

SUMMER 1 - James 1:1-27

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[0 : 0 0] an epistle of straw is what Martin Luther called the letter of James not a very kind way of describing this letter an epistle of straw he didn't like it in particular because of what he thought it's contradictory nature with Paul's doctrine of justification by faith more of which we'll see next week but it's certainly a letter that has aroused some controversy over the years Luther wanted to more or less keep it out of the New Testament relegate it to a sort of secondary status but it is a letter that fits the Bible it's one that fits hand in glove I think with the theology of Saint Paul as we'll see as we go through this letter it's not an easy letter to follow because it's a little bit like a sort of hodgepodge of bits and pieces small paragraphs which appear to be relatively unrelated to the paragraphs that precede and that follow if we were to try and get a handle on the whole letter from the start it's a bit like a spiritual heart test over the years a number of folk in this church and other churches where I've been have had tests to do with their heart one of our members is still recovering from heart surgery just before Christmas and is in hospital going well and all sorts of tests are done in order to determine the state of the heart and then to determine what sort of treatment whether a stent needs to be put in whether bypass surgery needs to be conducted or even perhaps I guess it extremes an artificial heart or heart transplant or something like that in a sense what we find in this letter are sort of diagnostic tests for our spiritual heart because the person that this letter is addressed to is one that we might call double-hearted double-minded mind and heart fit neatly together in scripture or as we'll see a bit later on tonight double-souled the person who is not single-minded or single-hearted in their Christian faith and their devotion to God the person who on the one hand seems to pursue God and his truth and follow his ways but on the other seeks to follow the wisdom of the world so in a sense this is a diagnostic letter assessing our own hearts as we read it and study it in these weeks to see what state our heart is in is our heart split is it bifocal half following God but on the other hand a half wanting to run things our own way and follow our own paths and we'll see that sort of split double language come up a few times throughout this letter but in a sense I think that's a helpful way to at least enter this letter make sure that as we read and study it it is applying to you James wrote it to Christians maybe churches or congregations in different parts of the ancient world but as a letter of scripture it is still written to us and we must study it indeed as we'll see later on in this very very first chapter not just for our information's sake but let it address ourselves let it be a doctor's implement testing our own heart well James was the brother of Jesus most probably he is the author of this letter he writes the letter

under the authority not of being the brother of Jesus but of being a servant of him so he begins the letter typically for an ancient letter saying who is writing first James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ not wanting to boast in his filial relationship as a younger brother of Jesus probably he is the head of the church in Jerusalem or was probably still is at this point we see that from Acts for example Acts 15 and he writes to the 12 tribes in the dispersion it's an odd addressee the 12 tribes of the dispersion is clearly picking up Old Testament language there were 12 tribes of Israel the dispersion applied at the time of the exile in about 580s BC but also when the tribes of the northern kingdom were conquered earlier than that in 721 and scattered to different places here though he's not writing I think to Jews he's certainly writing to Christians I don't even think he's writing to Jewish Christians only I think he's writing to Christians some of whom would be Jewish maybe many but some of whom would presumably have been Gentile they are of the dispersion because they're scattered throughout the

Mediterranean world we're not sure exactly where they were but the way that he addresses them tells us that he regards the church Jewish and Gentile as the true Israel the legitimate successors if you like of the ethnic Israel of the Old Testament and that is consistent with all sorts of others in the New Testament writings those from Holy Trinity will know I've been preaching through Romans recently and in Romans 9 to 11 we see the same argument in force but we see it in 1 Peter we see it in the book of Revelation and in other places as well some would say that this would be the earliest document we have from the New Testament many would place it at the end of the 40s AD maybe just before Galatians was written we're not really sure there's not enough internal evidence to be certain about that but we could be reading the very first writings of the New Testament as we read this letter well he extends greetings to them typical of ancient letters and then launches into his letter unlike Paul who often has an opening paragraph about giving thanks for the people that he's writing to and what he prays for them and so on by way of leading into his letter none of that here greetings and then he launches straight into it and what we find as I hinted at before is that we have small paragraphs dealing with issues and it seems to jump around a bit some would say there are some connections here and there and some themes keep getting repeated so some of the things we'll see tonight are like a sampler or an overture for an issue that will be dealt with at more length in subsequent chapters but the first issue comes in verses two to four testing which produces joy my brothers and sisters whenever you face trials of any kind consider it nothing but joy now he's not dealing purely with the issue of persecution though that may be one of the trials but notice that they are trials of any kind so probably he's writing to Christians who may face some persecution but may face poverty that seems to be one of the issues that crops up in this letter a few times maybe the poverty comes because they're Christian and so the non-Christian rulers the influential people of the towns and villages where they are living are exercising some economic oppression against Christians and therefore they're suffering for that but it may also just be things like ill health bereavement all sorts of difficulties in life it's very broad anything that is a trial a difficulty in life when you face them James says consider it nothing but joy their trials which are tests the words relate or the the word has those sorts of connotations and that is how Paul James rather been preaching Romans so much I'm going to keep saying Paul but that's how James views difficulties not as something to pray away quickly but as a test or trial which is to be encountered with joy indeed he says pure joy or nothing but joy at the end of verse 2 not meaning that every bad thing that happens we just smile and laugh and joke about it but rather that our long-term perspective is one that anticipates the final fullness of joy of heaven and knows that the trials that are we're undergoing now are there to guide us and help us to achieve that final joy because he goes on in the next verse to say because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance and let endurance have its full effect so that you may be mature and complete lacking in nothing it's not a masochistic joy that

we're enjoying the suffering but it's a joy in facing it because we know that these are trials that God is using to help us grow as Christians and that is why we can have joy in the midst of them and in the face of them the trials the tests if you like are a bit like a refiner's fire which is an image used in other places of scripture something that will purify and strengthen our faith so that the dross can be consumed and that we become more and more conformed to the likeness of Jesus as we anticipate that final day and James also recognizes here that endurance or perseverance in the Christian faith only comes through strengthening faith through tests and trials a few weeks ago in an in a crazy act I went horse riding with a friend now I was a little bit reluctant but let me say the first hour was quite pleasant it was up in the man for snowy from snowy river country we could see that very steep cliff where he goes down and apparently one of the stunt actors broke a leg or something doing that and they had to get somebody else in to shoot that scene but the first hour was was fantastic beautiful day and very pleasant the next half hour an hour to an hour and a half in was rather uncomfortable and then the final half hour up to the two hour mark was absolute agony now I expected that the next day I'd be in agony I didn't realize I'd be in agony before I even got off the saddle now I expect that people who horse ride often don't feel that agony the guy who was leading this little group of us he certainly didn't seem to be uncomfortable and some of the others who are obviously horse riders also didn't seem to be uncomfortable but I was in agony if I'd exercise myself little bits at a time in the right sort of way on horses I presume then I would have managed after some time a two-hour horse ride without being in agony in the same sort of way these tests and trials are strengthening our faith muscles for the big events little trials strengthening us bit by bit for big trials so that we will persevere and endure I mean I couldn't have stayed on that horse any longer I was counting the minutes to the two hours were over but if I'd been exercised well then I could have kept going and kept going and persevered and endured and no doubt had even greater joy at the scenery and so on so in the Christian life where to regard the trials and tests and difficulties of life some of which before Christians just like other people some of which are particular to Christians and the realms of oppression or persecution or ostracism or whatever we're not to pray them away quickly like we tend to do but use them as testing and strengthening for our faith because we know we've got a lifetime of faith to live before that final reception of joy at the end of time when we are taken finally into God's heavenly kingdom the endurance you see is to make us mature and complete lacking in nothing that is a person who is fully integrated in faith and behavior conformed to the image of Jesus not split not lacking something not with areas of our life that need work done in them it's a long-term goal that James has in mind here and as I've said I think too often we pray for quick relief we get sick we pray for healing we lose a job we pray for a job something goes wrong we pray for it to be corrected now there's nothing wrong with praying for that indeed in chapter 5 James will talk about praying

for healing for the sick but it seems to me that if we are to treat these trials rightly then whatever the difficulties of our life at least one of our prayers must be Lord make me grow and strengthen my faith through this and maybe that's what God's doing in the trial and maybe that's why we don't have answered prayers when we pray for healing or a job to come up or whatever the difficulty is we're praying about God is wanting us to grow and be strengthened so that we can endure so that we will be perfected in Christ at the end of time maybe it's worth thinking back over the past year 2001 what was the major trial in your life illness job loss bereavement some dislocation loneliness how did you handle that trial how did you pray about it how did you approach it and have you grown through it is your faith stronger now than it was then because as our faith is strengthened through difficulties then the bigger the difficulty the more faith resources we've got to keep on persevering and enduring in our Christian life well James goes on in the next verses and the next little paragraph five to eight to deal with the issue of wisdom in the Greek there are some words that sound similar which some suggest is why he leads from one topic relatively unrelated into another if any of you is lacking in wisdom ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly and it will be given you now perhaps this wisdom is in particular the wisdom to face trials and endure through our Christian faith to stand or survive or pass the tests and therefore ultimately to be complete maybe this wisdom is tied to the Holy Spirit who's not mentioned here but in other passages of the New Testament the wisdom is a gift of the Spirit and if lacking in wisdom ask God and he'll give it now the premise of this paragraph is that we are to have confidence and faith that God will answer that prayer and give us the wisdom we need because we know what God is like

[16 : 06] God is generous and ungrudging and the giver of wisdom as we'll see in a few minutes if we doubt that then our prayers will not be answered but James's words here echo those of Jesus for example in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 and in Luke 11 how much more will your heavenly Father give you the Holy Spirit if you ask so we need to have a confidence or knowledge of God that will stimulate faithful praying the more we know God the more we'll pray and the better we'll pray and Paul James goes on in the next verses but ask in faith never doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind for the doubter being double-minded and unstable in every way must not expect to receive anything from the Lord now in verse 5 the focus was on God who gives generously and ungrudgingly willingly wholeheartedly even is one of the connotations of those words describing God in verse 5 and now comes the description of the Christian who's praying to this God in verses 6 and 7 and 8 if the request is not fulfilled it's not because of God it's because of the Christian who is praying and just as God gives generously or even we could say single-mindedly because that's part of that connotation the Christian is to pray single-mindedly not doubting that is being double-minded we might say

God responds here to spiritual integrity the person who is convinced that God is a generous giver ungrudging giver and the giver of wisdom who will answer prayers that is the person that God wants to pray and whose prayers will be answered the person who doubts is described as one who is their allegiance wavers and literally in verse 8 in our translation here it's got double-minded but literally it's double or two sold s-o-u-l-e-d it's a word that's not found anywhere in ancient Greek earlier than this that comes again later in this letter it's perhaps an expression coined by James to describe the sort of Christian whom this letter is directed to the person who's double-minded double-hearted double-souled that is in their innermost being they're split they have an element of them that has faith in God and trust God and wants wisdom but there is an element of them that is reserved away from God that wants the world's wisdom or the world's ways this is the person that this letter is addressed to and it's a sense

I guess in which all of us fall into this category as well remember that scripture wants us to love God with all our heart soul mind and strength Jesus said that merely quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 6 as well but the Psalms say the same sort of thing about the person who is single-minded in their pursuit of God and their faithfulness to God and indeed the Old Testament as well as James here and in other places in the New Testament is critical of those who are split or hypocritical divided within themselves doubters as they're called here they are unstable in every way verse 8 says that is they're like a something that is on the sea that is tossed by the waves to keep on the analogy from the end of verse 6 that is they're going one way then they're going another way they're changing all the time not certain not solid not confident in their faith in God we are to be single-minded lovers and followers of God that is what James is exhorting us to be here there's no middle ground in one sense between faith and doubt here there's no certainly no place for what we might call spiritual schizophrenia

God does not look favorably on such things we move on to the next paragraph now we're dealing with poverty and riches or wealth in verses 9 to 11 and perhaps carrying on what we've been seeing poverty and wealth could be one of the tests or trials that are being faced by the people to whom James writes this letter notice that I said poverty and wealth are trials it's not that poverty is the trial and wealth is the answer both are tests and trials and indeed I think in scripture it would be fair to say that wealth is the more dangerous trial that Christians face rather than poverty let the believer who is lowly but in this context meaning poor boast in being raised up and the rich in being brought low that is and the rich are to boast in being brought low because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field now this is not an easy verse although in one sense it's obvious I guess what James anticipates is a reversal in one sense the person who is poor humble lowly will be lifted up and exalted one of the common themes of scripture the great reversal as Mary sang in the Magnificat about God who was coming in Jesus to lift up the lowly and bring down the proud in their conceit and in the Old Testament in a number of places to lift up the poor and lowly and to bring down the boastful or arrogant and the rich so that reversal is basic to what James is saying in verse 9 and in verse 10 what I think he's also got in mind here is the anticipation of the final day and that's already something that we've seen say with the issue of joy in verses 3 and 4 2, 3 and 4 that is you face trials with joy because you know that there will be that final joy at the end for those who persevere and these trials are to lead you to that day that final day so too here there's a sense in which those who even now are facing the trial of poverty maybe it's persecuted poverty that comes as I said from economic oppression against Christians they are to boast in a sense in their poverty but boast in their being raised up at the final day to look forward to that and glory in it it's not boastful as in conceit but it's to glory in that final exaltation on that day knowing that even though now they are suffering as poor people lowly people

God will raise them up on the final day and for the rich people and here I take it that he's still talking about Christians the rich people are to boast in being brought low because their wealth and riches will count for nothing the thing that matters for them is not what they've got possession wise here on earth but is that they glory in God and know God these are words that perhaps are echoing from Jeremiah perhaps but other places of the Bible as well and again it's a final day or what we might call eschatological perspective that means to the end times looking forward to that day when all the wealth of this world's gone but the thing that matters is that yes even as a rich person maybe who's in charge of people or whatever now being brought low and equal with even the poor people on that final day before Christ and then this is elaborated on in verse 11 for the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field its flower falls its beauty perishes it's the same way with the rich in the midst of a busy life they will wither away now notice the severity of warning here for rich people as I said the bigger trial is wealth not poverty wealth is so insidious and leads us so easily into self-sufficiency independence from God arrogance pride boastfulness in our wealth and so on this is a strong warning against people who are rich not that there's something wrong with riches or wealth or prosperity used a right and approached a right but it is so fleeting and the warning is that even in the midst of a busy life it will wither away as though suddenly the person will die or suddenly their wealth is taken from them don't place your trust in it is what James is saying and again

[25 : 14] I think he's dealing with Christians here so again we've perhaps got this sense of the double-minded double-souled Christian the one who's perhaps in one way tempted to try and serve God and mammon which Jesus said you can't do the person who's trying to do a bit of both and keep juggling both things their faith in God but also their accumulation and pursuit of wealth on the other hand can't be done James says be careful well he resumes the issues of trials and temptations in verses 12 and following blessed is anyone who endures temptation such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him now the word goes from trials or tests in the earlier verses into temptations the words can mean the same as Anglicans know from the change in the Lord's Prayer in recent years going from lead us not into temptation to save us from the time of trial and it's only the context that determines what is in mind here but I think there is a progression because there's a sense in which every trial carries with it a temptation the temptation or a temptation from the trial of poverty can be to tempt us to doubt

God's goodness or providence for us provision of our daily needs the trial of wealth can tempt us to become self-sufficient of God as though we don't need God we've got everything that we need bereavement can tempt us to question God's love for us suffering can tempt us to question God's justice or fairness and so on trials and temptations go together in a sense as the same word that's used suggests the one who endures the temptation passes the test or maybe if James were writing in our day and age he'd be referring to those TV programs I think it's called temptation island I've never seen it but where they put people together to try and tempt them over a series of episodes I gather to commit adultery with other people I think that's right well the person who endures the test is the one who received the crown of life the one who resists temptation the one who passes the test the trials of life that is the person who received the crown of life now all of us face temptations some of us are vulnerable to some and others to other sorts of temptations but our world is throwing temptations at us all the time and TV programs like the one I mentioned which I've never seen and don't want to really are just sort of trying to focus what the world is already doing in its standards which we are confronting every day of our

Christian lives we are to keep resisting temptations to go through the trials counting them joy and looking forward to that finishing tape when to us will be offered here as James says the crown of life as he'd said in the earlier verses verse 4 that at the end in effect will be mature and complete lacking in nothing it's different ways of describing the same day in effect the crown of life may have in mind the victor's wreath from an athletics contest it may be the crown that an emperor or ruler would wear we know that Christians will wear crowns in heaven from the book of revelation at least so that's what's in mind here in James's letter but then he goes on dealing with this issue of temptation a bit more in verse 13 onwards no one when tempted should say I'm being tempted by God and that's fairly that could be easy to do think that somehow the temptations we're undergoing are brought to us by

God somehow God is trying to lead us or entice us or induce us to sin or evil and then the reason against saying that James says for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one God's not tempted to evil because he's not susceptible to committing sin and he tempts no one that is he doesn't try and entice us or induce us to commit evil or to do sin and that's elaborated on in the next verse one is tempted by one's own desire that is we can't blame God for the temptations we face or fall into nor can we though it's not said here explicitly blame the devil which is often what Christians do but rather one is tempted by one's own desire James is writing this in a way that shows us our own responsibility we are to resist temptations we are to endure trials so that we may receive the crown of life and God's not trying to thwart us and we can't blame others as well it's the desire within us that makes temptation so alluring he uses a fishing analogy to illustrate the point one's tempted by one's own desire being lured and enticed by it to be lured is to be snared on the hook and drawn in to be enticed is to see the delicious bait and to go for it we might think it's in reverse order

I suppose in one way it is but it's a fishing analogy or illustration then when that desire has conceived it gives birth to sin and that sin when it is fully grown gives birth to death notice the sequence there is desire if we do not resist following where the desire is wanting us to go if we are lured and enticed then it's conceived and gives birth to sin and then ultimately sin leads to death part of the snare I guess of temptations is that it promises much it promises life often it promises richer life than we think that we're actually enjoying now that's why advertisements on television and in magazines and so on are so compelling sometimes because they're trying to tell us we can offer you a better life a richer life more life but the reality is it leads the opposite direction it's very deceiving sin's pleasures may be fleeting but it leads ultimately to death not life it's like a seductress indeed in verse 15

[32 : 02] James has almost got in mind what the writer of proverbs has in mind that somehow there is this adulteress this temptress seductress who is coming to us and our desire when it's conceived as though we go to bed with her and what is conceived is sin and then that sin ultimately leads to death not just sexual sin any sin any temptation is in mind here basically there's two ways then in these verses there is the way that gives way to desire so that we commit sin which leads to death or the other way is to endure the trial resist the temptation to be proved through it tested through it and receive the crown of life not death the opposite in fact because God is on about life and he knows what life is like at its best and he promises that for us although maybe not in its fullness immediately so there is this longer term anticipation of the crown of life

James says do not be deceived my beloved because sin is so deceptive temptation is so deceptive don't be deceived sin promises life joy pleasure but its pleasure is fleeting and it leads to death and also maybe he has in mind in verse 16 don't be deceived that God is the one who's tempting you either don't fall for that trap God is not doing that it's your desire within you now then in verse 17 by countering what he's just said snares to sin or enticement to sin that doesn't come from God what then positively does come from God he says in verse 17 every generous act of giving with every perfect gift is from above that's from God coming down from the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change that is God is thoroughly consistent

God is integrated he's not double-minded on the one hand he's not going to offer you something good and then on the other hand try and entice you to sin you see God's character is integrated and James is writing to Christians so that they are integrated like God don't think God's going to be doing one thing one minute and then a different thing another minute he's not vulnerable to changing fickle you might be but he's not so you can trust the character and faithfulness of God at every point James is saying here maybe he's giving a quotation in verse 17 from some quote that's around in his day and then in verse 18 in fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth here is one good gift that God gives he's already mentioned wisdom back in verse 5 and now is another good and perfect gift that comes from above from God it is birth by the word of truth not birth to be human but new birth to be Christian because this is birth from the word of truth from the gospel the regeneration that comes through the gospel of

Jesus Christ that is perhaps the best gift of all that God gives he's hardly likely then to try and entice us into sin which leads to death when he's given us new birth into new life and eternal life so life and death are poles apart and we can see that God is consistently on about life in its fullness and richness and its eternity whereas the opposite way leads always and inevitably to death where sin leads to death God brings forth life well let's move on to verse 19 and 19 to 21 and this now deals with the issue of speech you must understand this my beloved let everyone be quick to listen slow to speak slow to anger he's just mentioned

God's word and now he mentions our words that is our speech and again this is a bit of a test of our double heartedness you know when you go to the doctor and they say poke out your tongue say ah ah here is James saying the same sort of thing poke out your tongue I don't want you to say ah I want to see what's on your tongue be quick to listen but slow to speak and this is an issue that will come up later in the letter as well at more length in later chapters chapters three and four as well the issue of being right speaker and listener but also I think connected here if a person is going to receive God's word rightly then they need to listen to it well and a person who will listen to God's word well will be a person who listens to other people well as well if you can see what I mean but the person who's quick to speak whose mouth is full of all sorts of things without control is less likely to listen to other people and therefore also less likely to listen to

[37 : 24] God and also there's a connection with anger here slow to speak slow to anger because the person who's not slow in one will not be slow in the other either how often we say things and then regret it because there's been an element of anger and we've lost control of our tongue James is addressing our practical living and you think of the things that you say the words that you say how much are you a quick person to speak or a slow person to speak it's a good test in a way are you when you're meeting someone or talking with someone more eager to listen to them or to tell everyone what you want to tell them I think most of us on the whole are quick to speak and slow to listen James says it should be the other way around for your anger does not produce God's righteousness forgiveness both in our own life but also in our fellowship with other

Christians which is part of the context later on in this letter as well and then verse 21 therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls to get rid of is to take off as though it's clothing that is covering us over the sordidness we could say is moral filth it's actually a fairly strong word to show just how detestable our sin is to God's sight the rank growth of wickedness is got the sense of abundant evil as though it's sort of overflowing out of us that's how bad we are in God's sight and in contrast to what is taken off we are to receive the implanted word that has the power to save your souls receive it with meekness with humility because the word of truth shows our dependence upon God not our self-sufficiency or independence the implanted word is the gospel the word that's written in our hearts but remember

James is talking to Christians here not non-Christians so he's not talking about being converted he's talking about Christians who are in danger of following the wrong half of their heart if you like and so he's saying come on get rid of that moral filth and receive properly the implanted word within you so often the reason why people give up the Christian faith is not through an intellectual problem with the resurrection or with God or the Trinity or anything like that not sure that I've ever met anyone who's given up the Christian faith on purely intellectual grounds it's always moral grounds it's always because people want to run their own lives their own way and James is saying here if you are to receive the word of God rightly you've got to shed all this moral filth our sinful behavior hinders our reception of God's word so often we think of separate compartments theology and practice but they're not separate compartments in scripture ever they go together right theology means right practice and vice versa and we won't get our theology of

God right if our lives are up the spout and that is what James is saying here if you are to receive the implanted word of truth then rid yourself of moral filth and then he goes on to say this in a very striking way famous way in verse 22 but be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves yes we can understand we've got to be a doer of the word not a hearer only and that's why if we're going to study James in these five weeks we must make sure that it's changing our lives not just informing our minds but notice how James finishes the verse don't be hearers only who deceive themselves that is people who think they understand the gospel or the truth about God their lives are unaffected but they think they're saved because they understand the gospel intellectually or cognitively they've deceived themselves and they've actually built a house on sand not on rock the hearers of the word only are blind to the reality of their spiritual state it's a very strong warning that James is making here he describes the hearers only in verse 23 as those as being like those who look at themselves in a mirror but when they go away in verse 24 they immediately forget what they're like now I think he's suggesting here that somehow the word of God is like a mirror it exposes our soul not just our sort of front you know the exterior but you walk away and you forget about it expose our soul from in and and we're forgotten we just live our lives many people are like that they sit lightly with the word of truth many times in

Deuteronomy I think it's there also say in the institution of the Lord's Supper when Jesus says do this in remembrance of me not just that we remember Jesus and his name or what he looked like or something but that we remember by doing and being obedient that is what James is saying we Christians ought to be like doers not merely hearers of the word the hearer is a double-souled or double-hearted person one who for the one minute sits well with the word of God the next minute they've forgotten it that's the person that this letter is addressed to well then comes the summary if you like of some of these things in verses 26 and 27 if any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts their religion is worthless see there again this divided heart the heart that's deceived the heart that thinks it's right with God but isn't because it hears but doesn't do in this case the example given is not bridling their tongues an issue that's been mentioned already of course and will come up again later in this letter what does your tongue say is it unbridled and then comes a positive counterpart to it religion that is pure and undefiled before

[43 : 45] God the father is this and then we get two things that are quite extraordinary really I think if if we were given a sort of you know complete this sentence what does the Bible say pure religion is two things we would not put care of orphans and widows in their distress and secondly to keep oneself unstained by the world we might just hint at the last of those two but I'm not sure that we probably jump at the first I don't think James is trying to summarize Christian faith as caring for widows and orphans and keeping unstained in the world and nothing else matters don't think that's the thrust of what he's saying here he's giving a practical test to show whether a person is pure with God pure in the sense of being whole not divided there's a whole lot else that we could add to this list indeed this whole letter gives us all sorts of other diagnostic tests why care for orphans and widows people that were helpless people who could offer nothing in return people who had no social security often in the old testament the orphans and the widows were singled out for special care and love and attention in our society there's usually sufficient social security but it should be a warning to us to be on the lookout for people who are in particular need through no fault of their own but maybe also not just within our own neighborhood our refugee situation and so on around the world as Christians of all people in our society we should be challenging our government's position on this and our care for those who are orphans and widows in the refugee situation true piety I guess is practical not just theoretical and it helps the helpless when there's no advantage to ourselves and then keeping ourselves unstained from the world is perhaps a broader expression one that we might well see the significance of but just a couple of examples I guess from

James not wanting to serve mammon that is prosperity wealth money property and goods and so on something that's already been hinted at in this letter will come up again later as well our world is wanting to serve mammon it's wanting to serve enjoyment entertainment hedonism or fun and so on we are to be unstained by that but live in the world this is written to Christians in the dispersion that is scattered in the world and there is no call in this letter for Christians to gather together in a holy huddle we're to live in the world but remain unstained from it it's as though you're walking the other day yesterday or the day before I was in a hospital where they've done some painting and the whole place smelt of paint I was wary everywhere I went in case I would touch wet paint only saw one wet paint sign but it smelt as though everything was wet paint we're going to live in the world unstained from it as though all the bad things have got little signs wet paint don't touch we've got to be on the lookout to make sure that we're not stained by this world well that then leaves a question to us to reflect upon what steps are we taking individually and together as Christians in fellowship to make sure that we are not being stained by the world how are we letting these words of truth infiltrate our lives and change us and reform us how is our approach to trials and tests different from our world's views and leading us not to be stained by the world but to be conformed more to Jesus well let me pray our heavenly father as we have read these challenging and provocative words of

James we see time and again our heart being exposed before you our hearts that are not pure that are divided parts of our lives that we try and preserve under our own control and for our own enjoyment or pleasure and not yield to you our God help us to be ruthless as we apply these words in our lives that the words that we speak to you and to others will be pure that we will be people of wisdom that we will endure trials with joy that we will be quick to listen not only to your word but to others that we will be slow to anger that we will not be consumed by money or its lack that we will care for the helpless in particular orphans and widows and that we will be unstained from this world so that we will be spotless before your heavenly throne amen to hear you and to understand all the transcendental