

RUF Large Group Bible Study
Rev. Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
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James 1:18-27²

James 1:18-27 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. 19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. 26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

We're looking at James this semester, going consecutively through this remarkable book. I've already been extremely blessed and humbled by studying it, and feel like I've neglected it in somewhat my Christian life to this point. To my hurt. Last week we finished with 1:18, which talked about how the word of truth makes us "born again" in Jesus when we become Christians, and then how we are set aside for his use, we are his "first fruits."

Now, here's the big question we might have, one that I think James answers in this next passage, though he doesn't provide us with much of a transition: Why am I not more different? I mean, if this incredible power is in my life, why am I still like this?

Think of it this way, because this is intensely practical: You have met a ton of people this month. Many, many of them say they are Christians. And yet, you wonder. You may feel guilty for wondering about them, because you feel like it's wrong to judge others – and these people might even throw that concept in your face. But the Bible says that we are always to help people, to minister to them, and one important part of that is to ascertain where they are. Not in a judgmental way, but it certainly takes discerning and judgment to help people. So we have to ask ourselves, what is a Christian? Are you a Christian because you say you are? Are you a Christian because you prayed a prayer at summer camp when you were twelve? Because you are a moral person who doesn't drink or smoke or sleep around? Because you go to church?

If I am a Christian, how can I grow? James gives us profound advice here.³

The Bible

The first thing that James shows us, and this will be something we keep coming back to in this passage, is that we are changing when we are interacting with the Word of Truth. The Bible is essential for us. We are born again, which is of the essence of being a Christian. He says this in verse 18. And then James pounds us with the word: the word of truth implanted in our souls, the law of liberty, the royal law.

He is saying that one way to know if someone is really a Christian is to observe his or her relationship to the Bible. The Bible, the word of God moves from being an interesting book to being food, air, water for you. If you are dying of thirst and someone gives you a glass of water, you don't look at it and say, "Well, how interesting." You consume it. You devour it. You desire more and look for it.⁴ You'll do anything to get it.

This should be our attitude toward the Bible. Frankly, I just don't see it in the Christian community out there. I don't see a commitment to the Word. I don't see a care to get around good teaching, to memorize and stow away the Word on our hearts. A pre-commitment to do what it says even if I disagree.

What I see instead are several other things. The first is just complete nothingness. This person claims Christianity and then has weeks and months go by where she doesn't go to church, doesn't read the Bible, doesn't have anything to do with Christianity.⁵ How is this person thinking that Christianity is a working worldview in her life? How can she change? How can she love Jesus? This is a very dangerous place to be. If you are this person or you love this person, you should do all you can to get this person in touch with the truth, in range of the Word of life and make her see that IT is the only thing which has the power to save her soul.

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² Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller's sermons on James found at www.redeemer.com; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter's Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1985.

³ I'm drawing heavily from Tim Keller's message on this passage this week. He's one of the only ones who seems to "get it."

⁴ I'm reading a book about sailors captured and wandering around the Sahara and how they were slowly dying of dehydration.

⁵ A friend of mine was recently telling me of going to a liberal church where the pastor started his sermon this way: "I was wondering what the Bible had to say about this topic so I went over and picked it up and I blew the dust off of it..." Great.

The next type is someone who stands either equal to or over the Bible. This person reads the Bible and then decides what is right in there and what is wrong in there. He doesn't like Paul or believes that the deuteronomist reinterpreted entire sections of Isaiah to better suit his purposes. He believes none of the assessments of those who have gone before and puts his trust in the scholarship of the last fifty years. He stands over the Bible. He is its authority. This is a very dangerous place to be.⁶ This person is wrapped up in novelty and is unwilling to submit to the Bible. He will not allow the Bible to contradict his own way of thinking and thus doesn't have a real relationship with it or with God. If God cannot contradict and change you, then you don't have a relationship with him. If you read something in the Bible and then say, well, my God would never do something like that, then you have a God of your own making. This is true in any relationship. The closer you are to something the more that thing is able to change you and contradict you and make you a better person.

There's also the person who believes that the Bible is a morality book. This person takes great pains to read and follow every letter of the book, and is on the look out for those who break these rules – and yet he or she doesn't know the real author and perfecter of the faith. There is a lack of understanding that being precedes doing, something we'll talk about later.

James says that we should be different because of our changed nature, our new birth. Why doesn't this happen? It's because we are not letting the thing that is inside of us actually change us like it should. This word has been implanted in us, so when we come into contact with it, our souls should soar. Now he's going to show us just why that doesn't happen as much as it should.

Anger

Our overarching principle this week is that the outward and the inward are connected. The way you treat people is the way you think God treats you. The way you interact with the world on a day-to-day level reveals things about your heart. You cannot isolate your life into compartments to manage them. It won't work to live like hell during the week and come in to church all nice and proper on Sunday mornings. You can't sustain the bifurcation. You will be forced eventually to be more genuine and integrated.

To put it in the context of this week's topic: If you can't listen to other people or receive from others, you can't listen to or receive from God. Let's look.

We're first confronted with verses 19 and 20, which have to do with anger and listening. Our initial glance may lead us to think that James digressed greatly and we are on an entirely different point. Indeed, if we don't read the context we will probably be led that way. But these verses are sandwiched within a greater context that speaks of God's word. That he gives us new birth by his word of truth and that we should receive the word implanted in our souls. In fact, verse 21 even says, "*Therefore*" which indicates that the anger passage that came before has something to do with what follows.

So we might be on the right track to consider what this anger might have to do with our reception of the word.⁷

The first thing we should notice is that the text doesn't say, "Don't get angry." It says "*Be slow to anger.*" What's the difference? Anger is energy released to defend. That is not de facto bad. Jesus got angry and God gets angry. So anger cannot be in and of itself wrong. But there is an anger that is wrong and bad. This kind of anger gone bad by sin is a cancer.

One of the indicators that you have this cancerous anger is that it's quick, it flares up in a second. Jesus and God get angry, but it's not a temper, not quick. They are slow to anger.

The other symptom of this kind of bad anger is that it leads you to do something you regret. This is what James means when he says, "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires." Anger is good if it leads you to do good, to do the right thing.

You can think of this character in the movies. It's usually someone who is not naturally a leader, or an especially principled person. This character would rather not confront a wrong or evil. But, through the movie he gets angry and then rises up to defend in righteousness. His anger has led to something good. Perhaps William Wallace as depicted in "Braveheart." Boy, he sure gets mad and attempts to confront injustice. Or Humphrey Bogart in "Casablanca," whose anger makes him terribly hurt bitter until he knows that he's been loved all along. Then he lets the Nazis have it.⁸

Unfortunately this doesn't happen very often in our daily lives. Why not?

We can bring this out by looking at the opposite of anger. What would you guess is the opposite of anger? You might guess self-control, but alas, you'd be wrong. The opposite of anger is self control is humility. James writes, "*Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word,*" Thus, the problem with anger is pride. How's that?

⁶ I have put several articles that will help you in your understanding of the canonicity, authority, dating and writing of the Bible on www.ouruf.org. Be wary of religious studies classes! Not because we shouldn't know what they think, but because we must be ready to defend the Scriptures and too many students are unprepared to do so and are thus overwhelmed by what seem to be great and irrefutable arguments. Rest assured, they are refutable.

⁷ "It is the divine power behind the truth of Scripture that is able to initiate salvation; keep it alive and growing and finally bring it to final glory, complete and perfect. We have been saved (justified) through the power of the Word; we are kept saved (sanctified) through the power of the Word; and we will be ultimately, completely, and eternally saved (glorified) through the power of the Word." MacArthur, p. 76

⁸ Dare we say, "The Incredible Hulk"? There are many. Harrison Ford seems to play this reluctant-anger-turned-for-good character well.

Inner anger is bitterness and outer anger is blowing up at people. Anger is cancerous when you release the anger to defend your pride, to defend an uncontrollable universe to preserve a spotless image of yourself. Your anger flares up to defend this. When you defend the good and the true, it leads to righteousness. But when you defend the spotless image of yourself (or someone else besides Jesus) it turns cancerous.

For example, in abusive relationships, when typically the husband blows up and hits his wife, she will usually say, “he never listens to me.” Isn’t that interesting?

There is a relationship between anger and listening, accepting.⁹ Listening and accepting what others say means you have to listen to and accept that you are a moral failure. An angry person is someone who denies that at the heart. It’s not my fault! It’s his fault! Her fault! God’s fault. He is quick to speak, to defend, to deflect, to keep away hurt from his heart.

The reason this happens is because people believe that you are either a moral failure or completely loved. But the gospel says that both are true. The angry person does not agree with that. Most of us don’t really agree with the gospel’s picture of us. Both a moral failure and completely loved? No way. You’ve very rarely been treated like that in your life, so you’ve been taught to believe the anti-gospel, worldly view of yourself. Some of you are striving with all your might to live up to expectations – of your parents, of your siblings, of your teachers, of your own self-concept of what you should be like. Any blow to that expectation is crushing to you – that’s why you get so mad when you fail in big ways or small ways. This isn’t only in sports or grades, but in relationships and conversations, in thinking and friendships. You have a self-image you are desperate to preserve. You don’t want people to know when you mess up. You want to be strong, capable, able, meaningful. Who wants to date and marry a loser? Who wants to date and marry someone so confused, so wrong, so sinning, so lusty, so lying, so unstable? I have to hide that from people, to defend the image of myself I want to show the world. Then I will be loved. Then I will be accepted.

But the gospel says that you are a totally loved moral failure. That both can be true at the same time.

Do you see how anger is working in this? Do you see that if you are angry, irritable, angry and bitter, than you cannot allow the word of God into your life? It won’t be able to touch you. The opposite of this angry person is the humble one, the one who listens to others, who is teachable and able to hear the truth.¹⁰ She listens to others instead of always defending herself. If you’re not a good listener, then you aren’t getting anything out of the Bible either.

So what do we do about it? Not self-control. Stop being angry, control it!

We’ll talk about this more a little later, but you have to talk to yourself, teach yourself. The next time you are thinking of your life and are getting angry, tell yourself and ask yourself; I am a totally loved, moral failure. What am I defending? Why am I so angry?

You have to use the gospel on your pride, to develop your humility. If you don’t develop a humble spirit, relax when you fail, relax when others point out your faults, if you’re a lousy “repenter,” then you won’t move forward in your relationship with God.

Some of us might think that James should break into a study program. Studying the Word is important, but James doesn’t talk about techniques at all. You should be in the word, reading it every day, memorizing it and meditation on it, listening to good Bible teaching as much as possible. But if you are angry, if you are speaking and not listening, then it won’t affect you. That may be why you’re not growing and changing. He says that accepting the Word of God is a character issue, not a matter of methods.

“By hearing the life-giving word, the energies of the new nature are stimulated into action. Therefore we must be *quick to hear*. We might wonder why the ever-practical James does not proceed to outline schemes of daily Bible reading or the like, for surely these are the ways in which we offer a willing ear to the voice of God. But he does not help us in this way. Rather, he goes deeper, for there is little point in schemes and times if we have not got an attentive spirit. It is possible to be unfailingly regular in Bible reading, but to achieve no more than to have moved the bookmark forward: this is reading unrelated to an attentive spirit. The word is read but not heard. On the other hand, if we can develop an attentive spirit, this will spur us to create those conditions – a proper method on Bible reading, a discipline of time, and so on – by which the spirit will find itself satisfied in hearing the Word of God.”¹¹

You have to learn to see this pride if you’re going to be a person who grows in the presence of God. Jonathan Edwards says that it’s pride that kills revivals. Not only on a massive level, which was his concern in the middle 1700s, but at a personal level. Do you want to see revival, real change, Christlikeness in your life? Then we need to develop an early warning system so we can kill pride early. What are the early warnings of a proud heart?

A proud heart is sure of every single point of his beliefs. It sees no difference between a major and a minor point. Any belief, if it’s mine, is a major belief. This person will argue with equal ferocity the deity of Jesus and the merits of cloth diapers over disposable ones. There is no real difference in his mind in the importance between the atonement of Christ and how short a skirt should be. He will be just as sure about the inerrancy of Scripture as he is about the appropriateness of going to parties. A proud heart argues about everything, it is not teachable, is argumentative.

⁹Quick to listen – Prov. 17:28, 29:20, Ps. 119:11, 2 Tim 2:15

¹⁰ For a spectacularly bad idea, and one that smacks of not only unteachableness, but not understanding the church, see www.Semesterchurch.org

¹¹ Motyer, pp. 64-65

A proud heart either enjoys confronting or avoids confronting but never confronts with tears. A sure sign of a heart desperately patching up righteousness or preserving a spotless image of itself goes after people when they fail or else a person refuses because he cannot take any criticism back at him. This person is either always on the attack or else never speaks up when he or she sees wrong happening. A humble heart speaks the truth in love.

A proud heart is always unhappy with its life. This person is always griping about how his or her life is going. When bad things happen, a humble heart says, "Well, I didn't want this to happen, but I guess God knows best." A proud heart is sure she knows more than God so is always ticked when things go wrong and never satisfied when things go right. A humble heart is at peace.

If these are the marks of your heart, then no wonder you're not growing. You need a change of perspective on the world. You need a new way of thinking. You need to either experience the new birth talked about in verse 18, or you need to remember that that is the operating paradigm in your life. You are forgetting who you really are and are instead believing the lies told to you about yourself and how the world works.

This anger passage might be revolutionary for you. You may have never understood how and why you're like this. You may have never asked other people who you really are. I am convinced that you cannot make your own meaning for yourself, for sure not in the way the world means. Meaning comes from an outside source. It comes from somewhere – clothes, sex, people, money, men, women, children, career, something someone said. These things shape who you are. The question is, where are you going for your source of meaning, your sense of identity. There is only one place that is ultimately trustworthy and that is God, as revealed in the Bible. But he says just the very message you don't like to hear – you are a moral failure *and* intensely loved. Perhaps it's time to start believing that.

Doing/Being

Let's move on. James says, Don't merely listen, but you have to do.

We might think of it like this: "I spent fifty minutes this morning reading the Bible – and I can remember what I read. It was a super uninterrupted time.' And James would say, 'Well done! But now, what about obeying the word you read? Have you actually changed your mind so that you now hold to be true what you learned in the word? Have you (and are you) re-directing your imagination and your eyes and your thoughts so as to live according to the standards of the world? Are your relationships different, as the word instructed you they should be?'"¹²

And we cringe a little, feeling very small indeed. We must be doers of the word, and James is going to explain what that means. There can be a continuing enjoyment of a relationship with God's truth and God's law begun in the early morning – but it is the work of a lifetime. It is like the deep and pervasive matching of lives, personalities and thoughts which emerges in the course of a happy marriage."¹³

He uses the analogy of the mirror. Mirrors back then were made of polished metal, so they didn't give nearly as accurate a picture that mirrors do today, but they were certainly functional. But that's not his point. James is saying that there is something in our hearts that doesn't want to know what we are. When we look at ourselves, we only see what we want to see and we forget what is actually true about us.

We can understand this when we think of anorexia. The anorexic person looks in the mirror and actually sees a size eight but thinks he or she sees a size eighteen. She doesn't have an accurate view of herself. Anorexia is pathological, but it is reality in every human heart. We tend to forget the right and true.

Now you don't forget everything you see or hear. Just the right and true things. We tend to remember the bad and ugly, but forget the right and true. We remember the awful, harmful things. We hear we're loved 100 times and we forget, but one person says once ten years ago "You're ugly, we hate you" and you never forget.

Your heart is allergic to the truth. If you don't know this and don't set your life up to fight it, then it will take you out. If you don't know this, then you will continually be looking into the mirror and seeing what is not actual reality. You have to orient your life around the truth, which is why you so need the Bible. You must go out and do what the Bible tells you and never stop looking. You have to take the mirror with you, implant it in your heart, keep looking over and over and over. Never stopping reminding yourself of the reality of things.

What is the reality of things? The gospel, which says that you are more wicked and deceitful, awful and disgusting than you ever realized, but at the same time you are more loved and accepted, sought after and respected than you ever believed possible. Because Jesus Christ the Son of God came, lived the perfect life for you and then died for you. His perfect life is accounted to you and your sinful life is accounted to him. That is the truth. Whenever I stop believing this, whenever I stop looking at this I cause incredible damage in my life, in my kids' lives, in my wife's life. I don't really want to believe that she loves me even though she knows I screw up. I want her to think I don't mess up, and so get angry when she insinuates that I've failed. If I don't believe the gospel, I will destroy her and my marriage.

One thing that is fatal to me is having the attitude that I can handle my life by myself, even my Christian life. That I can be the sole responsible person to keep this gospel truth in tact. The opposite is in fact true. I have to have others, I have to have input from the Word, sacraments and prayer, from fellowship with other believers.

¹² Motyer, p. 70

¹³ Motyer, p. 70

So many people don't want to be accountable to anyone. I can handle it myself, they say. You don't understand this at all if that is your attitude. You have to intently bind yourself to this Bible and get your friends to do the same.

In addition, will power is not the point. You can't tighten up your morals and say, "I'm not going to be angry. I'm going to have self control!" Or "I'm not going to be anxious. I'm going to be peaceful." No, you have to look. And what do you look at? You look at reality as expressed through the Bible. This book is your eyesight. These words are your glasses.

Do you remember that bad song, "This is the air I breathe"? Well, there is something true about that song. The Word becomes life for you, life-giving air.¹⁴ A Christian then starts to crave it, to hunger for it, to want to breathe it in. He can't help it. He can't get enough. He doesn't make excuses, but schedules some time each day to get it. He longs for good teaching and appreciates it when he gets it. She memorizes the word to get it in her heart. She gets in a small group in order to discuss it with others. Why? Because it has been implanted on her soul. It is in her! It's not some unsightly appendage that has to be hidden – it's part and parcel with her very being.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism helps instruct us on this point, on how we should approach the Word of God so that it might change us. I'm always convicted of this when I read it, convicted that I don't do it and don't believe it.

Q89: How is the Word made effectual to salvation?

A89: The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

Q90: How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?

A90: The Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

Unfortunately, not many of us attend to it with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts and practice it in our lives. Wouldn't our lives be different if we had that kind of attitude?

It's like the word is an acorn in you. It's been planted. It will grow and it has the potential to make you a very, very different person, a forest of oak trees if it is nourished and watered and tended to. But you have to look, listen, get yourself around the Word as much as possible.

My buddy, John Knorr, RUF campus minister at the University of Tulsa was recently talking to a man in his forties. A third person was there and told me afterward that after John had talked to his friend, he said to him, "Wow, I need to figure out how to get more time around that John Knorr." He sensed a deep calling to his deep. That there was life there when John spoke wisdom from the Bible.¹⁵

Do you have that passion? Do I have that passion?

Are you looking intently at the word implanted in you? Looking at what? Look at Jesus, what he did for you, what God has done for you. And now you think God is going to forget you? Don't be anxious. How do you not be anxious? Look to Jesus.

This means that there should be no difference between doctrine and practice. How we think comes out in how we act. How we act reveals how we think. You have to integrate your theology with your life. Your doctrine has to be practical and your practice has to be doctrinal. You have to think as you act.

James says that if you do this, you will be blessed, because the perfect law brings liberty or freedom. This means the more you obey, the more free you will, the more like God wants you to be you will be. Do you believe that? Do you look at the law like that? Do you have this sort of view of the Old Testament?

You might remember that after God brought his people out of slavery, he then gave them the law. He didn't bring them out of slavery in order to put them into a new kind of slavery. He brought them out of slavery in order to give them freedom. This then is how you should live as free people. Living like this will be a blessing. "The law of God is *the law of liberty* because it safeguards, expresses and enables the life of true freedom into which Christ has brought us."¹⁶

If you look at the Bible and try to do what it says you will be immensely frustrated. But if you concentrate on being the person God wants you to be, doing what he wants you to do with flow out of that. Doing flows out of being. Most of us think that being flows out of doing. If I do the right things, then I will be accepted and loved. But the Bible teaches us that if we are accepted and loved, we will want to do the right things. That is a big difference, one that you must understand in order to understand true Christianity.

You will be blessed. Really. Do you think so?

¹⁴ Believers love the word! Ps. 42:1, John 8:31, Jn. 15:7, Ps. 119:155, Jn 5:37-40

¹⁵"It is tragic when new converts, especially celebrities, are immediately encouraged to begin speaking publicly, not simply to give testimony to their salvation, but to begin giving advice and counsel about other aspects of Christian doctrine and practice for which they are not biblically or experientially prepared. Not only does it tend to foster pride and false confidence in the new convert, but almost inevitably offers shallow, and often erroneous and spiritually dangerous, ideas to those who hear them. Well aware of that danger, Paul warned Timothy that an overseer, or elder, should not be a "new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil" (2 Tim. 3:6). Later in that letter he adds, "Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others" (5:22, cf Ez. 3:17-18, Acts 20:26-28, Hebr. 13:17)."MacArthur, pp. 71-72

¹⁶ Motyer, p. 71

Let me mention at the end that I'm going to only very lightly brush on these last verses, because the rest of the book brings them out. James is here setting up what he will spend time on throughout the rest of his writing, so we'll have ample time to delve into what he means here.

But he's saying this in general: if you are born again, if you have the word implanted in your soul, if you are gazing intently in God's Word, if you are a Christian, if you have all of this internal stuff going on – then that should be seen in the real world. You should not only be thinking differently but behaving differently. The internal is shown by the external. That has to be true.

A tree isn't made healthy by its fruit. But a healthy tree bears fruit. That's what he's saying, and we'll be looking at it over the next weeks.

So what do we think a Christian truly is?

A Christian is a person who has been born again by the word of truth and has that word of truth implanted in his or her heart. This person sees life as it truly is by continuously and intently gazing into the Scriptures. This person deals with anger and pride by cultivating humility and listening to the truth that the Word and others bring. He hungers for and intently looks into the Bible for truth and recalibration. You can find him where there is good teaching. You can find him with the Bible in hand and in heart. He doesn't avoid church or Bible study or accountability or good discussion or hard talks, but seeks after them because he knows he desperately needs them all in his life.

She teaches herself to believe what the gospel says about her and applies that to her life – that she is a moral failure and intensely loved at the same time. This truth makes a difference to her. It makes a difference in her that you can actually see. She tries to obey the Bible out of who she is, not to gain favor from God. Her external pictures her internal. She understands the difference, the symbiotic relationship, and which way they flow. She doesn't think that Christianity is merely words or a claim. Nor does she think that Christianity is a morality-based checklist. She understands that as she thinks, so she acts. That her time and priorities reflect her heart. She deals with herself with repentance, humility and confidence in Christ.

This is who we are to be. This is James' picture of Christianity. May it be ours as well as we examine ourselves and try to discern how to help others in our spheres of influence. May we cry out to Christ for forgiveness.