



**November 2022**

# **What the Spirit says to the Churches 3**

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers  
about following Jesus  
in Revelation 1-3**

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## Monday, November 7: James 1:1-8

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While I worked on my Ph.D. at the University of Alberta, I worked fulltime at a church, taught part-time at a college, and we had three young children. I got up early to do my readings and assignments. I worked late at night. It was tough. When I finally finished and graduated as "Dr. Martin," everything changed, right? I got a raise? People treated me with new respect? No. My job was no different the day after. My salary was no different the day after. My kids were no different the day after. "Post-doctoral malaise" is common: after all the work and anticipation, you finally graduate, and nothing changes. You wonder why you bothered. Life is still hard. Was it really worth it? (FYI, yes, it was – I learned a lot).

When a person comes to faith in Jesus – the risen Jesus – we sometimes imply that life will suddenly be gloriously wonderful. Instantly your job will be better. Magically your marriage will be better. Suddenly your kids will be better. Your finances will be better. Your health will be better ... Is that true?

Believing in Jesus DOES mean your sin and guilt are forgiven. Knowing the risen Jesus does give us hope, healing, joy, and encouragement. We know we are loved by God. Jesus is with us always, through His Spirit. He can give us wisdom, guidance, strength, and help through tough times.

But we may still be going through tough times. Life may still be hard. Everything probably won't suddenly be better. Just ask the Christians in any of the churches in Revelation 2-3, including those in Sardis.

This month we'll read the letter of James. We're not sure which James wrote the letter; James is a common name in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The author only identifies himself as "*a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Jesus had two apostles named James: James, the son of Zebedee and James, the son of Alphaeus. James, son of Zebedee, was a leader in the Jerusalem church and one of the first Christians to die for his faith (Acts 12:1-2). James, the son of Alphaeus, is less prominent in Scripture. Early Christian theologian, Hippolytus (170-235 AD), records this James was stoned to death by the Jews when preaching in Jerusalem.

Most scholars suggest the James who wrote this letter was a third James, one of Jesus' half-brothers, son of Joseph and Mary. Like Jesus, James grew up in a small, off-the-beaten-track town, probably in poverty (Joseph, his Dad, seems to have died young). After Jesus' resurrection, he would have been on the run, hiding from the Jewish inquisition. James' life was hard. Following Jesus certainly did not mean everything was suddenly magically wonderful.

James did find faith in Jesus changed his perspective on, purpose in, and trajectory of life so completely, that his new life – his "faith-in-Jesus-life" – was more than worth the sacrifices and suffering.

We can learn much from James. If someone tells you being a Christian means a life of earthly blessing, invite them to meet James: "***When*** troubles of any kind come your way ("when" not "if"), *consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that ***when*** your faith is tested ("when" not "if"), your endurance has a chance to grow*" (1:2-3). James assumes hard times are part of following Jesus. But those tough times can help us grow in faith.

That is the same message Jesus is giving to His people in Sardis. "*Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine.*" (Revelation 3:4-5).

What is James saying to you

- In 1:4?
- In 1:5-8?

*You have created us to live in community, O God of love.  
 Bless our friends who provide us with the grace and love of an extended family.  
 Endow them with your blessings of health and mobility,  
 that they may enjoy the wonders of your creation and share their delight with others.  
 Bless them with keen minds and compassionate hearts  
 that they may create a better life for all.  
 Guard them from injustice, oppression, and evil  
 that they may know freedom and hope lifelong.  
 In their waking and in their sleeping,  
 in their laughter and in their tears,  
 surround them with your love  
 until the end of their days.  
 In the end, bring us all to eternal life in peace.  
 Through Jesus Christ, our Savior.  
 Amen.*

Vienna Cobb Anderson

## **Tuesday, November 8: James 1:9-18**

I live my life in the real world. The real world is messy, confusing, painful, annoying, frustrating, and challenging. I need wisdom. I need strength to stay faithful and resist temptation. I need practical help.

Jesus, in His letters to these seven early churches, like Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis, deals with real world challenges. Their world is messy, confusing, and challenging. They need wisdom. They need strength to stay faithful and resist temptation. They need practical help.

I love James because he deals with real life challenges that followers of Jesus face. He deals with real world issues like those we struggle with. He helps us think through how we can live wisely and well with Jesus, when things are difficult.

James is warning us about two things can lead us away from genuine trust in God: the lure of wealth and the lure of actual temptation. Of course, these two often go together, as when someone is tempted to lie, cheat, or steal to get rich. Drawing on Old Testament imagery James' readers would know well, he warns us that these temptations are like wonderful wildflowers that look SO SO attractive. But they are here today and gone tomorrow:

- *"Our days on earth are like grass; like wildflowers, we bloom and die. The wind blows, and we are gone – as though we had never been here. But the love of the Lord remains forever with those who fear him. His salvation extends to the children's children of those who are faithful to his covenant, of those who obey his commandments" (Psalm 103:15-18).*
- *"The grass withers and the flowers fade beneath the breath of the Lord. And so it is with people. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:7-8).*

What is permanent? What lasts? What matters? The love of the Lord. The salvation of the Lord. The word of the Lord. The "word of the Lord" is not just written words that convey true information. *"When God speaks, things happen. Things happen to us. Things happen in us. The word of God is like medicine which goes down deep inside, healing our inner hurts and changing our inner motivations, so that we become different people (verse 18)" (Tom Wright).*

Jesus comments, *"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money.*

*"That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life – whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far*

*more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?*

*"And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?"*

*"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need" (Matthew 6:24-33).*

What is Jesus saying to you?

*Lord, grant me tenacious courage as I go through this day.  
When I am tempted to give up, help me to keep going.  
Grant me a cheerful spirit when things don't go my way.  
Give me courage to do whatever needs to be done.  
Lord, give me eyes to see my "neighbour" today –  
that person who is lonely, struggling, afraid, confused, needing hope, needing love.  
Give me the courage and the wisdom to be the presence of Jesus,  
the love of Jesus, the mercy of Jesus, and the compassion of Jesus.  
We are "the body of Christ" in our world – help me to be more and more like Jesus.  
In His name, Amen.*

### **Wednesday, November 9: James 1:19-27**

In elementary school, I was small for my age. For a few of the not-so-nice, bigger brutes, I was an easy target. But as a child I learned the pithy proverb, *"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."* It was supposed to help us survive the bullying. Maybe it helped a bit. But to this day – 50+ years later – I still remember some of the cruelty and taunting. Words do hurt.

Especially if someone lies about you, smears your good name, questions your reputation, gives your business a bad review on Google – and people believe them – words can do real, lasting damage. It may affect your friendships. It may affect your business. It may affect your job prospects. It may really affect your self-confidence and limit what you see as your possibilities. It may shape your future.

James knows life is tough: through those hard times

- God can help us mature (1:2-4) – that's wonderful.
- He can give us wisdom and confidence in our faith (1:5-8) – that's wonderful.
- He strengthens the poor and struggling (1:9-11) – that's wonderful.
- He helps us when persecuted (1:12) – that's wonderful.
- He empowers us to resist temptation (1:13-15) – that's wonderful.
- He gives us all we need (our daily bread) not necessarily all we want (1:16-17) – that's wonderful.
- We are a new creation in Jesus (1:18) – that's wonderful.

Those are great truths, but how do we put them into practice? How do I live my faith? In 1:19-26, James lists some of the qualities of character that should – and should not – characterize us as people of Jesus:

NOT Christian behaviour:

- *Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.*
- *Get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives.*
- *If you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself,*

*walk away, and forget what you look like.*

- *If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.*

Christian behavior:

- *Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.*
- *Humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.*
- *Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says.*
- *If you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.*

Finally, James concludes: "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means \_\_\_\_ " What do you EXPECT James to say? Believing in Jesus? Confessing your sins? Praying a prayer?

James assumes we have already done that. "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means **caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you**" (1:27). True faith in Jesus means we live with compassion, mercy, and love. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is a matter of right belief and right morals (not letting the world corrupt us), but also a commitment to action, particularly practical care for the poor.

How does that challenge your preconceptions? How will you respond?

*Dear Lord, I don't know who or what will cross my path today.  
But I do know that You are my Rock and my Fortress.  
You are my Shield and my Strong Tower.  
Help me to anchor myself to You today.  
Teach me how to stand strong in You and choose only Your way today.  
Help me walk by Your truth and not my feelings.  
Help me to embrace anything that comes my way as an opportunity to see You at work  
and as an opportunity to point others to You.  
Help me to pray for those in need and help practically in any way I can.  
Give me a heart of compassion and love.  
  
Thank You that You love me and nothing can ever take that away from me.  
Even if I fail today and fall short,  
You whisper Your unconditional love deep into my soul.  
You remind me that Your mercies are new every morning.  
Thank You for meeting with me today.  
Would You wake me again tomorrow with the same sweet whisper of Your love?  
I can't wait to meet with You again.  
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Wendy Blight

#### **Thursday, November 10: James 2:1-13**

Peter Scholtes, a Catholic priest in a poor neighbourhood in Chicago's south side, wrote the song, "[\*They'll know we are Christians by our love.\*](#)" His inspiration was Jesus' words in John 13:34-35, "So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." How are we doing at that?

James is anxious we understand there's a clear link between what ***we say we believe*** and ***how we actually live***. We don't just "talk the talk." We "walk the walk."

"It is good," James says, "when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (2:8). He goes on to talk about this commandment, particularly regarding the poor (remember

1:27: "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you").

From the very beginning of Scripture, the basic biblical principle is that we are all our brothers' keepers, whether we like it or not (Genesis 4:8-11). The Kingdom of God is a place of unconditional love, grace, and mercy, especially for those in need. We are invited and challenged to live these principles here and now.

We like to trivialize this: it just means we are "nice" to people, right? James is downright practical: "*It means caring for orphans and widows.*" He doesn't blame the widows and orphans: "*They're lazy; they just need to get a job!*" He doesn't say help only "Christian" people in need. He just says, "Care for people." Provide practical, tangible help to people in need, whoever they are, whether they deserve it or not.

James writes, "*There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you*" (2:13). If we have really understood that Jesus has come announcing the Kingdom of God, modelling and teaching the Kingdom of God, and inviting us to live the Kingdom of God, it will change how we live.

If we genuinely know God's love, mercy, and forgiveness **ourselves** then, inevitably – James argues – we should want to extend that love, mercy, and forgiveness to **others**. If we cannot extend mercy to others, we have to ask whether we have experienced the grace and mercy of God in our own lives.

"*So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free*" (2:12). How can a person be judged by "*a law that sets you free*"? That's the point. You can't. The wonder of God's love is **we are set free**: that is His gift of grace and mercy to us. Our challenge, then, is to live by the same principle: **to set other people free** by giving them gifts of grace, mercy, and practical care and compassion, too.

Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35). This is true about giving generously (for instance to help the poor). It is also true in terms of giving gifts of mercy and forgiveness. Paradoxically, it does our own souls at least as much good to forgive someone from the heart, as it is a blessing to the person we forgive. The gift of forgiveness sets us free as much as the other person.

How can I live this out today?

*I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day.  
I had so much to accomplish that I didn't have time to pray.  
Problems just tumbled about me, and heavier came each task.  
'Why doesn't God help me?' I wondered.  
He answered, 'You didn't ask.'*

*I wanted to see joy and beauty,  
but the day toiled on gray and bleak.  
I wondered why God didn't show me beauty.  
He said, 'But you didn't seek.'*

*I tried to come into God's presence.  
I used all my keys in the lock.  
God gently and lovingly chided,  
'My child, you didn't knock.'*

*I woke up early this morning,  
and paused before entering the day.  
I had so much to accomplish  
that I had to take time to pray.  
Lord, hear my prayer ...*

Unknown

## Friday, November 11 (Remembrance Day): Psalm 11

We can hear pessimistic voices warning of impending disaster: *"Fly like a bird to the mountains for safety! The wicked are stringing their bows and fitting their arrows on the bowstrings. They shoot from the shadows at those whose hearts are right. The foundations of law and order have collapsed. What can the righteous do?"* (Psalm 11:1-3).

Those voices of doom can come from people within the church. Sometimes Christians are the most pessimistic of all. We may hide away, wringing our hands, fearing there is no hope at all.

Early believers, in churches like these in Revelation and those to whom James is writing, were in much, much worse circumstances than we are now. But many kept the faith. They kept trusting in God.

David, hunted by Saul, betrayed by his own son, facing hardship after hardship, says, *"I trust in the Lord for protection ... The Lord is in his holy Temple. The Lord still rules from heaven. He watches everyone closely, examining every person on earth. The Lord examines both the righteous and the wicked. He hates those who love violence. He will rain down blazing coals and burning sulfur on the wicked, punishing them with scorching winds. For the righteous Lord loves justice. The virtuous will see his face."*

Today, as we live in a violent world, we pray for peace. We remember those who served in the past (many of whom died) to oppose evil and protect our freedoms. We remember those serving as peacekeepers and peacemakers around the world today. It is good to pray for those who serve in troubled parts of the world, their families, our leaders, and those who have been injured and continue to suffer.

Remember as we pray, *"The Lord is in his holy Temple. The Lord still rules from heaven."*

*Today we pray for the members of the Canadian Armed Forces deployed throughout the world:  
We pray that those in our Armed Services might know you, Jesus,  
and be open to your Spirit's leading, guidance, wisdom, and protection.*

*We pray that they may discharge their duties with honour and dignity,  
remain ever mindful to defend all human rights, especially for the most vulnerable,  
as they labour to bring peace and comfort in places torn by war or disaster.*

*We pray for the families, relatives and friends of our military personnel:  
that they may be comforted by the Holy Spirit during their time of separation  
and be filled with joy when their loved ones return.*

*We pray for the members of the Department of National Defense community  
who have been killed or injured for the cause of peace:  
that their sacrifice may not be in vain,  
and their families and friends will experience the comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit.*

*We pray, particularly, for those who are injured and are rebuilding their lives.  
May your Spirit inspire them, heal them, and surround them with godly people.*

*We pray for the Prime Minister and our political and military leaders:  
that they may tirelessly seek peaceful settlements to international disputes.  
We pray for all nations: that they may be preserved from violence or terrorism.*

*We pray for all men and women involved in conflict areas:  
that all hearts may be moved to pursue justice and peace.*

*Lord, give all of us courage, hope and strength.  
Strengthen our resolve to promote peace and security in every land.  
Lord, let there be peace on Earth, and let I begin with me.  
Help me to be a peacemaker in my own family and community.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen*

## Saturday, November 12: Revelation 3:7-13

Philadelphia (modern Alashehir, Turkey) was a military outpost. The city is strategically located at a crossroads from which you can travel north, south, east, or west. The church:

- Had *"little strength."* It was not wealthy, large, or well respected like Ephesus or Sardis.
- Faced strong opposition within the city from the local Jewish community (3:9).
- Feared impending persecution: Nero and other Romans? Jewish zealots? (3:10).

How could this church possibly survive? What hope was there? What future could this struggling little group of believers really have? What difference could Jesus really make in their lives?

Some of us may feel like we don't have a lot going for us, either. We perceive "real" Christians to be more "spiritual" than we are (the poor Philadelphians probably looked at the wealthy Sardis and Ephesian churches that way). We have this idea, fed by religious television, the internet, and social media, that being a believer means living on some "super spiritual" plane where we cruise smoothly and serenely through life, oblivious to the problems and issues that assail lesser mortals like us (from illnesses, to mortgages, to family issues, to work struggles). These "victorious" people don't seem to live the same kind of life I live.

In fact, being a spiritual person (someone whose heart is focused on God) is simply another way of saying *"following Jesus."* It's what Christians have been doing for 2000 years by going to church, struggling through life, worshipping God, facing problems, learning to pray, muddling through relationships, reading Scriptures, and dealing with real life. Note the key qualities of the Christians in Philadelphia. They

- **serve God.** *"I know all the things you do."* Note Jesus does not say "incredible" or "amazing" things you do, rather just ordinary "things you do" – faithful consistent stuff like fellowshiping and worshipping together, caring for the needy, visiting the sick, sharing the good news ...
- **are faithful.** *"You obeyed my word and did not deny me."* They keep on plodding in their faith.
- **struggle, yet persevere.** *"You have obeyed my command to persevere."* They don't give up.

These folks aren't "super saints" doing astounding things. They are not performing miracles right, left, and centre. They are definitely not healthy, wealthy, or successful. They are just faithful people loving God, faithfully serving, patiently enduring, consistently affirming their faith, day-in-day-out. What pleases God? Their faithfulness, perseverance, and plain hard work. So, God says, *"I have opened a door for you that no one can close ..."* These are people through whom **Jesus** can do great things. They do NOT have the strength, money, or skills to do anything on their own. But **Jesus** can do great things **through** them.

God doesn't require us to be "super saints" either. He simply wants us to be faithful people loving Him, patiently enduring, faithfully serving, consistently affirming our faith day-in-day-out. God says, *"I have opened a door for you that no one can close ..."* – the privilege to live out our faith in our neighbourhoods, with friends, and family. We may think we don't have the strength, budget, or skills to do much on our own. That's the point. The issue is NOT what **we** can do for Jesus, but what **Jesus** can do **through** us.

Jesus' commands are: keep the faith (*"hold on to what you have"*) and share the faith (go through that open door). Pray boldly and step forward confidently. What challenge is God putting before you?

*Lord of the nations,  
God in whom we trust,  
you alone are holy, good, wise,  
and the source of every blessing.*

*In trouble and turmoil, be our peace.  
In our hearts and minds give us the peace that surpasses understanding.  
In our mouths, put words of peace,  
and make us peacemakers that we may be called your children.*



*Let the truth of your Word  
govern and guide us  
when we are inclined to be like Pontius Pilate  
and say, "What is truth?"*

*When we are unsure of all things,  
draw us to you, our faithful God,  
steadfast in love,  
our rock, refuge and fortress.  
Amen*

Paul C. Stratman

### **Sunday, November 13: Revelation 3:7-13**

Philadelphia is the ONLY one of these seven churches that is not critiqued at all. Jesus only says good things. They are struggling. They are oppressed. But they are keeping the faith. They are holding on. Jesus wants them to realize it's NOT what we can do for Jesus, but what Jesus can do through us.

Let's think for a moment about what Jesus can do in and through the not so glamorous, weak, struggling church in Philadelphia (and us):

- When Jesus opens the door for us, whatever that door may be, no one can shut it (most scholars suggest that, in this case, it refers to sharing the good news with not-yet-believers).
- Jesus will humble our enemies. Note, we still will have opposition, but in the long run God's will and justice prevail. *"Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the Lord"* (Romans 12:19).
- Jesus will hold His people safe, in His power and presence forever. Remember Jesus' words to Smyrna: *"Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days (a limited time, not forever). But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life"* (Revelation 2:10).
- Jesus is coming again.

Jesus gives great promises to His church:

- Jesus' promise is that **He never leaves us or forsakes us** (Matthew 28:20), so we know that no matter where we are, what our circumstances might be, God is with us. **God is directly present** everywhere in the universe (*fancy theological word: omnipresence*). As we go through our lives (or as the little, weak church in Philadelphia faced persecution and seemingly insurmountable opposition) we know that God is with us. Always. In every circumstance. He always hears our prayers. He always knows our pain and senses our joy. We are never abandoned.
- **Jesus knows our circumstances** far better than us. **God knows everything**. Nothing is hidden from Him. Think about being at the Rose Bowl Parade: from the curb you'd see a little bit. From a blimp you'd see the big picture. In life, we stand on the curb. God has being-in-a-blimp-like knowledge (*fancy theological word: omniscience*). Why is that important? God sees the big picture. So we can trust God always knows what's best for us. When He opens/closes doors or answers/doesn't answer prayers how we want, He knows what's best.
- Because God is always with us and knows everything, **God is able to do** what is best for us, and best for the Kingdom of God (*fancy theological word: omnipotence*). Note that God does not just randomly do things for the sake of doing things. He has a purpose. And His purpose, as Jesus taught us, is that all of creation be restored to a pure and perfect relationship with God. He is in the business of redeeming and transforming His creation. Why is that important? God can and is doing things that fit in with His purpose.

As you reflect on Jesus' promise to Philadelphia and to us, what is Jesus saying to you? Is He encouraging you to think about

- **A life decision:** Career? Move? Relationship? Pray boldly, knowing God is present and powerful in your life; He knows what's best and can make it happen (but you must be humble and obedient to accept His answer). Then go forward confidently.
- **A lifestyle decision:** things you know you need to change? New disciplines you need to adopt? Pray boldly, knowing God is present and powerful in your life; He can help you make those changes you need to make. Move forward confidently.
- **A faith decision:** To begin to pray? To believe in Jesus? To be baptized? Pray boldly, knowing God is present and powerful in your life; He will always be with you, guide you, and provide for you. Then step forward confidently.

*Dear God, the world seems so dark and foreboding.  
Where are the signs of hope?  
What are you calling us to do?*

*Wars, uprisings, displacements, hunger, poverty, and disease  
continue to claim victims by the millions around the world each year.  
In our hearts and minds there is a desire to help somehow,  
but the crisis seem so overwhelming and we wonder what the point is  
for us even to attempt to be witnesses for healing and hope in this hellish morass.*

*We pray that we may see glimpses of truth you have for us.  
Help us to follow the path of Jesus, the Suffering Servant.  
Give us the courage to be willing to walk the path of depression and pain  
with the victims of injustice here at home as well as abroad.*

*Help us to seek ways to light candles of hope, however small,  
through our words, our deeds, and our prayers,  
to encourage our sisters and brothers to hold onto the faith  
in spite of the pain and suffering they are facing.*

*And help those of us who are among the fortunate ones,  
who have enough bread to eat, good health, and who live in relative peace,  
to open our heart to learn from our sisters and brothers  
who are living lives of grace and forgiveness in the horrid circumstances which surround them.*

*O God, help us to light one candle rather than to curse the darkness.  
We pray this in the name of Jesus,  
who knows what being a light in this dark world is all about.  
Amen*

Larry Kehler

## **Monday, November 14: James 2:14-26**

We can believe all the right things about God. However, if all our "right doctrine" doesn't change how we live, there's a problem. Our beliefs ought to help us become so more like Jesus in how we live and love. Knowing all the right stuff isn't enough. Our lives and our theology ought to be consistent.

In this text, James is NOT saying we are saved by our works. He is saying that, when we are saved, our lives ought to be transformed to be more and more like Jesus. How we live – our works – should be shaped by what we say we believe. Our doctrinal beliefs should be lived out in practice.

*"You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you. Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish. Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless" (2:19-20).* James is correct. **The devil believes all the right theology about God** – he would ace an exam on his statement of beliefs about God. But the devil certainly doesn't apply those beliefs (in a positive way) to how he acts. Are we ever like that? Do we have all the right doctrine, but live in an ungracious, unloving way?

Back before Easter, a friend posted on Facebook this wonderful wisdom from Pope Francis:

Do you want to fast this Lent?

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

Then the person immediately posted several other nasty comments, memes, and posts critical of just about everyone ... The contrast was jarring. Hmmm.

Do I act in the same way?

*"Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works"* (James 2:26). Lord, may people know I am a Christian by my love ...

*Lord, thank You for the people You have divinely placed in my life  
who speak holy truth, love, and words of wisdom.  
Give me a heart of discernment to hear your instruction for my heart and my circumstances.  
Give me the strength and courage to follow through with that advice, even when it's hard.  
Fill me with peace in knowing that, even if I take a wrong turn, Your purpose will prevail.  
May there be opportunity for me, today, to be a blessing to another person:  
In Word: sharing the hope and love of Jesus  
In deed: providing comfort, encouragement or practical care.  
May Your Kingdom come and Your will be done in me.  
And through me.  
Amen.*

based on a prayer by Tracie Miles

## **Tuesday, November 15: James 3:1-12**

A hunter raised his rifle and took careful aim at a large bear. He was just about to pull the trigger, when the bear spoke in a soft, soothing voice, *"Isn't it better to talk than to shoot? What do you want from this encounter? Let's see if we can't work this out. Let's negotiate through this sticky situation."*

Lowering his rifle, the shocked hunter replied, *"Um. OK ... I want a fur coat."*

*"Good,"* said the bear, *"we can negotiate that. I only want a full stomach. Let's sit down and see if we can come up with a compromise."*

They sat down to negotiate. Shortly thereafter the bear walked away licking his lips. He was alone.

The negotiations had been successful. The bear had a full stomach, and the hunter had his fur coat.

Sometimes our words can get us into trouble (hopefully not into the belly of a bear).

Words. Once we've said something, our words are out there. We cannot take them back. One pundit said,

our words are like toothpaste – once they're out of our mouths (or the toothpaste is out of the tube) you cannot put them back. James is warning us to choose our words carefully. This is great, practical advice.

Jesus says, "*Blessed are those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God*" (Matthew 5:8). It is very, very difficult – impossible – to have a totally pure heart. We know that. For instance, we can say wonderful things one moment, and rip someone apart the next (like my Facebook friend, yesterday). We struggle being who we want to be (people like Jesus), and who we are (people NOT-yet-like Jesus). Paul is very honest about his personal struggle to live up to his high ideals, too ([Romans 7:15-25](#)).

What we say – especially "in the heat of the moment" – reveals what's going on in our hearts. Those who are "pure in heart" can generally react to stressful situations with some self-control and grace. Those of us who are not so pure in heart can respond to challenges with less restraint and grace. We can be downright nasty, critical, bitter, and biting. We react out of fear. What does that say about the state of our heart?

When you face stress, what do you feel? How do you respond? What words do you say? What does this say about your heart? How can we be more like Jesus?

*Lord, I'm here today with open hands and an open heart,  
ready to depend on you to help me through the day and all it will bring my way.  
Help me be like James.  
Help me come to you for guidance, strength, provision, and protection.  
As I face tough choices and hard situations, help me remember my beloved-ness:  
help me remember that I am Your child.  
Help me remember I am Your representative to the world around me.  
Help me live, today, in a way that brings honor to Your holy name.  
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Charles Stanley

### **Wednesday, November 16: James 3:13-18**

How are you feeling today? Are you bitter about anything? Are you angry? Are you really, really wanting your own way? Are you ready to lash out?

*"Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom?" James asks. "Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom; it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats" (James 3:13-16 The Message). Ouch.*

James moves on to speak about how we might become pure in heart ... Back in James 1, James had written, "*When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking ...*" (James 1:2-5).

Now James says, "*Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.*" (James 3:17-18 The Message).

To be pure in heart we need God. We need God's wisdom. We need to become like Jesus. This is counter-intuitive to our natural, human way of living, reacting, and relating to people.



God's Spirit – who is within you – would love to give you wisdom for the situations you face: whether they be troubles or joys, sorrows or celebrations, challenges or successes. Pray for God's wisdom:

- **Ask** God for wisdom.
- **Be willing to listen.** God may speak to you through Scripture. Through a reading. Through a wise, godly friend. Or through your prayers.
- **Be willing to do – to take action.** When God gives us His wisdom, will we "*prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom*"?

How can you be more pure? More peace loving? More gentle at all times? More willing to yield to others? How can you be more full of mercy and good deeds? How can you show no favoritism? How can you be always sincere?

*Lord, we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed.  
We are perplexed, but not in despair.  
We are persecuted, but not abandoned.  
We are struck down, but not destroyed.  
Help us to know our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory  
that far outweighs them all.  
Help us to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.  
Give us faith in Jesus.  
  
Lord, thank You for looking beyond my faults and for loving me unconditionally.  
Forgive me when I fail to love others in the same way.  
Give me eyes to see the needs of the people in my life,  
and show me how to meet those needs in a way that pleases You.  
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

based on 2 Corinthians 4 and a prayer by Mary Southerland

#### **Thursday, November 17: James 4:1-12**

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

James has just said, "*The wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also **peace loving**, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are **peacemakers** will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness*" (3:17-18).

It all sounds wonderful and Kingdom-of-God-like, until we read the next sentence: "*What is causing the quarrels and fights among you?*" (4:1). Apparently, people in the church are NOT living this out.

James talks about some of the quarreling/fighting/ethical problems in the church:

- Wanting what others have.
- Being greedy for more and more wealth and "stuff."
- Judging and criticizing other people.
- Being overly self-confident and ignoring God.

We know these things can cause problems. Do we struggle with any of these personally? In our church?

What is James' counsel? "*Let God work his will in you. Yell a loud 'NO' to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet 'yes' to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet*" (James 4:7-10)

*The Message).*

What might that look like in my life? In our church?

The challenges for us are

- (1) to keep asking God for wisdom,
- (2) to listen for His Spirit guiding us ... and then
- (3) to take action.

An old proverb wisely reminds us that "*The road to hell is paved with good intentions.*" While we might want to quibble with that theology (we are saved by God's grace not our good works), that proverb is a solemn reminder that we need to LIVE our faith. Faith in Jesus changes how we live.

May God bless us with His wisdom ... and may we bless others by living it out. Just do it.

*Father of love, hear my prayer.  
Help me to know Your will  
and to do it with courage and faith.  
Accept my offering of myself,  
all my thoughts, words, deeds, and sufferings.  
May my life be spent giving You glory.  
Give me the strength to follow Your call,  
so that Your Truth may live in my heart  
and bring peace to me and to those I meet,  
for I believe in Your Love.  
Amen*

### **Friday, November 18: James 4:13-17**

Edmund Burke (1729-1797), an Irish politician and philosopher, quipped, "*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*" He was rephrasing what James is telling us here: "*Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it*" (James 4:17).

You cannot be a good, godly person and do nothing in the face of injustice and evil. To be a godly person, you must act, in the name of Jesus, out of the love of Jesus, to see His Kingdom come and His will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. There is no such thing as a "good" spectator sitting in the bleachers, in the Kingdom of God. We're all players on the pitch. We're all called to live out our faith.

William Wilberforce (1759-1833), British politician and devout Christian, was a leader in the movement to end slavery. He and other believers were horrified by the depraved and un-Christian trade in human lives. They were appalled by the greed, cruelty, evil – and rationalizations – of the "Christian" owners and traders, who argued they were somehow "benefiting" the slaves. Wilberforce's passion for the abolition movement was motivated by his desire to put his Christian principles into action and serve God in public life. Wilberforce published pamphlets and spoke publicly denouncing the slave trade as un-Christian. To his critics, he said, "*You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know.*"

If you do know about the existence of injustice and evil, then, Wilberforce argued, your Christian faith **must** motivate you to action: "*Some might say that one's faith is a private matter and should not be spoken of so publicly. They might assert this in public, but what do they really think in their hearts? The fact is, those who say such things usually don't even have a concern for faith in the privacy of their interior lives either.*"

Because of his strident efforts to abolish slavery, Wilberforce's opponents attacked his integrity and faith. They argued the slave trade made good economic sense. It was necessary for the economy. People were

making money, a lot of money. That was good, right? His critics accused him of being a religious fanatic. Wilberforce countered, *"If to be feelingly alive to the sufferings of my fellow-creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large."*

*"It makes no sense to take the name of Christian and not cling to Christ,"* Wilberforce wrote. *"Jesus is not some magic charm to wear like a piece of jewelry we think will give us good luck. He is the Lord. His name is to be written on our hearts in such a powerful way that it creates within us a profound experience of His peace and a heart that is filled with His praise."* And that will lead us to action.

I'll let Edmund Burke have the last word: *"Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little."* Do a little. Be good news to one person today. Smile. Say an encouraging word. Call. Help. DON'T criticize, cut down, or destroy.

*Father in Heaven,  
You made me Your child.  
You called me to walk in the Light of Christ.  
Free me from darkness and keep me in the Light of Your Truth.  
The Light of Jesus has scattered the darkness of hatred and sin.  
Called to that Light,  
I ask for Your guidance.  
Mold my life in Your Truth.  
Fill my heart in Your Love.  
Give me the power of Your Grace that I may walk in the Light of Jesus  
and serve Him faithfully.  
Amen.*

### **Saturday, November 19: Revelation 3:14-22**

Several of the most expensive natural disasters in Canadian history have been in Alberta: the 2016 Fort MacMurray wildfire (\$4 billion), 2013 Calgary/High River floods (\$2 billion), 2011 Slaves Lake fire (\$700 million), 2012 Calgary hailstorms (\$450 million). Insurance helps. But with floods, "overland flow" is often excluded. Thankfully the government helps (really it's all of us, as taxpayers, who pitch in). Many of us give above and beyond. As a community, especially as Christians in community, helping out is what we do.

In AD 61, a devastating earthquake hit Asia, now Turkiye. The Roman treasury offered to help: most cities gladly accepted Imperial aid. But Laodicea refused. Proud, wealthy, and fiercely independent, the Laodiceans wanted to show off their independence and felt they could afford – literally and figuratively – to snub Rome. They could manage on their own, thank you very much.

Christians in Laodicea seemed to have the same independent spirit. They didn't need God. In fact, they could leave Him (literally) out in the cold. Jesus has a pretty blunt message to the church in Laodicea.

To the believers in weak, struggling Philadelphia, Jesus had said, *"This is the message from the one who is holy and true, the one who has the key of David. What he opens, no one can close; and what he closes, no one can open: I know all the things you do, and **I have opened a door** for you that no one can close"* (3:7-8). Speaking of doors, Jesus now says to the strong, proud, wealthy Laodiceans, *"Look, I stand at the door and knock ..."* But the Laodicean believers have the door closed, locking Jesus outside.

We often read this as an evangelistic text, encouraging non-believers to open the door of their hearts/lives to Jesus. But notice that Jesus is **NOT** saying this to non-Christians. He is saying this to **the church**, to **us**.

In the gospels, there are several parables where Jesus is described as the Master, unexpectedly coming home: are His servants ready? He is the bridegroom coming: are the people awake, with oil in their lamps? He is knocking: will His people open the door and let him in?

How do Christians “lock Jesus **out**”? How can a church “lock Jesus **out**”?

How can a follower of Jesus open the door and invite Jesus **in**? How can a church invite Him **in**?

What does it look like when we invite Jesus in? Some of us may worry Jesus is going to take all the fun out of life. It'll be all rules and regulations. Reread Revelation 3:20-21: *"Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to feast with you. Conquerors will sit alongside me at the head table, just as I, having conquered, took the place of honor at the side of my Father. That's my gift to the conquerors!"*

Jesus wants to come into our lives – and our church – and have a party, a feast, a celebration with us. One of the images of life with Jesus now, and in the future, is a banquet/feast ([Psalm 23:5-6](#), [Isaiah 25:4-6](#), [Revelation 19:6-9](#)). He wants to share His throne/head table with you (3:21). We cannot comprehend what this really means, but it sounds pretty awesome. It's certainly something very, very, very good.

Jesus wants to share life with you. To guide you. To encourage you. To teach you. Will you let Him in?

*Almighty and Eternal God,  
I pray you would give me the great gift of inward peace.  
Command the winds and storms of my unruly passions.  
By Your grace, subdue my proneness to love created things too much.  
Give me an acceptance of suffering for Your sake.  
Make me patient and kind to others,  
that I may avoid quarrels and contentions.  
Teach me constantly to seek after and to acquire  
Help me to live this day fully and completely in your will,  
Even as I look ahead to eternal life with you.  
Only this life, lived in obedience to you now and hope for the future brings interior peace.  
Amen*

### **Sunday, November 20: Revelation 3:14-22**

My background is in geography. Jesus' comments to Laodicea are particularly poignant given the geography of the area. Jesus is using their local geography as an object lesson on their lives:

- Colossae, 18 kms from Laodicea, is at the foot of 2500 m (8000 ft) mountains (similar elevation to the mountains in Waterton National Park). The water that flows from Colossae to Laodicea is from clear, cold, mountain springs. Today we'd be bottling it and selling it at exorbitant prices.
- Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13), Pamukkale, 12 kms in the other direction, has world famous hot springs. The water that flows from Pamukkale to Laodicea is warm, sulphur-smelling, and impossible to drink (imagine trying to drink warm, sulphur water from the hot springs in Banff – yuck. The water from Pamukkale is just like that).

These two water sources – cold, clear mountain water AND hot, foul-tasting sulphur water – flow together and mix in the Lycus River, right below the city of Laodicea. The water in the river at Laodicea is literally lukewarm. It also tastes awful. It's undrinkable.

Do you see how pointed Jesus' words are: *"I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!"* (3:15-16)?

- What might it mean for a church be lukewarm – neither hot nor cold? What might it mean for an individual Christian to be lukewarm? Where is Jesus in a lukewarm church? A lukewarm life?
- What might it mean for a church (or an individual) to say *"I am rich. I have everything I want. I*



*don't need a thing."* What would it mean if you're wrong?

- Jesus says, *"I advise you to buy gold from me – gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. Also buy white garments from me so you will not be shamed by your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see."* What do you think He might mean?

Jesus' challenge is this: *"I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference."* The Message translation puts it like this: *"The people I love, I call to account – prod and correct and guide so that they'll live at their best. Up on your feet, then! About face! Run after God!"*

We would like to think we DON'T need to hear that message, but we all make mistakes. We all have moments of indifference. We can all be lukewarm. What might Jesus be saying to you?

*Breathe into me, Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.  
Move in me, Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.  
Protect me, Holy Spirit, that I may always be holy.  
Attract my heart, Holy Spirit, that I may love only what is holy.  
Strengthen me, Holy Spirit, that I may defend all that is holy.  
Guide me, Holy Spirit, that I may invite others to You, who are holy.  
Empower me, Holy Spirit, that I may serve others in ways that are holy.  
Fill me, Holy Spirit, that all I say and do brings honour to You, the One who is All Holy.  
Amen*

### **Monday, November 21: James 5:1-6**

As someone who preaches sermons, I'm aware of a constant tension. I want to communicate God's truth clearly AND I want people to listen. I can speak the truth, but if I do so in a rude, offensive way, no-one will pay attention. If I'm too "in-your-face" people will tune out. The old hell-fire-and-brimstone, dangle-people's-feet-over-the-burning-pit-truth era is gone. On the other hand, I could get a bit too soft, love-y, and non-offensive and not communicate any truth. I can be so loving, I water down the truth (lukewarm, like the Laodiceans?). How do I communicate God's genuine **truth**, in genuine **love**?

James doesn't mind getting in our faces, but he does so with love. He always speaks the truth, in love.

In James 4:7-10, James said this (in *The Message* translation): *"Let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet."*

James is serious enough about his faith that within a year or two of writing this, he will be executed for his faith in Jesus. Two separate early Christian historians, Clement of Alexandria and Hegesippus, relate that *"the Scribes and Pharisees placed James upon the pinnacle of the temple, and threw down the just man, and they began to stone him, for he was not killed by the fall. And one of them, who was a fuller, took the club with which he beat out clothes and struck the just man on the head until he was dead."* Horrible.

This is how Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, translates James 5:1-6: *"And a final word to you arrogant rich: Take some lessons in lament. You'll need buckets for the tears when the crash comes upon you. Your money is corrupt and your fine clothes stink. Your greedy luxuries are a cancer in your gut, destroying your life from within. You thought you were piling up wealth. What you've piled up is judgment. All the workers you've exploited and cheated cry out for judgment. The groans of the workers you used and abused are a roar in the ears of the Master Avenger. You've looted the earth and lived it up. But all you'll have to show for it is a fatter than usual corpse. In fact, what you've done is condemn and murder perfectly good persons, who stand there and take it."* Ouch.

I don't suspect any of us are the "arrogant rich." In his culture, a very, very few controlled all the wealth (although our society is heading that way more and more). But his point is this: trusting in our "stuff" will not save us. We can't take it with us: you don't see any hearses pulling U-Hauls. We can use our resources to make life better for people around us. So do it. Be a blessing. Don't just be a "fatter than usual corpse."

What is James saying to us?

*Lord, You have always given bread for the coming day;  
and though I am poor, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always given strength for the coming day;  
and though I am weak, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always given peace for the coming day;  
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always kept me safe in trials;  
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always marked the road for the coming day;  
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always lightened this darkness of mine;  
and though the night is here, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always spoken when time was ripe;  
and though you be silent now, today I believe.  
Amen.*

## **Tuesday, November 22: James 5:7-12**

In traditional societies, people value elders. Elders have been there, done that, and are valued for their life experience and learned wisdom. But age alone does not make you an elder worthy of honour. Some older people are not wise. Elders earn the right to be heard by learning, growing, and integrating their experiences with genuine wisdom. Elders are honourable by being honour-worthy people.

In contemporary society, we often value youthfulness, innovation, experimentation, and novelty. The "wisdom of the ages" is suspect, or, we think, is just plain wrong. In popular culture, it is assumed elders are wrong about most things. After all, they cannot keep up with TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and all the other new social media. They can't even programme their own PVR or smartphone.

James reminds us we ignore wise mentors at our peril. *"Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything, and never once quit, all the time honoring God. What a gift life is to those who stay the course. You've heard, of course, of Job's staying power, and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end. That's because God cares, cares right down to the last detail"* (5:10-11 *The Message*).

True, the old prophets couldn't figure out how to download pictures from a smart phone. True, they couldn't figure out e-transfers. But when it came to the real issues of real life – suffering, tough times, dealing with temptation, needing wisdom, facing their own mortality – they have a lot to teach us.

Who do you know who can be a wise mentor? Who can give you some helpful advice for life? Make the effort to invite them for a coffee, talk with them after church, give them a phone call ...

Who can you mentor? Who needs someone to come alongside them and share life's challenges with them? Perhaps you can be an encourager to someone? You may not think you have a lot to offer, but as you have gone through the good and bad of life, you have learned a lot. Your experiences and wisdom can be a real help to a person who is struggling.

*Christ, as a light, illumine and guide me.  
Christ, as a shield, overshadow me.  
Christ under me.  
Christ over me.  
Christ beside me, on my left and my right.  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Be in the heart of each to whom I speak.  
Be in the mouth of each who speaks unto me.  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Christ as a light.  
Christ as a shield.  
Christ beside me, on my left and my right.  
Amen*

Celtic Prayer

### **Wednesday, November 23: James 5:13-18**

At the end of his life, the legendary King Arthur says these words (according to poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson):

*The old order changes, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.*

The world changes. That's inevitable. And it's not all bad. Not everything from the past was so wonderful. Wishing things would "just go back the way they were before" may not be the best option. It's certainly not a realistic option. Things change irreversibly. And, if we look closely, some changes are actually good.

King Arthur goes on to say,

*More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let your voice  
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.  
For what are men better than sheep or goats  
That nourish a blind life within the brain,  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?*

We may tritely rattle off the phrase, "I'll pray for you," but never actually pray. When there's a natural disaster or a shooting at a school, politicians rattle off feel-good slogans like, "*our thoughts and prayers are with you.*" I wonder if most of them actually pray? (If they did, would they be challenged to deal with **underlying causes** of climate disasters and mass shootings, rather than glibly promise to pray AFTER?)

James – and Tennyson's Arthur – actually believe in the power of prayer. They actually believe prayer makes a difference. More precisely, they believe **in the God to whom we pray**. Therefore, they believe that speaking with God makes a real difference. Do you?

If we say we know God – the God who created the universe and everything in it, who gave us His own Son, Jesus, who destroyed the power of sin and death – and we don't actually pray to Him, what does that say about our faith? If we don't bring our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, our worries and our dreams to the God of the universe in prayer, why not?

When in doubt – pray. When you are feeling glad – pray. When you are angry – pray. When you are thankful – pray. When you are worried or confused – pray. When you feel blessed – pray. When you are

struggling – pray. When you are celebrating – pray. Pray about everything.

*"Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven – healed inside and out. Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with" (5:13-16 The Message).*

What can you pray about today?

*I call on You, O God, for You will answer me.  
Give ear to me and hear my prayer.  
Show the wonder of Your great love.  
You save all who take refuge in You from their foes.  
Lighten my darkness, Lord.  
Let the light of Your presence dispel the shadows of night.  
  
Christ with me sleeping.  
Christ with me waking.  
Christ with me watching, each day and each night.  
Save us, Lord, while we are awake, that we may watch with Christ.  
Guard us while we are asleep, that we may rest in His peace.  
God with me protecting.  
The Lord with me directing.  
The Spirit with me strengthening forever and for evermore.  
  
In the name of the Father precious,  
and of the Spirit of healing;  
in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
I pray that the peace of all peace be mine this day and this night  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

#### **Thursday, November 24: James 5:19-20**

As Jesus is about to ascend to heaven, He says to His friends, *"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:18-20).

Luke comments, *"When the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, 'Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?' He replied, 'The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'"* (Acts 1:6-8).

God wants people to know Jesus. God wants people to have new life in Jesus. The Holy Spirit makes this happen, as He works in our lives.

It's interesting that, after all James' discussion about suffering, enduring, watching our tongues, and praying, he concludes his letter with: *"My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God"* (5:19-20 The Message).



James could have ended his letter in all sorts of ways. A sharp reminder to live their faith. Personal greetings. A blessing. A prayer. What does this conclusion tell you about what is important to James?

Who do you know who needs to know Jesus? Advent/Christmas is a good season to encourage people to meet Jesus again, or for the first time. Pray about opportunities to help people discover Jesus this year ...

*Almighty and Eternal God,  
I pray for the great gift of inward peace.  
Command the winds and storms of my unruly passions.  
By Your grace, subdue my proneness to love created things too much.  
Help me to accept suffering for Your sake.  
Make me patient, forgiving, and kind to others.  
May your grace to me shape my grace to others.  
Teach me constantly to seek after your truth.  
Help me to become more and more like Jesus.  
Allow me to welcome your Spirit into all parts of my life.  
Only You, and you alone, can bring me perfect peace.  
Amen*

## Friday, November 25: 2 John

If you had to write a letter about what was most important in your life in 250 words or less, what would you say? 250 words may sound like a lot, but try it! It's harder than you think!

2 John is 245 words (in the original Greek). It is written to a "*chosen lady and her children*" – perhaps an actual lady and her family – more likely this was a code phrase for a church and its members (these were times of intense persecution of Christians, so this kind of coded greeting would avert suspicion from Roman imperial authorities). John may have been writing to one of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. John knew them well. He was part of the church in Ephesus, for instance, for many years (he is buried there).

To whomever this letter is written, John emphasizes three things:

1. **Know the truth** (verses 1-3). John uses the word "truth" four times in verse 1-3! "*We must not only **learn the truth** with our minds, but we must also **love the truth** in our hearts and **live the truth** by our wills. Our total persons must be **yielded to the truth***" (Warren Wiersbe). The truth, as John, defines it, is very simple: Jesus is fully human and fully God; He showed His love for us by dying and rising for us; we have life in Him and through Him by faith in Him; our love for God is shown in our love for one another (see 1 John 4). We love God – and our neighbour as ourselves.
2. **Walk in the truth** (verses 4-6). John emphasizes exactly what Jesus taught: if we love Jesus we will walk in His ways. We will want to honour Him with our lives. That includes figuring out how to "*love one another.*" We speak the truth – in love.
3. **Stay faithful to the truth** (verses 7-11). Be wise. There are people who distort the truth. So we need to be careful
  - a. not to go backwards and hold onto the past (v.8) – the message remains unchanging, but we do need to find new ways to communicate to new generations; and
  - b. not to get all excited about the latest spiritual or church 'fad' (v.9) – there are a lot of ideas that sound exciting, dynamic, well-intentioned, and neat ... but may be shallow, off-base, or downright wrong. We need to be well-educated, discerning, and wise – in the truth.
  - c. Not to add to the truth with extra rules, regulations, and interpretations (John was specifically warning about the Gnostics – people who denied Jesus was a real person, and who claimed "secret" knowledge only "true Christians" – them – knew).

How are you doing loving and living the truth? How can you continue to grow?

*In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
The Lord is my light, my salvation; whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the refuge of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?  
In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
One thing I ask of the Lord, one thing I seek;  
to dwell in the presence of my God,  
to gaze on Your holy place.  
In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.  
O wait for the Lord. Have courage and wait, wait for the Lord.  
In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
Amen*

### **Saturday, November 26: 3 John**

What are the essential qualities of a follower of Jesus? What would you say?

This is another short letter from John. It may be written to people in one of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. John knew these churches well, as he lived in Ephesus for many years (he's buried there).

This letter is about three men. Take a few moments to reflect on each of them:

- **Gaius** (verses 1-8) – faithful to the truth, walking in the truth, hospitable, and generous. Gaius is a faithful, godly person who appears to have taken many of the values James writes about in his letter to heart. He appears to have a great balance of truth and love in his life.
- **Diotrephes** (verses 9-11) – self-righteous, proud, a malicious gossip (literally "*a person who brings false testimony*"), inhospitable, and judgmental. He is not a nice guy. Diotrephes thought he was "*doing the Lord's work*" but his actions prove otherwise (v.11). Does he model truth and/or love? Not much of either, I'm afraid. What might a modern-day Diotrephes look like? Someone who loves to be the leader? Who refuses to work well with others? Who constantly criticizes? Who promotes alternative "truth"? Who posts nasty things online? Who always has to be right?
- **Demetrius** (verses 12-14) – "*everyone speaks highly of him.*" John doesn't go into details. What qualities of character do you think he might have had? What is person like who is "*well-spoken of by everyone*" or of whom "*everyone speaks highly*"?

Verse 11 is the key to this letter: "*Remember that those who do good prove that they are God's children, and those who do evil prove that they do not know God.*" This sounds a lot like James, doesn't it?

Our good deeds do not save us. But if we truly have faith, our faith will be shown in how we live. Our good deeds reveal the changed hearts, minds, and lives we have thanks to the Holy Spirit. The truth on the inside will always come out. We speak the truth in love. And we live the truth in love.

I wish John were more explicit about what, specifically, it was that gave Demetrius great rapport with everyone. What do you think he was like?

Reflect on our readings in James, what qualities of character might he have had?

How can I integrate some of those qualities of character into my life?

*We believe and trust in God the Father Almighty.  
 We believe and trust in Jesus Christ His Son.  
 We believe and trust in the Holy Spirit.  
 We believe and trust in the Three in One.  
 Teach us, dear Lord, to number our days,  
 that we may live wisely.  
 Help us to appreciate your mercy and love,  
 that we may rejoice and be glad all of our days.  
 Jesus, establish the work of our hands.  
 Spirit, let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us.  
 Father, let nothing disturb us and nothing frighten us.  
 All things are passing, but God never changes.  
 May we know you, O God, personally and passionately  
 because when we know You, we need nothing else.  
 You, alone, are all we need and so much more.  
 We pray, Your power and Your presence in our lives,  
 in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
 Amen*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, November 27 (HOPE): Isaiah 6**

What is Advent? Why do celebrate it? Advent is about Jesus/God coming into our world. Advent is about the good news that God loves His creation and sent His son, Jesus, to save us and give us new life.

Isaiah "*saw the Lord*." In the Old Testament, no one sees the Lord and lives. God is so holy, so pure, so righteous (and we're not) that anyone who sees God dies. Isaiah is sure he's done for. Instead, God cleanses Isaiah. God makes Isaiah as holy, pure, and righteous as God Himself is. God, in His grace, takes away all of Isaiah's uncleanness and gives him a new beginning. Isaiah does nothing.

This is what God, in Jesus, does for each one of us. Through His death and resurrection, God makes us as holy, pure, and righteous as Jesus Himself is. God, in His grace, takes away all of our uncleanness and gives us new life. We do nothing.

The process may hurt. God burns away the sin. We will be changed. But it's worth it.

God is looking for people who will be His people. God is looking for people who will seek to live this purified, godly life. Of course, every person, including Isaiah, is still going to be imperfect. We will still make mistakes. We will still sin. But we choose to aim for that life of holiness ...

Theologian David Wells writes, "*Holiness is not a matter of people simply cleaning up their lives on the outside, becoming civil as a matter of politeness only, or going along with biblical teaching because others are doing so. This is not biblical holiness. This is, at best, social niceness.*"

*"Biblical holiness begins with the Holy (as Isaiah discovered!). But the Holy, by its very nature, can be approached only when we come as sinners. He is never accessible to us as consumers. We come in sackcloth and ashes, not as buyers. Indeed, we cannot approach the Holy at all on our own terms. We must see that the Holy has first approached us in Christ and, through Him, reconciled us to himself. The revelation of the Holy would be unbearable were we to see it in any other way than from within Christ. In Christ, what we are seeing is God's holiness in its action on our sin. Without Christ we have to bear that judgment in ourselves. What we see instead is holiness coming down in grace and, in Christ, going forth against our sin in triumph.*

*"Holiness is so much more than just a moral code or a set of rules. It is all about what is right because it is*

*all about what God is in his utterly pure being. It is his being in its burning purity that drives us in pursuit of what is right. And he has disclosed to us in Scripture, in a multitude of ways, what is right and true."*

This is also a missional passage. Our God is an awesome God. He is Creator. He is King. He is holy. He is more than capable of handling all the world's problems – and ours, too. Our Father invites us to be ambassadors, sharing this good news with the world.

Remember James' final words in his letter: *"My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God"* (James 5:19-20).

Advent is a great time to invite people to find the reason for the season: to meet Jesus. How can we encourage people to find Jesus in the coming weeks?

*God the Father, enfold us with your love.  
God the Son, surround us with your presence.  
God the Spirit, revitalise us with your power.*

*As the sun melts the frost at the dawning of a new day,  
so you calm our fears and anxieties if we trust you.  
You give us strength and courage to live our daily lives  
knowing you are with us, and we do not walk alone.*

*As the midday sun warms us,  
we feel your protecting arms around us  
and sense your loving presence.*

*As the sun sinks in a kaleidoscope of colour  
you give us hope and renewal.  
Enfold, surround, revitalise us  
each day, each night, Lord.  
Amen.*