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James (Fragments from Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.) **NLT**

Chapter 1

¹⁴ Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away.

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

¹⁷ Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens.

²² But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.

Chapter 2

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

¹⁷ So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

Chapter 3

² For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.

Chapter 4

¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

¹² God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?

¹⁷ Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

Chapter 5

⁴ For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

¹⁶ Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Faith without deeds is dead.

James, one of the shorter books of the Bible, is a letter written by someone who identifies himself simply as James. It is often called a book of Wisdom, which is a term that normally refers to a handful of books from the Old Testament, namely Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. These books, rather than detailing Israel's history, provide sayings, songs, and poems that tell us how to manage everyday problems through the lens of faith. James is a New Testament book that does a similar thing. It isn't history. It's actually an integrated, polished essay written as a letter. The fragments we've looked at this morning don't convey the well-honed, tightly-written nature of this letter. It's actually very elegant and quite easy to read.

The letter doesn't precisely identify who this James is. But it is widely believed to be the brother of Jesus. He wasn't a follower of Jesus during Jesus' lifetime, but became a believer; Paul identifies him as an Apostle of Jesus. He was also a leader of the Jerusalem church, which was made up of Jewish converts. As recorded in Acts 15, James was active in the Jerusalem Council, which affirmed the decision to bring the faith to Gentiles, or non-Jews. This meeting took place in the year 49, and it is believed that the letter called James was written before this, making it the earliest written New Testament book. The reason for this estimated date is that James never makes any reference to non-Jewish Christians; the letter seems to assume that the only Christians are Jews. There is some controversy, though, to identifying the author as the brother of Jesus. The letter is written in very polished Greek. Jesus probably could carry on a casual conversation in Greek, but it's unlikely that a poor man like him would have been highly literate in Greek. However, James might easily have employed someone to cast his words into good Greek, something that was very common at the time. It's also true that James lived longer than Jesus and might well have developed polished Greek as he became involved in the formation of the church. There is evidence that our traditional estimation of the Galilee as being backward is not correct; it was a cultural center. So, perhaps both James and Jesus were more literate than we

have assumed. To me, though, the bottom line is that it's amazing that we have a document that was almost certainly written by the brother of Jesus Christ.

Although James' letter is quite applicable to us today, he wrote it to address the spiritual needs of Jewish Christians living in the area immediately around him. The historical context is that the people there lived a very hard life. The Roman Empire had taken land from farmers, turning them into poorly-paid farm hands. Farmers who had managed to keep their land were in many cases driven out of business by the astonishing taxes charged by Rome. Many were driven off the land and ended up working in towns as marketplace day-laborers. In short, there was an extreme separation of wealth, with what we might call the traditional middle class being driven in large part into poverty. There were grain shortages that led to rioting elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Violence in Palestine, where Jewish Christians lived, was held in check by force, but like much of the Empire, resentment among the population was extremely high. Eventually, after this letter was written, there would indeed be violence, with a revolt in the year 66 being brutally put down with the widespread massacre of Jews. In the year 70, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and in 73, the final resistance at the stronghold of Masada was crushed. It was to Jewish Christians, who were caught up in these social tensions, that the letter of James was addressed.

So, what is in this letter, exactly? Before we go there, I'd like to talk about a man I met recently at Boulder Community Hospital. I was with him as his wife died. I was called to the Emergency Room around 10 P.M. They were both somewhat younger than me. She was unconscious, having passed out at home. She was brought to the hospital by ambulance, after EMS personnel were able to get her heart beating again. Her heart stopped two more times at the hospital and was restarted each time. He was a devout Christian, a man with a very kind spirit who repeatedly thanked me for my presence and thanked the doctors and nurses for their efforts. He whispered in the ear of his unconscious, dying wife for hours. I had my hand on his shoulder when the ventilator was removed. There was no chance of survival. Her brain was badly damaged by lack of oxygen and she would never be able to breathe on her own again. After she passed, I talked to him out in the parking lot of the hospital for a half hour, and then I drove home as the sun was rising. We talked about a lot of things, in particular, about his wife having not suffered and her now being in the hands of God. But there were some words of his that I will never forget. I'll get back to this.

So, let's look at the letter written by James. Interestingly, he wrote his letter to a culture that was in chaos, with wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, with more and more people falling into poverty, and with people beginning

to demand that riches be shared with all people. And violence was constantly threatening the stability of the Empire. It sounds like today, huh? That's why this letter is so fitting to us. It's not an abstract document about Christian theology. It's not about doctrine, like the letters of Paul. It's about ethics, about how a person should live like a Christian during times that would morally challenge even the best of us. Let's look at the passages we listened to earlier. I tried to pick representative passages that give us a solid overview of the letter, but this of course leaves out the beauty of the prose.

Chapter 1 ¹⁴ *Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. ¹⁵ These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*

What does this mean? We like to blame Satan for temptation. But we have free will and the kid brother of Jesus tells us to remember that temptation begins in our hearts. We desire things. It leads to doing things we shouldn't do, and that in turn leads to spiritual death. The things we manage to squeeze out of the world end up killing us. That's good advice for people who desire to have the things that the rich have. Maybe the rich folks are the ones who are missing out, not us.

¹⁷ *Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens.*

James tells us that the things that are important in life don't come to us in the form of buying power. Granted, it's not true that all of us in this world have the basic things we need to live decent lives. The problem is that we think that the way to get what we need is to get it from other humans. We need to remember that when we are blessed with the necessities of life, or with extras that we don't need, they come from the hand of God. When we are in need, we should first turn to God.

²² But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.

This says that you can't just read the Bible. You have to live it. Actions must follow from reading the Word. But importantly, of course, what we do with our mind is part of what we do. Our thoughts are a kind of action.

Chapter 2 *My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?*

This is a simple restatement of what Jesus said repeatedly – love all people.

¹⁷ So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

This verse has raised great controversy over the centuries, and Martin Luther – based largely on this verse – wanted the Book of James to be removed from the Bible. It's because it superficially seems to conflict with a basic doctrine of

Protestant Christianity, as taught by Paul in his letters in the New Testament: that we gain salvation through faith, not through our actions. But in truth, the Book of James doesn't conflict with the letters of Paul. It simply says that if you don't live like a Christian, then your faith is false. If you don't live out your faith, you're lying to yourself if you think that you believe in God and that you are a follower of Jesus.

Chapter 3 ² *For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.*

The lesson here is simple. To live Christian lives, we must be careful about what we say. Our words, the things we say, are our actions. Humans do things with words.

Chapter 4 ¹⁰ *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.*

Jesus said this over and over – live humbly. This is the best way to live like Christ.

¹² *God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?*

This says that we should leave judging to God. Jesus said this. In large part, James is telling us in his letter to do what his brother would do. It's as simple as that.

¹⁷ *Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.*

We see here that inaction can be a form of sin. There are times when we have to do something.

Chapter 5 ⁴ *For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the LORD of Heaven's Armies.*

This is for those of us who have assets and who are obliged to pay people for their work. Remember that Jesus had a special place in his heart for the poor.

¹⁶ *Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*

This is my favorite passage in the letter of James: we, as Christians, need to protect the souls of each other. We must hold each other accountable, and we must model ethical behavior. And we must pray for each other.

So, what about this man at the hospital whose wife died over the course of a handful of hours? The truth is that it took much longer than that. She had been in the hospital a month before, at a different hospital, that is. She had had pneumonia. But he and his wife had no insurance. They treated her for a couple of days, and then, while she was still sick, sent her home. He was convinced it was because they couldn't pay. So, she went home, and as he put it, she was never the same again. She had trouble breathing, had no energy, and stayed inside, in bed. It turned out that a massive infection had developed inside her. That is what apparently killed her. Yet, this man wasn't bitter. He knew that his

wife was with God, that she was okay. He was the only one suffering – and his faith kept him from being angry about that. He simply thought it was sad that we live in a wealthy nation and his wife died because they had very little money.

Our society needs to read this letter from James. Here are some more words from James. These are the first three verses of Chapter five: *Look here, you rich people: Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you.* ² *Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags.* ³ *Your gold and silver are corroded. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This corroded treasure you have hoarded will testify against you on the day of judgment.*

I don't want to end on a negative note. But it is a cold, hard truth that TV and the Internet tell us over and over that our value lies in wealth and power. But God tells us that our value often lies in what we do NOT have. The Letter written by Jesus' brother tells us that what is important is how we live, that this reflects our true level of faith. It's okay to fight for human rights. Again, though, we must make sure that our actions and our words live up to our faith.