

Daily Proverbial, from James, 19 August 2013

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. James 1, verse 1.

Hello once again, my friend. After a few weeks away, it's so good to be back. My time away was spent both working and vacating, recharging in the far north woods of Minnesota known as "God's country." We all need some time away from routine, and I feel blessed to have been able to take some. Blessed enough, in fact, to share in James' introduction by simply saying to you "greetings."

It's funny, you know, how we all like to be greeted. We enjoy a smile, a compliment, an honest "it's so good to see you." None of us likes to be greeted in a sober manner, with stern correction or, worse, rebuke. We much prefer seeing someone with an open handshake and a twinkle in their eye. That's how I tried to be as I traveled the northern Midwest. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't. Some of the folks I met were downright cold. Perhaps they had been through sobriety, correction and rebuke; it isn't my place to judge.

Yet here we are, greeting each other in the same way as James did. Here's where I have to make a confession: I struggle with James. For a long time, I didn't much like him. His short book is full of stern encouragement. A surface-reading of it would make you think James tells us to work out our own salvation, that (to quote my wife) he is sort of 'poopy.'

How wrong could I be?

The author of the book is, most likely, the physical brother of Jesus. Several James' are mentioned in the New Testament, and this one is likely the one who grew up as Jesus' younger brother in the home of Mary and Joseph. Imagine how tough it must have been, to grow up knowing your older brother was different, special, chosen. Walk around in James' measured shoes for awhile. He must have always felt out of place. Like the guy who runs the bases after the star player bats him home. For a long time, I read James and really didn't care for his tone, how he brings me to task, how he tells me things I don't understand or don't want to hear.

And to begin all that, to a bunch of strangers, to God's elect scattered all over the globe, James simply says "greetings." Hello; from my heart, it's good to be with you in this way. Blessed be your life. Jesus, my brother, sends His love.

Over the next few words, we'll spend some time talking, questioning, and praying together. As we undertake this together, I pray that you have an open, rested heart. To you, with my friend, James, I send warmest greetings.

Jesus, brother of mine, thank you for your greeting love, for your patient forgiveness, and for the rest that is your peace.

Do you struggle with genuinely greeting others?

How have you misjudged people?

What is Jesus telling you in His words today?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 20 August 2013

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. James 1, verse 2.

This is a repeating theme within the Christian faith: consider your trials to be joy. Rather than run away, Paul sang hymns after being beaten. Instead of being trampled by troubles, Peter used them as a way to give glory to God. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek. Now, Jesus' brother, James, tells us that we should consider adversity to be a joy.

It's a very Michael Jordan kind of thing, ya know. You've seen them: the Tweets or commercials or motivational posters from Michael or other athletes telling us that it won't be easy but it will be worth it. Nothing good ever comes easy, and hard work pays off in the end. Ditto our warriors, who come through literal hell so they can return home to those who love them. Find joy in adversity

The key is, of course, Jesus. Only faith in Jesus makes us able to consider trial to be a blessing. Only faith in Jesus ennoble the ignoble, making something contemptible into something beautiful. Have you ever really considered the brutality of the cross? It wasn't just an executioner's tool: it was an instrument of torture and humiliation and S L O W execution, designed to brutalize the punished while sending a warning to those who saw him. Jesus chose it. He could have run from it. He could have ended time and stopped the torture. He could have said "no further." No, He chose it. He chose it to make noble what could not be made noble by anyone else.

He chose the brutality of the cross so that you and I could look at the small brutalities in our lives and consider them to be joy when compared to faith in Him who chose to love and die for us. Is it any wonder, then, that those who want to follow Him would consider it pure joy to suffer so that He might be increased? People of James' time couldn't have imagined the kinds of trials you and I face in our post-modern world...just as we have a hard time imagining theirs. Those people of long ago had the same 24 hours in every day that we have. They ate, clothed themselves, worked, purchased, cried, hurt, laughed, and every other emotion we ever had only they did it in the Roman world of antiquity instead of the Roman Empire-like world of today. And in it all, James – because of Jesus – tells us to consider everything that happens to us to be full of joy. Amazing.

Jesus of joy, I praise you for the joy You are in my life. Help me to see the trials today as small obstacles compared to your bottomless love.

1 What trials try to pull you away from following Jesus?

2 Do you see obstacles as impossible roadblocks or setbacks that you can overcome in faith?

3 When was the last time you found yourself in a tough spot but then found yourself contemplating the cross of Jesus instead?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 21 August 2013

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. James 1, verses 2 and 3.

So, here, in verse 3, is the thought that completes verse 2. James doesn't want us just to suffer so we can be happy about it: he wants it to build character.

James is Paul is you is me. If you know your Romans, you know of Romans 5 (my wife's favorite part of Scripture) where the apostle Paul tells us how suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope, which never disappoints us because it's not the wishing well hope we think it is. Jesus' hope is a promise and a guarantee. Paul uses Romans 5 to remind us that, through the trials of life, suffering teaches us to persevere, which is a stepping stone to living out Jesus' guarantee of living forever.

James and Paul were contemporaries, early fathers of the church. James ministered to Jews and new followers of The Way around Jerusalem; Paul went everywhere else. Their letters were written at approximately the same time in history even as they were written many physical miles apart (and to different audiences). Knowing all that, do you find it as amazing as I do that their verses segue so beautifully off each other? Suffering – the testing of our faith – produces perseverance. Perseverance – learning endurance in our faith, in our lives – leads to hope. Jesus' hope; the sure-fire guarantee not the "I hope gas falls to \$2.00 a gallon" type of winsome wish.

Just like Paul, James tells us to rejoice in our sufferings because rejoicing in them is what Jesus does. Don't be down about things: get up and rejoice! In the middle of real suffering that you have, look at how God still blesses you. As you're suffering, consider all the ways the Lord builds you up, strengthens you, helps you to overcome. As you endure and overcome, think about how Jesus did the same and did so to the glory of the Father. Be thankful for all God teaches us in this mixed-up thing we make of life. Most of all, rejoice because rejoicing brings smiles, contentment, satisfaction, and peace.

Consider our sufferings to be pure joy because a first-fruit of suffering for Jesus is Jesus' peace. No Jesus, no peace; know Jesus, know peace. Peace is not the absence of conflict, but is the fruit of victory. Jesus' victory leads to the only real peace there is in this crazy world. James tells us to rejoice in our suffering so that Jesus' peace may reign.

Lord of peace, thank you for the trials and suffering in my life today. Thank you for building me up, for sustaining me, for correcting and teaching me. Thank you for paying all of my debt, and for Your peace. Reign in my life today.

Are you suffering?

In what ways can you submit your suffering to Jesus as thanks to Him?

How do you feel peace?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 22 August 2013

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1, verse 4.

Perseverance: we've spent several days discussing it. It's learning endurance in faith. It's learning to endure in life. Successful people learn how to persevere. I think that, more than overcoming, conquering, or mastering something, successful people learn how to persevere. They learn how to bend without breaking, how to give without giving up or giving in to the travails of the world. More than any other quality, successful people, I think have learned to understand what is needed to persevere.

Do you remember "The Right Stuff?" The Tom Wolfe book that was made into a movie about the early US space program? 'The right stuff' was an ephemeral quality in Chuck Yeager, Scott Crossfield, and the Mercury 7 astronauts. It wasn't just bravado (or bravery), knowledge, training, endurance, or physicality. The early space pioneers persevered. They had to learn to be built up in adversity and danger so that they could succeed in conquering the last great frontier.

James' success was more than just this yet he had 'the right stuff,' too. Yes, he was martyred for his faith in his brother, Jesus. Through it, he was successful because he understood what God had spoken through him: perseverance in the faith completes mankind. James says that, more than anything physical, when we surrender to Jesus, we learn to persevere, and this is all we need to be whole.

Think about it. Faith is calming. It centers us and provides us with reference in the true north of Christ. Even in the worst adversities of life, we can remain calm knowing that He has our back. Faith is knowledge, because faith in God is the foundation of all knowledge and reason. Human reason is meaningless without the knowledge that the Triune God created us to know His love. Without knowing God's love, there is no reason; life is simply brutal chaos.

Faith is what grows us. It plants the seed of wisdom that is essential to becoming a seasoned adult. Faith encourages us, teaching us to love through our hardest moments and to expand that the love that is Jesus to others, which is our primary calling in life. Faith is our mirror, showing us our failings while teaching us how to recover from them.

To live out the right stuff of faith, we must persevere. Sometimes we let the world make it tough for us to cling to Jesus. When we don't, we stumble, we fail, we embrace the negative. Yet through it, Jesus is always saying "abide in me." Abide...endure...persevere. As the King of Kings now lives forever, He is the ultimate expression of real success. To have faith is to persevere.

Persevering Lord, teach me to humbly persevere in You. Grow me into the mature follower You want me to be, and help me to always have my heart open to where You're leading me today.

Where are you struggling with becoming mature in your faith walk?

What do you do to persevere?

How is Jesus calling you today to persevere, mature, and grow?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 26 August 2013

^ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. James 1, verse 5.

Today is my son's last first day of school. Today starts my son's senior year. You know the drill: prepped with school supplies, a good night's sleep, get up, mom and dad make a good breakfast, take the traditional picture, send him off, we have a small cry, and then we're off into our days as well.

I won't give away too many family secrets, but I'll proudly confess that junior year was a resounding success for Son Bull. He passed all of his classes without tutoring or coaching. He wrestled successfully and competitively. He kicked addiction. He changed his living patterns, his set of friends, and his outlook. We were so proud of him for all he did, and today we send him back to school one last time so that he can repeat, and maybe improve on, last year's success.

Over the summer, he toured on his third consecutive Spoke Folk mission. If you aren't familiar with Spoke Folk, it's a touring evangelism and biking troupe for young people. Young folks of high school and college age bike from one town to another, give a Christian-themed performance, spend the night at a host church, then get up early the next morning to do it again. My youngest daughter has done two tours, in New York and Maryland. But it is our son who has made it his own, touring the last three summers in Illinois, Michigan, and now Minnesota.

This year saw real life changes in his life because of his junior year success, but mostly because he let Jesus in his heart and let Him really take over. This year, son was out in the crowds being a friend to new believers, mentoring young kids, and 'bringing it.' At the end of the tour, I took him fishing for a week and saw first-hand how he really internalized the Jesus experience.

Today, at the start of his last school year, his mom and I are praying that he continues to walk the Jesus walk. At the start of senior year, we pray the advice of James, that our son will continue to ask God to generously give him wisdom, leadership, and inspiration. We pray for his success, and for having his heart broken for Jesus every day so that the real young man we love may shine through for all. God bless you, Dillon Terry, for all the hard work you've done these last 12 years, for starting your strong race to the finish line, and for becoming the mighty man of God He made you to be.

Lord of wisdom, Your love is the fount of all knowledge and reason. Help me to do my best for You today and in this school year to come.

When was the last time you asked Jesus for His wisdom in your life?

Are you tired of always working alone?

Do you measure success in just what you do, get or achieve, or do you also measure it by recognizing what God did for you today and how He's leading you where He wants you to be?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 27 August 2013

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

Whether we intend to do it or not, it's a sin to not trust Jesus. Not trusting God, worrying, obsessing, letting ourselves be unsure, doubting that God 'can:' all sins. All worry is doubt. When you worry, you're placing your anxiety over Jesus' ability to guide you through anything. It isn't being proactive; it isn't prior planning; it isn't leaning forward: it's saying to Him who spoke creation into being, "I know better than you." Slice it any way you want but the lesson always comes back to the fact that worrying is a sin.

Take it from me because I know first-hand. Some of the people closest to me are real worriers. I was raised to worry about things, especially things out of my control. I learned it as a child. When I was a teenager, it was one of the factors that made me socially awkward and led me to withdraw from friendship circles that might have made those tough years much easier. Fast forward into my marriage and family life and constant worrying helped to cause divisions. Worry about the job, the family, my wife, the kids, tomorrow, my dreams, my needs, my, my, me.

It has taken years of talking and even therapy and counseling to let go of this destructive habit. I had to learn many behaviors and things that a better, smarter man might have learned much sooner. Looking back, I wish I had read up on James many years ago. His words nailed my worries to the cross. When we worry, we deny God the place in our lives to guide us and set us right. When we're caught up in that, we can't see how vulnerable we are to doubt, reaction (instead of pro-action), and being swayed by things that may not be right for the moment. By any other name, those are called "sins."

Here's one of those times when James seems to bring us up short, but he's speaking from the heart: Jesus' heart. Jesus asks us to cast aside our worries and let Him do the heavy lifting. He is to be our confidante; He is to be our burden-bearer. All we are to do is take the leap of faith and trust him.

It surprises me that contemporary psychologists haven't 'discovered' this miracle cure for anxiety. Then again, maybe not so much. We're always trying to find ways to fix things on our own. Is it surprising, then, that instead of fixing (or even understanding) them, we only complicate things more? The better way is to open up to Jesus, tell Him what's on our hearts, and ask for His help. He always helps.

Worry-free Jesus, take my worries, anxieties, doubts, and worldly cares. Take them away and guide me in Your better way.

What things do you worry about?

Why do you think you're in this all alone?

If it's been awhile since you prayed for Jesus to take away your worries, give it a try now.

Daily Proverbial, from James, 28 August 2013

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. James 1, verses 6-8.

James is talking about the people with genuine doubts. I once knew a man who said he could never believe in God because he doubted the whole idea of original sin. I know people who 'have a problem' with the creation account and, when you dig, have more than a few other prides and questions about Jesus as well. I know folks who openly reject Christ because 'He allows all this bad stuff to happen.'

James is definitely talking about them. In this one case, I'll judge: such outlooks are unhealthy. Such views are toxic. We need to flee from them because they can pull us away from God's straight and narrow. James is talking about such things.

And us.

James is also talking about you and me. We DO doubt; we do worry. Got skin? Got sin. Every time you or I fail to put our trust in Jesus, we walk in sin. We do it by second guessing. We sin by relying on ourselves and our gut instincts first instead of asking Jesus "what are You telling me here" first. We are like those waves on the sea that ebb and flow but never seem to go anywhere...except that the sea is cold, deep, and seemingly endless...just like our path in sin. In that condition, we break down. As James says, we are unstable and double-minded, still denying God His chosen and desirable path to help us for His Kingdom's sake.

Yet that path isn't bottomless. When we rely on ourselves instead of Christ, we can sink. Eventually, we hit bottom. Even the Titanic sits somewhere, decaying at the bottom of the deep. That can be us. For our own good – so that we might learn to come back to God and ask first of Him – God can turn us over to the fruit of our sins. Dismay, disaster, depression, cascading consequences, selfish indulgence that never leads to satisfaction: are these better than the path of walking in Jesus? Better think quickly because those things await all of us who reject Him.

Dependence on our sins is not independence. Real freedom is found only in Christ, and the better way is simpler. A friend of mine tweeted today "Love God, love people." It starts with that. Love Jesus by asking Him "what are you telling me? What do you want me to do?" Do it in things large and small in your life today. Open the dialogue. You'll find He's already talking with you.

My Lord my leader, guide me in Your path today. Help me to be stable in You, to always consult You first, and to walk where You are leading me.

What are you worried about today?

Why are you worried about it? What's causing it?

What are you prepared to do?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 29 August 2013

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. James 1, verse 9.

Some of the proudest moments of my life are when I was humbled for God. There were moments on mission trips, moments when I felt moved by Him to do things I wouldn't ordinarily do at home. One time in Africa, I felt so despondent and broken that I knew in my heart I had nobody to rely on but Jesus. When I found Jesus was breaking my heart, I also found that He quickly began to fill it. I'm proud of those moments; really am. It's not an arrogant, cocky, self-confident kind of pride. Instead, it's thankful, glad to have been a part of it, understanding God's purpose for me in those moments, and happy to have let Him do what He did through me.

Then there is last night. I went to the Minnesota State Fair. Don't get me wrong: I love Texas, and I really love the Texas State Fair. If you want to do it right, though, you simply have to go to a fair in the Midwest, and the fair here in Minnesota is one of the best. The food, the rides, the rodeo, the crowds, the bargains, the free stuff: I love it all. Most of all, I love walking through the 4H exhibits. I'm constantly amazed by the arts, crafts, and foods that 4H children make. They are intricate, very difficult, and original. Quilts, foods, woodwork, art, photography, different crafts: they're all made by kids.

The things on display there are the best of the best; you can tell by all the ribbons. Yet I imagine the kids who make them do so in humble circumstances. They're from small towns all over the state, and they do their best to make things that will be judged among the finest in their craft. One way of looking at it is that these kids are using their God-given talents to humbly do their best, making things in which they can take rightful pride.

In a way, their handiwork is Jesus' handiwork. Those fancy ribbons are recognition for the humble work of humble people, but, in a way, they're recognition for the good work done by Jesus.

That should be our goal too: to win a ribbon for our humility. We should let Jesus speak through us by using our talents quietly, patiently, humbly, and in a dignified way so that our best, our Jesus light, can shine through. The longer I live, the more I find that the things of which I'm most proud aren't things at all, but Jesus moments. Contentment in my family; smiles on kids; the feeling of a job well done; knowing that I'm loved. The things of which I'm proudest are the moments when Jesus is most active.

My Lord, I'm proud to follow You. I'm proud of the faith You grow in me. Help me to humbly live it. Thank You.

What are you proud of?

Do you have pride in things, or in people, or in what Jesus does in you?

If you aren't proud of that, what are you prepared to do?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 30 August 2013

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. James 1, verse 12.

Please permit me to skip ahead a few verses to commemorate a milestone for someone special to me.

Today is my wife, Kimberly's, final day on her job. She has spent the last few years working as a director at a private pre-school in North Texas. Years ago, she dreamed and planned to work in a position like this one, so when the opportunity presented itself, she quickly rose up to apply. Every job has its challenges, and every job is demanding, but I don't know how many people looked closely behind the scenes to see just what she has done to serve in the position that, for her, successfully concludes today.

Kim is leaving her job to begin a new phase of her – and our – life. By this time next week, she will be overseas, in Romania, working at a mission there run by a friend of ours. She'll only be gone for a little under two weeks, but what she'll do in that time remains unknown. The reason? She's simply going overseas to serve. Serve in whatever capacity the mission there needs at the moment. Washing dishes, working with kids, talking with students, cleaning a street, reading, a good cry, hugs for those who need them, anything: her only goal is to serve.

After her return, she'll be helping me to publicize my new book. We'll be doing book signings in Indiana, Texas, and possibly Colorado. In-between that, she's volunteering at a local MOPS group, and doing background work on the vineyard we're looking to open in 2015. Hopefully, she'll stop herself enough to take a breath, relax, and revel in where she is.

All this is possible because of God. That, of itself, is a miracle. Even more amazing to me right now, though, is that someone, especially my Hunnie, would do it. It's not that she couldn't; I can think of nobody more eminently qualified. No, the amazing thing is that she would; in a world of "me first," it's so rare. In every job she's ever had, she's made it into much more than she found it. It was that way at the pre-school, at the avionics company where she worked prior, in the church office where she worked before, and in our home. Along the way, she had to persevere. It's no coincidence that Romans 5 is Kim's favorite Scripture because she has learned to trust the real hope of Jesus through suffering, perseverance and the best character I know.

At the conclusion of her life my stunning wife will receive a crown of glory from the Lord of Lords for living a life of service. Service as a nanny, mom, wife, worker, companion, follower, and friend of God. All of her life she has worked for a moment such as this, and thanks be to Jesus that He made it arrive here and now. Her crown is coming some day, but I applaud her with everything I am today.

From the bottom of my flawed and sometimes selfish heart, all I can say to my wife is that I love and admire you. I'm thankful for all you've done in your work, and so proud to stand by your side while you exit your current job with your head held high. The long hours, tedious days, early mornings, and sometimes endless downloading of frustrations are all worthwhile because you've served so honorably and so well. You're going off on your first mission, and for all of us it is a change. But it's a good change, and a wonderful gift of honor to be the partner, lover, husband, and best friend to such a selfless servant of Christ.

Thank you, my Hunnie, for all you have done, for providing for us, for setting an example that all of us can aspire to, and for serving Jesus faithfully, with dignity and energy, and with courageous perseverance. Thank you for enriching the lives of all of us around you, and especially all those kids at the school. Godspeed your trip next week, and I can't wait until you get back home to see where God leads us tomorrow.

Lord, thank you for this wonderful woman in my life. Keep and guide her safely on this journey, and bring her home safely to serve You as You'll have us in the exciting years to come.

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Daily Proverbial, from James, 4 September 2013

But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. *James 1, verse 10.*

Contrast this with verse 9, where James praises the glory of humility. Is it hard to picture the familial brother of Jesus being sarcastic? Elijah used sarcasm; Job's friends were sarcastic; Paul was sarcastic; absorb a little sarcasm and irony from James. Perhaps you are sarcastic; I know I am...yeah, whatever!

Seriously.

So, last night I was helping my wife pack for her long trip. She leaves today for Romania, so please pray for her, for the mission lead, Sarah, who's already over there, for Lindsay and the other mission workers who are training in Constanta, and just for those around them. She's excited about going, nervous (in a good way), and proud to be going to serve God in whatever way He wants to use her.

God bless her.

Anyway, last night I was helping her pack and I was in my element. I know how to pack a suitcase; I do it nearly every week, and I can have a week's worth of clothes and necessities rolled, stowed, and wrinkle-free in a suitcase in about 10 minutes. This is my thing; I do it well. I felt sort of anxious when she packed different than I would, but, you know, not my call. Ok, whatever.

God save us from that kind of pride.

Then there is my son. We're a week into the school year – senior school year, no less – and this alien seems to have possessed my son. This is my son, the great kid who worked all summer in the mall, then biked 300 miles to share the word of Jesus, then went fishing in the north woods; this is the kid I was bragging about only a week ago. I don't know what demon has possessed him this week but he's sullen, sarcastic, angry, and not pleasant to be around. This week, he has a teenage chip on his shoulder that makes Mount Rushmore look like an anthill. We're going to be spending a lot of time together in the next few weeks, and I am looking forward to relieving whatever burr is under his skin. Whatever it is, he's cocky about it. Cocky, angry, and proud.

God save us from THAT kind of pride, too.

In fact, God save us from any kind of pride that detracts from submissive pride in what Jesus is doing in and through us. It's a great thing to be proud in the Lord, but it is a path to death to be proud of ourselves apart from Him. The rich folks James speaks of are doomed because they put their faith in the world, in their stuff. Do we do the same thing?

Jesus, break my pride. Shatter me, take away my guilt, and build me up in Your better purposes..

Does your pride keep you apart from Jesus?

When you're proud of something, are you thankful to Jesus for it as well?

Where are you a work in progress?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 5 September 2013

For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. *James 1, verse 11.*

We remember the great titans of industry; Rockefeller, Carnegie, Mellon, etc. We remember famous leaders of principle; Washington, Lincoln, Reagan. We remember famous people and celebrities, great athletes, those who sparkle and shine, those who make an impression. Riddle me this: without Googling it, can you tell me who was the mayor of Cleveland in 1916? Or the members of the Elko, Nevada school board in 1968? Can you tell me who oversaw the last time your city hall was painted, or who organized the local Veterans Day parade five years ago?

We think the world goes around because of the decisions of the 'best and brightest,' but I've long held that it is the millions of things we the people do every day that really make the world go around. Lately, though, I've seen the flaw in my thinking and need to back that up a step. The world goes around because of God; duh! But when you back up to gain perspective, perhaps you, too, will see that 'things happen' not because some president or celebrity says something but, instead, because God is active in the decisions of people who do amazing things. Sure, the celebrities, politicians, and the wealthy have their moments in the sun; history remembers flashy diamonds while forgetting that diamonds are nothing but pressured coal. It is Jesus, leading our actions every day, that makes things tick.

Our world doesn't care whether we believe or not, but when we don't believe, we're set against God. Is there anything wise in that? We can work for all the worldly wealth and status that our talents can accrue but, in the end, we leave the world alone and stand before God: He who gave us our talents for His Kingdom's glory, not for just our self-improvement. We can die on a moment's notice, rich or poor, and that same fate awaits.

The only real wealth one can accrue in this life isn't wealth of the world, or the kind we can store in a bank. Jesus is the only wealth that is, that lasts, that can carry us through the terror of that fate awaiting. We were meant to live; we were created and born to live. Rockefeller and Carnegie found this out. So did George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, and the others. Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks (both of them), Notorious BIG, and all the famous names of the past learned it. The only real riches that can last are the Words of Jesus of Nazareth. They are the key to life forever, forgiveness here, and peace that never ends.

Lord, please forgive me for the times when I've trusted the ways of the world instead of the Word of Your heart.

Where do you put your trust: in your talents (and your wealth) or in He who gave you the talents (and the wealth)?

Who are your role models? Who do you idolize?

You can read the words of Christ yourself. What are they saying to you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 6 September 2013

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. James 1, verse 13.

It's SO tempting to give into the desire to blame God when bad things happen. "If there is a God, then why does He let so many bad things happen?" "I can't believe God is doing this to me." "God made me this way." You and I, even if we say we know that all that Jesus says is true, we still live in moments of doubt. I'm ashamed to admit it but it's true. Sometimes I've had thoughts like these.

Does God put us in situations to test us? Anyone with a knowledge of both Scripture and his own life must answer yes. Does God allow evil in the world? Here's the surprise. No, He doesn't. We do.

Yep. It's on us. God is pure love, pure justice, pure mercy, pure truth. There is no evil in Him or about Him. Jesus, who created everything using only His words, has not a single speck of evil in His person. Zip, zero, nada. It wasn't God's choice to follow evil: it was man's. Does God tolerate it? Again, if you're honest with yourself you have to admit He does. But does God allow it? Tap into that same honesty and you must conclude He doesn't. God cannot be in union with evil. He can't be joined with it, in unity with it, or be of it in any way. If He did, He wouldn't be holy. Yet we choose evil every time we say 'no' in independence or defiance. He doesn't desire evil for us in any fashion, which is why He constantly offers us mercy and an exit strategy that He Himself put in motion.

I'm watching "The Stand" while my wife is overseas. It's one of my favorite books, and one of the few Stephen King books that was made into a tolerable movie (miniseries, actually). If you don't know the story, it's basically a battle of good versus evil. A flu epidemic wipes out most of humanity, and then God uses those left to make their stand against an imp of hell. It's apocalyptic stuff. God gives those who follow His directions the ability to stand against evil, allowing their free choices and always offering a path home in mercy.

Isn't that how it is with you and me as well? Sometimes we are tempted, but when we honestly appraise it, it isn't God doing the tempting. It's the deceiver, and we choose to listen. God allows us to bear the burdens of our choices, even those that result in grave sins. Yet He always puts in front of us the hope of Jesus that He secured on that Calvary tree.

Lord, I don't understand Your ways or even Your will sometimes. But I accept them both and follow You. Help me to stand against the evil that plagues me today.

Have you ever doubted God?

What was Jesus telling you in those moments?

Where are you being called to make a stand?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 9 September 2013

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. *James 1, verses 13-15.*

To do a little recap, God doesn't tempt us. We give into sin on our own. It isn't something God forces us to do even if He allows it to happen, or even if He places us in a situation to test us. Sin is a choice and a process. I'm sure some social scientist could explain the 4 steps of sin but let me simplify it because, well, I'm sort of simple-minded.

We see. We desire. We self-absorb. We sin.

Seeing is believing. We see something that we want. We sense it, think of it, consider it, contemplate it. What the mind or the eyes behold, they take in. It becomes something on our radar screen.

Once that happens, the "it" becomes a viable option, so we desire. If you're keen on warning bells, this is the step where they should start to ring. This is the step before we sleep with someone else, before we steal the necklace, before we tell the lie, before we pass on the rumor. We desire whatever it is that has occupied our senses because desire is an elusive, addictive drug. We're born addicted; our nature is sinful, our disposition to it is already there. Now it's on our mind, on our heart. What comes out of the heart is what can make us sinful.

Desire accomplished, we self-absorb it. Pride comes into play and suddenly our desire is self-justifying. "I deserve it; what about me; it's not so bad." We don't see the line in the sand that we are stepping across because "it" matters more than the line.

Those three steps done, we sin. We take the plunge. Off come the clothes, into the pocket goes the jewelry, we speak out of turn, we whisper in someone's ear. Whatever the sin, we do it. We own it.

At what point in all this was Jesus tempting us? Any honest assessment has to conclude He doesn't. We sin; we do it. Jesus is there urging us, loving us to turn away or, sin-done, to turn back to Him and let Him fix our hearts.

The saddest part of it all is that we don't consider this a death sentence...but it is. Each sin is a separation from God's holiness; each one is fatal. Death is separation from Jesus, and each sin separates us more and more from Him. We can stop the process, but only He can remove the guilt of our sins.

Jesus, search me deeply and lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil.

What sin are you dealing with right now?

Where are you in the process?

Where are you being called to make a stand?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 10 September 2013

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. James 1, verses 16-17.

Your children. Your saintly mom, dad, or grandparents. That unexpected bonus. Babies laughing. Not running out of gas on a crowded highway. Cold beer on a hot summer evening. Christmas morning gifts under the tree. Sunday dinner with your family. James says that EVERY good and perfect gift is from Jesus. All of them. Every one of them that you or I can think of, and all that we don't. It's easy to believe that good things that please us come from a loving God. He loves us. He died to save us. He constantly provides for us.

Here are a few things we might not consider good; what are they? Parents grounding their kids after the kids skip school. The upbraiding you get for not turning in a report on time. Getting denied credit when you want a new car but are financially unstable. A disease that gives you time to reflect before you die. Getting fired. An argument with your husband. Your wife leaving you after she catches you cheating. A speeding ticket. Death in the family: are these good and perfect gifts from above?

You know the answer.

A couple of days ago I finished reading a really good book, another Stephen King novel. "11/22/63" is about what you would think a novel of that title would be: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In the book, the main character befriends a local tavern owner who shows him a portal that allows time travel. The tavern owner then implores the young man to travel back in time to prevent the assassination. I won't give away the story, but there's a theme that segues off these verses. Even the awful things in life are gifts from God. Even something as catastrophic as political murder has consequences, downstream effects on others. The main character finds this out and is given a choice about what to do. Consequences are gifts from Jesus.

Whether we know it or not, you and I have choices about what we do, and even those choices are gifts from God above. We can either look at all that He provides for us as blessings and gifts, or we can turn them around and convince ourselves that it just is never enough. No matter what we do, whether we realize or like it or not, Jesus is the only real constant in this universe He made, and everything about Him is only good. All that we have, are, do, think, or want is a gift from Him, even the things we think are bad.

Lord, thank you for all the gifts you give to me. I don't deserve them, but thank you for them anyway and blessed be Your name.

What gifts have recently come into your life?

How do you feel about unexpected gifts?

What is Jesus telling you in this?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 11 September 2013

*He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.
James 1, verse 19.*

Firstfruits: have you ever considered that word before? It's a churchy word; duh: we're talking about Bible verses! But, seriously, have you really ever noodled that word before?

Think of harvesting fruit. Big, juicy luscious strawberries fresh off the plant. For the first one of the year, you want the most choice. You're the farmer, so you look through your fields and find the very best of your harvest. Perhaps you're having a dinner and you want your guests to have the best. Or, perhaps you've worked all season and you're anticipating how good it will be to finally get something from all your hard work.

God wants your best. God thinks you're His best.

Think of first-born children. In all societies, the first-born is a special child. Monarchical societies bestow unique status on the first-born. The first child in the family is the ground-breaker, the trendsetter, the one who gets all your undivided attention, and the one who sets the precedents for all the children to follow. All kids are special, but there's something undeniably unique and special about having your first-born.

God wants your special. He sees you as special.

Think of first things first, a very Stephen Covey kind of idea. Whether it's your day, taking kids to school, building a moon rocket, or how to make the peace, you put first things first. Principles matter. What is most important is what becomes the primary focus. Critical tasks are priority and are done first or receive attention due to them. As you progress, you measure that progress against those first principles. In this way, first principles become the standards to which we adhere and by which we measure.

God wants us to know that He considers each of us to be firstfruits. He wants to be the firstfruits in our hearts, too.

James tells us that Jesus lived, died, and resurrected so that each of us might be considered bountiful, special, and a priority. We would not be physically reborn to attain this special status in God's eyes. Instead, we would be reborn through the miracle of faith in He who died for us. In humbly grasping that faith, we who are unworthy are made righteous by the only One who could do so. He no longer looks on us as enemies, but instead as the best of His creation. To Jesus, we are special and priority friends, followers, and siblings. To Jesus, we are the best of the harvest. To the God of all eternity, we are the firstfruits of His creation. Let's live like this today.

*Giving Lord, I'm human; I'm not You. Forgive me when I've not treated my faith in You as what is best in life.
Thank You for not treating me the way I've treated You. Help me to change and do better.*

What are the firstfruits of your life?

Who do you revere as special and a priority?

Have you thanked Jesus today for them?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 12 September 2013

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. James 1, verses 19-20.

My project is experiencing delay. We are one year out from implementation of changing codes and practices that have been in place for over forty years and we are experiencing yet more delay. It's true, there are valid business reasons for this; competing projects, unavailability of resources, limited funds, simple overwork, and corporate intransigence. As a project manager, my client is paying me to advise them on how to avert crises, then make plans for how to still complete our tasks. Some days that seems for naught because, when all's said and done, we're being delayed, and every delay increases risk, cost, and the likelihood of problems.

It makes me angry.

Now, it's true that there are situations where it's ok to become angry. Dictionary.com defines anger as "a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong; wrath; ire." Fair enough. Jesus understood anger. He became angry at the moneychangers in the temple. He strongly but angrily defeated Satan in the desert when the devil tempted Him. He rebuked His close friend Peter when Peter displayed ignorance and pride. Anger can be ok. Within us, it's a hard-wired psychological response to a physiological condition. God calls us to tap into that condition on matters that offend Him. When we're confronted with actions, words, etc that are contrary to Jesus, He tells us that it's ok to be angered by them so that constructive action for the betterment of the Kingdom may result. Righteous anger should lead only to righteous following.

Yet James, inspired by his Brother, reminded us of the fine line between human anger and the righteous anger of challenged faith. He reminds us that, even when being righteously angered, we should temper it. Temper the anger with patience and wisdom instead of fueling it with impetuosity. Looking and listening serve to inform and may just open our eyes to things God may be doing in the moment. If there is a need for our anger, that need will only be correctly focused if it is better informed by Him.

Those are good lessons to remember today when I jump back into project meetings. It's not that the customer is always right, especially as regards delaying things that shouldn't be delayed. It's their decision and their prerogative. I serve my customer better by offering choices, outlining consequences, and planning for contingencies. The way to do that is to listen, to keep my mind on first principles, and to pay attention to what God is doing in things that would otherwise have fueled my sinful anger.

Lord Jesus, teach me more to be angry only at the things that anger You. Remind me, I ask, to listen, watch, and learn to better be led by You.

Is your anger on a tripwire?

What things anger you?

Is your anger a reaction or is it righteous?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 13 September 2013

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. James 1, verse 21.

I never realized that my tripwire temper was morally filthy.

My son and I watched "The Exorcist" the other day and it had been years since I had seen it. I had forgotten the stark contrasts between Ellen Burstyn's 12 year old innocent girl and the evil demon who possessed her. The moral filth that spewed from the mouth of the demon was much more than just anger.

But, today, James is telling us that our anger is the same. When I get angry, I'm evil. Yes, you heard it: evil. Not upset, not ticked off: evil. James equates that anger to the moral filth that you and I see every day. Torture porn, chemical weapons attacks, murdering little children, the very worst of skid row: we're no better. You and I are guilty of moral filth when we go to sleep angry at someone, or hold life-long grudges, or refuse forgiveness. Whenever I lose my temper, I'm guilty of spreading evil moral filth.

Have a good weekend thinking that think.

It's not just James. The words come from the top. Jesus Himself said that someone who is angry has committed murder in his heart; see Matthew 5:22. If you don't believe me, believe James. If you don't agree with James, take it up with the Man Upstairs. The words are His.

Along with those words are the way out. Notice how James doesn't even finish the sentence of law before he offers Christ's gospel remedy. When we humbly accept the word planted in us, Christ saves us. He saved us once for all, yet we accept that salvation again and again because we keep messing up again and again. The cure for our anger is Jesus' patient love. The remedy for all evil is Jesus' love. The solution for all moral filth that springs from us is Jesus' love. It's not some Pollyanna-ish wish: it's a real and living medicine. Jesus' forgiveness always turns us away from our sins. His Word always heals; His word always tells of the path we chose.

We can choose His word instead.

In the movie, when all medicine had failed, Ellen Burstyn turned to faith. Her skeptical faith was rewarded through real spiritual warriors who willingly entered into combat. They didn't mince words: they confronted the demon head-on and drove it out. Maybe you or I don't need Max Von Sydow; we'll save that topic for another time. But we passionately need the power that spoke through him to exorcise the evil anger and the moral filth that comes from it.

Lord, I desperately need You in my life right now. I believe in Your patient love and ask you to take away my sin.

What good has sprung from your anger?

Where do you need Jesus' help (trick question)?

What do you intend to do about that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 16 September 2013

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. James 1, verse 22.

I'm impatient, and I don't tolerate 'stupid' very well. If there is something to be done, I prefer to get on it and get it done. Someday, when I get to heaven, I hope to meet James and see if my hunch is right because I suspect that we have a few things in common. Maybe that's why I bristle at this book. I've read and re-read James several time over. On the surface, it seems very works-righteous centered. Don't just say you believe: do something about it. Work out your own salvation. You need to prove to God that you believe in Him, because you need to prove yourself to God. You, you, you; me, me, me.

If you stop here, you're getting the wrong message. That isn't what James is saying at all. The impatient part of me wants to cut to the chase and get busy. I've got it, you see; I understand. Now, it's time to do something with it. James would agree with that, right?

Probably not.

You see, James isn't telling us to do anything to be worthy of Jesus, or curry His favor. He isn't saying that there's anything we need to do to gain salvation because salvation is a free gift of Jesus, something He does for us and not the other way around. We don't have to earn our way into eternity. He's already made it possible for us to be there with 100% of the work already done.

I think one of the ways to read what James is saying is 'don't be a hypocrite.' The gift of being redeemed is too good to keep silent about. We shouldn't say we believe but then disprove it by living unwholesome lives. We need to talk the talk and walk the walk. Faith and living were designed to go together, not just be a suit to wear on Sunday. We're fooling ourselves if we think they weren't.

Another way to interpret James is to hear a call to action. You've heard the word, now go and put it into practice. We put Jesus' word into practice by sharing faith in Him, and the single best way to share faith is to live in such ways as prove to a watching, skeptical world that we believe. That's key: the world is watching. Our friends and family are paying attention. Others are just as hungry for peace as you or me. If you want folks to join the family of believers, then be welcoming by the way you live. Live out Jesus' words to be righteous, understanding, patient, loving and kind so that others will think to themselves "I want to be like that."

Lord, I want to live like You would live. Constantly teach me to follow You closely and live in better ways.

Do you have trouble walking the walk?

Why is that? Are there impediments in your way?

How do these words challenge you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 17 September 2013

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. James 1, verse 23 and 24.

I've been a believer for most of my life. There were a few years, when I was young and impetuous, when I didn't actively practice what I had been raised to believe. I was openly defiant and felt alone. Several times in life, it seemed like I forgot who I was. These days, I look back and feel thankful to have lived through them. Still, even including those years, I can't think of a time when I didn't at least acknowledge that God was real, that He had a Son who died for me, and that He had a purpose for my life.

And yet...

And yet how many times have I said one thing and done another? I can't tell you how many times I've written even these words and then said or done things during the day that were completely contrary to them. Please understand, I say this to explain, not to excuse. There is no excuse for writing one thing in this blog and another thing on my Facebook page. There is no excuse for talking about being controlled and reverent for Jesus, and then acting in ways completely opposite to that.

There's just no excuse but I've made them. It's as if I had immediately forgotten what I looked like. Have you ever done that? The apostle James seems to understand the idea, perhaps he did. Is that so hard to comprehend? How would you have liked to grow up in the same house as Jesus. You knew he was different and that He was God but He was also just your big brother. Wouldn't James have felt a bit, shall we say, inadequate?

How amazing is it, then, that he overcame whatever he may or may not have felt to share these words with us. James is taking his advice to 'do what the word says' a bit farther. The really miraculous thing about it is that this speaks to a miracle of the word. Not only does it motivate: it changes. The Word of God is powerful enough to make us forget the troubles of this world and then to overcome them. It's powerful enough to impart wisdom and forgiveness while washing clean the memory of unwise foolishness. Jesus' Word is powerful enough to help us actually turn from those things that confuse and cloud us. Even those of us who openly profess belief sometimes fall away from the true path.

Jesus, help me to stay on Your path. Help me to always remember where You have me in this life and why.

Have you ever forgotten who you were, where & what you were all about?

Do you ever feel distant from God or confused?

When was the last time you prayed with Jesus and asked Him to help you through this?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 18 September 2013

But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. James 1, verse 25.

Why do you think this is? The short – and correct – answer is “because of Jesus.” Jesus blesses us when we follow His commands. The tough part to understand, though, is that He blesses us whether we follow His commands or not. Why do you think that is? Perhaps I’m asking the wrong question.

Perhaps the better question is “why do we reject this?” We could spend thousands of pages listing the reasons. They’re all sins. Big and small, consequential and inconsequential, they are all sins; things that divide and separate us from God. And yet, despite all our best efforts to continue to divide and separate, Jesus still blesses us each with air, food, shelter, new days, love, friends, you name it.

And have you ever considered freedom? Government doesn’t give freedom. A constitution doesn’t give freedom. Graduating from high school, divorce, a million dollars in the bank, summer vacation, a new car: none of these give freedom. None of these things grant us real liberty, real freedom. Where does your freedom come from?

You guessed it: Jesus. Specifically, Jesus’ law. His law is the source and basis of all freedom. Law giving freedom? You read it right. It is only by knowing our boundaries that we can truly live in ways that give and get everything from the world that we could ever desire. The more intently we study Jesus’ word, then follow Him, the more we realize that all we could ever desire is found in Him.

Think about it. Jesus’ law is not just those Ten Commandments. It isn’t all the stuff that, to non-followers, makes following Christ seem like a drag. Those are only facets, only the left-most boundaries of defining what our acceptable behaviors and norms are. No, the bulk of Jesus’ law is love. Read Matthew 5-7; read the dozens of parables; read the Lord’s Prayer; read 1 Corinthians 13; read John 15:13 and then 15:17. Most especially, if you want to sum up Jesus’ law, remember these words: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

That’s Jesus’ law. The legal code parts that define the outer edges of that law seem harsh, but even they are based in that law. God is holy and He intends for us to be holy. That’s why He gave us the gift of His law. But when dig beyond the surface that is our humanity, you see that God’s law, Jesus’ law, is pure love. And love always blesses us.

Jesus of law, bless me with Your love that I might share it with others.

What do you think of the law?

Do you have any difficulties understanding Jesus’ words? What are they?

Do you sometimes struggle in forgiving others when they do things that hurt you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 19 September 2013

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. James 1, verse 26.

If you're like me, do the Mary Poppins thing before you read any further. This medicine will go down a little easier with a spoonful of sugar. In fact, better open up a whole bag...we might need it.

Repeat after me: (What James says) I'm guilty of this.

See, religion won't save you. Christianity won't save you. Being a good Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, or Baptist won't save you. Memorizing your Bible, following the law, doing good deeds, first doing no harm whatever thou wilt do, the US Constitution, and helping little old ladies across the street won't save you. Jesus saves us: only Jesus. Hold onto that thought for a minute.

Warning: judgment follows. I have only contempt for the holier-than-thou folks who piously stare the rest of us down at church. I have only contempt for the people who insist that theirs is the only true religion, that they know the way to heaven that seems to elude the rest of us. I have only contempt for people who lord their faith over others as if to use it as some kind of weapon or shield against contact with 'those sinners.' Most of all, it's not just me who has contempt for these kinds of people. It's James, who was speaking for his brother, Jesus.

Warning: confession follows. Those folks for whom I have contempt? I'm one of them. I'm guilty of those things that I look down on others for doing. I've done those things, and I'm ashamed of that. When I consider that Jesus has contempt for folks like me who've so misused His great commission, well, I'm even more ashamed of myself and even more thankful for His grace. Without His grace, I would have no option other than terror.

How about you?

Those of us who say one thing but do another have a big problem on our hands. James reminds us that our faith in Jesus is made disreputable, worthless by our hypocrisy. We bring discredit on Him by our words and actions and as long as we willingly wallow in this condition, we're depraved and without hope. Everything we do to make amends is worthless. Dress in your Sunday best, put your hands in the air, shout out along with the praise band wannabe rock stars, and go through all the motions you can: you're out of luck. We're damned. There's nothing YOU or I can do about our condition...

...except repent, turn, and follow. Healing starts with following Jesus and reshaping our lives to do what He says. Repairing the damage can only happen by starting at the cross. Only Jesus saves us.

Lord Jesus, please save me from myself. Teach me to temper my words, to listen and be patient, and to always follow you no matter what.

Do you struggle with keeping your tongue in check?

In what areas have you talked the talk but not walked the walk?

Who do you see when you look in the mirror?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 20 September 2013

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. James 1, verse 26.

Dictionary.com defines 'religion' as "a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects." It also defines it as "a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs."

Please repeat after me: so what?

According to James, even God the Father believes in religion. John Lennon may have imagined a world without religion but God his maker didn't. I won't presume to speak for the Almighty, but I will paraphrase His word. God the Father accepts our beliefs and practices to look after each other and keep from letting ourselves get messed up. God's religion is living his love, NOT in a bunch of traditions.

Again, so what?

Here's a list of good religious practices that won't get you into heaven. Being a devout Southern Baptist. Living like Mother Theresa. Having the ability to quote book and chapter in Scripture. Taking communion every Sunday. Reading every Max Lucado book. Holding your hands in the air when you pray. Refusing to curse, cheat on your spouse, steal, lie, covet, be idolatrous or kill. Without the heart, these good things are worthless.

If you want to practice your religion, your set of beliefs in God, then live it out in how you live your life. Care for each other. Help those who need help. Listen and love.

It's not just you: it's me too. I don't know about you, but all of these are much harder for me to do than they should be. I'm aggressive behind the wheel. I jump to conclusions and judge people. I gossip. I hold grudges and don't hold my tongue. I'm impetuous and impatient. I hope this mirror doesn't glare at you too brightly, especially if you're religious.

Gimme that old time religion...it's good enough for me. But is it good enough for God? Nothing we do is good enough for God if we don't do it seeking His heart. The longer we practice our religion, the more we see our fairly desperate need for God's heart to remold our own. Once that happens, all the things we think we have to do start to get put into perspective. Only by letting Christ take the lead in how we practice what we preach can we begin to transform our polluted 'so what' into His 'so thankful.'

Lord, help me to keep to Your religion and run away from anything that tries to pull me from it.

What do you think about religion?

How are religion and faith different things?

When was the last time you talked with God about this?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 23 September 2013

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. James 2, verse 1.

I've been blessed to be the father of three great kids. My Hunnie and I both agree in that: we're intensely proud of all three kids. We did our best to raise them and we raised them from a young age in a believing Christian home. In our Christian home, however, familiar with the distinctly un-Christian concepts of lying, cheating, stealing, adultery, promiscuity, killing, charades, false fronts, procrastination, personality disorders, disabilities, addiction, slander, envy, rage, and deceit. I'm not talking about them watching Jersey Shore (which I still don't understand). I'm talking in our own experience, in the lives they've lived and grown. These are real lessons, real things with which they've dealt, real situations in an all-too real world of fallen depravity.

I'll tell you the truth: I don't have a favorite. These days, I'm thankful to share unique and special relationships with each of them. The differences are what make them special. If I die today, let my life be judged by God and others looking at the kids with whom He blessed it: I'll exit a success.

To say I'm proud of how each of them has turned out is to under-whelmingly define pride. I'm intensely proud of each of them because I see them as Jesus' gifts. My oldest daughter the innocent girl who wanted to grow up to be a princess; my youngest daughter, who always tests limits in finding out who she wants to be; my son, who struggled against bullying outsiders and finding his place in a world he didn't understand: all three of them live lives that make me proud to know them, and especially proud to be their father.

So I understand what James is saying when he says that believers shouldn't show favoritism. In my own life – in work, play, time with my wife, time with those kids – whenever I've shown favoritism for one thing or another, I've lost balance. People suffer when we let that happen. God created us to live in harmony as His children, and He created us for balance. Not moderation, for we can't moderate where Jesus is concerned. No, He created us to live in balance and you can't live in balance if you are improperly partial to one over another.

Take this lesson and apply it wherever it calls you because it's universal. If you are playing favorites with anything in your life, but especially with people like good kids, I urge you to get with God on this one as soon as you possibly can. Cast aside the favoritism because we were made and loved for so much more.

Lord, thank You for blessing me with the kids – and the wife – in my life. I don't know what I've ever done to deserve them and their love, but thank You for it.

Are there any ways where you're out of balance in your life?

What areas of your life try to get you to play favorites?

What are you prepared to do about it?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 24 September 2013

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?. James 2, verses 2-4.

Here's my timely confession where I failed just like the folks James is talking about. Last week, I flew from Minneapolis to Dallas, flying home after a long three days at work. When I got to the airport, Delta had upgraded me once again (it happens a lot) and once again I got the nice seat instead of the crowded seat in coach. Don't get me wrong: I was thankful for it. But it went to my head, ya know?

As I'm waiting to board the plane, I saw a couple of kids also waiting. One had multiple piercings, tattoos, and bi-colored hair. She was wearing pajamas and flip flops. Her traveling partner had long red-haired dreadlocks and was dressed comparably, that is, shabby. From their interactions, I guessed they might be lesbians. Wouldn't you know that they, too, got upgraded and sat in front of me.

Wanna know my first reaction? Eww. Gross. Can't you people have a little self-respect? Show some courtesy and clean up already! Pleeeeease!

There in that moment, I was the hypocrite James is talking about.

It doesn't end there. Yesterday, when I flew back to Minneapolis, I saw them again. Again, I was upgraded, and again I boarded the plane. This time, they boarded and walked back to coach. My reaction? Same 'eww.' Same judging. Same discriminating in a sinful way. I was the same hypocrite. My reaction could have been "God bless em" or "I hope they had a good weekend." Instead, I resorted to my defensive, go-to, first and sinful response of judging them sinfully.

How about you?

Jesus lived as God on earth, demonstrating his just love through all He said and did. He didn't see Miss Red Dreads as a freak: He saw her as someone to love just as she is. He still sees her this way. He sees me and you this way. What James points out to us (on Jesus' behalf) is that our only standard in judging people is to be Jesus. And then only for ourselves. We are to flee from sin and sinful inclinations but only by judging the situation against Jesus and what He would want. Not to hammer others, or keep us apart, or to judge them harshly...like I did.

Jesus, forgive me for failing to love as You love. Forgive me, speak through me, and teach me to do better in the situations I encounter today.

How have you judged incorrectly?

What does Jesus say to you in those moments?

What are you prepared to do about that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 25 September 2013

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? James 2, verse 5.

I just finished reading the Phil Robertson autobiography "Happy Happy Happy." To me, it was thoroughly enjoyable reading because it was easy and Phil's the kind of guy I want my son, son-in-law, and grandson to be...

...today. If you go back to the mid 1970s, Phil was a dirtbag. He wasn't the praying patriarch, who sits at the end of the table at the end of every Duck Dynasty show. The Phil Robertson who lived the first 28 years of that man's life was a drinking, pot-smoking, violent, contentious dirtbag. Read the book if you want to know more.

What's the attraction that the Duck Dynasty phenomenon has for people? The simplest explanation is that it's a Jesus-thing, that He's touching people through this corny TV show and all the hub-bub that goes with it. If you didn't know about Duck Commander, you wouldn't know that Phil and family have been working in the duck-calling (and now hunting supply/outdoorsman) business since those early 1970s. Decades of hard work, unending hours of a family pursuing a goal and, more importantly, using every minute of that time to spread the Gospel are what made the poor in the eyes of the world rich in faith.

Not long ago, a friend of mine Tweeted that, if the whole Duck Dynasty furor died down tomorrow, none of the Robertson's would change how they live. After reading Phil's book, I agree with that. It goes back to the Jesus moment years ago when Miss Kay had taken the boys and left Phil's drunk behind after being unable to tolerate it any longer. After a few months of separation, she found Phil crying in his truck outside her place of work, begging to get his family back and change. Her response was, "you can't do it on your own. You need Jesus."

That changed everything. He did need Jesus and Jesus richly blessed him and his family – and now many others – because they changed and started really living. Being poor in the world held no meaning because his life became indescribably wealthy in the love of Jesus Christ. Phil had been a talented, bright, but detestable human being who Jesus transformed into a talented, bright, earnest herald of the Gospel. Now, so many others are blessed through that. In an era of TV when debauchery rules, the Robertson's cling to prayer, family and Jesus...and millions of people experience that, know Jesus more, see Him practically preached in front of them. 'Happy happy happy' becomes something more than just words to describe how you pass the day.

Lord, change me today. Where I am, who I am, what I am: change me and teach me to follow only You.

Are you happy?

When you're unhappy, have you ever really asked why?

What's the connection in your life between Jesus and happiness?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 7 September 2013

But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? James 2, verses 6-7.

Hello, friends. I've been away for awhile. Last time we chatted was the week before a book signing in southern Indiana. My family and I took a whirlwind trip, met hundreds of wonderful people, sold a few books, and, hopefully, got to share Jesus with a few folks we hadn't known before. Our writing business is brand new for my wife and I; this is our first book. Like any business, we hope to make a lot of money and do some extraordinary things. Here at the start, though, it's good to ask a gut-check question:

Are we dishonoring the poor? Are we exploiting anyone?

You see, you could interpret this verse in the obvious monetary way. We could go all class-conscious and, if we're careful to avoid class-envy, surmise that James is saying rich people oppress poor people. That those who do such things are blaspheming the name of the Jesus who died to save them. There's truth in this.

I think we could also talk about those who are cannier than the rest of us. For a long time, I was one of those snarky know-it-all's who seemed to lord things over other people. It's an ugly trait, and I'm guilty of having lived it. The verse could have been talking about me when it implied that I dishonored Jesus by snarking over those who I didn't think were very bright, or very good. When you boil it down, it's really a kind of bullying.

There could be truth in that too.

It could be talking about the politicians, elitists, dilettantes, intellectuals, or celebrities who seem to exude superiority over those of us who, it would seem (to them), don't quite measure up. There's truth in this as well.

James could be talking about the folks in church, good Christians all of us, who seem to play "I've Got a Secret" with the Gospel that was never meant to be hidden behind false fronts or opaque traditions. No wonder so many people feel uncomfortable with practicing faith when we, who are entrusted with growing it, fail to be Jesus to them.

Yet, perhaps, James is talking about all these things. It's why I go back to my original question. With all those new people I met last week, was I Jesus' ambassador or was I the rich person oppressing the poor man, or the snarky know it all, or the elitist, or the hypocrite in a choir robe? James' verses hold up a mirror. Who do you see in it?

Lord, help me to always represent you with faith and trust, not agendas, secrets, or sarcasm. Forgive me when I fail; strengthen me to do Your will.

Who are you to people: a person of faith or just some person?

Have you ever oppressed someone? If so, what did you do to change?

What's your story of how Jesus pulled you out of that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 8 October 2013

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. James 2, verses 6-7.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment found in all of God's word was to "Love the Lord God with all your heart" and that the second greatest – the one right on the heels of the first – is to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Stop right here. If you're wondering "how do I live as a believer" you now know all you need to know. Don't walk away thinking that more classes, more time in confession, more learned people will teach you better ways to do things. It doesn't get any more complicated than this. All you need to know about salvation is found in John 3:16, and all you need to know about what it takes to live as a Christian is found in those words of Christ.

Is it any wonder, then, that Jesus' brother James echoes these words? After all, James was struggling with ways to encourage new believers in a young church based on a very radical idea. "Love people" was something quite new and astounding in first century Judea. It is today, especially since, millennia later, James can sometimes sound harsh and overbearing (even as we constantly need his reminders).

Yet I'm practically jumping for joy reading that sour old James gives the tender advice that any kindergartner would know to be true. "Love people." It's no harder than that. When Jesus said to 'suffer the little children to come to Me,' He was saying 'love people.' When He said 'love your neighbor as yourself' He was saying 'love people.' And when James then echoes his blood-brother by reminding us that loving our neighbors is the right thing to do, he's really reiterating Jesus' command to simply 'love people.'

Love people because loving people honestly is loving Jesus.

Just last nite, I was reading a Facebook post from a friend who mentioned that "it's hard to pray for people who constantly make your life hard!" Amen to that. I think, however, that praying those kind of prayers are the most satisfying of all. I know they are to me. It's not just the 'heaping burning coals on their heads' aspect. It's the 'love people' aspect. Folks who torment, vex, frustrate, anger, and hurt us are folks loved by Jesus Christ just like those who don't do such things. One way to get back in the swing of loving unconditionally is to pray for those who challenge us. Thus, to pray for folks who make our lives hard is to love our neighbors as ourselves.

James and Jesus might just agree.

Lord Jesus, teach me today to better love my neighbors. Open my eyes to see these people, and help me to love them unconditionally, pray for them endlessly, and just be Your ambassador to them.

Who is your neighbor. Don't take the easy answer: really: who is your neighbor?

Who is vexing you and what can you pray to help them?

How can you better love someone today?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 10 October 2013

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. James 2, verse 10.

James is one tough cookie. Right on the heels of reminding us that loving other people is the right thing to do, he reminds us that one slip up means we're sinners. Not just sinners: damned sinners.

I hate it when the guy with the tough talk is right.

But James is right. It didn't take long for me to break all of God's law this morning, proving myself unfaithful to Him and unworthy of Him. The residual angst from too many undone tasks yesterday, the 'me-first' attitude of getting ready in the morning, the fleeting thoughts of resentment, lust, bitterness, and envy when I logged on the morning news sites: all proving I'm worthy to be damned. All proving I'm separated from God. Small sins? Yes indeed, but large enough to keep a chasm between my Lord and me.

After all, it wasn't capital murder that caused Adam and Eve to fall away from God. It was selfish idolatry; a simple "no, I know better" kind of attitude. That whole murder thing didn't come about until a few years down the road when their son thought he knew better, too. The thing is that it didn't take murder, lying, conspiracy or anything that complicated to separate man from his Creator. All it took was a selfish change of heart. How tragic is that?

And since that's the case, then how miraculous is it that all it takes is Jesus saving us, then turning things around by changing our hearts. All that we ever need to know about how we are saved is contained in the words "Jesus died for you." All we ever need to know about how to live as a Christian is found in those words "Love God with all your heart, then love your neighbor the same way." All we ever need to know about the future is found in hearing Jesus say "come all you who are weary and I will give you rest." James tells us the cold, hard truth that one transgression makes us guilty of breaking every one of God's laws. Yet he uses the rest of his missal to remind us that, even as that's true, the bigger truth is that Jesus took away all our guilt about it.

The weird thing about all of this is that it can be a tough thing to tell people about the Gospel, that Jesus loves them and wants them to know Him. Some folks are all Cain and want to do it on their own. Some folks just disobey, like Adam, Eve, and me. And some other folks too...who are you and what's He saying to you?

Lord Jesus, tell me your hard truths. Teach me to know that such hard truth is a soft yoke to bear and a pleasure to live out.

When did you break all of God's law?

What about doing that bothered you?

How can you do better today?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 11 October 2013

But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. James 2, verse 9.

Forgive me because I messed up. I skipped a verse. I moved ahead a verse, preferring it to this one. Maybe I was committing a subtle sin of favoritism, of omission. That's not a trite line: it's where we're going today.

You see, you and I show favoritism in everything we do. James reminds us of that fact. I like skim milk instead of 2%; I prefer green to red; "Lord of the Rings" over "Saw" movies. Perhaps there's no harm in those choices, but what about I prefer black people to white, or I love me some Christians but can't stand those Muslims. Go ahead: it's ok to pick the good ball players first; everyone always gets stuck with the lousy players when there aren't many left to choose. How does that favoritism sound now?

Personally, I think it sounds typical. I've done it. You have too. In verse 8, James reminds us to love everyone, and then, in the verse after this one, he reminds us that one sin means we're thick with sin and guilty of breaking all of God's law. It's as if we are staring at a crystal bowl of perfectly still water, then we drop a single pin-point bit of dye into it that stains the whole thing.

God won't be stained. He's holy. He can't be. He won't allow it because, without that holiness, life has no source, no meaning, and no love.

That's not good enough for me, though. I'm thick with the idea that I know better. Just ask me: I'll tell you. Give me long enough and I'll plan out your day, equip you to do it, tell you how to get it done, and then send you on your way. I'll hammer you if you don't do what I want, too. It's what I do for a living and, if you ask my wife, it's what I do at home; terrible gift and flaw. Just ask me: I'll tell you that too. I know better, and I know better than God, right?

Guilty. Guilty, stained, and damned. I chose me over God.

That's just not good enough for the Lord. In the same chapter where Jesus uses James to tell us to love everyone, He also says we're damned if we choose favorites that push Him out of the way. James warns us about showing favoritism because it's not just scorning people who Jesus loves: it's scorning Jesus. It's choosing something else over Him. And He is righteously jealous, wanting to be our only choice. He knows that everything else in life is second best and He only wants the best for us. It isn't cocky arrogance: it's unending love.

Lord, You are my favorite. You are my only choice. Show me the errors of my ways and humble me when I become proud.

When have you played favorites?

What good resulted from that?

How does it make you feel to walk in the shoes of the 'un-favored'?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 14 October 2013

For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. *James 2, verse 11.*

More exposition on the theme that, if we break one of God's laws, we break them all.

Think about it, though. Think about that term 'lawbreaker.' In 2013 America, 'lawbreaker' is losing its power. Our politicians gleefully exceed their Constitutional authority and half of us give them a pass because 'he's our guy.' Grand Theft Auto V is the biggest video game of the year. I watched my son play it this weekend and was amazed by 2 things. One was the glorification of murder because it was an unending bonanza of violence in a game whose sole purpose is to see how much crime you can get away with. The other was thinking that there were four previous versions of this murder-orgy game and that people pay more and more for the experience of killing other virtual people. It's our games and our entertainment. "Breaking Bad," "Sons of Anarchy," and "Boardwalk Empire" are brilliantly written TV shows that are predicated wholly on breaking the law. It's discouraging.

I guess that makes me a prude. I'm an adulterer; I've done that and you've read about it. No future in politics for me, and I don't want to be in Grand Theft Auto VI. The thing is, I'm no better than you. I'm no better for admitting it because admitting to having done that terrible thing DOESN'T mean I've admitted to all the other terrible things I've done in life. I've been angry enough to kill, but I've never done it even as more than a few men have threatened or tried to kill me. Yay for my team; chalk one up for the scumbag who hasn't murdered anyone.

Somewhere, I believe Jesus is shaking His head in sadness.

According to Jesus' brother James, it doesn't matter. Jesus is speaking through His brother saying "it doesn't matter. You've broken the law." It doesn't matter if your intentions were good, or if you got trapped into it, or if you're an addict, or if you thought it was the lesser of two evils: you broke the law. I broke the law. It doesn't matter.

He keeps saying that because, then, letting Him take away the guilt, the shame, and the eternal consequences of holding onto those since, means they don't matter. It doesn't matter what I did, what you did: Jesus died so that we don't have to be separated from Him forever. It doesn't matter that my sins were heinous because He paid for them. It doesn't matter how bad they were, or how disgusting I was, or how I kept going on and on in them because He changed things. Only Jesus changes "lawbreaker" to "permanently saved."

Jesus, teach me to follow only Your laws and to give You honor. What are your sins?

What are your sins?

How & when were you a lawbreaker?

Do you want to live forever?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 15 October 2013

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. James 2, verse 12.

This one completely convicts me. It really does and it hurts. You see, I'm judgmental. Get on my Facebook page and you'll find me railing against things I don't believe in, things I think are genuinely bad for the country and our world in general. Many believe the same thing, but I really speak out against it, and that isn't necessarily a good thing. I don't just use social media as a way to keep in touch or share trivial stuff: it's a platform to advance what I believe, especially my faith and my belief in American tenets.

Yet I don't always bring good credit on that faith or patriotism. It's tedious to argue with people about matters of principle and politics, and I don't see how anything I've said or done has positively swayed anyone's opinion. I think you could reasonably argue, though, that there are things I've said and done online that have negatively swayed people, and I'm ashamed of that. I won't curse you out or call you names or belittle you as a human. But I can eviscerate your position and make it seem like you are lower than low for simply standing up for what you believe in, too.

I'm ashamed of that. To quote a friend, it makes me 'judgy.' It's not just unattractive: it's wrong.

It makes me a hypocrite. It's true, there are people who will twist and turn your words and use them against you, using your faith or your beliefs as a way to hammer you while they hide behind a sheer veneer of their own hypocrisy. That doesn't matter. It's not the point because, when the admission of judgmental hypocrisy is made, I'm only responsible for me. I'm the hypocrite.

The freedom this verse is talking about isn't one guaranteed by an earthly Constitution. The source of all freedom is Jesus. It was in faith in Him that our ancestors sought refuge in a new world. It was in faith in Him that those ancestors enshrined their beliefs about human liberty in the most influential government documents ever written. Yet His freedom is freedom of the spirit, freedom from the slavery of sin. It was something He bled and died for so that all men would know they are equal in Him. All of us are sinful, and all of us have our judgmental and hypocritical faults. Only through Christ are those faults neutralized and His glorious freedom advanced. Social media may debate this, but nothing can ever deny or destroy it.

A judgy old coot like me would do well to remember it.

Freedom Jesus, thank you for setting me free. Help me to stay free through clinging to you and laying aside all that isn't You.

What keeps you enslaved?

What do you think about your freedom?

How does Jesus set you free?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 16 October 2013

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2, verses 12-13.

Here's why we shouldn't be 'judgy.' Jesus was judgmental, but He was God, the source of all judgment between sin and righteousness. He administered His judgment with mercy. He set an example for us by judging between right and wrong, then always siding on right, yet He did it without condescending and without demeaning others. Jesus judged using mercy. Why? You know why.

If we are without mercy, we are without Christ. Simple as that.

Jesus knew – and James re-iterates – that, without mercy we are without love. Mercy isn't turning your back on wrongdoing. Mercy isn't condoning sin, or turning a blind eye when wrong happens. Mercy isn't giving people a pass. Mercy is showing love despite all those things happening, especially when they happen to us.

Mercy is saying a prayer for the guy who cut you down in the meeting at work yesterday. It's helping the kid who stole money from you to buy drugs, with no expectation of anything from them in return. Mercy is not responding in kind when someone verbally attacks you and leaves you raw and exposed. Mercy is walking away when there is a fight at your doorstep and you know you have the advantage.

Mercy is doing anything that Jesus would because that's the way Jesus would do it. We're encouraged by Jesus to use our learned power of judgment to stick to the straight and narrow, not to narrowly edge out each other. And when we're presented with the opportunity to do one thing versus another, we're told to be merciful. Not because we have to, but because He loved us and showed us how and why.

Lord, have mercy on me and teach me to have mercy on all those around me.

When was the last time you acted in mercy?

Who can you be merciful to today?

How has Jesus been merciful to you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 17 October 2013

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? James 2, verse 14

Be very careful here. If you want to grasp the meaning of this verse, don't read it alone. Go back and re-read all of the 2 chapters before. Don't get fooled into interpreting this verse as "work out your own salvation."

It's a mistake we all make from time to time. Especially if you're bull-headed like me. It's easy to think that we can do it all ourselves, or that the things we do earn favor in God's eyes. After all, we're put here to work, to share Jesus in all that we do... to 'do' things in life. Isn't it easy, then, to think that it's our doing that makes Jesus love us more? Just look at how good I've been, how hard I've been working. Just look at my good intentions! James even agrees, saying that our faith only means something because we're doing something about it, right?

If that's what you think, you couldn't be more mistaken. Go back and re-read again, then come back to me here.

Now that you're back, let's get back to the truth that James is telling us about his brother, Jesus. All through chapter 1, he says that believing in Jesus is going to be tough, that we'll need to persevere. And that persevering in Jesus means something. It builds others up, toughens our skin, and prepares us to move forward in the faith. It is evidence of faith to people who watch us, who are looking to see what evidence we show that we believe in this Jesus, that He is all He says He is.

The 'doing' matters because it is the doing that shows others. It prepares us for more, like tuning an instrument. What good is it to believe in Jesus if we don't let Him change what we say & do, then prove we're changed by living in changed ways?

Believe me, this is the toughest part of following Jesus. It's hard to back away from the arguments because my self-righteous nature rails against doing so, and I don't like to lose. It's hard to keep away from the things that tempt us because, after all, just one more won't hurt. It's hard to stand up for what you believe when everyone else compromises on principle instead of compromising on practice.

We aren't in it alone; we never are. The doing matters. It matters to help build others up so that Jesus might have a work in them too.

Lord, help me more and more to do for You. Keep me from temptation, forgive me when I mess it up, and help me to move forward in following You.

What are your thoughts on working out your own salvation?

How do you confuse what you do & working for faith?

Do you sometimes feel alone in what you do?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 18 October 2013

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. James 2, verses 15-17

If you believe in Jesus, do something about it. Not because you have to. Not because you're afraid of what He might think. Not because you're afraid of Him because He's God. Not because you feel obligated. Not because someone else tells you. Because you get to. If you believe in Jesus, do something with it.

Start a blog. Pay it forward next time you go to Burger King. Help your neighbor in with the groceries. Stop talking back. Call your parents to chat. Listen to your teenage son. Pay someone else's bills. Help the cranky old man clean out his garage. Reconcile with your estranged sibling. Volunteer for the Red Cross. Serve. If you believe in Jesus, do something with it.

Don't sit there on your butt and wait. Don't procrastinate. Don't equivocate. Don't ruminate. Don't delay. If you believe in Jesus, do something with it.

And because you believe in Jesus, your doing something is an opportunity to share Him. It's how He rolls. We do it through listening, kind words, undeserved mercy, unexpected actions, caring. It's not just you doing the nice things, but good for you for doing them. No, it's Jesus working through you. It's Jesus looking through your eyes, reaching out with your touch. It's you being Him to someone else, doing what He would do for them.

Not because we have to. It's because we get to, because we can. Because He is. Without doing something about what we say we believe, our faith is useless. Dead. Without doing something about it, what we say we believe about Jesus is hypocrisy, just words; talk without walk. Don't go off half-cocked thinking that these good things will get you into heaven because they won't. Everything we need to go to heaven was already done by the Jesus we say we believe in. Instead, let's let our actions come from our hearts, remembering that we don't have to carry the burden of doing something to earn our salvation. Instead, we get to go beyond that, sharing the fact that He's done the heavy lifting so we don't have to. So we get to do things in this life because we get to feel good about how we feel inside. Because He loves us first. We get to share Jesus. Do something with it.

Lord, show me today where You want me to do something with my love for You. I want to serve You.

Where can you serve Jesus in your part of the world today?

Are you willing to do this?

What can you do to help someone else where you are right now?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 21 October 2013

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. James 2, verses 15-17

Get on my level. That's what James is saying, right? I have to admit: I'm not always comfortable with that. I don't like folks all up in my business. At work, I'm ALL about confronting issues. In political discussions, I'm ALL about confrontation because we might disagree on important things.

Jesus has us here for a reason, though, and it isn't for work or politics. We aren't here to accumulate wealth. We're here to accumulate believers in Jesus, to connect other people to Him. Sometimes we do that; sometimes we mess it up.

Last Friday, I flew home from Minnesota and got a chance to discuss the book I'm reading: "Killing Jesus," by Bill O'Reilly. It's an easy, interesting read because while it fully mentions Jesus' divinity, it treats his life as a factual, news-verified account. The author drew not just from the Gospels, but also heavily from Josephus and archaeological evidence about first century Judea.

The man sitting next to me asked what I thought of the book, and I told him that I was enjoying it. It was a chance to have a Jesus moment with someone, and we talked for awhile. He said he was English, and a doctor, and was going to a weekend meeting in Dallas. He said his wife was very religious but that he wasn't. He said he was thinking of getting the book for her. We discussed the book, and I gave it a recommend.

What we didn't do much of, however, was discuss what is actually said in Scripture. I stood up for Jesus but not very well. What a lost opportunity. Thank God that He put this man in my path for the chance to talk about real things with him. I'm ashamed to admit that I did a lousy job at it. Next time, I hope to do better. I pray and hope the man got interested in Jesus after all. Now, it isn't for me to know.

What's the point? The point is that we're put here not just to say we believe in Jesus but to share that with others, to do something about it. Talk about what the Bible says about Him. Volunteer to help others. Let Jesus remold how we think, act, and speak. James gets all in our faces to remind us that we're here to do something with the faith that God plants in us. We aren't supposed to bottle it up, or keep it just for Sundays, or share it only with folks like us, or clam it up in rituals. We're supposed to act on it, reach out with it, use it the way Jesus would. Get on His level, not mine.

Lord, forgive my stupid use of Your good faith. Forgive me, inspire me, teach me, and lead me again.

Where can you serve Jesus in your part of the world today?

Are you willing to do this?

What can you do to help someone else where you are right now?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 22 October 2013

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. James 2, verse 19

Remember that this verse comes on the heels of the one that reminded us of how faith without doing something with it is dead faith. Why is that important?

Because it matters what we do. Duh, right? You'd think so, but we live in an age uninformed people. Just this morning, I read about how a group of people in San Diego were signing a petition requesting that the US government become more like Nazi Germany so as to protect the average US citizen. Nazi Germany...yes, that's what they were told. You can't make this stuff up. We have so many people who are not clued in to what's going on around them. Have you ever watched Jay Leno's staff interview people on the street and ask them simple questions about current events, leaders, or basic facts of history? It's surprising how many average people don't know these things and it sometimes leaves me shaking my head.

Is it any wonder, then, that so many people would be uninformed about Jesus the Savior? That so many people – I'd even dare to say most people – don't know about Jesus beyond invoking His name when they want to swear? If you're surprised, I'm sorry to be the splash of cold water, but it's simply the way it is. Most people know there is a God, and maybe even that Jesus is that God, but that's where their knowledge ends.

Therefore, what we do matters. It matters because what we say and do is walking the walk to our Christian talking the talk. This is the tough part.

I do it poorly. Whether it's arguing politics, disciplining my son, being patient, understanding where my wife is coming from, taking responsibility for my speech and actions, or anything else, I'm sometimes a lousy witness. More times than not, I'm really bad at it. Thank God Jesus is God and that He is more patient with me than I am with Him and the job He has given to me. I work hard to walk the walk but I don't usually do it very well. Often times, even mockers point this out to me. They're not unlike James, telling me "duh, Dave. Even I know that."

What to do about it? First and always, remember that the cure for the common sin is Jesus. Time in the Word, time in prayer, time reminding myself of the Word and prayer, time contemplating the Word and prayer: all these things are the ways we overcome sin's temptations and temporal consequences. We grow through these things, and get our lives in line with where Jesus would have me so that our words and actions become obvious evidence of deep belief that even un-believers or demons could understand.

Lord, steep me in Your Word. Teach me to improve myself so that I can live more evidently for You.

How have you not walked the walk?

Is your faith hidden or public?

What are you doing that matters?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 23 October 2013

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? James 2, verse 20

We are skeptical, you and me. One of my favorite movie lines is from Judy the Elf in "The Santa Clause." "Seeing isn't believing. Believing is seeing," says the small elf to the very shocked new Santa. In my estimation, that line sums up a lot of following Jesus. Only when we truly believe in Jesus do we really see things clearly.

Yet even then, we want evidence. We want proof, something we can touch and feel. I'll spare you the "it's ok because Doubting Thomas the apostle wanted evidence too." You know it. Instead, let's simply fess up to our shortcomings and accept the hard truth of it. We want evidence. We don't fully believe, so we want proof.

This could be a case of 'be careful what you wish for' because James brings us to task, saying that those who demand proof because of their own unbelief are fools. It's not enough for God to say to us "this is the way it is. Trust me." No, we want more than that. James paints such people – people like us – as fools. Stop me if I'm wrong but it's not exactly complimentary to have the brother of Jesus Christ, another of Mary and Joseph's real children, telling us that we're fools.

But that's the reward, the just-due, for our skepticism. Foolishness. That's a first-century way of saying some not-so-nice things to us that I won't describe in twenty-first century vernacular. We don't believe because we don't see. Some of us, even when we see, still don't believe. Perhaps not even some: perhaps most. It's the way of a fallen world. When what we believe matters, and then what we do about that belief matters, it's reasonable for James to say to us that this is self-evident. That it's true for all of us. We're all doubters; we all have times when we just don't see.

In those times, James reminds us, our deeds should remind us of our faith because our deeds matter, because faith matters more. What we do about our faith is not only evidence to others. What we do should be a reminder to us that we have faith. More importantly, what we do should be a reminder to us that Jesus has faith in us whether we do things for Him or not. No matter where we are, or what we do that matters, Jesus believes in us even when we don't always fully believe in Him. Only by believing in Jesus do we really see how it is faith that matters most, and that faith is then proven to a weary world by how we live it out. Skeptical or not, that simply is the way it is.

Lord, help my unbelief.

What things make you skeptical?

In what ways are you skeptical about your faith?

"Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?"

Daily Proverbial, from James, 24 October 2013

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? James 2, verse 21.

As soon as James is done calling us fools for demanding proof, he then cites an example of how our deeds should prove our faith. Let's be honest: he uses a very extreme example. How many of us would say we believe in Jesus and then, if Jesus told us to take our son and sacrifice him, would balk and say, "are you crazy?" 99.9%? I'd say that percentage is probably low.

I mean, how far do we have to go to be considered righteous? Do we have to give up our old ways and live better? Do we have to memorize verses in the Bible? Do we have to do unto others as we would have them do unto us? Do WE have to offer up our children as sacrifices? How far do we go to be considered righteous?

Answer: only to the cross. We don't have to do anything to be considered righteous. Jesus makes us righteous. All that ever needed to be done to make us, consider us, render us righteous was done by Him on the cross. There is nothing we can do to make us righteous, or to make God consider us righteous because, when God sees us through the lens of Jesus, all He sees is Jesus' perfection.

What James is doing in this verse is offering an analogy for us to understand God's effect. Not cause and effect, just effect. God considered Abraham righteous after Abraham proved his faith. Or did He? Perhaps God considered Abraham righteous because God looked into Abraham's heart and saw the honesty of the man inside and He did it before Abraham even picked up the knife. Perhaps Abraham's following directions was for Abraham to see God's righteousness and blessing (and for us as well) and not the other way around. Perhaps, just maybe, the effect was what God did and not anything Abraham, or we, did.

I'm just speculating; I'm no trained theologian. What I am is a follower of Jesus, and what this follower knows is that James is reminding us, yet again and using the extreme example of Abraham sacrificing Issac, of how we need to live out our faith by what we do instead of only what we say we believe. The proof is for us, not for God, who can see inside us just like He could see inside Abraham's heart. And James'. And yours.

Jesus who sees in my heart, I pray You see someone You love. Help me to live in ways that demonstrate Your love, and that help bring others to You.

What's in your heart?

Are you considered righteous because of what you do or because of God?

What proof do YOU need?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 28 October 2013

You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. James 2, verse 22.

Do our faith and actions work together? I get easily irritated. Little things lying around the house (that could easily be put away), folks who dirty dishes but don't then wash them, the lack of common sense that seems to pervade the political world these days, rushing around all weekend without having time to really relax and do what I want to do, feeling like I'm constantly battling cleanup for folks who haven't done their part, clothes that don't get folded, constantly tight money: that's a small list of things that irritate me.

It's also a perfect illustration of how faith and actions don't work together. You see, those petty irritations? They really are petty. They don't really matter in the grand scheme of living life, even though larger lives are built of doing and saying thousands of small things. In the more important scheme, though, it does matter because when our spoken faith doesn't match our acted-out life, there's a problem.

Do you think it's ok for someone who professes to really, really love & follow Jesus to get so irritated at things that really don't have much to do with how the world spins around? Me neither.

I suspect James would agree. I don't like getting dressed down, but I think James would give me one, and it is deserved. I'm guilty of advancing the petty. In his lesson, he talked about how Abraham's faith was followed through by his willingness to sacrifice the son of his promised inheritance. Abraham held nothing back from God, and he was rewarded for that. The lesson he left for all of us is that God wants us to do the same. Jesus doesn't just want our small, petty stuff: He wants ALL our stuff, large and small. He wants us to hold nothing back, to keep back nothing for ourselves. And He wants what we say and do to jive. If you think about it, that isn't asking for a lot. It's asking for simple honesty.

I think He wants me to loosen up a bit, too. It's ok if a few dishes are sitting around. It isn't a character flaw of mine to want them clean in my own house any more than it's not a character flaw of someone to leave them sitting there dirty. Dishes aren't souls, and souls matter. The flaw would be in either of us making those things more important than the love we share together, the love the Jesus entrusts to us.

Loving Jesus, I want my faith in You and the things I do to match. Help me to never say one thing while doing another. Forgive me where I mess this up.

How do your words and deeds not match?

What's the biggest way this has recently happened to you?

Have you sought forgiveness from the person(s) affected, and have you forgiven them...or yourself?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 29 October 2013

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. James 2, verses 23 and 24.

Who credited Abraham with righteousness? God. Who considered Abraham righteous? God. Who needed to know that Abraham was righteous? God?

Not so much. It was Abraham – and his friends, family, you, and me – who needed to know it. God already knew. A few days ago we talked about how God already saw in Abraham's heart. The demonstration of Abraham's tough faith in not holding back even his son was for human benefit, not for the divine. As an act of ultimate love, it was proof to God, even an act of worship in which Abraham was saying "Lord, I give all to you." But God didn't need the proof, or the sacrifice, or the whole story of it. We did. We still do.

Don't believe me?

When was the last time you wanted to trust someone but something held you back? When have you asked more of someone than you knew to be fair of them, and yet you asked it anyway (married people: stop jumping up and down to answer)? Millenia after Abraham held down his son to slit his throat, we still need proof of each other's real intentions.

Even more than that, we still need God to intervene and stop us when we reach the brink of insanity. Too often we walk away from experiences thinking "God why didn't you stop me?" I've had those moments, and I bet you have too. Perhaps the better question is "why didn't we stop ourselves?" When you're tempted to cheat, when just one more drink is beckoning, when you can smoke or not, when your choice is the plain truth or the seductive lie, why don't we stop ourselves? Like it or not, it isn't up to God to stop us. Indeed, all He wants is to shower blessings on us, sitting back to take pride in how others credit us with righteousness that starts in His love.

Instead, we muck it up. Instead, we cling to our differences, refuse to let go of our pet sins, and put up barriers between ourselves and Jesus. Instead of offering it all to God in worship, we choose the wrong thing, and then we go with that.

Abraham wouldn't do that. He didn't do that. Neither did James. What say you?

Lord, take away my junk. Forgive me, correct me, and teach me to follow Your will.

What do you think of the story of Abraham?

Would you be willing to sacrifice what is most important to you if God asked you?

Are you withholding trust from someone?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 30 October 2013

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. James 2, verses 25 and 26.

The last few days, James has used the example of righteous, upright Abraham to educate us about our faith and works because Abraham is the example we should all aspire to follow. Today's example was a whore; yes, I said it.

One of the Twitter feeds I follow is from a woman whose handle is "Hookers for Jesus." The handle belongs to one Annie Lobert who, as a former prostitute, found her way out of the sex industry by kneeling at the feet of Jesus. Her website says that her organization, "Hookers for Jesus is a faith based organization that addresses the realities of human sex trafficking, sexual violence, and exploitation linked to pornography and the sex industry. We are committed to reaching out to children/teens/women that need assistance/escape from sex slavery." Further, it says, "It is our heart's desire that our friends that are working as sex workers would be released from their past and healed through a personal love relationship with God."

Do you think Annie Lobert or Rahab the Canaanite whore were justified in front of God by their lifestyles in the sex industry? Certainly not. Do you think your sins are better than theirs? Do you think they're better than mine? Better do a gut check because we both stink on ice in front of God. I'm so filthy with the stain of my sins that Annie Lobert on her worst day as a hooker looked more righteous than me on my best.

She was a whore. Just like Rahab the prostitute, who helped the Israelites conquer the land promised to them by God. And yet, like Rahab, Annie Lobert found her redemption and real place in the world by turning her life over to Jesus. Check out Ms. Lobert's website at www.hookersforjesus.net or her story on www.iamsecond.com and see for yourself what Jesus can do.

Because what Jesus can do is make our faith worthwhile by leading us to do good things for Him that our sins would keep us from doing. Rahab provided shelter for men sent to scope out how to take possession of God's promise. Jesus saved Mary Magdalene from a life like Rahab's, then turned her to a whole new path. Jesus saved Annie Lobert to help her lead others to Him. Jesus saved me from myself. He can save you too. He can save you, like He's saved these others, by justifying and making righteous in the eyes of the world the lives, deeds, and words of sinners like us.

Righteous Jesus, forgive me, make me new, and make me righteous for You.

What do you think of Annie Lobert's testimony?

How have you been embraced by the Devil and turned from Jesus?

How has Jesus turned your life around?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 31 October 2013

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. James 3, verse 1.

Happy Halloween on that thought. I'm glad I'm not a teacher; I don't have the patience for it. No, I'm not putting teachers on a pedestal. I don't want to talk about the myriad of problems with American public education and, yes, some of those problems are the fault of teachers. Still, it's undeniable that teaching others is a calling that requires patience, devotion, and understanding on levels that I simply don't possess.

James is glad I'm not a teacher too; at least that's one way I'm reading the verse. Teachers should be held to a higher standard because God does. Teachers are responsible for passing on (as Paul said) what is of first and foremost importance; what we need to make it in this world. It's debatable whether or not this includes algebra. Those who teach are in the spotlight and rightfully so because shaping the hearts and minds of others impacts the world for years to come. What would you say to the teachers who taught Hitler, Charles Manson, or Joseph Kony? Or the teachers who taught Ghandi, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King? Whether we realize it or not, those folks impacted those impactful minds to do things that impacted the world in ways we still talk about. That's more responsibility than I could bear 24/7. I'm glad I'm not a teacher.

Except...

...Except that you and I are teachers. If you're a parent, you're a teacher (and you teach more to your kids than any school ever will). If you're a blogger, you're teaching others. If you're a manager at any task, your primary task is teaching and mentoring, NOT telling others what to do. If you're a quiet follower, you're a better teacher than I'll ever be. Get the picture?

Those whose job it is to formally teach are and will be held to a standard that the rest of us don't and won't know. According to James (and thus Jesus), that's how it should be. But don't lose sight of the fact that you and I teach others in everything we do. Just the other day I was reading the text of my first book, Uncle Boo and Me, which is about my son's invisible friend. I realize now all the things I was teaching my son in my absence and in my absence even when I was home. How he and Uncle Boo were reaching out to me; how they're still teaching me good lessons today. We're teaching in everything we do, even if we don't get an apple on our desk. Never forget that.

Teacher Jesus, teach me today to be forgiving, listening, merciful, and compassionate. Nothing else I do in how I live my life will be more important than how I live and teach these things of You to others.

Who do you teach?

In what ways are you a teacher where you are?

Who taught you and what is most important about that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 1 November 2013.

We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. James 3, verse 2.

When was the last time you were perfect? Jesus lived a perfect human life. He committed no sin; ever. Not one "no" when He should have said "yes." Not one selfish thought; not one second of lust; not one action thought or done out of malice. Jesus proved a perfect life can be lived. It can be done. Why haven't me or you done it? When was the last time you were perfect?

Here endeth the preaching. Time to get down from the pulpit because, in chapter 3, James is grace in your face. He talks about taming the tongue, then the better ways of wisdom. He doesn't get in our faces with preaching, perfectionism, and poking us with a stick of anger. Instead, he gets in our faces with grace, with Jesus' grace, reminding us that Jesus lived a perfect life for us, for you and me and everyone you can think of. Remember that verse 1 reminded us that those who teach are accountable. Now read verse 2 again. Isn't this a more gentle reminder that those who teach, do?

Jesus taught us to be perfect. Not to try: to be. "Remember the Titans;" have you ever seen that movie? Denzel Washington plays a high school football coach in a racially divided school, and he demands perfection from his players. Not the old college try: perfection. Loss-less perfection. Perfection in each play, in each game, in each day they learn to live together. He demanded perfection and taught his kids to achieve it. Jesus demands perfection and taught us the way to be perfect.

I don't look at Jesus as the vengeful, fire-breathing Jehovah, master of the universe and all-power lord of time, space and dimension...but He is that God and those things. These are things I know in my mind and my heart, but I also know that the root of that all-powerful deity is love. That love, to remain love, demands holy perfection. His love is holy, blameless, without blemish, without fault, and it's so powerful that He wants to share it with us. He wants us to share in Him, to join with that love. Yet He rightfully, righteously refuses to compromise on the love, demanding our perfection so as to not poison His. Without perfection, we can't share in the love. Without the love, He wouldn't be Jesus.

How did He make it all right? By choosing to selflessly die in our place. THAT is perfection. When was the last time you were perfect? Simple: when Jesus died to make you that way. That's what James wants us to remember.

Perfect Savior, I praise You for Your perfection. Forgive my imperfections, and restore me to You.

How does Jesus make YOU perfect? Not me, not your friends, not your pastor, kids, or family: you.

What do you think of when you think of Jesus?

Do you think it's possible to live a perfect life?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 5 November 2013

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. *James 3, verse 3.*

There are folks who say that the Word of God is a bit in the mouths of fool horses. That easily duped fools are controlled by words like these. There are also those who say that many who obey what our government is directing, doing, and law-breaking are horses with bitter bits in their mouths, that they're easily directed by drivers who hold a whip in one hand and the reigns tightly in the other. And there are those who say these are simply words.

None of that is what James is saying.

What Jesus is saying through James is an analogy, and I love analogies; do you? Sure, the Word of God can change and turn your whole life. Yes, many people are easily controlled by words that mean one thing but mean something else when done by authorities. And these are more than simply empty words.

What James is saying is that our tongues, our words, hold great power. One of the most influential people in the American media today has been saying for years, "words mean things." He's right. He's saying what James – and thus Jesus – is saying but in another way.

Sunday night I stood witness while a mighty young man of God was baptized here in North Texas. He's always been a good guy, one of the young men who represents the best in his generation and even our whole country. His words brought him to the baptismal tank at a local charismatic church, and that's where I saw him take the plunge. Literally. All because of words; words that, like a bit in his mouth, helped steer him in a new direction. He can be guided by them, washed clean by the water of the Savior, and branded as a member in the family of God. All because of the tongue.

And just last night I read about a Lutheran pastor in Denver whose radical approach to theology chucks out everything that makes us feel all comfy cozy about Jesus. Her messy history and up-ended life preach now about a fervent, passionate, all-engrossing loving Savior who met her – and you and me – right where she was. All because she said "I believe in Him."

All because of words. Words mean things. Words can get you married, or in the military, or in jail, or becoming a millionaire. And words – "It is finished" – tell us all we ever need to know about The Word who was and is and is to come, and enable us to live forever.

Forever Word Jesus, speak Your Word into my heart that I may follow you truly always.

What words do you consider most important?

What words drive or control you?

Are you a prisoner to words other than The Word, and what are you prepared to do about that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 6 November 2013.

Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. James 3, verse 4.

What guides you? You know this is a continuation of what we talked about yesterday. That conversation was about being led by having a bit in your mouth; that the tongue – our words – can steer and control us left and right, forward or backward. The captain of a ship turns a wheel, which is connected to the rudder, and the ship moves left, right or straight. So it is with what we say. Don't lose sight of the concept of taming the tongue; that's where James is going in this section of Scripture. But before we go back there, stop and ask yourself a question. What guides you?

Are you addicted to online porn, can't get enough of watching whatever trips your trigger? Are you obsessed with watching 'that show' on TV? Are you a gamer who can't wait for the new PS4? Do you thrive on knowing everyone's business? Does work control your day; do you live to work or work to live? How many hours per week – or day – do you hang out on Facebook...and why? What about your kids: do they run your life?

Mind you, not all these things are bad. TV can be entertaining; ditto Facebook. Work is a blessing, and kids are always a gift from God. Porn is indefensible, but you get the drift. Whatever it is that you allow to steer your life will indeed steer it for you. Drugs, booze, affairs, pornography, thrills, denial, co-dependence: all those bad things can easily steer your ship. So can kids, church, family, friends, Bible blogs, Billy Graham Crusades, and home cooked meals. Do those things while neglecting what's in front of you and they, too, can end up in the negative column.

What's the point? You know it. The strong wind of Jesus blows in your life whether you open up your sails or not. Why not let Him serve as both the means and the mechanism by which you live in your days? Don't just go through life: LIVE it. The more you live in Jesus, the more you see that the only life worth living is in Him. The more you live in Him, the more you see that He is both rudder on the ship, water in which you sail, wind to move your sails, and North Star by which to guide them. We can either ride the voyage as a passenger or get involved with making it all go forward. What say you?

What guides you?

Jesus, guide me today. Guide me, preserve me, correct me, forgive me, empower me to be Your witness wherever today takes me.

What things in life guide you and why?

When was the last time you considered whether or not what guides you is a good thing?

Where in your life is Jesus guiding you now?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 7 November 2013

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. James 3, verses 5-6.

When was the last time you had a family fight? My Hunnie and I are the patient parents of 2 ex-teenagers and 1-current teenager. We aren't sure when these argumentative people replaced the sweet children we once knew, but it happened some time in the late 1990s or early 2K years. Not to describe too much dirty laundry, but I was eavesdropping on a conversation my wife had with one of our daughters. Dear daughter must have had a rough day because she was sniping, trying to pick a fight. It's something that teenagers – or recently recovering teenagers known as “20 year olds” – are particularly good at. Instead of downloading from her day, she was throwing out verbal grenades, seeing which one would explode and elicit a reaction. God bless my patient wife for being the Verbal Grenade Bomb Squad, who deftly, faithfully, and patiently defused every grenade thrown her way.

The tongue is a very small part of the body that makes great boasts. As folks say in my small Indiana hometown, “your mouth can overload your butt.” Remembering that the tongue is like the bit in the mouth of a horse, or the rudder on a ship, it's easy to see how the tongue can overload your butt. I think James might agree with that rather earthy vernacular.

It doesn't take much for words we say to overtake us. It doesn't take much for the fire set by our words to burn out of control and consume everything around us. Indeed, social media, 24/7 information access, text messaging and our so-called modern world make it even easier for a shot to be heard round the world. Or words. Sometimes, as in hurtful language, that's not a bad thing, especially if there's repentance or justice involved.

After all, it's good to remember that God's grace is meant for all of us, that His word can be like a consuming fire as well. After all, didn't Jesus set the world on fire with His words of forgiveness from the cross, changing more lives in human history than any other belief ever known? After all, didn't God simply speak everything into existence? After all, God's word trumps any of ours.

After all, consider the fight that turns into screaming, tears, separation and divorce. Consider what happened when Joseph's brothers transformed their envy over his status into selling Joseph into slavery. Consider all this the next time your kids fight with you.

Lord of the Word and all words, speak Your love through me.

How have your words started a fire?

When did someone else's words hurt you, and what did you do about it?

How can what you say be a beacon of light for Jesus today?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 11 November 2013

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3, verses 7-8.

The tongue is full of deadly poison. Imagine that. Don't believe me?

What about all the hateful things that kids say to each other? Have you seriously considered what kids say, how vicious it can be? I go back and forth on how to deal with it – self-esteem encouragement or put them down hard – but one thing is certain: bullies are mean. It's a hateful thing to bully someone, and ally bullying starts with words. Words lead to fists, intimidation and more. Or what about those "Mean Girls," who are nothing more than bullies in makeup and heels. I've raised two girls and have seen time and again how vicious girls can be to each other, usually by way of cheap talk.

Or what about political invective? Elections in the last 10-15 years have become blood sport. Perhaps they always were and I simply didn't notice, but it seems that our political rhetoric has become more and more personal, and more and more full of poison. You can't just be against what the other guy is for. No, both sides seek to paint the other as Satan incarnate, smearing and sliming opponents with verbal half-truths (or blatant lies) and virulent greed.

Yet things were no different in James' time. He saw what slander, lies, politics, and hatred had done to his brother, who was God Immanuel. Nothing the Jewish elders did or said about Jesus was even remotely true, yet they convinced the complicit and too-willing Romans to execute Him: because of the spoken word. Before his own untimely and horrific death, James saw or heard of how his brother apostles were murdered and martyred for what they believed: all because of things spoken against them.

Is it any wonder, then, that James would call the tongue a restless evil, full of deadly poison? James echoes what Jesus said when He said that it is what is in our hearts that makes us sinful. We simply say what we're already thinking, or already desire, and the desire takes on twisted life. "Just one more drink." "Hey, you're pretty." "But what about..." "I hate you." You get the drift.

And if you get the drift, I'm hoping you get James' message that the tongue is a dangerous thing indeed. We can tame dogs, cats, cows, horses, even lions and tigers and bears (oh my). None of them, however, is as dangerous as an unwound tongue venting the innermost thoughts of a fallen soul.

Lord, forgive me for when I've not tamed my tongue. Speak through me and teach me to model what You say instead.

Have you ever said anything vicious?

Do you think the tongue is a restless evil?

What can you do to change?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 12 November 2013

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. James 3, verses 9-10.

We are people of contrasts. James notices this and pounces on it as the question of the ages, and indeed it is. I go to church a lot; mostly regularly; usually every Sunday. Yet my wife is constantly (rightfully) ragging on me if I leave the parking lot and let some inappropriate comment or foul language fly. I just spent an hour (more when the pastor goes over time) praising and worshipping God, and I immediately foul it up with what I say. I'm the same me who sat in church and gladly sang, praised, lifted my hands, prayed, and all that you do at Sunday worship. I'm the same me who did all that and then gets mad at the guy who cuts me off on the street, or lets the off-color joke fly by, or passes judgment on what was said and done in the service.

Out of the same mouth. It's nothing new. If you went to one of the small home gatherings that characterized 'church' in 1st century Judea, you'd see something similar. Folks would say one thing holy, then immediately besmirch that holiness with something unholy. Such behavior transcends time.

Here's a good time to remember that we weren't made for just one time: we were made for forever. God made you, me, and everyone we know to last forever, to be with Him forever. Eternity matters most and God – Father, Son, and Spirit – is in eternity, of eternity, and around eternity. He made us to commune with Him in eternity, to share His love forever. That's why He sent His Son to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves: make our sinful lives into sinless forever.

That news, too, is nothing new. It's older than James: just like our response to it. Me first. I know better. Did you see that new kid in school? What planet did she come from? "Guess what I heard about you know who over in the next department? Yep! Doing the boss again." The single digit salute to the guy who whips into the parking space you're waiting for. How have you responded in ways that a loving follower of Jesus shouldn't respond? We could swap war stories on that but we'd miss the point. We aren't made for the war stories. It's not that we have to become prudes. Joy is the better path. We, people of contrast, are made to love Jesus forever. Let's start in small ways today.

Patient Lord, teach me to tame my thoughts and words. Teach me to control them and to use them only in ways that glorify You.

How are you guilty of this double-speak?

What contrasts are your weak spots?

Have you asked Jesus to help you change them?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 13 November 2013

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. James 3, verses 11-12

You: person of many contrasts: listen up! Jesus isn't asking you to do something you can't do. He is asking you to be holy, like Him. You can do it...there is a way.

Are you out of your freakin mind?

I'm serious. I'm not asking you to do something uncharacteristic, or something that you're unable to do. I'm not asking you to give up anything that is truly good or in live in regret. You don't have to do something unnatural or something that you weren't born to do. Nobody is asking you to be unhappy.

On its own, a wellspring can't produce both salt and fresh water. On its own, a fig tree can't bear olives, nor can a grapevine bear figs. They can't change their nature. It would take a miracle to change that.

On your own, you can't be holy, or give up nature, or really be happy. That may be a tough thing to read, but it's true. You and me, we can rail against that fact and, if we're honest, that wouldn't be surprising. Railing against what is – against the I AM – is the very nature of sin. We do it with our big indiscretions and our small ones. On our own, we can't give that up. It's in OUR very nature.

Jesus changes all that. Changes it in radical, unconventional ways. Jesus takes our contrasts and turns them around. Instead of our self-gratification, our sins are changed into Jesus' glorification. And He does it for us. He did it for us. He did it to enable us to be holy. On our own, we can't do that. On our own, our nature is that we're grapevines that can't grow figs, but we can grow poisoned grapes. We are a poisoned spring.

Want to change that? Believe in Jesus.

With Jesus – with our asking Him to change all things for us – we can be made holy, made righteous, made new. All we have to do is believe. Believe in your heart. It isn't hard to do. We can say "I love you" and mean it to other people. Say that to Jesus. He says it to you and me in every possible blessing. "I love You and I believe in You." Say that and things start to change. It's something you CAN do. It's something you can do to take hold of what He has already done for you. It's not getting religion: it's embracing Jesus. It's Jesus making you holy. The Jesus who loves people of contrasts like me and you.

Lord who loves me, thank You for living and dying for me. My sins contrast how I want to live for You. Forgive me and change me.

What are your contrasts?

Have you talked with Jesus lately?

If not, why not and what's stopping you now?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 14 November 2013

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. James 3, verse 13

So you've prayed the prayer, told Jesus that you love Him and want His forgiveness, and want to be a changed person. What's next?

Follow through.

I haven't smoked a cigarette in 28 days, and in the last 49 days I've had exactly one. The last 49 days have been extremely difficult at work and at home. I've been sick twice, been on the road 5 of 7 weeks, have done some major home improvement, worked with some difficult situations with my kids, adjusted to my wife working from home instead of at her old job, and the seasons have changed, going from pleasant summer to cold autumn. At this time, staying off the smokes hasn't been easy.

What's the difference? He put it on my heart to quit and stay quit. It isn't worth it to me to smoke but it is worth it to me to do better for Jesus. No, we aren't going down the self-righteous path of my trumpeting my own horn or telling you how wonderful it is to be smoke-free and how healthy I'll be. Personally, I think that's bunk because there are times when I've stopped myself from buying them.

But it's not about me. It's about the difference. The difference is Jesus, and the proof is in the follow through. Mind you, Jesus doesn't need proof of Himself, and He doesn't need us to prove to Him how wonderful we are. It's you and I who need to see the good deeds to reinforce our belief. Jesus has wanted from eternity to share His wisdom, His perfect love, with us, and He wants to share it with ALL of us.

Everyone. One way He shows it is by each of us living out changed lives. He changes us; He makes all things and all people new. He wants us to then go forth and sin no more, changing our behaviors and being more than we were. That isn't easy. Look no further than me for proof of that. I'm not perfect. I fell off the wagon. One day I smoked. I messed up. I fell short.

But I bounced back because He makes it possible. Jesus makes us wise and He wants us to share His wisdom. It can be done. Not necessarily quitting smoking; that may not be your vice or pet sin. But whatever your sin is, He can change your heart, plant His perfect love in You, and bless you through it in ways you never considered. He can do it now. Be wise: follow through. What are you prepared to do about that?

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your perfect love. Change me with it so that I can live for You and live You to others, so You can change them too.

Do you want to live forever?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 18 November 2013

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. James 3, verse 14

This sucks to hear. It's convicting, don't you think? I mean, I could forgive anything except that one time my ex did me wrong. That really hurt. Then there is the fact that I'm really good at what I do and, if I play my cards right, there's no telling where this whole thing could take me. And I am all for Christian living, following Jesus, and all that stuff but you just don't understand all the pressure I'm under, right?

Do I need to go on? The Beatles said 'let it be.' The better advice is 'let it go.'

You see, even though yesterday was such a busy day, it was only one short day ago that we were talking about how follow through matters; about how it matters what we do when we do it for Christ. If, in all I do for Christ, I do these things while holding on to envy, malice, grudges, unchecked ambition, greed and the like, I'm missing the point of Christ. There is no room for envy or ambition in Jesus. There's no room for these things because He never demonstrated them. He didn't do all He did out of pride: He lived in service to the Father.

Go ye therefore and do the same. Go now, Dave, and do the same.

That's really convicting because it calls me up short, making me realize that, even while I'm doing good things, I sometimes don't keep my eye on the ball. Being smoke-free, alcohol-free, drug-free, or any other kind of ism-free is nothing if I'm holding on to those ism's that dragged me down in the first place. It does no good to lie to myself about it, thinking my sins aren't as bad as, say, yours, or that person's over there. Their sins are bad enough to condemn them to hell. So are mine, and I'm stuck with them, and I live with the guilt of them, and the damnation from them. No way out.

Jesus sets us free by giving us the ability to change. He changes us by giving us the freedom to let go of the ism's, the burdens, the grudges, or anything that tripped us up in our past. Sure, He doesn't always remove us from the consequences of our choices. Yet we don't need to live with 'it' hanging around our necks anymore. 'It' doesn't need to define us, even as the world defines us. When Jesus changes us, HE is who defines us. Everything else takes on a new look. The guilt goes to glory.

The convicted is set free.

Tell me, my friend, do you want to live forever? You know how. Let it go

Lord, I'm convicted by your hard but loving words. Change my heart, then help me change my life.

Do you want to live forever?

What things are you holding on to?

What is keeping you from embracing Jesus?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 20 November 2013

Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. James 3, verse 15.

My ways are demonic. Satanic. Evil. Sinful. Damning. Deadly. Need I go on? When I rely on myself, the ways I do that are demonic. Ouch. I mean, James really brings it even across time. It hurts to realize that, whenever I even mildly transgress, I'm demonic. So are you.

And that's why it hurts. You see, we try. You try. I try. I really try. Consistently I fail, though. Case in point: just this past weekend. My mom is moving into assisted living in the next few months, and to do that means an awful lot of work for all of us in her family. The house needs to be cleaned out. Possessions must be sorted. New living arrangements must be made. New medical providers found. A new church, new acquaintances, just a lot of work.

My reaction? Anger. Self-pity. When I saw how much work needed to be done to make all this happen, I immediately reacted with selfish anger. "Woe is me because I have SO MUCH to do!" Why can't she do these things herself? Doesn't anybody know how much I already have on my plate? There are so many things that need to be done to get her moved, and than so many more that need to be done to close out the house.

Pity party. Consider yourself, Dave, and all that stuff you have on your plate. After all, there are only so many hours in the day, and even though 2014 isn't even underway yet, you already have so much that's planned. Boo freakin hoo.

Worse, that's the wisdom of the world. According to James – and Jesus – that 'wisdom' is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. It's as old as Eden, and is the same tactic the devil used on Eve back then. At the moment when I should be most caring, I'm more self-centered. Some son I am. Some follower of God.

There's a better way.

Reject the world's wisdom and seek Christ's. Christ is along for the ride, you know; He's part of our planning for where Mom moves next. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and then be still. God is involved in the plans we're making and, since He's there, whatever happens will be ok. Jesus was the only son who never failed His Father. All the rest of us? He saved us from ourselves so we could be forgiven, be redeemed, and be there for each other.

Which is what I'll be when we move Mom in a few months. It's a tough thing to give up 70 years of belongings, but thank God that she's willing to do so willingly. Moving is her idea, not mine. She sees that it's time. Thank God, too, that He lets us see time as well despite our demonic ways.

Saving Jesus, save me from my demonic thoughts and renew my wandering heart.

What ideas do you have that are demonic?

Do you grasp the depth of what demonic really means?

What are you willing to do to change?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 21 November 2013

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. James 3, verse 16.

Envy and selfish ambition: that sounds like Washington DC. But if you think about it, it also sounds like a church council meeting, a high school reunion, family gathering for Thanksgiving, and people watching at Starbucks. Not to paint things in too cynical a picture, but it sounds like you and me talking here. It sounds, too, like we're biting off more than we can chew.

According to James, where you and I feel envy or selfish ambition, we're also susceptible to (and culpable in) adultery, murder, slander, hatred, and a rash of other vile sins. They are closely linked and intertwined. Envy breeds more and more sin. Ambition usually stems from envy.

Mind you, there are healthy kinds of ambition, namely being ambitious to build one's talents for God, or being ambitious in setting goals that better the situation of others, perhaps even yours. That's not what James is talking about. You know the kind of selfish ambition he's talking about. It's the kind of ambition that makes us think "that lousy so and so. They don't deserve to win." Or it's the jealousy with which you and I look at other people who have things we want or live lives we wished we lived. When we think like that, we're guilty of sowing the seeds of murder, hatred, adultery, idolatry and every other kind of possible sin. Is this so hard to believe when, just in the previous verse, James counsels that our ways are demonic when they're apart from Jesus. Demonic and full of every evil practice.

Notice something, though: James couples 'evil practice' with 'disorder.' That's not a coincidence. Personally, I think that sin comes from a condition of disorder. Our hearts or minds are out of synch with where God wants us to be. We take our eyes off of Jesus and whammo! Disorder, then sin. Pick your sin, your pet transgression. When you do it or are in the middle of it, you're disorganized, off kilter from the norm. It isn't a random thing that James links evil practices with disorder.

Where are you in disorder today? What things make you feel envy, or tempt you into evil? They're out there, I know. And I know that I resist evil every day. The evil I resist may not be the evil you resist, but it's just as real and just as disorderly. What do we do to resist? You know the answer. Jesus. Focus on Jesus and resisting evil becomes possible, feasible, real. Focus on Him and the disorderly assumes order again. The cure for the common sin is Jesus: today, tomorrow, and forever. That's why James says what he says.

Saving Jesus, save me from the disorder of sin. Forgive me again and teach me to follow You.

Where do you have disorder?

What things tempt you into evil practice?

What are you prepared to do about that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 25 November 2013

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. James 3, verse 17.

The sermon topic on Sunday was John 3:16: For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life. It was the first time in my life that someone had broken down that verse (which really explains the entire Bible) into understandable chunks that each reveal the splendor and forever love of God. Later, when I read today's verse I realized something. Stop me if I'm wrong, but couldn't this verse from James 3 also work just fine as the one after John 3:16? God created us to share heaven, to be part of it now and forever. He did it selflessly, fully, and eternally because He is all pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive and full of mercy. Is it just me or do the two verses go together?

Later (again) I also thought a lot about the verse while writing this because yesterday was my Dad's birthday. It has taken me years to be able to say that I miss him even though he died in 1997. Now that he's gone, I can say that he was a good man who tried his best to be a good father, a hard worker, and a decent man. When he was here, Dad was peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful, bearing good fruit, impartial and sincere. He was a good man while still being just a man. His flaws were my flaws and the flaws in my life are ones he would have understood. Yet he lives today because God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son so that men who believed in him would have eternal life.

Dad was an intellectual. He revered the human intellect, learning, and the process of learning. More than that, I think he enjoyed being part of things where people became better than they were. Dad liked to learn, teach, and do, and he liked combining those things in his work and his rest. I think it's why he had the career he did, teaching people how to properly safely use guns and ammunition. Toward the end of his life, when the career was done, he couldn't do many of the things he had always planned to do; cancer prevented it. Yet he still found time to contemplate wisdom, to put first things first and consider where he was headed. He told me that he didn't want to die, but that he understood it and wasn't afraid of it and that he knew heaven would be a good place. He knew it because Jesus' wisdom is all pure, and given so that we might have eternal life. Happy birthday Dad.

Wise Jesus who gave all, thank You for Your eternal love.

Do you know someone wise?

Read the two verses again. What are they telling you?

How would you describe wisdom from heaven?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 26 November 2013

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. James 3, verse 18.

The big news this weekend was that there was a tentative peace agreement signed between the US and Iran to delay the development of Iranian nuclear weapons. I'm skeptical. When someone says they hate you and want to destroy you, I think it's best to take them at their word and be wary. Knowing even that, I'll say that anyone with a half a brain must be hopeful that a hostile nation might be kept from developing terrible weapons, and that there might actually be peace in our time.

Yet peace is not the absence of conflict. Simply not being at war is not the same as being at peace. I'm far from the first person to opine this but I do so now to make a larger point. Stopping a bully from hitting you today isn't the same thing as preventing one from hitting you tomorrow. The only real peace in this world is Jesus Christ. Those who sow in His peace reap a harvest of righteousness in Him.

It's true that those who wish to forge peace between hostile adversaries are peacemakers. Such people are some of the best of us; only a fool could consider otherwise. And, even as some peacemakers make peace for selfish reasons, they are peacemakers all the same and deserving of our praise. And (again), even when disagree with the political aims of those who purport the advancement of a false and untenable peace, well, at least someone is trying to maintain peace all the same.

But I'll say it again: the only real peace in this world is Jesus Christ. The only real peace that can last in this world, that can change hearts, that can mend disagreements and bring tranquility to the world is the peace which surpasses all understanding found only in Christ Jesus. Anything else is simply cheap diplomacy. Anything else doesn't last. Anything not centered on Jesus isn't peace.

Peacemakers sow in righteousness, but those who sow in Jesus grow in Jesus, grow the Kingdom of Jesus for Jesus, of Jesus, and about Jesus. That Kingdom will know no end, and in that Kingdom there will be no more war. There will be no war there because in that Kingdom the wisdom, patience and love of King Jesus will infuse everything. Hateful ideology, selfish ambition, crafty politics, and useless diplomacy won't stand a chance.

I welcome that Kingdom today. I hope and pray that the new 'peace agreement' actually does maintain peace. I hope and pray more, though, that it is a good, solid step towards advancing the reign of King Jesus in a world that desperately needs it.

Jesus of peace, teach us flawed people to know Your peace so that there may be an absence of sin.

How do you define peace?

Have you sown peace in righteousness lately?

How have you been a cheap diplomat?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 28 November 2013, Thanksgiving Day

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? James 4, verse 1.

How fitting. Happy Thanksgiving all, and I sincerely hope it's a good day for you to remember all the ways God blesses you. Have you ever considered that one of the ways He blesses us is allowing us to have conflict in our lives?

You see, it's Thanksgiving Day here and things are already tense. There are only four of us in the house today: my wife, our son, my mom, and myself. We're going out to have dinner at our daughter's house later, making this the first Thanksgiving in many years that we haven't cooked. I'm a bit of a control freak, so this is causing me angst. I like to cook and put on a show, but this year it isn't my show. Thank God it isn't about me, but you know, it's making me feel a bit rough around the edges.

And then there is the gingerbread house. Son Bull is building a gingerbread house to enter in the annual city contest. Last year, he won the entire show (which is quite an achievement in a city of over 100K people), so this year he's trying to top himself. He's a perfectionist (like his father), and he's really struggling to not rush. Yesterday, he asked me for some advice on how to support the roof on his building, so I gave him some advice. Is he taking it? Nope. Is this causing a bit of grief between us? Sadly, yep. In the long run, does this really matter? No, not really, although it's very likely his gingerbread house will collapse if he doesn't do something (whether it's what I recommended or not).

What causes fights and quarrels among us, even on days like today when we're supposed to be higher-focused, lasered in on thanking God for all His provision? The answer isn't difficult. We each wrestle with sin, whether it's giving up control or watching our kids take risks. The temptation to helicopter, to overshadow, can lead to the sin of doing those things when we don't need to. Perhaps God has something else in store. Our election to give in to the evil desire leads to the fights and quarrels.

Wouldn't it be better to remember the verse just before? You know, the one that said "peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness?" The house might not collapse; all may be fine. Or it might just cave in and lead to something different, something better. The meal will be delicious today, and all I will have to do to contribute is wash a few dishes. Through it all, God brings us together to fellowship with each other while working through life's conflicts. That's fitting on every day, but especially so on this one.

Thank You, Lord, for all the ways You bless us.

How has the Lord blessed you this year?

What angst are you wrestling with today?

What can you do to let go of it right now?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 2 December 2013

You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. James 4, verse 2.

Our sin is due to the fact that we don't ask God. Underlying that, however, is a bigger fact: we don't ask God because we don't come to God first. How many of our worries, troubles, crises or disasters could we avoid if we simply stop, pray, and seek Jesus' guidance before we proceed any further? I struggle with this daily, and if you don't believe me (or think yourself different), then let me tell you that, just since I awoke this morning I've wrestled with envy, anger, impatience, arrogance, idolatry, filthy language, lust, hatred, judgmentalism, and falsehood...and it isn't even noon yet! How are you different?

But beneath the idea that we don't seek Jesus first is the even more insidious truth that's sometimes hard to acknowledge. We don't ask God first and we don't come to Him first because we want to be God first. Yes, you read that right: you and me, me and you: we want to be God. You've heard me say it before that all sin is really a sin of idolatry. Underneath every sin we think, say, or do is the partner sin of idolatry. We murder because we've made something else our god. We lie because we think we know better than God's truth. We deceive because we think we can control things better than God's life. We lust because we tell ourselves that God hasn't given us enough. You get the picture.

This isn't my original thought; I'm not that clever. No, I'm doing little more than parroting an idea that many others have spoken before me. Many of them are echoing James, and so do I. James was speak on Jesus' behalf, on the older brother with whom he grew up. Perhaps James learned of desire and coveting by watching his brother grow up and make choices to avoid these things; perhaps James grew to understand them by watching others around him. Or perhaps these are sins he knew too well from his own lexicon of sin. We don't know and, in reality, it doesn't matter half as much as the truth that our sinful desires take root because we don't seek God. And we don't seek God because we think we know better.

Idolatry.

New Years is only a few weeks away. Perhaps you and I could each make a resolution, starting now, to stop and pray, to seek first Jesus' counsel, in the decisions and actions we choose. Perhaps, then, a happy new year would be truly happy and we could avoid the pitfalls of our misplaced desires.

Wise Lord, help me to know You more by partnering with me today in all I decide or do. Lead me and advise me and teach me to follow.

Daily Proverbial, from James, 3 December 2013

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James 4, verse 3.

This one goes with the verse before which, if you'll remember, said "You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God". I split the two, however, because there's a point worth talking about, a point that reinforces an argument we talked about yesterday.

When we ask with a wrong motive, we're practicing idolatry.

You see, we're impatient. We want what we want quickly. I sometimes think we want things quickly because we don't trust, because we aren't really sure God will keep His promises to provide all things. Life isn't about things; life isn't even about surviving. But we make it that way, and we make ourselves think it really is (when it isn't). So we're impatient, mistrustful, doubting. If you back away from those particular trees, you begin to see a forest wrapped in putting things in front of Him who made all things.

I'll admit it: I wrestle with this one. Sometimes I pray and it isn't earnest. I know it isn't earnest because I feel clouded, conflicted. Sometimes I doubt, wondering if my prayer was good enough, or if God will call me up short on it, seeing through my selfish charade. Will He say "I know, Dave, but is that what you really mean?" Sometimes I feel disconnected from God and, when I finally do pray and ask Him things, I feel like my words are falling on deaf ears.

Ah the glory of sin...how's that workin out for you Dave? Jesus is the cure for the common sin. Lead me not into temptation, Lord, but deliver me from evil. His prayer says that and it's earnest. I can't fill His shoes. I'm not God.

The trick isn't being disconnected from God. The trick isn't a trick at all, in fact. God is still connected to me. Jesus is still listening, still active in my life, still working to turn my rebellion with His redemption. Perhaps it's me who's hiding things from himself instead of hiding them from God (who knows them anyway, but wants us to talk with Him from the heart). No, there isn't a trick at all. It's a matter of continuing the conversation, of not giving up. More importantly, it's a matter of praying to Him at ALL moments, especially the inopportune, uncomfortable, and testy moments. Those are the ones when I'm most vulnerable, most susceptible, most likely to fall into temptation. It's in those moments when I'm most likely to put me first and try to step into God's shoes.

You know, idolatry

Lord, forgive my impatience and teach me to not devote myself to idols.

Are you honest with God when you pray?

What are your personal idols?

What can you do to not feel disconnected from God?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 4 December 2013

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. James 4, verse 4.

Hard words for hard people in hard times. The people who choose money, a nice home, and a good job may be enemies of God. The sweet suburban mother who adores her children and thinks they are the single most important thing in the world may be an enemy of God. The life-long church worker who makes sure things are 'just so' every Sunday morning so that the service goes off well may be an enemy of God. The Pope, the pastor, the parent, the person you meet on the street: all may be enemies of God.

"May."

"May" because it's a matter of choice. Choosing the world makes us enemies of God because we're choosing the creation over its Creator. We've heard the old maxim about how the road to hell is paved with good intentions. If you think about it, that's just another way of saying what James is saying. I may have the best of intentions in doing what I do, but the moment I put what I do – or what I want – in front of my faith in Jesus, then I've set myself against Jesus. He isn't my enemy; He never is. No, I make myself His enemy.

Do you really want to be the enemy of the person who created the entire universe simply by speaking?

To hammer home his point, James goes further. He calls us adulterous. Unfaithful, untrustworthy, deceitful, lusting, seductive, lying: all that and so much more is involved in being an adulterer. That's me. That's you. When we choose the feeling of Christmas over the reason for Christmas, we're adulterers. When we choose the person over the vow to God, we're adulterers. When we lie to someone to avoid hurting their feelings, we're adulterers. Do I need to go on?

I don't know about you, but I'm tired of being called an idolater and an adulterer. I don't want to be an enemy of God. The God of justice is the same God of unending love. His justice protects that perfect love. I'm weary of being set against Him, His dreadful justice, and His love for me. You and me, we are in the world but we don't have to be the world. We can live our lives as part of Heaven and all that God intends for us in His plan. That plan doesn't involve adultery, or idolatry, or being separated from Him. There is a better way and Jesus' arms are open.

What are you prepared to do about that?

Lord, I'm sorry for how I've chosen the world over You. Forgive me and renew me, and teach me again today how to be faithful to You in all things.

How have you been unfaithful?

Do you consider yourself an adulterer?

What are you prepared to do to change?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 5 December 2013

Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? James 4, verse 5.

God longs for the best of you. He created you, me, and everyone we can think of to love Him, loving not out of compulsion or obligation but out of the heart. To make that possible, Jesus put the best of Himself – His Spirit – in each of us. Grafted onto the soul of the believer is the soul of Jesus Christ. You were redeemed – bought back from sin – by Jesus' death. By claiming your belief in that, He grafts His soul onto your own.

It's very real, our souls. Jesus imprinted His love – His Spirit – onto our very existence, onto the eternal soul that lives in each of us. He did it so that, when our days of judgment come, just and right God the Father would see through the shallow, selfish veneer of our sins and how it corrupts even our souls. God won't see those sins or a corrupted soul: He'll see Jesus. He'll see Jesus' soul living with and in our own. We were bought back for this purpose: to share God's love, God's Spirit, with Him and with everyone else forever. It was done with perfect love.

So God is jealous for our spirit. His jealousy isn't like high school jealousy, or JR Ewing jealousy, or pop culture in the streets jealousy. God's jealousy is a yearning for us, a longing to share Himself with us, love us, and forgive us. God's jealousy is that protective jealousy, that loving desire to share what matters most. Jesus longs for us to give ourselves to Him, lock, stock, and barrel; everything about us, including (maybe especially) the unattractive things.

It isn't a transient or lightweight thing: it's God's holy desire. He longs for us to share Him with others who don't know or have forgotten about Him. He longs for us to share His just, holy, enriching love. He longs for us, longing for us when we don't deserve Him. How astounding this is to hear right after the verses that talk about how we make ourselves into enemies of God, enemies of Jesus. Jesus doesn't want us to be enemies; He doesn't want anything but His perfect love to live in our hearts. To be grafted to our souls.

At your very worst, at your most embarrassing, in the moments of which you're most ashamed, in the times you most want to forget, Jesus of Nazareth – the Great I AM and Son of the Triune God – longs for you, pines for you, desires for you to share in His rich love, and wants you to live with Him forever.

Longing Jesus, forgive me when I have failed you. Thank you for your longing love, for wanting me. Grow my love for You today.

What do you long for?

Do you long for Jesus?

What are you most ashamed of, and have you truly considered that, even in the middle of all that, Jesus loves you with a love that lasts forever?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 6 December 2013

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." James 4, verse 6.

Jesus longs for us and wants to hold us with Him forever. But we set ourselves up as enemies of Him when we bask in our selfish pride.

That sucks.

Grace doesn't.

A friend of mine was reading through the book of Ephesians and said that the message exploded in his understanding like a huge grace bomb. If you want to know more, check out gracebomb.com to see the music cooperative that he started for Christian artists to share their music. But before you go there, consider Bill Brimer's point: grace explodes in our life like a huge love bomb.

If you woke up this morning, you're in God's grace. If you have clothes to wear, a bed, anything to eat, sense from your senses, and if you're able to read this, you're swimming in God's grace. He dropped it on your life, onto your soul, like a huge bomb that exploded away the wreckage of your sins. Everything that you had ever done to pry yourself away from Jesus or His perfect love stained you. God blew all of that up with His grace.

He did it when we least expected it, namely when we didn't deserve it. He did it when you were contemplating how much you hate your teacher. He did it when I refused to back out of the fight even though I realized long ago that it was going nowhere. He did it when you walked into the strip club. He did it when I flipped the bird to the guy in the next lane. He did it on Christmas morning when the present you wanted wasn't under the tree and you sulked. He did it when I was too proud.

The thing is, we least deserve it during every breath we take. Every breath is a gift given in God's grace. All we need to do is humbly acknowledge it. All we need to do is lay down our pride and submit ourselves to Jesus. Once we do that, things begin to change. He changes things for us, around us, in us, about us. Maybe we don't become rich or maybe we do; wealth is irrelevant. Maybe we have health or maybe we don't; it doesn't matter. Maybe our dreams come true or maybe they don't; Jesus is better.

The cure for the common sin is Jesus. Jesus longs for us, longing to share His love with us. He loves us through His grace. And Jesus pours His grace on us like a waterfall. Like a bomb. It explodes in our lives like a bomb, like a giant grace bomb.

Graceful Lord, explode in my life, wreck my sins of old, and pour Your holy, wonderful grace into my heart.

How has Jesus exploded in your life?

How do you still want Him to?

What does grace mean to you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 10 December 2013

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. James 4, verse 7.

In my opinion, this is one of the most powerful verses in all of Scripture.

Now that we've gotten the obvious out of the way, have you really considered what this means to you? It's right up there with Jesus telling us that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains. It's right up there in impact with Paul, telling us that not even the most powerful forces in the world can separate us from the love of Jesus. It's up there with Jesus telling us "behold, I am coming soon."

Submit ourselves to God. How difficult is that, yet how empowering! We agree to give up everything, be willing to do anything, even give up who and what we love most, even to die, and God promises us more power – HIS power – than we could dream of. And the beautiful thing about it is that we won't be wielding that power to destroy, rule, or have dominion over others. We use the blessed power of God to share His love, to help others gain His power. And we do it by submitting, by surrendering, by giving up all we have done, are, or could be and letting Him take full control over us.

In doing that, He empowers us to resist. I like that word: resist. I can't overcome sin on my own. I can't overcome the consequences of the wrong I've done, or the junk I've brought into my life, or the hurt I've caused. But God can. He can and, in doing so, he empowers me when I submit to Him so that I might resist the devil. Resisting is standing against. With God's help, I can stand against Satan. When I'm tempted, God empowers me to say no. When I'm falling, He empowers me to step back. When I've messed up, He empowers me to stand up. When I'm standing, he empowers me to resist again, to try harder, do better, live for Him. And turn from my old ways.

And in doing so, the devil will flee from me. When God empowers me, I'm a badass. I'm a badass who can tell the devil to get his hell out of my life. When I speak with the delegated authority of the Most High, the devil is powerless. Against little old me. Against me who has been freed from all the bad stuff I've done. Simple, humble, submitting me can stand up high in my faith in the Most High Jesus of eternity, my brother and savior and friend, and tell the prince of lies to beat feet. And he will do so.

Consider that. It's the best and most important news you'll ever hear.

Lord Most High, You forgive my sins, empower me to live, and enable me to stand. Help me to stand for You, and to resist the devil when he comes calling.

Have you stood up for Jesus?

How does He make you into a spiritual badass?

In what ways do you need to ask for his help to resist?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 12 December 2013

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. James 4, verse 8.

It's too early in the day to mince words, but I have to here. You see, I have come to believe God is always near us. He was near me yesterday when I was driving and was more into the conference call on my phone than into paying attention to the road. He was near my son last night while Son Bull was practicing giving tattoos with his new tattoo kit. He was near my daughter while she was Christmas shopping. He was near my wife when she was making her weekly grocery list. He was near you yesterday when you were doing whatever it was that you least wanted to do. He was near Obama when he was taking that famous selfie. He's near the nomads in the desert who sleep under the cold starlight.

More and more I've come to believe that God is near us all the time, but it's us who draw ourselves away from Him. Yeah, I know, really profound and really obvious. A first-grader knows this. But a middle-aged overweight Texan sometimes forgets it. I get wound up in working, thinking, DOING. The way of the world is to lead us astray, and all too often I follow.

When that happens, the only thing to do is to wash my hands and purify my heart. It's not for God: it's for me so that I remember He's God. Jesus doesn't give a flip whether my hands are dirty or clean. He's very interested in my heart, though, and doesn't want me to stand before Him holding onto the crap that made me dirty in the first place.

He doesn't want us to stand before Him being double-minded. In one verse, he reminds us to repent, submit to Him, then resist Satan. He encourages us to do all that because He doesn't want us to be double-minded anymore. We spend too much of our lives chasing after things that don't matter when what we need most is found at the feet of Jesus. To stand there, He asks us to cast aside everything we cling to, especially our sins. Let em go. Better yet, hand em over. Hand them over to Jesus and let Him carry the burden. Let Him wash us clean and purify our hearts. Jesus doesn't want us to be hurting any longer. He doesn't want us to be double-minded.

He doesn't want that because He's near us all the time. When we're double-minded, dirty-handed and oh so impure of heart, Jesus is near us all the time.

Nearby Lord, I give You all my burdens. Grant me Your perfect love and empower me to live You to other people today.

What things have you thinking double-minded?

How are your hands dirty?

What do you think about Jesus always being nearby to you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 13 December 2013

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. James 4, verses 9-10.

The full text of verses 7-10 reads, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." In a way, it's almost unfair to chunk them down to analyze them apart. A solid teacher of the Bible will remind you to use Scripture to interpret Scripture. We must be careful to not solely rely on outside analysis or take each verse out of context. To set the record straight, this isn't out of context.

What I am doing, however, is reminding you that, on its own, these verses are ripe with contrasts and that these contrasts are especially impacting here at Christmastime. Let's be honest: they have impact on any day of the year. Yet who could truly read "grieve, mourn, and wail" at this time of the year and not see the poignant, ironic bent of it?

Here's another thing: humbling ourselves by grieving, mourning and wailing: they're part of the reason for Christmas. I do believe there is a 'war on Christmas' going on in American culture, yet I'm not one of those who wants to harp on 'Jesus is the reason for the season.' To me, that's self-evident, something that even the most strident non-believer sees and knows. I don't need to pig-pile the point. But why have a Christ? It's to save us from ourselves, from our need to constantly repent in front of a just God and hope He is in a good mood that day.

Christ was born in that dirty stable to die for us. He was born to live, teach, love, and die for a bunch of folks who, when judged by our own standards of selfishness, aren't worth it. To really grasp this, we need to grieve, wail and mourn for the terrible things we have done. My lewd thoughts; your angry moments; kids' selfish times; anything bad that we've done. We should grieve, mourn and wail in repentance...as we hand our sins, grieving, mourning and wailing over to Jesus so He can take them away forever. Without our Christmas reminder, the start of that process seems a little less bright.

We are 12 days from Christmas – get your partridge in a pear tree ready – and here is James, speaking these complex truths. Advent comes a couple of months before Lent, when we should reflectively grieve, mourn, and wail for the cost our sins' require. But with Christ in our hearts, let's lay aside the hurt and embrace the hope. Today.

Christmas Lord, I believe in You.

What have you thought, said, or done that should make you grieve?

What do you really want for Christmas?

What contrasts do you see in these verses and what do they mean to you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 16 December 2013

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. *James 4, verse 11.*

One of my friends has a theme in her life: if you judge people, how do you have time to love them? She isn't a believer, isn't a person with Christian faith in her life or her background. Yet I think she probably summed up what the Apostle James is saying here better than anyone I've ever known.

So, with that in mind, here's a weekend confession: I got really angry when someone took my parking space this weekend. I was at the mall on Saturday – a mistake in itself – and was waiting (with my signal on) for a parking space. Soon as the man in the space backed out, another car pulled up quick and swooped in. Here's the confession part: I rolled down my window and said something quite uncomplimentary to the woman in the car, who refused to make eye contact. Here's my next confession: I was immediately ashamed for doing it. I soon found myself praying for the person and thinking, "if it means that much to them, let them have it. Lord, take care of em." And that was that. I quickly found another space, and walked into a very crowded mall where the crowd didn't seem to bother me that much anymore.

Lesson: it works. Not judging people works. It works to not think bad of someone just because they get something you wanted. It works to not assume things about people based on nothing more than a casual glance or a short conversation. It works to not judge a situation because you read something into it from Facebook or text messages. If you judge people, how do you have time to love them?

James exhorts us to NOT judge each other because, when we do, we're judging God. It isn't our place, our role, or even our right, to judge the Lord. It simply isn't. It is our place to take God at His word and remember that, in all things and at all times, Jesus is with us and will provide for us. He is always involved in our lives – and that includes in the lives of others around us. Including those folks we'd judge.

And when we don't judge – when we simply accept people and things as they are and concern ourselves only with where & what the Lord has us doing in our own lives – we find it works.

Lord, You alone are my judge and the judge of the world. Let me submit to You and learn to follow your guiding love in not judging others.

Are you judgmental?

Have you recently judged someone?

Have you ever been unfairly judged and how did you feel about that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 17 December 2013

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? James 4, verse 11.

I went to the Mall of America last night. It was kind of a bizarre evening of Christmas shopping, for reasons I may go into some other day. As I was walking around the mall, trying to fill in my list, I was reminded that the world is a pretty multi-colored thing. I'm not going all multi-cultural and diversity here, though if that's your bag, knock yourself out. But you can't walk around in such a public place and not notice how different we all are.

You see, there are over 600 stores in the Mall of America, each one dedicated to parting you from the greenbacks in your wallet in exchange for fulfilling whatever choice brought you in. I'm sure a mathematician could calculate the precise number, but if you tried to mix and match all the possible choices of all the millions of kinds of things for sale, the possible number of variations in the things you could choose might be in the factor of trillions. Or even trillions of trillions. All the possible ways to mix up things, styles, choices, colors, fabrics, items, you name it: the number would boggle my mind. I think God must love variety.

Who am I to tell you that your choice is wrong? And who are you to tell me that about mine? It's a matter of choices. There are some things I wouldn't buy if I had all the money in the world, and there are some things I think are downright awful. But I imagine you could say the same about some things I choose (or even a few of the things I bought last night). As long as what you choose satisfies you and, above all, is Godly, then good for you. I support it and hope you can do that same.

And what is Godly? If God isn't telling you no, then perhaps it's just fine. Listen to what He's telling you in your heart. As for me, I won't judge you over it. I may not like your hat, and you may find the books I read to be BORING, but good for you and your hat and good for both of us. When we get down to brass tacks, God wants us to live out of love for Him, not out of spite for each other.

I spent a few hours walking from store to store and doing some people watching. It's quite entertaining to see what people buy, how they interact, what they say and do. It's good to watch for such things, and appreciate them instead of criticizing them. Like Bette Midler said, "God is watching us."

Lord and judge, teach me to love others and not judge them.

When was the last time you considered that God is watching while you judge?

What do you think you deserve for judging people?

Do you want to change?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 18 December 2013. Dillon's 18th Birthday

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. James 4, verses 13-14.

Today is a special day. It's not every day that your youngest child is no longer a child, but that's what today is. Today is my son's 18th birthday. I don't usually pick these verses out of order; today is no different. To segue from James, I have a few words for my new young man.

Live today. I'm not just talking about doing well in school, or making good choices, or even being responsible in all you do. Those things are a given. We're talking about living. Submit to God, then watch Him get down in your life. These verses are talking about how brief life is, and implied in them is the message "live it." Live each day well, enjoying and making the most of it, serving others, doing your best, and having fun.

Don't wait for tomorrow. Don't assume tomorrow will happen. If there is something you dream of doing, then find a way to make it happen and don't wait. Prepare, be a good steward of the so-many gifts you have, and use your time here to live that dream. Don't be controlled by anyone here but the Lord. God didn't put you in our lives just to take up space. You have gifts, talents, purpose, and dreams. Develop and use them. God gave you life to live. Today. Not waiting for tomorrow.

Be thankful. Part of the book of James is a reminder to thank God for all He does. Be thankful and have a thankful outlook today. For the rest of your life, you'll be an adult. Be thankful for that. Each day, I'm thankful for you, for being your dad and to now be your fellow man. Pass on that thanks to others by living in thankful ways for them. In doing so, you'll be giving thanks to Jesus.

Finally, grow as a man of God. It's a wonderful thing to grow up, and I would pity the man who wanted only to be a child forever. It's a wonderful blessing to grow, but only if you grow in God. The longer you live, the more you'll find that, to live in today being thankful, the only way to do it and be happy is to grow in God. Let Him lead you. Be in His word. Question Him. Follow Him. Ask Him. Submit to Him. Love Him.

I'm proud of you, Dillon. I'm proud of all you're doing, and how you've striven and succeeded in your childhood. It's a great start. Happy birthday son. God loves you and so do I.

Lord, thank you for my son. Love, grow, and protect him today and always.

Daily Proverbial, from James, 23 December 2013

Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. James 4, verse 15.

Christmas Eve is tomorrow. My wife and I were talking just the other day about the disappointment that so often occurs after Christmas; the big let-down. We were saying that some of the let-down is due to not getting the anticipated reaction from people. Whether it's giving gifts, cookies, meals, or just a simple act of generosity, there are fewer things that can pop your Christmas bubble quicker than apathy or satisfaction at something you give or do.

Wouldn't it be better to simply give the gift no matter what could happen, saying "if it's the Lord's will, I will live?"

And then there are New Years resolutions. I've said it before: I don't make them. My history with keeping new year resolutions isn't very successful. To be honest, I've made more than I've kept, and some that I've kept haven't been for the best. These, too, can be a let-down when I fail, once again, to modify my behavior or live up to some unreasonable expectation that I've set for myself.

Wouldn't it be better to simply resolve this, saying "if it's the Lord's will, I will live?"

Like every other year, this Christmas season has been busy. Work, travel, parties, baking, shopping, meals, gifts, travel, family, cooking, eating, movies, music: need I go on? Worse, does it sound familiar? Do people in other countries obsess about Christmas the way we do in America? And even worse than that, can they? Dr. Seuss is right: Christmas will still come whether all the Who's in Whoville put up their fluff and stuff or not. It will come and it will still be Christmas no matter what decorations, presents, foods, or whatnot we do or not. We aren't in control of that. God is.

In other words, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. To get on James' level, wouldn't life be easier, maybe fuller, if we simply lived like that?

Not long ago, someone in the media opined that "we would all be better off if we loved God and loved each other." When you think about it, that's saying what James is saying. We would be better off to simply love God and love each other. That's especially true at Christmas if we want to avoid the letdown which is waiting just a few days up the calendar. If we let it, that letdown can ruin a perfectly good day that just so happens to commemorate Jehovah Emmanuel. If it's the Lord's will, I'll live this week to see that day. If it's the Lord's will, I'll simply live to do this or that, let yes mean yes and no mean no.

Lord, Merry Christmas, Your day. Thank You for the reminder to live in today.

Do you find yourself all wrapped around the axle at this time of year?

Do you find yourself feeling sideways at Christmas, and have you asked yourself why that is?

What do you think about simply living according to the Lord's will?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 26 December 2013

As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. James 4, verse 16.

Merry Christmas on onward towards New Years. Dinner was pretty good yesterday, and it was great to spend the day hanging out with my family. Soon, the tree will come down and the decorations will be put away. Before that happens, however, what arrogant schemes and evil boasting am I doing?

You see, Christmas should be a gut-check. Once a year, as we're making merry and enjoying how we commemorate the birth of the King of Kings, we should give ourselves a gut-check. The day after (what I hope was) a merry day, here is James, smacking us in the gob with our evil arrogance.

Did you get a diamond ring under the tree? Good for you, but keep it in perspective. Was your Christmas meal a feast? Again, good for you, but how about a little reflection (and a few sit-ups). Tell me (better yet, tell Jesus): what are you holding on to that makes you boast, or feel cocky, or even make your chest swell?

Yesterday, we watched the end of "Ben Hur," after which I went into my office to write these words. Between the two, I got my gut check. If you haven't seen the movie, it's the story of a man and his family, and how their lives are touched by the polar opposites of Rome and the Son of God. Near the end, the main character sees Christ crucified: hardly a Christmas scene (which, btw, is how the movie begins). I realized what the day was all about while sitting there next to my very-pregnant daughter. The miracle birth at Christmas is only made complete by the miracle death coming at Easter. Without that death, Christmas is meaningless. Congratulations, Dave: you grasped an obvious cliché.

And yet it's more. It's more because James gob-smacked me with reality and told me how much my fat Christmas self needs that brutal murder on Good Friday. And how much everything else pales.

Prime rib in the roaster: tasteless. New tools, a new puzzle, new clothes: close, but no cigar. Beautiful tree, decades-old traditions, priceless decorations: whatever. Precious memories with the people I love most in the world: worthless, in compare. Ten seconds of heart-to-heart with the Man from Galilee whose birth we did all this to celebrate: merry Christmas, one and all. All those wonderful blessings are special, to be sure, but they're only made special by knowing it's Jesus who does so, and whom we share, and Who was and is and is to come. Holding on to anything else is simply evil.

Only by letting go of the things that I hold dear, even the deeply buried resentments and arrogance, can I truly understand how beautiful is the death of the Savior made possible by the miracle of His birth. That's the best Christmas gift of all.

Thank You, Lord, for your birth...and for how we will soon remember Your saving death.

What so-called gifts are you holding onto too close?

What should you let go of?

When did you last consider Christmas without Easter?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 27 December 2013

If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. *James 4, verse 17.*

James is saying that, if we know we should do something but don't then we're sinning. That's just peachy.

You see, I know of a million things that I should do and I haven't. My list could be endless. I should tithe more. I should help my neighbor cut down his tree that has been dead since that October storm. I should volunteer to help more with the Salvation Army. I should stop complaining about things at church. I should let go of my regrets and grudges. Should I feel guilty for not doing these things (and add another 'should' to my list)?

Maybe.

Maybe something else, too. Perhaps what James is telling us is that, if there's something right we know we should do and yet we choose to not do it, then we're falling into sin. Yes, maybe that one thing snowballs into a list of one hundred others; that's possible. That isn't the point. Don't you think that, usually, at the nub of multiple wrongs is some central wrong, some key thing that we need to address? Get to what's causing the hurt and other things start coming into perspective, sort of like how a tiny splinter can cause a large infection.

The only way to fix it is to take it to Jesus. As much as all those 'shoulds,' not truly getting to the root of a sin and then taking it to the Savior can be the worst sin of all for us. Perhaps those pangs of guilt are telling me 'there's something underneath all this.' It could be that God is speaking through the conscience He gave to me, telling me 'Look at this first and then let's deal with the other stuff after.'

Years ago, I was struggling, at spiritual rock bottom after affairs, arguments, anger, and all hell on earth. I asked my pastor "how do you truly lay down all your sins at the cross?" He didn't give me the answer I was looking for; he didn't provide me with some gimmick. Instead, he simply said "you do. Trust Jesus." And that was what he should have told me...so he did. Over time, I learned to re-train my brain, learning how to change thoughts if the old ways, the old sins, came up. I had confessed the sins, now I needed to let God take them away. That required effort, and it still does because I mess up daily with new things. The only way to live past them is to first take them to the Lord. After that, all I really should do falls into perspective.

Lord, forgive me now for all I should do but haven't, and all I have done but shouldn't.

What should you be doing but aren't?

What shouldn't you be doing but are?

When did you last take the root of an issue and give it over to God?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 30 December 2013

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. James 5, verse 1.

That'll teach them! Those darn rich people deserve every bit of misery they get because most of them don't work the way REAL people do. They're just a bunch of greedy bloodsuckers who deserve to get punished for the way they keep the man down!

Please, not today; let's spare each other the class warfare. Besides, maybe that isn't all James is talking about. Maybe he is warning all of us to not think we're too big for our britches. It's a spirit thing. True. He's warning wealthy people to not think affluence is some kind of shock absorber from sin or calamity. Case in point: if you put all your money on Twitter stock last Thursday, by Friday you had lost 14% of your money (betting on a company that makes and produces nothing). Wealth can evaporate like water, which is one of the reasons God implores us not to cling to it. In fact, James spends the next six verses talking about how we misuse wealth against each other.

Yet I think there's another point crying out instead, especially since James had just spent the verses immediately prior to us imploring us to be humble. Perhaps it's better to read it as Jesus' warning to all of us to not cling to anything of this world. He is warning us to not oppress each other...period. Especially as regards our wealth, but we shouldn't try to keep each other down no matter what. Do you have a lean bank account but are rich in knowledge and don't share that knowledge? Oppressor. Do you have many possessions to share but don't? Oppressor. Do you have the ability to do something but instead elect to always stay safe and sound in your living room? Oppressor.

See what I mean?

Fact is, especially where there is affluence, we could each be considered rich in many ways. It isn't my place or yours to judge how someone is using their gifts: it's our place to judge how we are using the gifts God gave to us. And if we find we have had the "mine, mine, mine" attitude that you might find in a two-year-old or a stereotypical millionaire, then we need a gut check. Bully for those who are doing well these days; I wish them well, and I hope they aren't juggling bills like the rest of us. I hope they don't look down on me for it because I don't look down on them for doing whatever they do. My prayer is that God isn't ashamed of either of us.

Generous Lord, bless those who have that they may share with those who have not, and help me to see how very richly you've blessed me so I can do the same.

Are you rich or poor in spirit?

How are you using the gifts the Lord gave to you?

Do you need a gut check?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 31 December 2013, New Year's Eve

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you. James 5, verses 1-6.

Let's take these verses together today because it's a fitting day to do so. New Year's Eve is a good time to take stock of what we've done. This year has been a tough one for folks I know because the economy is in bad shape, prices are high for most everything, and real unemployment is higher than it has been in nearly 80 years. And yet, we are wealthy.

Now, if you're juggling bills like we do, you don't feel very wealthy. If you're having a hard time making ends meet, you don't feel wealthy. If you've declared bankruptcy, or at least missed payments, or are having to pay minimum balances, you don't feel too wealthy. In a depression like this one, it's hard for even the well-off folks around us to feel wealthy about anything.

Here's part one of your reality check. Go to rural China. Or anywhere in India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. Visit most of the nations in Africa, or South America. Even the poorest of our poor in the Yazoo delta, inner city Detroit, or deep Appalachia are shockingly wealthy compared to how the folks in those other countries live. Here ends the guilt motivation.

What's more, the important part of checking reality is to realize what real wealth means. Have you forgotten already? Wasn't it just six days ago that we each remembered how Jesus of Nazareth, God Immanuel, Alpha and Omega, King of Kings and Lord of Lords was born unto us in a humble manger? If the poorest child in Uganda knows that the sovereign of the universe once rose as a baby from similar privation, then that poorest child is wealthier than the richest man at the bank.

Tonight we bid farewell to an old year come to close, while welcoming an untried new one into existence. Today, let's close out our business with what's done, and weep only now for the misused riches of this year. Let's lay them at the manger...and at the cross. Then tomorrow, let's begin again in a new year knowing that, as long as we've got Jesus, we've got all the riches we could ever want.

Happy New Year, Lord. Thanks for Your blessings, a year complete, and a new gift of one to unwrap.

What are you doing for New Years?

Which are you: rich or poor?

Say a prayer at midnight, a prayer of thanks and a prayer of thankful hope...then have fun.

Daily Proverbial, from James, 6 January 2014

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. James 5, verse 7.

A very happy new trip around the sun to you! How about we plant a new crop for the new year?

You see, I love farming. I really do. Some of my best memories are of childhood days spent at farms, walking around barns, being near animals. I love it every time I get a chance to drive out in the country, to tour farms, ranches, and vineyards. A few months ago, my wife and I were sharing a bottle of wine at an east Texas vineyard when I told her that growing things, making wine, and meeting people was all I wanted to do for the rest of my life. And I meant it.

To this end, we are in the process of starting a vineyard. Our goal is to buy land in east Texas and plant a vineyard. God-willing, "Second Chance Vineyards" will be open for business next year or in 2016 at the latest. Our mission is to use our passions for wine, growing things, and meeting people to spread the Gospel in any way we can. Through wine, pumpkins, books, tastings, tours, whatever: whoever we meet gets put in touch with God's Word.

It's kind of like farming, you see (very much like it given that viticulture is, well, farming). God planted an idea seed in us. We know we're blessed, we enjoy meeting people, we have always wanted to start a business together, and we really like wine. And I love farming and she loves the country. Sounds like a plan to me!

Here's the kicker: it's not about me, or us. I've used ½ of this blog to talk about what I want, but it's my hope that this is nothing more than growing the seed God already planted. Farmers raise crops, watching the rain, the temperature, the seasons. From these they know how to adjust their methods and make the most out of a crop.

You and me, we are farmers, too. God sowed the seeds of His love in our lives. You and I get to plant that elsewhere, water and fertilize it, and help it grow to produce a crop. We then get to replant that crop everywhere we go. Through it, we watch love grown and watch the seasons of our lives turn, keeping an eye on the skies for when He will return and all will be complete.

God willing, my wife and I will do some of our farming on a small parcel of land south of Paris. If not there, then perhaps somewhere else nearby. I'm just the farmer.

Lord, help me to farm where You have me this year.

Where are you farming now?

What crop have you sown in the hearts of others?

What talents did God give you to help your crop grow?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 7 January 2013

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. James 5, verse 8.

A few miles south of where my mom lives in southeast Oklahoma, there is a sign beside the road. It has been there for many years, and serves as a warning and a plea. Taken from Matthew 25:13, the sign says "watch and pray for you do not know the hour when the Son of Man will return." Amen. Matthew could be leading James to say what he did in verse 8. Every time I drive by that sign, I read it out loud and remind myself that this is an unfulfilled promise Christ made, but that it's a promise all the same. He keeps his promises.

Now let me tell you a secret: I'm glad He hasn't come back yet. My wife and I were talking about this just the other day. I'm glad Jesus hasn't come back yet, that He didn't come back catching me in the middle of some of my worst moments. I'm not naïve: I know He knows what I've done in this world; who I've hurt, my dirtiest sins, the glaring hypocrisy, things I would rather not admit. Jesus knows all of them. Still, I'm glad He didn't come to confront me with eternity while I was doing some of them. I'm ashamed enough as is, and it might be a dreadful thing to meet the Lord of Lords while blaspheming His commands.

And yet...

...And yet we do that all the time, yet Jesus is still coming back. We don't know when or where, and for thousands of years that has seemed to give us emotional carte blanche to think it'll never happen. But happen it will, just as both James and Matthew said it would. Indeed, when so many people in the world don't know or even know about Jesus, it's a good thing that He hasn't returned to end history. More of us need Him, and He loves all people, even those who repulse us. He loves us despite the fact that we lie, cheat, fornicate, hurt, ignore, scheme, and abuse (and that's just on Sunday mornings).

Even me in my most repulsive moments He loves me enough to have died for me. Even in yours, too.

Jesus, thank You for loving me when I haven't deserved it. Help me to do better for You, to love as You love the best that I can.

How much do you love strangers?

When did you last do something kind for a stranger?

Do you REALLY believe Jesus is coming back? If not, why?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 8 January 2014

Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! James 5, verse 9.

I am a project manager on a large remediation project in Minnesota. I'm the program project manager, the training lead, and the logistics lead on an effort that is updating medical codes at a medium-sized insurance company. Come October, if you visit a doctor in the United States, you'll be affected by the codes we are updating because every doctor, hospital, and insurance company is doing it. It's a UN initiative; we're simply complying to bring us in line with codes the rest of the planet is already using.

The team I'm helping to lead has nearly 40 people on it. When you get any large group together and try to get them moving in the same direction, you'll encounter friction. Personality conflicts, unforeseen circumstances, emergencies, dissatisfaction, glory and glory-seekers, success and setbacks: you encounter all of them if you stick around long enough.

So I find it amazing that some of the most practical management advice is as old as the Bible because it's found in the Bible. Want to handle conflict? Try the Golden Rule. Want to address issues at the lowest level? Try Matthew 18. And if you want to lay out cause and effect, follow James' advice here. Don't grumble against us because we're all being judged. We are constantly being judged by God, who is the original TQM (total quality management) advocate, ensuring quality (holiness) in all things by constantly applying and evaluating the highest measurable standards. It's His job: he's the boss.

Don't believe me? Well, what else does a boss do but judge? Said judgment can be good or bad, constructive or destructive. It's a manager's job to constantly (and consistently) evaluate. Performance, people, systems, environment, changes, information: we evaluate everything. So does God. And He can see when we're doing petty things like holding grudges, gossiping about each other, and grumbling about the way things are. God sees those things as dysfunctional, counterproductive to the primary mission, which is sharing Himself for eternity. He's always watching, always measuring us.

The measure He uses is Jesus. When He sees Jesus in us, all is well. Quality is at its highest, performance is optimal, and standards have meaning. You can lead any team successfully with Jesus as your standard.

I don't know if you're a boss, but you're still a manager, you know. You manage yourself. Nobody else is responsible for you; only you. Accordingly, if you want to see success, don't grumble against others. Adopt Jesus as your only standard and watch how you won't feel like grumbling. Invite Jesus into your life and see how well you can manage things.

Lord, you are the highest standard and the only measure I desire. Remake my sodden life, so that when people judge me they see only You.

Are you a grumbler?

How do you feel when others grumble?

What is your standard? Or who?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 9 January 2014

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. James 5, verse 10.

Be warned: you may not like this. This may bristle against what you know.

People in America today don't suffer the way folks used to. This isn't designed to guilt you out, or make you feel like we aren't good enough. It's simply a matter of fact, a statement about the way things are. For example, Phil Robertson. We can talk about religious persecution, but tell me: was the man seriously persecuted for what he believes? Or Chris Kluwe, the has-been kicker for the Minnesota Vikings. Same question.

Isaiah was martyred by pagans. The love of Hosea's life was a whore who was chronically unfaithful to him. Amos was murdered by the son of another priest. Elijah was subject to fits of deep, black depression. Ezra watched as his countrymen, thrown into exile, rejected God and all that Ezra had based his life on. Ezekiel and his wife were seized from their home, carted away to a foreign land as slaves, and he watched his young wife die a horrible death. Ditto those twelve apostles, all but one of whom suffered excruciating deaths.

Have you or I suffered like that?

Again, please understand this: don't feel inferior. You have terribly difficult things happening in your life. There is real suffering happening in this world, here and now, today as we share this time together. There is real persecution of people who believe in Jesus in China, Iran, South America, and even in some places in the US (though probably not in Monroe, Louisiana). And it was just yesterday that James was exhorting us to not grumble, not grouse, against each other; to remain steadfast in faith.

Steadfast, perhaps, like those prophets of old. They truly suffered for what they believed. In a way, faith is like the old song: God never promised you a rose garden. Gee, that sounds like so much fun!

But life isn't all fun, and the fun parts are usually only enjoyable because we can contrast them with the other times that aren't. What's more, what's good in life is good because of love. God's love. Jesus' love. The prophets knew that, which is why they stood fast in it. If we value that love, it shouldn't be a surprise when we're persecuted for it. When that happens, we can be encouraged knowing that hundreds, maybe thousands or millions, of believers before us stood up for Jesus and stood fast. If anything, God promises that faith won't be an easy row to hoe, and that before He restores this world to heaven, He will let it endure pure hell. In those days, it's our lot to stand for Him. Like the prophets of old.

Lord of ages, help me to stand for You.

Do you stand for Jesus?

If not for Him, what do you stand for?

What are you prepared to do about that?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 13 January 2014

As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. James 5, verse 11.

Here's an example of the prophets to whom James alluded in the previous verse. Where, in verse 10, James simply exhorted us to be encouraged by the example of Israel's prophets, here he tells why we should be encouraged.

Because the Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Do you know about Job? It's one of the most mysterious but powerful books in the Bible. If you aren't familiar with the story, Satan comes to God and makes a bet with Him that he (Satan) can make God's most devoted and blessed follower, Job, turn against God. God allows it, so Satan proceeds to wreck Job's life. As Job is more and more challenged, he eventually confronts God and asks, "why." God's response is more than a simple answer: it is an exposition of power, mercy, and grace. What's more, God then restores Job with more blessings and prosperity than he knew before.

That's a pretty saccharin synopsis, though. It overlooks some of the harsher aspects of the book, things like the cynical nature of Job's friends (who are supposed to encourage him), the almost cavalier way in which God allows Satan to wreck all Job knows, and even the cruel nature in which God allows Job to be tested.

But if that's all you focus on then you're missing the point. The example proves how God is compassionate and merciful. God has faith in Job, stating how Job won't turn from Him. Further, Job clings to God even when things become dire, seeking only explanation when he feels he is at his breaking point. Instead of smashing him like an ant, God stoops to Job's level and reasons with him, doing something that the all powerful creator of the universe doesn't have to do for a created being. Instead of slamming Job back into his place, God talks with him, reveals the wonder of His love to Job, and persuades Job to love before he thinks and think before he asks.

Tell me, good reader, how is that different from you? You and I, we may not suffer the way Job did (or maybe we do). Through our suffering, does not God still provide for us? When we have nothing else, so long as we have Jesus, life, and air, do we need anything else to live through the moment? Even when things are dire, God is still who He is and He still provides for us in ways that help us to persevere, endure, overcome, and succeed.

Like Job. Especially when we ask "why."

Father God, thank You for Your mercy and compassion, and for providing as You do.

Read the book of Job.

How has the Lord been merciful in your life?

How has Jesus been compassionate to you?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 14 January 2014

Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned. James 5, verse 12.

James is simply echoing his brother, Jesus, who said much the same thing. And for much the same reason. And that reason is?

Verbosity. Wordiness. Something from which I suffer.

Biscuits are great. I like to say I make the best ones in Texas. They're light, flaky, fluffy, golden brown, and chock full of butter. That's the secret, you know: butter. You can never have too much butter. Gravy is pretty great, too; I make pretty darn good gravy as well. Put them together and you have a staple of a southern breakfast. Alone, they are one or the other; together they are much more. Alone, your body can quickly metabolize a biscuit, or a serving of gravy; you probably won't gain weight. Add them together, however, and you get a host of complex carbohydrates, fats, and calories that will both fill you up and weigh you down. I think I'm still carrying about 100 biscuits and gravy from 2011. But, you know, I LOVE a good breakfast, and nothing says 'comfort food' like a plate of my homemade biscuits and an iron skillet full of Jimmy Dean gravy. They're really easy to make; I don't understand why more people don't have them for breakfast. In fact, if you come around my house on Saturday morning, you can pull up a chair and we'll chow down on the best biscuits and gravy in the old Confederacy.

Terrible analogy? Maybe, but it serves a point. It says too much. Like my words do here. Sometimes. Sometimes there is much to say, but I don't need to make a show of saying it. Who remembers what Edward Everett Horton said one Pennsylvania November morning? He spoke for over two hours, and while I'm sure it was good, it wasn't memorable. Or helpful. But everyone remembers what Abraham Lincoln said that same day, 150 years ago. It's called "The Gettysburg Address."

Old Abe, he didn't waste words, or swear by this or that, or try to embellish to puff himself up. He left it at facts, simple opinions, and colorful but pointed stories. We remember that. So does the Lord.

The better way is to be plainspoken, and to not waste words. Let your meaning speak through the fog of language by using plain, simple, easy to understand words. In doing so, you paint yourself as honest and forthright. In doing so, you show the world that you're true to God. That's the point Jesus and James are making here.

Lord, help me to be plainspoken for You.

Are you verbose?

Do you mangle a syllable?

In what ways do you talk too much and take away from God what is His?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 15 January 2014

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. James 5, verse 12.

Simple solutions and first principles: that's what God is all about. It really isn't that hard to understand: when you're hurting, turn to God. When you're happy, turn to God. When you're enjoying your morning coffee (or biscuits and gravy), turn to God. When you're bored, turn to God.

Just turn to God.

Remember that, in the last verse, Jesus extolled us to keep our talk simple, letting 'yes' mean 'yes' and 'no' meaning 'no.' Now He expands on that advice, telling us simply come to God for everything. To pray when we're in trouble and sing when we're happy. It's so simple that many folks may ask the (logical) question, "so what?"

So what, because it's a simple matter of first principles. Our first reaction should be to go to God for everything. It's why the First Commandment says that we should have no other God but Him. Worried about bills? Seek God. Working on your car? Talk with God. Just woke up in the morning? Pray. In trouble, seek God's assistance through prayer. In happiness, seek God's ear through praise. In anything between the polar opposites of trouble and happiness, the obvious choice is for us to simply seek God.

And another not so obvious lesson James is teaching is for us to be active in our faith. Don't just realize you're in trouble and need Jesus' help: do something about it. Pray and invite Him to be the solution, to teach, correct, encourage, and guide. Don't just bask in your happiness: do something about it. Share your happiness with God (and others) by singing. These are activities, real tasks to act upon our faith instead of simply talking about it. Taking God's words to heart, pondering them, then changing our behavior according to what His Word says. Our faith is only words if we don't do something about it, doing what we can and should.

All that starts with simply turning to God.

Lord, I turn to You in trouble and in praise.

How often do you turn to God?

Are you one who prays just in need or just in praise?

Do you only pray when you're in trouble?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 16 January 2014

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. James 5, verse 14.

A few months ago, my wife told me of praying over people in Romania who were healed. Just this Sunday, my pastor (at church) talked about being in a group that prayed over a man whose back injury was instantly healed. A good friend of mine is constantly talking about how, at her church, they pray over disease and command it to be gone...and it is. Several friends of mine have participated in exorcisms that, miraculously, completely healed those who had been previously tortured by evil spirits.

Call me skeptical, but I've been tainted by pop culture enough to suspect that, when I see Benny Hinn on the tube, when he 'heals' someone on stage, a cash exchange has recently taken place. No offense to you if you follow Mr. Hinn, but it looks phony to me. I'm jaded in how I think. When someone presents me with sickness, my reaction is "what pill can you take?" Or to immediately resort to medical treatment, or go to the doctor, or (the bane of physicians everywhere) WebMD.

Could I be any more wrong?

To paraphrase the Lord, it is not the well who need a doctor, it is the sick. And He is the original doctor from eternity. We are ALL sick in one way or another. Sin is sickness, and I know I'm thick with it. I'm guilty as can be even only a few minutes after I wake up each morning. But you know what? I get a miracle healing for every one of them. Lusting after the pretty woman at the gym? Forgiven. Angry with my son? Forgiven. Grudge from years ago? Forgiven. You get the picture. All of my sordid sins are forgiven even before I bring them to Jesus. The relief of knowing that is a miracle in itself. Other people can forgive me the consequences of the wrongs I've done to them, but only Jesus can forgive the eternal damnation I earned with every thought of disobedience. That's a miracle.

So is it any wonder that the power of this same Jesus can heal us of physical conditions? We are amazed that human medicine can cure sickness. Is it so amazing, really, that Jesus' divine medicine can do the same thing? I look at these things skeptically but, perhaps, my skepticism is misplaced. Maybe I should be skeptical of the human medicine and accepting, as common-place, the medicinal power of divinity.

Healing Savior, heal my sickness, strengthen my spirit, and make me an agent of Your healing to others.

Do you have any experience with faith healing?

What does the power of prayer do for you?

Have you ever tried to heal in prayer?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 20 January 2014

And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. James 5, verse 15.

Let's get something on the table right now. This verse is not saying that, if you're sick, it's because you've sinned, or that it's always your fault. Let's also discuss another truth: sickness is due to sin, and sin is a kind of sickness. And we are sinful. We're sinful, and because sin is a sickness, we're sick.

God works through medicine. Personally, I think the restorative therapeutic power of modern medicine is a gift from God. When someone is healed by medicine, I truly believe that it is God, working through the doctors or the drugs or the treatments, that does the healing. Do I have any empirical proof of that? No, I don't. It's simply what I believe because Scripture says God can and does heal.

But that's the beautiful thing about faith in Christ. When you're very, very sick, faith is more important than ever. One of my friends here in Texas has an inoperable brain tumor. We've been friends for several years now and I've gotten to know him better in this time of illness. I won't tell you anything he wouldn't: the doctors don't know whether or not the tumor will eventually claim him. He has had surgery, is taking various treatments, has had regression and progress both, and has had the emotional, physical and spiritual up's and down's you'd expect with fighting cancer.

Yet even in those spiritual downs, I know that my friend knows God is healing him. The tumor is irrelevant. The healing is from the inside out, in the chance to connect people with Jesus through this condition nobody would ever want. We talk more. We attend a men's Bible study together. And we've gotten to know each other better. In my friend, I see a man of God. A frail, faulted, sometimes frivolous man like me or you or any other, but also a man of God because he's sharing how every day is a gift and how every good gift is from God. When I think of God healing through medicine, I think of my friend now. I hope we get to do Vegas one day, or open that bottle of Jack Daniels I brought him in the hospital. But if we don't, some day in a place where days and time no longer matter, we'll look back and laugh and be glad, saying "Glory to God, wasn't all that a kick in the head?"

I pray for my friend regularly. If you have a sick loved one, pray earnestly for them. Whether the sickness stays or flees, God is at work in them from your prayers. He is healing them in many different ways

Lord, I'm sick. Heal me and use my life to heal others for Your glory.

Do you believe in the healing power of prayer?

Have you ever seen someone healed, or read about it, or heard about it?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 21 January 2014

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5, verse 16.

If you're a follower of Jesus, you're most likely familiar with that second sentence in this verse. "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." Indeed, THOSE words are powerful and effective. Prayer isn't some wishing well, or some check-box activity, and it isn't something that we do in the blind. Prayers are real. They are all heard. I'm going out on a limb by saying they are all answered as well, even when we don't receive the answer we expect (or want), or even when it takes years to know the answer, that is, if we ever do. If you can do nothing more than pray for someone, then you're doing something that most of the other 7 billion people on this planet don't do, namely doing something to be actively involved in healing for another person. "For another person:" that's the key. Hold onto that key.

But let's not gloss over the first part of the verse before praising God for the second. If you're Roman Catholic, the idea of confession isn't unfamiliar. If you aren't (or maybe if you are) the idea is uncomfortable. It isn't Protestant practice to have to confess our sins to another person to receive absolution. Confessing to God is how absolution is given.

Yet we should confess to each other anyway...for the other person. James is way ahead of 21st Century psychologists, who are only now beginning to understand the healing power of confession...and subsequent forgiveness. It's not just the rejuvenating aspect of letting go of an emotional burden. If done in love, confession can be an act of contrition and service. It's not about getting something off your chest: it's about confessing honestly to help another person. To serve. To give praise, honor, and glory to Jesus by letting Him take over our sins, and by letting go of them through owning up to them so that others might be served. When we do that, we do it for another person. Just like praying, when we confess to serve someone else – for another person – we actively do something to help them. We benefit in the process, but a confession 'not about me' can be a beautiful thing.

Next time guilt sticks you, think about the other guy, and how you can help them. And if telling them of your wrong will help them. If it will, maybe God is trying to tell you something.

Lord Jesus, I confess to You all the ways I've failed You, hurt others, left things undone, and not been the man You made me to be. Forgive me, restore me, and help me to change.

When did you last confess your wrongdoings?

When you confess, who is it for?

Do you think there are things so bad that you can't confess them (you'd be shocked to learn that you're wrong)?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 22 January 2014

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. James 5, verses 17-18.

James uses the example of Elijah to make his point that praying is an earnest, active thing. That we should do the same as Elijah did. Gee, that's nice, except I'm just lowly old me. Elijah is this famous, powerful prophet who humbled kings, called down fire from heaven, and was so special that he never even died. He was simply carried away to heaven in an angelic chariot. Who am I to compare myself to all that?

Um, I hate to tell you this but you need to dispense with that line of thinking. It's a path to sin. It's unnecessarily self-deprecating and un-Godly. It's not for nothing that James uses Elijah as an example. You see, you or I can be the equals of Elijah. That's the point James is making. It's the point Jesus was making when He said "if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, if you tell a mountain 'go and move over there,' it will do so." Anything is possible through Jesus. Anything is possible through faith in Jesus. Any faith in Jesus is accessed and communicated in prayer with Him.

It wasn't Elijah who did the miracles: it was God working through Elijah, who had prayed to Him. It wasn't Peter, Paul, or John who healed people miraculously: it was God working through them, after they had prayed to Him. It wasn't the doctors who healed my friend (from yesterday): it was God working through them, answering the prayers of those of us who know him. I know a man who earnestly prayed when a tornado was moving towards his home, and the tornado moved away; I believe God heard that man's prayer.

All of these things happen first because we go to God in prayer. In prayer, anything is possible. It's a matter of earnestness. For you, maybe that means hours of prayer on your knees in solitude. Or maybe your head bowed in a church pew. My wife says she prays a lot while driving (and, yes, she has her eyes open while doing it, so it's safe to drive around her). I pray in all kinds of ways, usually a hodge podge of things mentioned above. What way is most earnest for you?

Tell God what you're thinking. Tell Jesus what's on your mind, what is bothering you, what you want. Not as a wish. Tell Him earnestly, then know that He hears, then know that, through your prayers to Him, anything you set your mind to can be done. Just like Elijah did.

Lord, hear my prayer.

When did you last pray?

What do you need to do to be earnest?

Daily Proverbial, from James, 24 January 2014. The last verses of James

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins. James 5, verses 19-20.

Here ends our walk through the book of James. If you remember, when we started all this I said that I really didn't like James that much. He was too confrontational for me, too preachy, too hard. How ironic is it, then, that confrontational, harsh James finishes his missal encouraging us to help each other. To encourage us to live.

Encourage us to live. They're fitting words, I think, given all that's happened here. This week, my son finished high school; his graduation ceremony was today. You've read here about some of our struggles with him over drug addiction, anger management, proud rebellion, and questioning his faith. In the end, he learned to rely on God, to trust his abilities, and to focus, to do his best. The result is that God and all of us worked to turn a sinner from the error of his way. In doing so, God covered over a multitude of sins and restored a young man's hope. Now, he's at the conclusion of one epoch while looking forward into the unknown of another.

Yet even more, there are the monumental events of the last 24 hours. Our first grandchild was born. After a 36 hour labor, our oldest daughter, Gretchen, gave birth to her first son, Thomas Nolan, late last night. He's healthy and big: 11.1 pounds and 21.5 inches long. Mom, Dad, and son are all doing fine, and Mom & Tom should both go home this weekend. It's my hope to one day gather with Thomas' mom and dad while we again await a birth, this one for Thomas' son or daughter.

That's many years away, though. In the days between now and then, I'm comforted to know that Thomas – and Dillon – will each be sinners who are saved from a separating death by the grace of the Savior King Jesus. We're each in the same boat. Me, the new dad, Josh, Dillon, and newborn Thomas: we're all sinners. And we're all loved by Jesus. Friends will work to turn us away from our errors and back to the forgiveness of Christ. Two thousand years ago, James, the brother of Jesus, reminded us of this simple truth. We need each other, and we each need Jesus. Without each other, despondent loneliness results. Without Jesus, eternal death is guaranteed.

It doesn't have to be this way. At the end of the book, I think that's what James had in mind. It doesn't have to be this way, friend. There is always the better Way. Knowing that, I like James much better now. Knowing that is the best message for my loved ones to begin their new lives.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the words of Your brother.

What do you think of James now?