

### James 3-5: Rhetorical Analysis & Structure

James 3 has a passage that is really fun to work on using more of a Sunday school or a sermonic kind of approach, so let's talk in a different mode. I will try to help you hone your analytical skills from James 3. I would like to call this segment, "James 3 and Rhetorical Analysis." The thesis is that understanding the conventions of rhetoric in the ancient world helps us to understand the message of James, both passage-by-passage and as a whole. Remember that commentators and analysts and critics used to fault James for being just a bunch of ideas thrown together chaotically. One person said that James must have been a good pious man who took a few sayings from the apostles and just threw them together on paper. Another person said that his exhortation is "mere pearl-stringing"—putting disjunctive thoughts together just by means of using catch words. Another person said that the Book of James is "agglutinative," which means he just kind of glued a lot of things together. However, what I want to say to you is that James has a clear and a tight structure. The book encourages deep, careful analysis if we just know how to look at it. James 3:1 to 4:6 has all kinds of indications of careful work. Chapter 3 begins with a warning about speech. It also continues to develop the nature of true religion, because true religion controls the tongue. Now, however, James will tell us that no one can control the tongue. What is he going to do with that? He has also said that true religion is unpolluted by the world, but in chapter 4:1 and following, he is telling his congregation that we are polluted by the world and we are friends of the world. What are we supposed to do with that? He says, "These are the signs of true religion," and he also says, "But we do not fulfill them." He is setting up a paradox in us. He will put us in a position of tension, and then he will resolve or relieve that tension toward the end of the section.

It is very important to realize that James 3 and 4 does not just warn against sin. It also diagnoses us. It does not just say "Don't do this and that." Although it does say those things, it also makes us face the question of why we do those things. The book of James follows patterns from the ancient world that were commended by rhetoricians—people like Cicero and like Quintilian, who had developed the skills of persuading and arguing a case to a very high level of science. They had a sophisticated theory of persuasion so as to sell things, to win in politics, to get people to do what's right, and so forth. The pattern that was used in Greco-Roman rhetoric had five parts. First of all, when you want to try to get people to do something, you set out your proposition, what needs to be proved, your thesis. Second, you give one main reason for that thesis. Then, third, you confirm that thesis by additional arguments. Fourth, you embellish. Embellishment includes all sorts of things: illustrations and similes and analogies, references to things from the distant past or common facts everybody knows, an appeal to emotion, entertaining objections and trying to answer them. The final step was called the resume or conclusion, where everything was brought together. That was the pattern in the ancient world of rhetoric.

Some people might say, "Why would James use Greco-Roman rhetorical patterns when he was writing for Jews from Palestine?" More than half the people who lived in Palestine during the life of James were Greek or Roman. Less than half were Jews. As a result, if you lived in Palestine, it was almost impossible to completely avoid the influences of your culture. I will use this analogy: everyone in the United States knows a fair amount about marketing. Even if you never took any courses in marketing and you never plan to take a course, you already know the way things are marketed. You know that the most interesting of aspect of most Super Bowls is the commercials and you know why: because marketers need to keep people watching the TV for their commercials, so they have to be very interesting. If you look around, you understand the way in which people manipulate you to try to get you to buy things. No one has to tell you those things or teach you about them because they are all around you. In a similar way, people in the ancient world knew the conventions of rhetoric. They did not have to be told; it was everywhere. You did not have to be educated. Rhetoric was unavoidable in that time in

the same way that marketing strategies are unavoidable if you live today. Thus, even though James was a Jew writing primarily to Christian Jews, he could still very plausibly use the categories of rhetoric, because they were everywhere. Everyone who received any kind of formal education studied rhetoric, and everybody who knew people who had received formal education knew people who knew rhetoric. Rhetoric was the one subject people studied every single year that they were in school, so we should not be surprised that James uses it.

Let me just show you how this works with a series of examples. In our last class, we saw that the thesis or proposition in James 2:1-13 is, “Show no partiality, or no favoritism, my brothers.” The reason is that partiality is inconsistent with faith in Christ, but he puts it this way: if you treat rich men as if they are superior, you are usurping God’s role as judge. That is the main reason. The confirmation is in verses 5-7. The third point is that God has chosen the poor, but the rich mistreat you. Those are further reasons to not favor the rich. He embellishes on his argument by citing previous authorities like the Old Testament law, by repeating the proposition found in chapter 2, and by amplifying the idea that if you break this one trivial law, you have actually opposed God Himself. James does not slavishly follow the conventions, and he does not really bring it to a conclusion. He simply ends by saying that mercy triumphs over judgment.

Chapter 2:14-16 works in a similar way. The proposition is, “Faith without works does not profit. Faith without works is dead.” He advances this thesis through some rhetorical techniques. One such technique is repetition; he says several times that faith without works is dead or useless or vain. He also uses rhetorical questions and he continues to use a key word—“What is the advantage?” He gives a reason. The reason is that you can see plainly that faith without works is useless, because it is like someone who tells his friend, “I hope things work out for you,” and that is useless if he does not actually do anything. The confirmation comes when James anticipates the objection: “You have faith, I have deeds,” or “You have deeds, I have faith.” He responds to that objection. He embellishes through examples from the life of Abraham and Rahab, and then he brings it all to a conclusion in chapter 2:26, where he says again, “So you see that faith without works is dead.”

Chapter 3 does the same thing. It gives a thesis: “Not many of you should be teachers.” That is the proposition. The reason is, “Because teachers will be judged more strictly.” The confirmation is, “Do not think that you will fail to fall on your tongue. You will. If you talk as much as some teachers do, it is certain that eventually you will say something that is wrong or false or demeaning or belittling or proud or something like that.” He goes on to say, “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.” Is anybody so perfect? No, we all stumble. The embellishment comes next, where he adds a series of things to enrich the argument. First of all, he uses a simile. He says the tongue is a little thing that accomplishes a great deal. It is like a bit in the mouth of a horse. How much does a bit weigh? Maybe 3 or 4 ounces. How much does a horse weigh? Maybe 1400 or 1500 pounds, but a bit controls a horse. How much does a rudder weigh? Not very much compared to the whole ship, but the rudder determines the direction of the ship. So the tongue is a small thing but it has great impact. He is using an embellishment. He is giving an analogy. He also arouses emotion. He says that the tongue is a fire. It is a world of evil. It stains the whole body and sets the whole world on fire and is itself set on fire by hell. He corroborates. He says that the tongue is such a strange instrument—with the tongue we bless God and then we curse our fellow man who is made in God’s image. What an absurd thing to do! Even so, the truth is that many of us do use our tongues, if not to curse, then at least to demean our fellow man, and yet we praise God. So be careful in the use of your tongue. He does not come to a classic conclusion on this matter, but what he does is to lead into the next section. Chapter 3:13 says: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” A teacher

should be wise and understanding. He says that if you are wise and understanding, you need to show it by your good life, including the way you use your tongue.

Let me give you one quotation about this, from a man who wrote a commentary on James. I will tell you that he himself is a truly great teacher, a spellbinding, masterful teacher. This is what he said:

Teachers particularly are vulnerable to failures in speech, not only because their profession demands that they speak more than others, and they must do so in public and before, very frequently, a captive audience, but because such a setting provides temptations to virtually every form of evil speech: arrogance and domination over students, anger and pettiness at every form of contradiction and inattention, slander and meanness toward absent opponents, flattery of students for the sake of vainglory.

This is so true. If any teacher could refrain from all of those sins of the tongue, he would be a perfect man. But, of course, we are not. Nonetheless, as we go on to chapter 3:13 through chapter 5:6, we see that even though we lack perfection, it is still incumbent upon us to live a good life, a wise life, and an excellent life. Here again we must believe that James is skilled. We must assume that the book of James is more than just a series of bits of advice about how to live as a Christian. I believe that there is a strong logic and flow to James. He is very craftsman-like in his work. It is here, in this passage as much as anywhere, that it is crucial that we be willing to believe this and follow it through.

There are a couple of themes that are introduced in the first chapter that we can trace throughout the book. One is that trials test the genuineness of our faith. Trials either cause sin, or they cause us to come to maturity. The Word of God is God's gift to us, implanted in us (now I am referring to chapter 1 around verse 20). In the midst of the trial, the Word is implanted in us, it recreates us, and it saves us. Otherwise our trials will lead us, by virtue of our desires, into sin and ultimately toward death. Our trials will determine which way we go, but if we listen to the Word that God has given us (chapter 1:20 and following) and receive that Word and gaze into it intently and it does give us this new birth and we see ourselves as we are, then we will be proven to have true religion. It will be evidenced in those three signs we have been working our way through in chapter 2 and 3. The first sign, again, is controlling the tongue. The second sign is caring for the poor and the needy, the widowed and the orphan. Chapter 2:1-26 was all about showing kindness to the poor, like the person who comes to the church or your brother who has no clothing, and so on. There is one left—being unstained by the world—and now we will come to that one. Now James will develop the third great test of the faith.

He does this by leading us into a discussion of true wisdom. True wisdom is described in chapter 3. It will be set up in contrast to false wisdom or worldly wisdom. By looking at true wisdom and false wisdom, James will address the question of being stained or unstained by the world. Chapter 3:13 says, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Have him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." This is connected with chapter 3:1-12, because teachers should be wise. This also sets up the next thing James will discuss, which is a life free from pollution by the world. Chapter 3:13-17 talks about the two wisdoms, especially the antithesis between envy, which is crucial to the wisdom of the world, and the wisdom that produces humility and peace. Then in chapter 4:1-4, James will look at the way in which desires rage and the way in which we handle these desires. James 3:14-17 says:

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom (we are talking about the world here) does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual and of the devil. Where you have envy and selfish ambition, you have

disorder and every evil practice, but the wisdom that comes from heaven is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

The first mark of worldly wisdom, then, is envy, a longing for what another person has. Envy is a sort of cancer. It is a gnawing sorrow; you cannot be happy because somebody else has what you want. This is essential to worldliness, because it comes from the worldly idea that our identity and worth come from our possessions. The idea would be, "I have to prove that my life is valid and good and real by having the right things." Envy is one of the clearest marks of an unbelieving lifestyle or an unbelieving mentality. The mentality of envy goes like this: "If my life is to be truly fulfilled and happy, I have to have the right things. I have to find them for myself. I have to look out for my interests. If I do not look out for my interests, no one else will. I have to make sure that I get what I deserve, and if I do not get what I deserve, then my life is not valid." I look around and I see other people getting more than I have. I see other people who are no more talented, no more hard-working than I am. It is logical for the worldly person, the person who is deeply stained by the world, to find that insufferable, and to think "I must get that for myself," because they do not know that their identity and their worth and their value comes from God. They do not know that they are significant whether they have accumulated rank and possessions or not, and so they have to strive for that and grasp for that. It will eat them up, because they do not believe that God will give them what they deserve. They have to get it for themselves. It is essential and it is logical to the worldly mind that it be filled with envy.

On the other hand, it is logical for the Christian, for the righteous to show their wisdom by an excellent life. Verse 13 says, "If anyone is wise and understanding, let him show it by his good life." The Greek there does not mean "a good life," in the sense of morally good, but the word that is used there for good is "beautiful." "Let him show it by his beautiful life," and word for "life," could actually be translated more aptly, "lifestyle." This means that wisdom shows itself all throughout your life. Your entire lifestyle demonstrates that you have wisdom from God. One of the crucial things of that wisdom is that it is the opposite of envy and selfish ambition. Instead, it shows humility. That word for "humility," in verse 13 is not the ordinary word for humility, meaning "not boasting," but actually this word is ordinarily translated as "gentleness." One of the central marks of the believer is that he is gentle. He is not like the unbeliever who has to assert himself to gain whatever he can. Instead, the believer is content and peaceful and therefore gentle. He is not ambitious, but rather, he is gentle, meaning that he does not run around asserting himself and demanding his own rights.

We must be careful that we do not misunderstand gentleness and humility as weakness or mildness or letting people take advantage of us. I want to tell you that it takes real strength to be gentle. It takes real strength not to grasp for oneself. It takes real strength to be able to wait for God to vindicate you. Do you know the story of Jackie Robinson and the racial integration of baseball? Robinson came into Major League Baseball in 1947, and I think that he, along with one of his teammates, epitomized this gentleness of a beautiful lifestyle, not asserting oneself. Some of you may know that baseball might have been Robinson's third best sport. Most people think that he was better at track and football than he was at baseball. However, even though he was probably better at football, it was already integrated and he was interested in the integration of sports. Some people were looking for the right person to help integrate baseball and they chose Robinson. Robinson was a very fiery man, a man of strong opinion, strongly expressed. He was kind of unpredictable. He said what he thought and he expressed himself forcefully. People knew that he had a lot of strength of character and a lot of convictions, but they made a deal with him that when he came into Major League Baseball, he could not talk for two years. That was the agreement they made: "No matter what anybody says, no matter what epithets and abuse they hurl at you, you have to take it in silence." For an articulate man with a lot of opinions, that is not an easy thing to do, especially when he had to hear the most harsh, cruel, and vile language time after time.

It took strength to be gentle. Jackie Robinson also happened to have a teammate, Pee-wee Reese, who was a many time All-Star shortstop for the Dodgers. Reese was from one of the states in the deep South, where racism was the most intense, and he was insulted quite a bit for being on the same team as Robinson. Sometimes he was accused in not-very-nice language of being a little too close with Robinson. One day the abuse became particularly intense. As always, Robinson remained quiet, and on this particular day, Reese went over and, instead of throwing the ball back and forth like players usually do during the break between innings, he looked at the other team and put his arm around Jackie and they stood there together for a while. The men on the other team were so astonished by this that they were shamed to silence. The accounts that I have read indicate that on that day, when the abuse of Robinson reached its height, and he said nothing, Reese said gently, "You can scream at me too, because Jackie and I are teammates and brothers." The men who had been abusing them could not stand that. That was gentleness and strength. That was not asserting oneself. The essence of worldliness is shown in things like envy, ambition, and self-assertion, because the unbeliever says, "I need to assert myself. I need to get things for myself and if I do not get them for myself, they will not come, because there is no God." But the Christian is gentle in the core of his being. He is not self-asserting, because he knows that God will assert for him. God will give us what we need. That is the core of godly wisdom.

In chapter 4:1 and following, James will talk about another mark of godlessness and another mark of true religion. He says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" We are back to the loudness of worldliness. He asks the question, "Do they not come from the desires that battle within you?" He is speaking here to ostensible Christians, and he says, "You want something, but you do not get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God." That is strange. He is talking to Christians and he says all this. "And you do not have because you do not even ask God." That is strange. When I read something strange like that, I have to ask, "Why is that there? Why would James say to Christians, 'You do not even ask God'?" The answer has to be that you do not ask God because you are ashamed to ask God out loud in prayer.

A few years ago, it became undeniable that our family car was dying and there was no alternative but to get another car. We had our second car. It is a car that looks terrible, but nobody cares because it runs well, but we had to get another car—one that would hold everybody in our family. As I looked around for a car, I found that it was difficult to pray for a car, because what I really wanted was a brand-new Lexus or maybe a brand-new Mercedes but to say that to God would be a hard thing to do. If you are looking for something big and expensive, it is hard to be honest with God and say, "Lord, what I really want is an Ivy-League education for community college prices," or, "What I really want is a 12-room house for the price of a 4-room house." We have a hard time praying about some of these things. There are some things that we want or need, but we find it very difficult to pray about them. We would almost prefer to ask somebody else to pray about them for us, because we know that we cannot really do it right. When we go to ask God, we know that we will be asking selfishly. I think that is what James is talking about in chapter 4:2, when he says, "You do not have because you do not even ask," and then he says, "Well, the truth is that some of you ask, but you do not get what you ask, because you ask with the wrong motives, to spend it on your own pleasures." Then he makes it even more intense. He says, "You adulterous people!" He now likens the church to God's people who are married to God, but they are now committing adultery. This actually connects back to the prophets, who indict Israel for going after other gods when they are married to Yahweh, the Lord of Israel. James says, "You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?" You cannot love the world and love God simultaneously. You cannot live for possessions, influence, material wealth, new experiences, and your own ease and pleasure and also live for God. You cannot do both.

I want to be very careful on this point. I am not saying that it is evil to have power or possessions. I am saying that it is evil to live for power and possessions. If power and possessions come to you—if you inherit wealth or you just do a good job year after year and get these financial rewards, there is nothing evil in that, if it comes your way. I have a friend who became pretty wealthy. He became the Chief Operating Officer of a small, but not tiny, company and he found it amazing how wealthy he had become (he was 60 years old when we had this conversation). He said, “They just hired me and I did my job and this is what happened.” He was adept at giving his money away; no one knew when he would give money away. He understood that he had it, but he did not live for it. One of the best ways to prove that you do not live for it is to give it away. So there is nothing wrong with having possessions and power and ease, but there is everything wrong with living for them. If you say, “That is the purpose of my life,” and if you say, “I must have them,” that is spiritual adultery. Friendship with the world is hatred toward God, because the world admires these things: material possessions, ease, comfort, the right experiences, status, influence, and all the rest. Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God, James says.

Now we see unmistakably that we have moved to that third sign of true religion. True religion is unstained by the world, but some Christians are stained by envy, ambition, and desires for things that are so questionable they were unwilling even to mention them before God. If there is anybody here feeling a little bit guilty now and saying, “I don’t help people who are needy, I don’t control my tongue, and I am stained by the world,” then James would probably say, “Good, that is what I wanted.” It is possible to read James with a certain sort of Christian heroism: “These are the signs of true religion; I will go out and do them, and then I will be right with God and I will prove my faith as real.” That would be a radical misconstrual of James. Real faith works, but James is breaking us down so that we realize that we cannot achieve these three. If we were just to say, “Yes, I have true religion,” then he is forcing us to recognize that these kind of things—desires we hide even from God and a tongue that is guilty of serious sins—are in every last one of us. Now, really, in a way, he has come to the climax. We might say that the evangelistic climax of the book is in the next verse. The difficulty with the next verse is that it is excruciatingly difficult to translate. I will tell you that I think that the NIV has not done it correctly. I will begin with the NIV, and I will simply tell you what the two possible translations of it are. After getting through all this thing about friendship with the world and enmity towards God, he then asks this question: “Do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain when it says...” something. There are about three different ways of translating this next phrase. One way is, “Do you think Scripture speaks in vain when it says that the spirit—the human spirit, not the Holy Spirit—which God caused to dwell in us envies intensely?” That is a very literal translation.

If this is how we translate it, then what James would be saying is this: God has put an eternal spirit in us. We have a sense of God, a sense of eternity, and a sense of purpose in life. He caused that spirit to dwell in us, and the Scripture speaks, and it does not speak in vain. Do you think the Bible says this in vain? It does not. The Bible does not speak in vain when it says that at this time, apart from God’s grace, the spirit which God caused to dwell in us is marked by intense envy. In fact, it is the testimony of the whole of Scripture that apart from the grace of God, this business of striving after the world, being a friend of the world, envy, and those sorts of things are actually the truth about human nature. It starts really with Cain and Abel. So soon after the fall, we see one brother envying the status of another before God. Then it continues with Jacob and Esau striving over the blessing and Joseph and his brothers envying each other as to who had favor in God’s sight. We could even say without much exaggeration that the history of the human race is a history of envying and striving after what other people have. So many wars are fought over wanting what somebody else has. Actually, I think that is probably the main way or the best way to take this passage.

However, there is another way to understand it, and that way is like this: “Do you think that the Bible speaks in vain when it says that the spirit which God caused to dwell in us craves for the sake of envy?” Look at the desires that we have in our heart, which we undoubtedly have. We have cravings and passions. Why do you think God put them there? Did God give you your desires so that you could spend them on your lusts and your envies? Is that why God gave you the energy that you have? Is that why He gave you the passions, concerns, goals, and aspirations that you have? Is that what they are there for, to spend them on envy? Is that what you think? Do not think that. No, the energies that God has given you should not be spent on envying after what other people have and being ambitious to gain what they have. Instead, we should understand that God has given us these things for a very different reason. He has given them to us and for us graciously. He gives us more grace. His purpose behind these desires is to drive us to Himself. We could say that when we see the envy and ambition, that also drives us to Him. He gives us grace when we see that the passions we have in us are so easily misdirected. I believe that this is the Gospel of James, the Gospel of introspection and repentance. Take a good hard look at yourselves. Look at the envy and the desires that are in you. Look at your tongue; look how easy it is for you to misdirect even the best traits in yourself, the energy of your life. When you see that, turn to God and realize that He would give you more grace, as we read in verse 6. God’s way is to oppose the proud, those who grasp for themselves, but to give grace to the humble, to those who see that they cannot pass those three tests of true religion. Submit to God, he says, humbly submit to God, (I am now in verse 7) and then resist the devil and he will flee from you. When you fail in those three tests and show the wickedness in you, once you come to Him humbly confessing that, then you will be able to resist the devil and he will flee. Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail over these sins that he has been indicting you of, and finally, change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourself before the Lord and He will lift you up. That is the word of grace. That is the Gospel of James. Dare the tests, strive for them, and recognize that you fail. Take your failure to God. Grieve over it. Mourn over it. Wail over it. He will lift you up. That, of course, is a quotation from the Psalms. What James is trying to say is that all of the Scriptures bear witness to this thesis of his.

I am going to guess that this is not quite the way the book of James has been explained to you in the past. What I am trying to do is to help us stop reading James as a series of aphorisms—“these are the things a good Christian does.” That way of reading James is not absolutely wrong, to read it as just a lot of guidance for Christians, but it is not deep enough. To go deep enough is to realize that James is not the Proverbs of the New Testament—a lot of nice little things we need to do—but it is deeply structured by rhetoric. It is structured by themes that have come up in chapter 1 and that are being constantly reworked throughout. These themes reach their apex in two places: in chapter 2:14-26, the discussion of true faith, and now also here. These two passages are kind of like bookends, one positive and the other negative. True faith shows itself this way, but wait—we are not capable of manifesting true faith. Therefore, humble yourself before the Lord. He will lift you up. The word of salvation is not mentioned in James the way it is mentioned in Paul, by talking about the propitiatory sacrifice and the blood of Christ on the cross. It is mentioned instead, not looking to the external work of Christ, but looking to the internal work of the Holy Spirit convicting us of sin and drawing us to humility before the God of grace.

Look at the way this theme is developed in the remainder of chapters 4 and 5. I will sketch a broad overview for you instead of working line-by-line. There are certain challenges to the way of wisdom that are outlined in James 4:11 through 5:6. These challenges are to live in ways that are contrary to the way of humility. This little segment has some stylistic unity. It has a series of kind of rough and deflating questions: “Who are you?” and “What is your life?” He says, “Come now, you rich,” and the entire passage of 4:11 through 5:6 has a sort of a rough, rebuking character. What he rebukes are all, in one way or another, sins of arrogance or pride. He rebukes sins against the humility that he just urged on his

readers. Chapter 4:11 is a warning against slander: “Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.” Slander involves judging another person and making the private decision that you have a right to judge their motives. If you think that you have a superior position to other people and you can judge them and condemn them and tell other people how bad they are, that would be a sign of the opposite of humility, verses 11 and 12. Verses 13 to 16 are very boastful and presumptuous. Verses 13 to 17 talk about the ambition of wealth or the quest for wealth and the intent of getting wealthy, which reveals an envious spirit.

In verse 13, he says, “Now listen, you who say, ‘We will go to this city or that city, spend a year there, take care of business and make money....’” These people are saying, “I want to get rich.” In the ancient world, in Palestine, the way to get rich was by trading, so the idea of this passage is, “I want to get rich. I am living for money. The way I am going to get rich is by trading.” This hypothetical person thinks he can control his destiny. This is foolish, because we cannot really control the future. Our life is just a mist on a lake that is gone by 10 in the morning. Your life is fleeting and ephemeral.

Third is the sin of oppression, in chapter 5:1-6. This is very clearly a sin of the rich, who should weep and wail because their wealth is rotting. What have they done wrong? Verse 4 says, “The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you.” You see the corruption of the rich. They were envious even of the daily wages of a common laborer. They are so envious and grasping that, even though they are rich, when it comes time to give the poor just a minimum wage, they will not even give them that. These are three sins of pride and arrogance and envy. In each one, there is a call to realize why we should be humble. Notice in the first one, he asks a question with regard to those who slander, “Who are you to judge?” Who gave you that post? What gives you that rank? Do you really think you are so noble? In the second one, he asks, “Who are you? What is your life?” You do not even know what is going to happen tomorrow; do you have so much control over history? You are just a mist. Your life is a mist on a lake, a puff of smoke, a puff of a cloud. Then to the rich, he says, “Do you really think that you can guarantee that you will stay rich by defrauding your laborers?” Not at all, because the more you defraud them, the more they cry out, and when they cry out to God, God will surely vindicate them. The gold and silver that you have hoarded up is going to corrode. James goes on and says that it will be worse than that. It will not just corrode, but it is going to be like burning metal, eating your flesh like fire. You who have gathered so much for yourself will turn out to be like beasts, dumb cattle who have fattened themselves for the day of slaughter. You thought you were going to guarantee yourself wealth forever, but you are guaranteeing your condemnation.

In each of these, while there is attention called to the frailty of a human who cannot really call himself a judge or control his future or secure his wealth, there is also a reference to God. God is the one who judges (chapter 4:12). God is the one who will determine the effect of your plans and the length of your days. That is why he says, “Instead of planning what you are going to do tomorrow,” (verse 4:15), “if you plan, you should say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we do this and that.’” God, the Lord of Hosts, will determine who gets the riches and who does not. He hears the cries of the harvesters, and He will judge those who have oppressed them. Thus we see that in each turn there is a call to godly humility.

In the last section, chapter 5:7-20, he gives the positive things we ought to do instead of the negative things he has just condemned. Chapter 4:11-12 said, “Do not use the Word to slander your brother.” Chapter 5:19-20 tells us how we should use the Word—not to slander a brother but to win back a brother who wanders away from the truth, to turn a sinner from error of his ways. When you see a brother sinning, do not slander him. Instead, win him back. There is the negative in 4:11 and the positive in 5:19-20. This pattern continues. Chapter 4:13-17 has condemned boasting and bragging about your plans to get wealthy and forgetting God’s sovereignty. Instead of that, chapter 5:13-18 tells us we should

take every joy and sorrow to God. Chapter 5:1-6 condemned hoarding and abusing your wealth and using your power to condemn righteous men. Chapter 5:7-12 tells us that instead we should be patient, and realize that the Lord, the judge, is coming. We should not ignore Him as the rich do, but be patient and wait for Him, since He will surely come. These three sections function kind of like bookends to one another.

The last section of the book is in 5:7-20, which gives certain antidotes to the way of pride. The humble, instead of being proud and boastful, use the Word to win others, take all of their cares to God, are patient, and so forth. That is one structure of the last part of the book. The other structure is a description of the life of prayer. Appropriately, the humble believer, instead of grasping for himself, takes his needs and concerns to God. James 5:13-14 says, “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.” This phrase, “Is anyone,” actually appears not just those three times, but also a fourth time. The structure, then, is this, is there anybody among you who is going through these situations in life? Of course, the answer is yes. In fact, we could say he has covered everyone. He has asked about people in trouble and people who are happy. What he is saying is, “Are you in trouble? Is your life difficult? Here is how to handle that. Is your life happy? Here is how to handle that.” He is telling us to take every mood and every life situation to God, to hallow every pleasure and to sanctify every pain. That is going to be his theme here. Another way of looking at it is to think about four groups at prayer. There is the individual at prayer for his joys or his sorrows. There is the elder or the elders at prayer over sickness. Then there are friends at prayer over sins committed (verse 16). Finally, there is a prophet at prayer. Elijah is an example of the efficacy of prayer in the time of need. The basic counsel is, “If you are in trouble, pray; if you are happy, praise.” That is generic. That will cover just about everything, but having done that, he wants to focus a little more on trials one more time. We have mostly left behind the theme of the signs or marks of true faith. We are now back to the early part of the book. This may be a giant inclusio: the book started with trials and now it will end with trials. The trial is sickness. He says in verses 14-16, “If anyone is sick, call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint with him in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well, and the Lord will raise him up.” The language there—“will make the sick person well”—literally means, “will save him.” What does that sound like? That sounds like resurrection language. “If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each others so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

One question people ask about this passage is, “Should we expect things like this to happen today?” Should we still do this sort of thing today, or is this something from the age of apostles, the age of miracles? Look at the passage. Is this for today? What is the indication that this is for today? Who is he talking about praying? Is he talking about apostles, or prophets, perhaps? He is talking about elders. Do we still have elders around? Yes. Do we still have people who are sick around? Yes. Do people who are sick still need to call for their spiritual leaders to help them? Is it still appropriate when you are sick to examine yourself to see if there might be any sin in you? These are all things that seem to be appropriate. Is prayer for healing appropriate? Certainly the answer is yes, so this is not simply something from antiquity. It is something that is ancient that still holds today. He is talking about elders and friends gathering at prayer.

We could almost work through the passage by answering some questions that come up. How sick does one have to be? Does any sickness count? How does it work? Do we have to use oil? Do we have to use olive oil? Does it have to come from Israel? What is the significance of oil anyway? Why oil? And how does this fit with other healings and other people not being healed in the New Testament? Epaphroditus

almost died. Paul didn't heal Epaphroditus. He got better. Paul tells Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach, implying that Paul did not want to or did not see that it was the right thing to use his miraculous powers of healing on Timothy. How does that work? Who gets healed and who does not? Those are all questions we have. The main idea is pretty clear. If you are suffering any trouble or illness of any kind, you should pray. Take that to God. The scene is not too difficult to understand. If you are sick, you call the elders. Why them? Notice that it does not say, "Call those who have the gift of healing." It says to call the elders. Why the elders? Because they are righteous. That's the primary qualification of being an elder. (Incidentally, the primary qualification is not being a person of rank and influence.) The primary requirement is righteousness, and the prayers of a righteous man are effective. The elders offer prayers for healing, not for a miracle. The use of oil means that we use spiritual means, because oil is evocative of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, but also medicinal means, because oil was used therapeutically in biblical times as well.

The illness appears to be major. In the Greek text, the first use of the word "sick," is the ordinary word for sick, but the next time the word "sick," is used, the text adds the word for "worn-out," or literally, "weakened by illness." What this means is that he is not talking about if you have a minor cold, but he is talking about someone who is in bad shape. It may also cover what we call depression today—somebody who is spiritually worn-out and weakened in their spirit. I do not think there is any reason to exclude taking those things to God, but it should be something major. There is also the idea that this person has to call the elders to them, and the elders lay their hands over them. Perhaps the person is envisioned as being bedridden and unable to go to the elders, but that is not quite clear. It is clear that the sick person takes the initiative. "If anyone is sick, let him call the elders." That is to say that the elders do not just show up and say, "Hi, we're here to heal you." There should be a desire for this in the sick person.

What should we say about the expectation here? The expectation is that there is a spiritual dimension to the illness. You are supposed to examine yourself and see if you have sinned in any way and confess your sins. Are we supposed to assume that everybody who gets sick has committed a sin? Not at all. There may not be a sin involved here, but you should examine to see if there is sin. The disciples were wrong when they said about the man who was born blind: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" The trouble is that today we sometimes de-spiritualize illness. We could say that the disciples wanted to over-spiritualize and say that every illness is due to a sin. Today we want to say that all sickness is caused only by microbes, bacteria and viruses. Sometimes the Bible does connect sin and illness. Deuteronomy 28 says that if the people are false to the covenant, they will receive diseases. When Jesus heals a paralytic, he says, "Your sins are forgiven," which implies that sin is connected to his illness. So what we should do is examine ourselves and see if there might be some sin involved in this, and then call the elders and pray in faith. The prayer of faith, as verse 15 says, will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up. That is to say, this will not work like magic. You cannot do it in a callous or calculating or skeptical way. I have participated in this about 20 times. I did not used to believe that it was effective today. I used to believe it was in the past, and then I studied it and I said, "No, I think it is for the present," and a number of times I have been in services where elders came and prayed over people. I want to tell you, for a Western person with overly developed critical faculties (and that is what professors are), it is very easy to stand there and think, "This is not going to work. All I have done is raise this poor person's hopes. Why did I do that?" It is very easy to be skeptical, but this is clear: there cannot be pure skepticism and nothing but skepticism. However, if you, out of obedience, say, "I want to do this," and you bring the elders together yourself, or if you are an elder, you do not have to have perfect faith. It is not that the quality of your faith will make the person well. That is not the issue. The issue is that you cannot all be gathered as a bunch of unbelievers trying to get something from God. If your faith is imperfect but real, that is good enough.

One reason why I tell you that is because there is no such thing as perfect faith, and another reason is because I am a skeptic. I have laid my hands on people and they have gotten better on a number of occasions. I know it was not the quality of my faith or the faith of the others there, because I talked to them, too, and they said, "I was doubting also, but it was in the Bible so I thought we had better do it, I guess." When it says, "the Lord will raise him up," does it mean every last person? Yes, every last person will be raised up on the last day. The Lord will raise everyone up. He may choose to raise some up now strikingly and surprisingly and others much later. For some, this raising up, saving, and healing may only be in the resurrection.

If some of you wonder about this, if it seems like a little too much, James gives you a little encouragement in verses 17 and 18. He says, "Look at Elijah and what happened when he prayed." We may say, "Elijah? That does not encourage me at all! Look at what a great prophet he was. He performed miracles. Is Elijah's success in prayers supposed to be an encouragement? It discourages me." Look at the way James describes Elijah. He does not call Elijah a "prophet," or a "great prophet." What he says is, "Elijah was a man just like us." Another translation is, "Elijah has the same passions as we do"—that is to say, the same variations and fluctuations. That is the truth of Elijah. One minute he is standing down 450 prophets of Baal and calling fire down from heaven, and the next day he is saying "This Jezebel scares me half to death. I have to get out of here," and he goes and runs and he is saying, "Lord, just kill me. I cannot stand it anymore. I am all by myself." That is us: heroic one minute, quivering the next. Elijah was a man just like us, but he prayed earnestly. He was also a man of great faith. He prayed that it would not rain and it did not rain. Three and a half years later, he prayed that it would rain and it rained. Elijah was a man with the same passions we have. He is more like us than he is unlike us. He had power, great faith and great position, but he also had great weakness. That is the way it is with us. I am going to tell you that the way through these trials really is by faith. It is faith and trial that takes us to completion and maturity. This thing that James is after is so needed by us who intellectualize the faith.

I will tell you a story against myself. This happened after I had laid hands on some sick people with a group of other elders. My church had never done it before, but I had been gently urging this for months in my church a number of years ago. I said, "This is biblical; we have some people who are really sick in our church." The elders laid hands on these people and prayed for them and one of them was spectacularly healed. It was like thunderbolts from heaven—diseases disappeared, and the doctors were saying, "I don't know what happened." In addition, a couple more people were healed very quietly and had enormous spiritual blessing, and with other people nothing happened. While this was going on, while I was laying my hands on other people, my youngest daughter had really severe allergies. She still has quite a few, but at this time she was less than a year old and she had a severe rash from head to toe. It was so bad that all summer long we had to keep her covered from head to toe, because the moment we would take off her clothes to give her a bath or play, she would just tear at her skin because it would itch so much. She had hundreds of tiny cuts all over her body from tearing at her skin and she would scream and cry out when we gave her a bath. The itching of her skin would cause her to shriek without stopping. We prayed over her, and although I had done so for others, I found it hard to call the elders to my own family. I think one reason was that I could tolerate the disappointment of other people but I didn't know if I could stand to have my own child not be healed. After hesitating for a while, we laid hands on her and prayed over her. Once I decided to do it, I decided to go the whole way. I gathered two groups of elders, one group on Wednesday and the other on Thursday, and I was filled with doubt and wondering. I wondered why I did not have any more enthusiasm for this myself, and I felt depressed, and nothing had seemed to happen, but about four hours later, before suppertime, I heard soft crying coming from upstairs in our house. It caught my attention. I walked up the stairs to see what it might be, and it was

my wife. She was crying as she was bathing our 11-month-old child and she simply said this: “She’s playing in her bathtub for the first time in her life.” There she was. Until that day she had always screamed, and that day she sat in her bathtub patting the water the way babies are supposed to do, but she had not been able to do until that day. I don’t know why it took us so long, but it’s so easy sometimes to intellectualize this faith ourselves and not claim it for ourselves. James wants to keep us from doing that. What the Lord wants us to do, whether there is the healing or not, is to take every sorrow and pleasure to Him. The result of it all is that the whole community will be healed. This last segment of James reminds us that all this living out of the faith is not something that happens in isolation as individuals. Rather, my brother, if any of you should wander, it should be that all of us are interested in bringing him back to the faith. He who returns to the sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins. That is what the Christian community should do, individually living out our faith in the face of trials but also being there to reclaim our brothers when they are not able to turn back themselves.