to show that we often do not realise how awful our sin really is. And the more we spend time with God and understand his holiness, the more we will grieve the state of our own hearts and recognise that our sin isn't something to enjoy

and take lightly. As it says in Isaiah 64:6, *'...even all our righteous acts are like filthy rags before him.'*

The good news is that although there's nothing we can do that will impress God, if we are humble before him he wants to bless us and lift us up (4:10). If we stop trying to elevate ourselves, he, in his mercy, will elevate us.

Key verse

Our key verse (James 1:27) gives a practical example of humble living. At the time of the early church, orphans and widows were the most neglected, overlooked and vulnerable people in society. By serving the most needy people, those who cannot repay us in any way, it helps us to serve with a pure heart, without ulterior motives.

This week of 40acts focuses on those who might need a helping hand in a variety of ways. It's an opportunity to generously share our time and skills and put the needs of others before our own, to live the humble life that James sets out.

And when it feels a bit uncomfortable or awkward to us, hold on to the fact that our Father in heaven accepts these generous acts of service as *'...pure and faultless...'* (1:27).





WEEK FIVE: HOPELESSLY HOARDING v FREELY GIVING

→ Key Bible feature

James 5:1–6

Warning to Rich Oppressors

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

James 1:9–11

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Money can be an uncomfortable subject. But Jesus never shied away from talking about money and our relationship with it – he used it time and again in his teaching, often as an indicator of spiritual health. James, too, sees the inherent dangers of wealth. He reveals his heart for the poor, and his language towards the rich is typically very direct as he homes in on hoarding, greed and self-indulgence. This may have been heightened by the fact that many of the believers under his care in Jerusalem were affected by extreme poverty. Hebrews 10:34 describes how the property of the new converts had been confiscated and they needed particular help from the Gentile converts (Acts 24:17; Romans 15:26).

James is not saying that wealth itself is wrong; the problem lies in the way it is acquired and the hold it exerts. It is spiritually 'corrosive' and needs to be handled with

care. Our attitude to money reveals a lot about our priorities and what we think is important in life.

We may struggle to identify with the gold and silver or hoarded wealth in the passage (verse 3), but many of us do live in comparative luxury to a large part of the world. So how can these passages help us to challenge our own attitudes to money?

Closer look

We don't know exactly which rich people James is referring to in chapter 5 of his letter. It could be that he is encouraging his readers who had been exploited by the schemes of the rich (as in 1:6) that there would be justice for their suffering. Or maybe it was a section of the new believers. John Wesley once said that "The last part of a man to be converted is his wallet." James may be trying to tackle some deep-seated attitudes by putting his message as starkly as he could.

Whoever it was directed towards, the aim was clearly to confront those who had been abusing their wealth and persuade them to have a major change of heart. Just as James seems to have used the Beatitudes to form many of the ideas in this letter, this verse is also reminiscent of 'the woes' in Luke 6:

'But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.' (Luke 6:24)

In verse 2, the tense James is speaking in changes – he speaks of the future, pointing to a time when earthly riches will have no value and in fact will positively testify against their owners.

James highlights three errors of the rich:

1. Greediness and hoarding – not being generous with what they had;
2. Abusing their power and position; cheating their employees of what they were owed; and
3. Living in luxury and overindulging.

Hoarding

Signs of wealth in first-century Israel would have consisted of large stores of physical things such as grain, oil and garments. So at the time of writing this was not just a metaphor but also a vivid picture of the literal reality. Grain moulders, oil goes off and clothes are moth-eaten. Hoarding deprives others but also risks the hoard eventually being completely useless. Jesus gave the same warning in Matthew 6:19–20:



'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.'

This is not an attack on wise stewardship or planning; for example, when Joseph stored up grain in a time of plenty, it was to mitigate against the future famine (Genesis 41:49). Instead it warns against the futility of putting our faith in earthly things which have no eternal value.

We cannot read these verses without being reminded of Jesus' parable of the wise fool who built bigger barns to store his surplus grain, so that he could live in ease for the rest of his life. Luke 12:20–21 says:

'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.'

Many Jews believed that God's favour was shown in having an abundance of possessions. But both Jesus and James after him turn this upside down. There is no safety and reassurance in wealth and there is no shame in poverty. In fact, verse 9 of chapter 1 tells us that humble circumstances mean high position in God's economy.

Abuse of power

James continues with his illustrations, personifying various objects: he says that the corrosion itself will testify, and that the wages that should have been given to the workers will themselves cry out to God. It may be a metaphor, but it also reminds us that God is Lord of all. Everything in this world, including all that we own or are in charge of, is under his ultimate care and power. If we misuse what he has given us and what was assigned for a purpose, it will be heard by the *'...Lord Almighty'* (James 5:4) and he will bring just consequences.

Living in luxury

The *'...day of slaughter'* (James 5:5) could be referencing a feast day for the Jews in which the rich especially would indulge themselves and eat to excess. The passage might suggest that the rich lived as if every day was such an occasion. On the other hand, like the stall-fed cattle that were going to be sacrificed, these rich people's priority was consumption. And just like the animal led to slaughter, they were oblivious to the consequences of their living and their imminent death and judgment.

The transience of life and wealth

Our second section, from the first chapter of James, is another prime example of the inverted values of the kingdom of God.

There's a parallel between the humility of the poor and the *'...humiliation...'* (1:10) of the rich. Matthew 23:12 says:

'For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Just as Paul boasted in his weakness, the poor should not be made to feel ashamed. It is reversed. James says it is the rich who should be concerned. God's priorities are different, as shown in Revelation 3:17:

'You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.'

Wealth can provide a false sense of security and stop us recognising our need for God. As it says in Proverbs 30:8–9:

'Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God.'

Whether rich or poor, our lives are short in comparison to the eternity that awaits us. Psalm 62:9 says:

'Surely the lowborn are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie. If weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath.'

James 5:9–10 shows the different perspectives that each should have about the brevity of life based on their current circumstances. The poor can be comforted by looking beyond this short life towards their future hope in Christ. But the rich can have a godly perspective if they look to the end of their life and keep in mind the worthlessness of wealth in the light of what's to come.

Verse 11 re-emphasises this with an illustration reminiscent of Isaiah 40:6–8. The beauty and delicacy of the flower is a perfect picture of the riches that we enjoy on earth: outwardly lovely but also fragile and easily destroyed. The word translated fade in this verse has a similar form to the word used in 1 Peter 5:4:

'And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.'



What an amazing contrast – the treasure we receive in heaven, unlike treasure on earth, is solid, secure and everlasting.

Application

What this could mean for us...

Whatever the state of our bank accounts, this teaching from James encourages us to examine our attitudes. Like the parable of the faithful and wise manager, our resources are entrusted to us by God to be used well. Luke 12:48 says:

'...From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.'

If we abuse our privileges there will be consequences because ultimately it will affect our relationship with God.

A couple of verses after this passage, in James 5:8, the ESV version says:

'Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.'

That is the security that James wants us to have – to know that our hearts are in the right place, rather than establishing our bank accounts as healthy and relying on that.

So where is the line between saving and hoarding? How much is too much to spend on ourselves? When does financial planning become a disregard for God's sovereignty?

None of these are easy questions, but central to all this is our attitude. Trust in money and it will let us down. Trust in God and he never will.

God gives us the means to overcome the desire to put faith in money and possessions. The antidote is generosity. Generosity turns our attention outward, makes us open-hearted and open-handed. Acts 20:35 says:

'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

In Philippians 4:16–18 Paul talks about the gifts given to him by the Macedonian churches being like *'a fragrant offering... pleasing to God.'*

God is delighted by generosity, and when we give, our 'heavenly account' is credited.

By holding lightly on to the money and possessions we've been given we avoid the 'corrosion' James speaks of, and by freely giving, we express in our small way something of the all-encompassing generosity of our Father in Heaven who gives all good things.



WEEK SIX: SAVING FACE v VULNERABLE FAITH

→ Key Bible feature

James 5:13–20

The Prayer of Faith

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Just one more week left of 40acts! Every one of the 40 challenges has required a step of faith but this week has a particular focus on generosity that requires some courageous vulnerability.

We've seen throughout James the importance that he places on humility, and his closing verses also centre on that subject. Vulnerability can be perceived as weakness but we are going to look firstly at the benefits of being vulnerable before God, particularly submitting to him in prayer, and then at the benefits of being vulnerable before one another and how this improves our relationships.

Closer look

Pray in every circumstance

James closes his letter by underlining the importance of prayer in all its different forms. He advises different forms

of prayer and worship depending on our situation or state of mind.

Prayer when we're in trouble seems both natural and obvious. But James reminds us to celebrate and thank God when things are going well, and to remember that, as James says in 1:17:

'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.'

So we remember him and turn to him in both sorrow and joy.

James also gives specific instruction for how to pray when someone is unwell. Passages like this can be tricky to understand because we know that God does not always heal. We will never understand it completely, except that we still live in an imperfect world, and are waiting for the time when there will be no more death or pain (Revelation 21:4). When we pray, especially for big things, we can feel vulnerable, but as James says in his first chapter, we should be confident:

'But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.' (James 1:6)

Our confidence is not in our praying ability but in his ability to do all things. We may not always receive the answer we hope for, but James wants us to commit all situations to God, and perhaps sometimes, as in chapter 4 (verse 2), we do not have because we do not ask God.

As a further encouragement, James references Elijah as an example to show how much can be achieved through prayer. Elijah had a fairly legendary status amongst the Jews, but here James chooses to highlight his humanity. He had no more special power in him than anything that we have through the Holy Spirit working in us. What he does highlight is Elijah's earnestness in prayer.

Some Jews viewed Elijah more like an angel than a man, but James assures that he was a human being (verse 17), subject to the same weaknesses and doubts that we all are. We see, too, in 1 Kings 19:3–4 that Elijah suffered from fear and despair at times, and he admitted *'...I am no better than my ancestors'*, but the Lord still worked mightily through him. We can be encouraged that prayer is a powerful tool that each of us has the opportunity to use.

A literal translation of verse 17 says that 'he prayed with prayer' – a double emphasis to indicate his zeal. And his

zeal wasn't to achieve things for himself but *'...for the Lord God Almighty.'* (1 Kings 19:10). Prayer was his only weapon but it had great effect. 1 Kings 18:42 describes the posture with which he approached God:

'...Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.'

He was humble and servant-like before God while he waited for him to answer.

Healing through confession

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the verse:

'Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.' (James 4:10).

But this time James goes a step further and in verse 16 he advocates both confession of sins to each other followed by prayer for each other *'...so you may be healed.'*

This is about forgiveness, although there are situations where we confess and ask forgiveness from someone we have personally wronged (for example, in Matthew 5:23–24). Only God has the authority to forgive our sins, but James says that through confessing to a brother or sister in Christ we can be healed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: 'In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother. Because this humiliation is so hard, we continually scheme to avoid it. Yet in the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother we experience our rescue and salvation.'

In the Bible, 'healing' is a word often applied to the soul as well as the body (Matthew 13:15; 1 Peter 2:24). It could mean a restoration of peace and the weight of guilt being lifted from us. Sometimes, despite knowing God has forgiven us, we find it hard to feel forgiven – and the loving acceptance of a friend after confessing something can help restore and heal that pain.

Keeping it real

However, revealing our weaknesses to others, even others we know well, can be extremely uncomfortable. We're all broken but we like to fake it. We have a desire to look good in front of each other and keep our pride intact, but in doing so we isolate ourselves. 1 John 1:6 says:

'If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.'

Confessing to each other means that we have integrity in how we present ourselves, not just putting on our 'Sunday best' for church.



James doesn't suggest a big public confession, but being accountable to one or two others means we are willing to change. It helps to ensure that we keep ourselves humble before each other as well as before God, putting others before ourselves instead of focusing on how they see us. It is vital in forging deep authentic friendships with our brothers and sisters. In doing so we break down barriers, and can empathise and become a supportive community.

Verse 16 suggests that we tell those we know to be righteous – who will pray sincerely for us. The righteous person's prayer is effective because it comes from good, godly motivations (unlike the wrong motivations he talks about in 4:3). There needs to be trust in the relationship and this is often built when the confession is mutual – we should be confessing to each other. We all need the security of relationships where we can be honest and commit to pray for each other.

Looking out for each other

James ends the letter with a final encouragement to look out for those who once committed their life to Jesus but have drifted away from their faith or been led down a wrong pathway. Throughout his letter, James has given us all the warnings about the temptation to have a *'...friendship with the world...'* (4:4), and in closing he tells us to look out not only for ourselves but for our brothers and sisters too.

Proverbs 10:12 says:

'Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.'

To challenge a friend when needed is one of the most generous ways we can love them, but it requires bravery and vulnerability. It can feel too risky: we wonder how they might react and worry about the damage it may do to that friendship. But James insists that the result is worth the risk – it might help to save someone heading towards spiritual death.

Addressing mistakes in somebody else's life needs to be done with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:25; Galatians 6:1), confidentiality (Matthew 5:18), respect (1 Timothy 5:1) and most of all with love. James uses the same phrase as Peter does in 1 Peter 4:8:

'Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.'

And we know that God, whose mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22–23), will be there with open arms to his son or daughter, no matter how far they have walked away from the truth. This is even more poignant

coming from James who, despite being the brother of Jesus, was at one point an unbeliever (John 7:5); having turned to Christ, maybe he realises its significance more than most.

Application

What this could mean for us...

We've now reached the final week of 40acts and things start to get really personal. If we thought before that being generous was something that we did to or for others, this passage reminds us that we're all in it together. God already knows what we're like, warts and all, so dare we show that to others?

This week there may be opportunities to be more authentic, more who we really are than who we might aspire to be. There may be opportunities to share our faith in a real way, including our struggles; to recognise our own failings so that we might be more forgiving of others'; to make ourselves vulnerable in the giving and receiving of prayer.

And if we find all this difficult? James has already reminded us that prayer is the answer in all circumstances. And, of course, if we need a model of true vulnerability, humility, forgiveness and love we need only look to Jesus and the cross.



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