

The Heart of the Matter

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] And so we're now going to turn to our Bible reading. And this morning, we're beginning a new series in the letter of James.! And if you wave your hand, I'm sure Rebecca or Scott would love to bring one to you.

And do turn up then to James chapter 1. That's page 1011, if you are using a visitor's Bible. So James 1, beginning at verse 1.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion. Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

For you knew that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

[1 : 33] But let him ask in faith, with no doubting. For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man. Unstable in all his ways.

Turn over to chapter 4. Chapter 4, verse 1. 1. What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder.

You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

[2 : 40] You adulterous people. Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the scripture says, He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us. But he gives more grace.

Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Be wretched, and mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

[3 : 50] Amen. Amen. This is God's word. Well, good morning, everyone.

Do turn with me, if you would, in your Bibles to the letter of James. Towards the end of the New Testament, after Hebrews, before 1 and 2 Peter.

And we're beginning this morning a new study in this letter. And, helpfully, it gives us an opportunity for me to explain why we do what we do on Sundays in our sermons.

And it's called expository preaching. What we mean by that is that we focus on teaching and applying the Bible on its own terms. And we do that so that we're hearing theological truth, true words about God, but in the words of God himself.

In the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture. Because when we listen to God's words his way, in the context that he has spoken them once and for all, and unchangeably in the Scriptures, then it is that we hear his voice with great clarity.

[5 : 02] Indeed, we hear him speaking to us still in our own lives here today. So, exposition of the Bible is the opposite of imposition. It means the Scripture itself sets the agenda.

We don't decide the subject. We don't then look for a text or a passage of Scripture to support what we want to say. Nor are we, in fact, just finding out what doctrines or what subjects any particular passage of Scripture may relate to and have something to say about.

Nor even are we putting all the different passages of Scriptures together to tell us what they say about some important doctrinal or ethical issue. That is an important thing to do. We do need to do that.

We do need to think systematically about what the whole Bible teaches us, about all kinds of things, about who God is, about what he does, about what it means for us to be human, what life is for, and all sorts of other things.

But especially as we gather together on the Lord's Day as his church, when he promises to be right here in our midst, when he promises to be meeting us in his words, then we trust him to speak to us in the words that he has given us in all the Scriptures, which the Apostle Paul tells us are written for us, to make us wise for salvation and also to equip us for every good work.

[6 : 27] Because in these great and precious promises, as Peter calls them, he has given us, he says, all we need for life and for godliness. So all the Scriptures, Paul says, are written for us, for our encouragement, for our hope, until the great day of Christ's coming.

And so we want to let God's words speak to us according to his will, setting the agenda for our hope and for our blessing. But of course, all these words were written for us, but none of these words were ever written directly to us, were they?

So we mustn't read the Bible naively and superficially as though they were. If we want to take God's word seriously, then we'll approach God's word seriously. We'll realize that it was written not to us today, but in a whole host of different contexts and settings.

Each part was written by somebody, to somebody, for a particular purpose. And it's as we grapple with these things that we begin to understand what the message and what the implication of the message is for all of us here today.

So rather than just diving straight in at the beginning of this letter of James, what I want to do this morning is to think clearly about some of these questions so we get in our minds very clear and understand properly, so we don't misunderstand, far yes, misuse the word of God that's before us.

[7 : 53] So first of all, who is this James who introduces himself in verse 1 of the letter? Well, almost certainly he is James, the brother of Jesus himself, who by this time has become one of the prominent, indeed the prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem.

You read about his place there, for example, in the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15. And by the way, don't miss the significance of that, because when we read in the Gospels about Jesus' brothers, during his earthly ministry were told very clearly that they did not believe in him.

John 7 verse 5 is just one example. But here now, James, the brother of our Lord, has been born again. He's been brought to newness of life through the gospel of Jesus and his death and his resurrection.

Notice how in chapter 1 verse 18 he includes himself in those who have been brought forth by the word of truth. So James was not an apostle.

He wasn't one of the twelve like the other James. James, the brother of John, who was beheaded by Herod in AD 44. Read about that in Acts 12. But notice in verse 1, he does call himself a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 10] At least that's how our translation puts it. The designation, those words actually are unique in the New Testament. Similar phrases are used by Peter and by Paul.

Literally, in the Greek, it reads, Of God and Lord, Jesus Christ, a servant. So it may very well be that James is very consciously naming the one that he used to think of as, that brother of mine with all his absurd claims, but naming him as nothing less than God and Lord.

Just as Peter, at the beginning of his second letter, speaks about our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. So whatever way we take it, James is very clear.

Notice that to be God's servant is to be Jesus' servant and vice versa. So let's be very clear about that. No one can truly serve God unless they serve Jesus Christ as Lord.

No religion, no cult that claims to speak for God without bringing us to God only through Jesus Christ is a Christian organization.

[10 : 24] Jesus himself is very clear about that, isn't he? No one comes to the Father but by me. And we must be just as clear as James is clear here. But there's more again to this designation of servant of God than meets the eye because in the Bible, all through the Old Testament in particular, the servant of God was a name for the prophets who spoke the word of God to God's people authoritatively.

Moses was the servant of God. But all the prophets after him in the same way were messengers, messengers, servants of God to speak his word and very often to speak it to a very wayward and disobedient people.

Think of Ezekiel. We studied a year or two ago, God's servant to speak the word of God to a scattered people who were in exile in Babylon. Think of Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 21, is it?

Where he summarizes the whole of history of Israel by God sending one after another servants to speak to his people whom they abused and disregarded.

And ultimately, of course, he sends his son whom they kill. So James is telling his readers in no uncertain terms that he is God's servant. He's his prophet.

[11 : 38] He is speaking God's authoritative word from their God and Lord, Jesus Christ, from the Messiah himself, from the Lord of glory, as he calls him in chapter 2, verse 1.

And he is speaking, in verse 1, he says, to the 12 tribes in the dispersion. That is to the people of God, the true Israel of God, to use Paul's words in Galatians 6.16.

All of those who are united together through Jesus the Messiah by faith in Jesus. Whether they're Jewish in their background or indeed Gentiles.

Now, obviously, most of the first Christians were Jewish by background, like James was. And so it was natural for them to use the language of their scriptures, which they understood.

We're now all fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. The prophets had foretold of a great day when God would gather his people from east and west to be one united people of God in that great day of salvation.

[12 : 39] All God's chosen people. And yet, not yet, finally gathered with God in glory. Notice he says they're still in the dispersion.

Peter uses a very similar concept in his first letter. He calls them God's elect, those who are chosen by God and yet who are still exiles, who are not yet permanently in their true home.

Now, that was a hard thing, actually, for Christian believers from a Jewish background to grasp at first. Because for them, the great day of the Lord that they longed for, that the prophets spoke of, the great day of the Lord when the Messiah would come at last would be the day, as they understood it, when at last God would make all things right, all at once.

But God's great kingdom would at last be ushered in. But you remember Jesus, all through his teaching, was having to tell people that no, the end wouldn't come all at once.

Rather, his coming, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, inaugurated what he called the last days of this world, the beginning of his kingdom of the new world, but not yet the consummation of it.

[13 : 59] Because, as Jesus says, his gospel of salvation must be preached to all nations. And Peter tells us in his letter, doesn't he, that that's not because God is slow, it's because he's patient.

He wants people to come to repentance. He wants people to find eternal life. And that's a wonderful thing. But, of course, it also means that for Christ's followers living through these last days, the days that Jesus calls, in Matthew 24, the birth pangs of his kingdom, well, there'll be days of many trials and tribulations.

Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. That was the apostolic encouragement to the early churches. And that's the very real experience that James is alluding to here in verse 2.

They face trials, he says, of many kinds. As they live now, not all together in Jerusalem, but dispersed throughout Judea and Samaria, and probably further afield up the eastern coast of what we now call Syria and so on.

If you read Acts chapter 8, it tells us that there was a great persecution that came after the martyrdom of Stephen, and it led to a scattering, to a dispersion. Same word as here. And the believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

[15 : 18] Later on in Acts chapter 11, verse 19, we're told that some of them went further still, taking the gospel as far north as Antioch in Syria. And Acts tells us wonderfully that that scattering took a dispersion, not only of the Christians, but of course of their gospel, so that many believed.

And more and more churches were begun and grew in many places. But the tribulations and the trials were real.

There was persecution. On top of that, if you read in Acts chapter 11, it tells us there was a great famine in those mid-40s A.D., and that led to great economic hardship.

And in those kind of circumstances, as we know, there very often arise many of the problems that actually are alluded to in this letter of James. exploitation of the vulnerable, poor treatment of workers, landlords taking advantage of their tenants, taking them to court, demanding payments of debts, and so on.

And it's alluded to here in James 2 and James 5. And of course, the problems of the early churches were not just from without, from outside, but also from within.

[16 : 35] Just read the book of Acts, the Pentecostal church of Acts chapter 2, which was growing daily, which was full of power and of grace, where there was no needy person, where there was great, enormous generosity, people like Barnabas and others.

Nevertheless, it wasn't perfect, was it? Read in Acts chapter 5 about the deception, the deceit of two of their members, Ananias and Sapphira. Read in Acts chapter 8 of Simon Magus, who was baptized and joined the church, but became a power seeker and was rebuked.

And on and on it goes. Trials of many and diverse kinds. Hence, this letter from James, God's servant, God's minister in Jerusalem, to speak to them God's word of truth for their life, lived amid many trials and tribulations.

But why this letter? A very tough letter, it is. It's very likely, actually, the earliest of all the New Testament writings, probably written in the middle of the 40s AD.

First Peter, which comes next, was written probably at least two decades later. And here, too, addresses people who are grieved by various trials. But when you read his letter, it's actually much more positive.

[17 : 57] There's lots of exhortation, but it's very, very encouraging. But James' letter is actually a very sharp letter. His exhortations are most uncomfortable.

His letter is full of rebuke. Why is that? Well, it's because these trials are evidently not resulting in honor and glory for Jesus.

These trials are not bringing out the best in God's people, but the worst. Not bringing about, as verse 4 says here, the steadfastness that will make them perfect and complete, that is, mature towards God, but actually, it's bringing out the opposite.

They're full of malevolence towards one another. We read in chapter 4, they're full of quarreling and fighting and murderous attitudes. Far from growing in the wisdom of true faith, actually, they're wandering away from truth altogether, and dangerously so.

The very last verse of the letter speaks of wandering away from the truth to a road that leads, says James, to death, to spiritual death, to eternal death.

[19 : 11] So these are the first believers in the foundational church, the mother church. Many of these people very likely heard the voice of Jesus himself teaching them.

They heard all the apostles. This was an apostolic church. This was the Pentecostal church. This was a spirit-endowed church full of spiritual gifts. One that was devoted, we're told, to prayer and to the ministry of the world.

And now, little more than a decade after Pentecost, they're exhibiting not healthy divine wisdom, wisdom from above, heavenly wisdom, but rather, according to James, horrible demonic worldliness.

And it was seen in their behavior towards one another. They're full of jealousy, he says, selfishness. And James bluntly tells them that is not what comes down from God above.

He says, in chapter 3, it's earthly, it's unspiritual, it's demonic. Isn't that shocking? So these primary church plants, if you like, are very sick indeed.

[20 : 27] And what's even more shocking is that they don't see it themselves at all. They're deceiving themselves. Three times in chapter 1, James tells them they must not be deceived.

They think they're fine, you see, because their beliefs are fine. They're always talking about faith, about religion. And they have a great pedigree. They have Jesus, they have the apostles, they have Pentecost, they have the Holy Spirit.

But here's the thing, their behavior tells a very different story. It tells the true story. And the truth is, they're wandering dangerously from the road to the crown of life that James says in chapter 1, verse 12, God promises to those who love him, wandering away from that.

Instead, they're conceiving and giving birth to sin, which verse 15 of chapter 1 says so clearly, when it is fully grown, brings forth death, the opposite of life.

Because it betrays not true love for God, but actually hatred of him, enmity towards him. So despite the wonders of the spreading gospel and the witness of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing march of the kingdom of Christ, here are churches, or at least many within them, who James says are in great peril.

[21 : 51] They're not wise. They're worldly. They're wandering away from truth and life into sin, which if unchecked will prove fatal.

And so James, you see, as a pastor, as a physician of souls, he wants to bring them back. The last verse of the letter so often tells us the real crux of what it's about.

Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death. James' purpose is to administer the medicine of divine wisdom, which alone can save people from dangerous wandering.

And that medicine is the word of truth. It's the word that brought forth their new life in Christ, says chapter 1, verse 18. And it is that word alone, says verse 21 of chapter 1, that word alone that is able to save their souls if they will receive it with meekness and not go on resisting it with malice.

But we all know, don't we, that people are often very reluctant to take medicine, far less reluctant to change their unhealthy ways until after a real crisis in health, or at least until they're faced very bluntly with a very severe diagnosis.

[23 : 18] I first preached on the letter of James nearly 30 years ago when I was still working as a doctor. And I recognized his purpose, his method, as that of a careful physician, a physician of souls, who's very clear that the real pathology, the root problem in these churches, and he's very determined to wake them up to that devastating prognosis if the disease is left unchecked so that they will take the painful medicine which alone can avert that critical danger to their spiritual life.

That's not an easy thing. I can tell you, any doctor can, not an easy thing to convince a patient that they have a big problem, a heart problem, see, especially if they're a very young, apparently fit person.

I once had a young man in my heart clinic whose only symptom was pain in his right thumb when he was running. But he ended up having triple coronary bypass surgery.

His life was in critical danger. How does a doctor convince a patient that he needs powerful medicine, maybe painful surgery when they have no idea there's anything wrong?

How do you get them to embrace what you know is their only hope? Well, surgeons are not really known for their empathy or tact, and so they probably just come wandering in and say, well, we need to operate.

[24 : 46] Remember, we used to have a joint cardiology and cardiac surgery meeting every week. We'd show them the angiograms and the surgeons would just sort of look up and say, yes, let's do it. But, you know, it doesn't work like that when you have to speak to a patient.

Surgeons are usually operating when people are asleep, so it's okay. It's the physician who has to come and talk to the patient and actually make it happen. They have to carefully explain, don't they, what the signs and symptoms mean, things that might seem trivial, and actually say that they indicate something very serious.

They have to do the tests and have to show the results, explain the scans. Explain the prognosis and explain the treatment that's needed and help the patient themselves to see what must be done as well as, of course, to give them some hope, to give them confidence in the prescription that will renew their health.

And that is what James' letter is doing. James is a careful physician. Indeed, as we'll see, he is, in fact, a heart doctor. And he relentlessly exposes the signs and the symptoms of spiritual ill health to show the real pathology and to show the dire prognosis unless the only true prescription for a return to spiritual health is embraced.

Or if you prefer, he's got to expose for them the root of the problem and they end the result if it's not dealt with before the remedy will be entertained, will be embraced.

[26 : 20] And what James demonstrates relentlessly is that the root problem in the Christian church always, just as here, always lies in one place and one place alone.

And that place is the human heart. and in the perennial pathology of a divided heart. And that is a sickness which, if it is not remedied, will always be spiritually fatal.

Well, you might say, well, that's all very well, but what have all these issues in the first century church got to do with us today in the 21st century? Well, friends, if the original church, the church of Jesus and of the apostles and of Pentecost and of missionary zeal and of spiritual power, if it so quickly in just a few short years can fall into such self-deception and danger so that their life is described by James as earthly, as unspiritual, as demonic, if that can happen to them, then do you think that we could possibly be immune to such danger?

I mean, it's hardly likely, is it? 20 years later, as I said, Peter is writing to his people and still warning them, saying the devil is prowling around trying to devour.

Hebrews later still relentlessly warns, doesn't it, about the dangers, the real dangers of falling back into the world. John's letters, even later still, decades later, he's still warning believers not to love the world because the world hates God and the world hates you.

[28 : 06] Don't be deceived about that, he says. Don't be self-deceived about your love for God. Your true love for God, John says, will be visible and tangible in your love for one another, just like James says here.

Love is seen in deeds and love to God is heard in your words about one another. That's what reveals your true heart. God. The whole New Testament tells us we are in a perpetual battle for our hearts.

Life in this world, life in these last days is a battle, a real spiritual battle and there will be trials of many kinds to bring us stress, to put us under pressure and you see, so often the result of that in our lives and in the church can be bad behavior.

We say things we shouldn't say. We do things we shouldn't do. We treat other people badly. We indulge ourselves in bad habits and we excuse ourselves all the time, don't we?

We excuse others. Oh, we're having a really hard time. I'm just not myself. It's very stressful just now, isn't it? It's just the circumstances. That's why there's tensions in the church.

[29 : 24] But James says, are you sure? Because the truth is that all of these trials are sent by God for the strengthening and the assuring of your faith, steadfast faith.

This is God's way, James says, to make you mature and complete in Christ. This is the road to the crown of life. The risen Lord himself says that, repeatedly, doesn't he, in the letters to the seven churches in the early chapters of Revelation.

It's to the one who conquers, he says, that I will give the right to eat of the tree of life, to reign with me on the throne. The one who conquers.

And Paul tells us, doesn't he, that in God's gracious, perfect providence, it is in all these things, he says, in all these trials, in them, not apart from them, that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

But alas, so often it seems, in reality, that in these trials we are seen not to be more than conquerors, but actually shown to be less than Christian in our behavior.

[30 : 43] Our belief is so often betrayed, isn't it, our bad behavior? And I think we have to admit that's true in the Christian church.

And that is why James' letter was needed then, and that's why it is preserved by the Holy Spirit in scriptures for us today. It's here to shine a piercing light on what we might think are simply peripheral symptoms in the life of the church, but in fact are cardinal marks, markers of pathological sin, sin which is potentially fatal.

So here's a church James is writing to and churches that are doctrinally sound, but inwardly they're dangerously sick. And that's a terrible thought, isn't it, for any church?

And so James writes to turn them back before it's too late, to cover a multitude of sins, and to save souls from death. And you may feel, well, we don't need a letter like this, do we?

Surely? I don't need these kind of sharp and shocking words for my Christian life. Well, are we sure?

[32 : 06] James' first readers didn't see much wrong in their church, did they? But they were deceived. Is it possible? That could be the same for us? I think we need to learn from Dr. James, the physician of souls, the Lord's heart doctor.

And I think there may well be some quite hard things for us to digest as we let him place his fingers on our pulse, put his stethoscope on our spiritual hearts.

But at the time left today, I just want to sketch something of James' case summary, if you like. James reveals the pathological sin by helping us recognize the peripheral symptoms.

The sin of divided loyalty towards God is revealed in our deficient love for one another. So let's get to the heart of it, which is, in fact, the heart of us.

First, James reveals the pathological sin and it is divided loyalty to God. It is an adulterous relationship with our Lord and God.

[33 : 19] The problem isn't in this letter doctrinal heresy. The problem is divided hearts. Look at how often James speaks of the heart through the letter.

Look at chapter 3, verse 14. He's unequivocal. They have bitterness. They have jealousy. They have selfish ambition in their hearts, showing not true but false behavior.

Not heavenly but hellish behavior, he says. Look over to chapter 5, verse 5. He says their hearts are self-indulgent. They're callous. They're even murderous.

And so their hearts, chapter 5, verse 8, need a sea change. They need to be established truly for the coming of our Lord in judgment.

And that means beginning with deep cleansing, humble penitence. Those words we read in chapter 4, verse 8. Purify your hearts, you double-minded.

[34 : 23] Now in the Bible, of course, the heart means the center of our personality. The Bible's heart encompasses our minds, our thoughts.

It encompasses our affections, our loves. It includes our wills, our volition. It is the control center of our whole life.

And James says that, if it is divided, is utterly deadly to spiritual health. It will lead to death. And that division in the heart is a division between a wholehearted desire and love for God and desires and passions and ambitions for this world.

Now James expresses that in different ways through the letter. He contrasts wisdom and wandering, contrasts fellowship with God and with the world, contrasts that which is above, that from below.

He contrasts the heavenly, the earthly, the hellish, the demonic. And that's the division that he means here in chapter 1 verse 8. Do you see where he speaks of what he calls the double-minded man who's unstable in all his ways.

[35 : 39] He's divided. He has divided loyalties. He's divided in his thinking, in his affection, in his aspirations. And that is deadly dangerous. As he says in chapter 1 verse 26, it's a deceived heart whose religion is utterly worthless.

It's the same as what he speaks about in chapter 2 in verse 4 and verse 9 where he speaks about partiality, where he speaks about distinctions, divided, conflicting loyalties.

Same in chapter 3 where he exposes the fourth tongue that speaks out of both sides of the mouth, speaks both ways. It's divided. In chapter 4, as we saw where we read, he becomes very stark in verse 4 where he calls them adulteresses whose affair with the world shows their real hatred of God.

They are divided in heart. That's what an adulterous affair does, doesn't it? It shows that actually in truth you hate your spouse. So James is speaking very seriously indeed.

And the shocking thing is, as I said, that this kind of thing is already endemic in the earliest apostolic churches. And by the way, that's a salutary warning, isn't it, when silly people sometimes say, we need to get back to the early church, we need to get back to the way the things were in the time of the apostles.

[37 : 06] Well, this is what it was like. It was endemic, and endemic diseases persist, don't they? They're very, very hard to eradicate.

And so the divided heart is a very high-risk spiritual condition, which, just like the physical condition, has to be recognized, has to be screened for, or else, if it's not corrected, it will lead to death.

That's why your babies get screened in hospital. Before they get taken home, the pediatrician comes and listens to their heart, wants to see if there's a heart murmur. Now, don't panic. Almost all of them disappear very quickly, and there's nothing wrong with them, but there are sometimes serious murmurs that betray a serious real hole in the heart.

And if that's not corrected, the baby will not grow, they'll fail to thrive, eventually they'll develop heart failure, and untreated they will die. It's very dangerous, but friends, a spiritually divided heart is far more dangerous even than that.

And so diagnosis is vital if Christians and if churches are going to be saved from disaster. But as I said, accepting that kind of diagnosis is very difficult.

[38 : 23] And that's because James says part of this disease, part of this condition is self-deception. Jeremiah tells us, doesn't it, the heart is deceitful above all things.

That's why three times in chapter 1, verse 16, verse 22, verse 26, he warns about this self-deception. It's like medical conditions like anorexia or alcoholism.

Self-deception is the biggest barrier to being able to actually accept and get help. self-deception has to be penetrated.

And so James sets about a rigorous diagnostic program for churches, for Christians. He's asking pointedly, as he does in chapter 1, verse 22, are you real doers of the word?

Are you wholehearted, real Christian people? Or are you really just hearers? Are you deceiving yourself completely? Are you actually in danger of wandering away into spiritual disaster?

[39 : 28] Well, I'm going to force you, he says, to examine the signs and the symptoms in your life, to face up to the truth about the real inner health of your heart.

And, you know, you can tell an awful lot about the heart by looking at all sorts of peripheral, outward things in the body, by looking at your nails, your skin, your eyes, your ankles, just looking at how the patient walks, and all sorts of things.

Things that seem unrelated, but actually are all derived from that same deep pathology in that central organ. And it's just the same with our spiritual hearts.

And James, the skilled spiritual heart doctor, he works relentlessly to show us how so many of these peripheral signs lead us to a true pathology of sin deep in the heart.

So, secondly, see, James makes us recognize these peripheral symptoms. And they all exhibit the deficient love for one another that actually exposes that divided loyalty in love for God.

[40 : 40] He takes all sorts of outward actions and shows the inward attitudes that they reveal. He shows what seem to be ordinary symptoms, people's speech, quarrels between people, favoritism, and so on.

And he shows that really it comes from a divided heart loyalty to God. And he shows very frighteningly how apparently very small little sins, if they're left unchecked, actually will lead to disaster and to death.

And he does it all through the letter by essentially laying out three key diagnostic tests to do with how we deal with people in our life and with priorities in our life, which will reveal what we really think in our hearts about God.

Look at chapter 1 verses 26 and 27. These are key verses that really control the rest of the letter. If anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

[41 : 55] You see those tests, the first one's a classic, isn't it? He's saying, let's have a look at your tongue. What is the way you talk to each other and the way you talk about each other in the church reveal about how right your heart actually is with God?

God. And it seems, as we'll see, that these are people who are not quick to listen but very quick to speak, very quick to get angry. Otherwise, why would he say what he says in chapter 1, verse 19?

Chapter 4, as we've seen, tells us there were quarrels, there were flare-ups. Chapter 3, especially, seems to tell us that there were people who were leaders and teachers in the church who actually were setting a terrible example in all of this.

Tongues betraying great ambition to teach but also showing great anger and arrogance. The way God's people talk to each other and about each other says a great deal about where they really are in their hearts towards God.

As does the way God's people treat each other. That's the second test, especially the weaker, the apparently less worthwhile and more unimportant ones. Verse 27, the orphans, the widows, for example.

[43 : 13] Well, chapter 2 tells a very sorry story of dishonoring the poor and the weak and fawning over those who seem to be very important looking and judging others in ways that are quite, quite wrong.

Well, of course, thank God we would never do that, would we? We would never think like that, speak like that, would we? The third test is probably the most wide-ranging one.

Verse 27, what do we really treasure in life? Are we truly unstained, untainted by the world and its values? Do we put Christ and his kingdom and his people above everything else in life?

Well, chapter 4 makes pretty sorry reading. Exposing all kinds of worldly desires and passions pursued at all costs at the expense of others. Very little prayer, apparently, or such as there is, all about seeking things from God for ourselves.

All the energy, all the ambition focus not on what God wants to do, but what people are seeking themselves. Profit in life, power, prestige, possessions.

[44 : 24] And so James goes through his letters systematically applying these diagnostic tests and eliciting multiple signs, multiple symptoms. And the picture is not a pretty one.

Over and over, we see it's not love of neighbor as yourself that fulfills the royal law in Scripture, as he calls it in chapter 2, verse 8, the mark of the Spirit of God alive truly in the human heart, but rather what is shown is the reverse.

The deficiency of love towards God's people that betrays that divided loyalty to God himself. Enmity to God, not emulating God.

It's a pretty grim picture. Thankfully, not at all like churches today, certainly not like us or anyone in our church. Our hearts aren't like that, are they? We wouldn't be worldly in our attitude in this church, caring more about some people than others, cherishing the prestigious, seeking recognition from those that we think are important, whoever we think that is, but having no time for those who are not really worth much.

We aren't tainted by worldly arrogance, are we, in our life, in our plans for our futures or for our children's. We're not constantly changing facing the best schools, best universities, pushing for the most important careers, mapping out a great future in the professions or in our businesses or whatever it is.

[45 : 59] If you're a new student who's come to university, those things are far from your mind, aren't they? No, you're saying what James says here. Lord, if you will, I will be alive tomorrow because my life is just a mist.

It's all dependent on you, so help me to do today what's really important and not have ambitions in these things. And none of us in this congregation would have selfish ambitions for leadership.

None of us would be desperate to have more of a voice in what goes on and what's said in the church, shaping things our way, influencing people our ways. None of us are like that. None of us is jealous of others. None of us here is jealous of those who have more notice from others than we do.

Thank God for that. It's such a relief, isn't it? Thank God that we can pray wholeheartedly with that man in Jesus' parable in Luke 18.

God, we thank you that we are not like other churches. But of course, there are, and I suppose we know other churches who might need these things, who might need James' searching teaching, who might need his rebuke and medicine.

[47 : 05] Pity them. So just try to imagine, I know it's very hard, but try to imagine what our response ought to be if we were even a tiny little bit like that ourselves.

I know it's for talking sake only. I know I'm being silly, but just try to imagine. I suppose if we could ever be like that, the response sought to be like that other man in Jesus' parable.

God, be merciful to us sinners. for Jesus' everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exhausted.

And that's what James, the servant of Jesus, says, yes, that's exactly the medicine that you need for that sickness. God opposes the pride, but gives grace to the humble.

See, James doesn't just reveal the pathological sin in the human heart by forcing us to recognize the peripheral symptoms that manifest in the Christian church. He wants to show that there is a profound solution, a profound solution that will bring back wandering hearts, that will save divided hearts from death.

[48 : 24] It's a powerful solution, but it's often a painful one. The power is infinite. It lies, James says, in the grace of God and in the God of grace.

He promises more grace, says chapter 4, verse 6, more grace than all that pathological sin. God gives generously, he says, in chapter 1, verse 5, unreservedly, without reproach.

It's a powerful solution, but it is a painful one. It is a deeply humbling one because we have to ask, as chapter 1, verse 6 says, we have to ask without literally dividedness.

God gives grace, he gives more grace, he gives more grace, and he is more full of grace than I can possibly be of sin. He gives unreservedly, but James says, we must ask unreservedly.

What does that mean? Well, look again as we finish at chapter 4, verse 7. What does it mean to ask for that grace unreservedly?

[49 : 36] Well, it means unreservedly submitting to God, doesn't it? In humble trust. Turning away from the devil. Turning decisively to the Lord, verse 8.

cleansing your hands, cleansing your heart of sin in your acts towards others and in your attitude to God. Putting away all of that two-timing of God and turning wholeheartedly to him.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you, says verse 10. That's the promise of God's grace. It is the power to save and the means of that grace.

The way and the only way to know that grace as a power in our lives is to receive and to go on receiving what James calls the life-giving word. That's the word that he says in chapter 1, verse 18.

Brought us to birth, brought us forth as new creatures in Christ. And it's the same word alone that will go on bringing us back from wandering, from disaster, from danger, back to life, receive with meekness, he says in chapter 1, verse 21, the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

[50 : 59] It can be hard, very hard, submitting meekly to that cleansing therapy, can't it? Think of the eye drops that sting.

Think of the iodine or the antiseptic that so burns. Think of a painful massage. I used to go and see an osteopath. It really killed me. But he would ask, is it sore?

Is it painful? And I'd go, yes. And he would say, but is it good pain? And it was. It was pain, but it was healing pain.

So studying James, friends, may be uncomfortable for us, may even be painful for us, but it is good pain. It's healing pain. James says it's saving pain.

James is the servant of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. He speaks his words, which is divine wisdom for all then and now who are so prone to dangerous wondering.

[52 : 04] So just in case it's possible that us in our Christian lives, in our Christian church, might have something to learn from such a situation.

Well, let's determine together to help one another to receive with meekness his word which is able to save our souls. Let's pray. He gives more grace.

Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Humble yourselves before the Lord. and he will exalt you. Blessed Lord, who has caused all scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of thy holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our saviour, Jesus Christ.

[53 : 36] Amen. Amen.