

Two Ways to Live the Christian Life

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Preacher: Dave Nannery

[0 : 00] It's good to see you all here today. My name is Dave Nannery. I'm one of the pastors and elders here at Squamish Baptist Church, and I'm glad to be able to bring God's word to you this morning.

One open prayer, not just for our sermon, but for our children as well, as they prepare to hear the good news of Jesus Christ taught to them. Let me pray. I thank you, Father, that our children are receiving the instruction of the Lord.

They are learning who you are, what you are like. Lord, I pray that they may come away with a deep impression of the greatness and the goodness of you, God. Lord, that they may learn to walk in your ways, that they may be born again, drawn near to you by the work of your Spirit.

We confess that even among us who believe, we continue to need the work of your Spirit in our lives. And I pray today that you may move us towards seeing both our deep need for your Spirit, and that you may prepare our hearts to receive what it is that we truly and deeply need.

I pray, Lord God, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to understand. Amen. Amen. Well, there are two ways to live the Christian life.

[1 : 25] There's two ways to live the Christian life. One is the Romans chapter 7 way. The other is the Romans chapter 8 way. And when BK returns to the pulpit, we will be continuing in Romans 7 and looking forward to Romans chapter 8.

And you're probably thinking, yeah, but I can't wait that long. And you're tempted to read ahead in your Bibles. I mean, that's spoilers, I'm afraid, if you do that. So maybe you're thinking, I can't, I can't, I can't do that.

I can't let it be spoiled. Well, I'm going to be a little bit of a troublemaker today because I'm going to give you spoilers. So I talked with Brent Smith the other day, last week, and I told him what I was going to preach on.

He told me, this is like releasing one of those trailers. You ever gone to a movie and seen one of those trailers for an upcoming movie and you watch the trailer, and after it's done, three minutes later, you're like, I don't even need to see the movie because the trailer showed me all of the plot points of the movie and it spoiled it for me.

I'm going to spoil Romans 8. Not entirely, okay, we're going to go into a lot more detail. So you do have to come back for more later and over the next few months, okay? But my plan is to spoil Romans 7 and 8 without ever once referring to Romans 7 and 8.

[2 : 47] In fact, I'm barely going to quote the Apostle Paul at all. And I want to do this to show you that what we are about to learn over the course of the next few months.

This is not a theme that is unique to Romans 7 and 8. This is not a theme that is unique to the Apostle Paul that he just came up with himself.

This is a deep and timeless truth that the Holy Spirit has revealed to many other authors of Scripture. In fact, I would argue that if you read throughout the whole Bible, you will see that on every page of Scripture, there is this deep and timeless truth that there are two ways to live the Christian life.

You can try to be a good person, do the right thing, follow God's law, do it all through your merely human ability.

You can try to willpower your way into right living. Or you can follow God's law by keeping in step with the Spirit, a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led life.

[4 : 00] My aim today is to show you that we find those two ways of living the Christian life in the book of James. In James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, he agrees.

There are two ways to live that Christian life. He uses a little bit of different language from the Apostle Paul, but hopefully by the time we're done today, you'll see it's the same idea. It's the same idea, and that James even perhaps has some Old Testament passages in mind as he is drawing on this.

Here's the word of the Lord through the pen of James, the brother of Jesus Christ. James chapter 3, verses 13 through 18.

If you're using one of the Bibles or Usher's handout, it's on page 1012. Page 1012, James 3, verses 13 through 18. Here's what James writes.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

[5 : 05] But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. And that is God's word for us today. Now, whenever we read a passage like this, we have to remember that, yes, there's timeless wisdom and truth in it, but we also want to remember that these are words written to a specific group of people at a specific time in response to specific things that are happening in their church.

So our first question is, what are these words doing here? Why would James feel the need to write these things? Well, it doesn't take much look at the context to figure it out.

[6 : 35] Right after these verses, once you read into chapter 4, you see James start talking about what causes quarrels, what causes fights among you. And he says it's desires that are running out of control.

Desires for things that are wrong to want, or desires for things that are perfectly good to want, but your desire has become disordered. It's out of control. It's coveting. Immediately before our passage of Scripture, in James chapter 3, James is warning us specifically about the destructive power of the tongue, how the words that come out of our mouth can be, he calls them, a restless evil full of deadly poison.

That phrase, sticks and stones may break by bones, but words may never hurt me, James would not agree. He says the exact opposite.

They are poisonous. James mentions many other topics in his letter. There are a lot of serious problems in the churches that he's writing to, most likely the churches in Judea.

There is disorder in the church. There are wealthy churchgoers who are abusing their power and privileges and status.

[7 : 57] There is a lack of concern for the poor, even discrimination against them. The church leaders want to target a specific demographic, the well-to-do. On top of the poisonous words and the selfish desires, we see a church full of people that are professing faith in Jesus Christ, but James says that their faith is a fruitless faith.

He calls it a faith without works. It is empty. He is warning the church that many of its members, they're a little bit like the fig tree that Jesus cursed in Mark chapter 11.

Some of you may recall that story, a fig tree that Jesus approaches and discovers that on it there are nothing but leaves. From a distance, it looks flourishing and fruitful, but when it is inspected up close, that tree was not producing any fruit at all.

The gospel authors, Mark especially, they drew a parallel between that tree and the Jewish authority, Jewish temple authorities of Jesus' day.

They were all leaves, no fruit. And James offers a similar warning to people in our churches today. There is a way to live the Christian life where you are all leaves, no fruit.

[9 : 22] In chapter one, James says, he says, be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. What's interesting is that phrase deceiving yourselves because the truth is people who are all leaves, no fruit, it's not like they set out to say, you know what I want my life to look like?

I want to look like all leaves, no fruit. I want all the form of religion and none of the substance. That's what I'm looking for. That's what I want for my life. People don't think that way and very few people

who are really locked into that mindset will admit that they are that way. And James says, they won't even admit it to themselves. They're deceiving themselves. They don't even realize that they're fruitless. Many people around them know, but they don't. They're doing the Christian life the only way they know how. They don't even realize there's another way. When James writes to them, he recognizes that they respect God's law. James name drops the law. He talks about the law of liberty, the royal law. He writes about them as things that his readers will respect, will want to honor.

[10 : 41] But somehow, their efforts to obey the royal law produce all kinds of deformed and ugly behaviors.

What comes out of them when they try to follow God, when they try to do his will, follow his law, what comes out of them is ugly words, discrimination, stinginess, jealousy, quarreling. Those are the specific things that James names. We saw in the passage Chris read in Colossians that Paul has to expand that list to many other things as well, to sexual immorality, to idolatry. Because when people are trying to do God's law this way, it's the only way they know how to do the Christian life. They only know how to do it powered by the flesh. Powered by the flesh. And that means powered by us just handling life the only way we know how, with our human wisdom, our human ability, the ways that we picked up and learned as a kid, the ways we received from our parents, the way we received from our culture, just handling life in your own strength, the ways you've learned, the only ways you know how.

[11 : 55] In the flesh. Some people have attended church all their life, and they never taste what it's like to be led by the Spirit.

All they know is how to willpower themselves into obedience with varying measures of success. And how to shame themselves and to shame others into doing it better, into trying harder. And eventually, what happens to so many people in the church is they burn out and they walk away. I would argue that many people who walk away from the church, who do deconstruction, quote, unquote, that's what's happening. They were just living the Christian life, flesh-powered, and it's exhausting. Then, those who are on the outside of the church, they look in and they see many people living this way, and they say, if that's what your religion is, I want nothing to do with it. And do you know what? James would agree. James wants nothing to do with that way of living the Christian life.

[13 : 12] To James, the law of God is a law of liberty. It's a royal law. But there's no liberty in the flesh, only frustration.

There's no royalty in living by the flesh, only slavery. It's no way to live the Christian life. James wants to show us a better way to live, and he describes the way that it shows up in chapter 3, verse 13.

Here's what James says. He first asks, who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

So the better way to live is what James calls the way of wisdom. Now, when he asks that question, who is wise and understanding among you, there will be many people in his churches who will say, me, me, that's me.

I am wise and understanding. I know my stuff. I am well respected. There are many Christians who do claim to be wise and understanding, or maybe they wouldn't say it out loud because that might look bad, but in our hearts we think, yeah, yeah, I know, I know, I know it's needed, especially on social media.

[14 : 31] Get on there and you'll see a lot of wise and understanding Christians. But wisdom has its counterfeits. Do you claim to be wise yourself?

Do you claim to be a man or woman who's got it all figured out? Okay, James says, how do we know you're right? Remember, we can deceive ourselves.

James says, the way that we know you're right is by your good conduct. In other words, James does not put a lot of stock into our personal testimony that yes, I am wise and understanding. Let me tell you more about how wise and understanding I am. Let me fill the room with words about how wise and understanding I am. James says, you know what? It's not merely your words that show your wisdom.

Wisdom is justified by your works. The way that you conduct yourselves in difficult situations, in difficult relationships, in difficult arguments, James says that wisdom shows up as meekness. [15:39] Now, this meekness, some people carry the idea of meekness as being a doormat, as just being somebody who is kind of cowardly and lets others walk all over them.

That is not it at all. Neither is meekness a sort of false humility that says, oh, you know, I just don't know what's needed. I'm broken. But, you know, but it's almost like you've seen that false humility that shows up on social media where people talk about, oh, my life is such a mess, but secretly they want you to think they're wise because they admitted that.

No, it's not a false humility that wants to paint itself as being wise. This word is, in many other places, translated gentleness. Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart.

The fruit of the Spirit is, in part, gentleness. The flesh wants to come in strong and be impressive and use big emotions and loud volume and harsh words and victim tears or to withdraw and avoid conflict and fail to show up at all.

None of that is meekness or gentleness. The way of wisdom, James says, is when a person, when their default posture is gentleness, their heart is to listen well, to speak graciously and gently.

[17:06] They're always thinking, you know, right now, this is a hard relationship, this is a hard argument. How do I bring this difficult relationship, this difficult argument, this difficult situation, how do I bring it back to where we can speak to one another gently again?

I want to get back there. That's my heart. You'll see that in Jesus Christ. He is always working to see whether he can bring relationships back to that gentleness.

To be that way, you have to be like Jesus, not controlled by fear of man. Fear of man will often show up when you're trying to appease people, being a doormat for them. Or when you're trying, when you start attacking people, showing up big, showing up strong.

Or when you avoid people and run away from them. but controlled by the fear of the Lord, someone with the wisdom from above is gentle and lowly in heart.

James knows that we waver between this way of wisdom and the other darker way that we have long invented for ourselves.

[18:24] Because in James 3 verse 14 he writes, But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

Sometimes what's in our hearts is not wisdom at all. Now, I don't think many people say, yeah, what's in my heart is not wisdom.

And we always think we got it. But James says, sometimes it's actually something else altogether. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

The word jealousy is where we get our word zealotry from, zeal. There is a deep zeal, a deep passion to get what we are wanting.

A sense that if only I could get that good thing that I am longing for, then everything will finally be okay. And if it comes at the expense of another person, then so be it.

[19:34] One of the ways that you can tell this is showing up in our hearts, James calls it a bitter jealousy because we start to feel a frustration and more and more harshness, an edge going into our language and our behaviors when people are standing in the way of what we want, when they are blocking the way to what will make us feel glorious or what would make us feel safe.

Especially if they have something that we want and we want something that they have. James warns us that if these passions are hidden in our hearts, his counsel to us, he says, sometimes we've got those in our hearts.

And he says, if that's you, he says, do not boast. He counsels us, you need to stop and let go of trying to win, trying to triumph, trying to feel on top, trying to feel safe, trying to feel glorious.

Let me give you just a small example of what this looks like from years ago in my life. And this is one of those ways that it can sometimes show up in these subtle ways, but I'm grateful because if I had kept walking down the path I was walking down, who knows where I would have ended up, but the Lord was good to me and called me out on this.

I remember back, this was back in my university years, I went with a few friends to go see a movie. I don't remember what the movie was, I don't remember what our conversation was about after the movie, but I do remember we were standing outside the theater and we were having a disagreement about some topic or other in our group of friends.

[21 : 15] And I felt strongly about something or other I don't even remember what it was and it honestly doesn't even matter, I just remember what one of my friends said to me in frustration.

She said, Dave, you always think you're right. And I remember a few days later I was talking with my pastor about this and I remember saying to him, well of course I think I'm right, doesn't everyone?

I mean, you know, why would you argue for something if you didn't think you were right? Like who argues for something thinking I am wrong this whole time? You know, nobody does that. We always think we're right all the time.

That's the point. Isn't that true? Am I right? I need to be right here. My thought was if you didn't think you're right you just change your mind.

Well, it took many years for me to understand what my friend was trying to say to me because I think what was going on is she just didn't have the words to communicate but she was noticing something real and something important in me.

[22 : 28] What she meant to say was this, Dave, you always need to be right. She detected that I had a bitter zeal, a selfish ambition, a need to boast in my rightness.

That's what was in my heart that I thought was wisdom. But she, and by the way, many other of my friends at that time knew wasn't wisdom at all. To me, it felt good, it felt triumphant, it felt powerful to be right.

And I thought, you know, being right would boost my status among my friends. I mean, everyone loves someone who's right all the time, right? Yes, thank you.

Oh, okay, now I can go back to that way. All right, good, got it, okay. Believe me when I tell you it did not boost my status among my friends.

It sabotaged it. And I was the last person to know. My words and their tone, they tended not to be gentle but to be harsh.

[23 : 40] welcome to the flesh-powered Christian life. I knew that way of life well. I scarcely knew any other way.

I thought I was standing up for the truth, I thought I was correcting error. I still think it's important to stand up for the truth and correct error but there's a difference between being right and needing to be right.

James says in verse 14 that when we are living this way, we are, and here's the gut-wrenching thing, we are false to the truth. James says you could even be fighting for the truth with your words but in so doing you actually tell lies and obscure the truth with your conduct.

Through one channel you uphold the truth, the other channel you undermine it. Oh, how often we are that way about many things we are passionate about. James then unfolds the two ways to live even further.

He first, he tells us more about this, that boastful, it's so hard to put in language, this boastful demandingness that we think is wisdom. James tells us where it comes from because James says it definitely did not descend down from heaven.

[25 : 03] Verse 15, he says, this is not the wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. When he says it's earthly and unspiritual, what he's saying is you can operate this way, you can live the Christian life quote unquote this way without any help of the spirit at all.

you can just accomplish this purely in your own wisdom and your own ability. There's something almost animal about it.

That longing for safety and status and glory and all the clever tactics we pursue to get what we're wanting. Sometimes we can pick up religious language in the Bible, at church, and we adapt it to pursue our earthly goals.

Sprinkle a little religious language on the top to put a nice veneer over our earthly pursuits. It is not a spirit-led way to live.

It is unspiritual. It has nothing to do with the spirit. spirit. In fact, James says, it does have something to do with some spirits, the demonic ones.

[26 : 31] That's where it comes from. Satan wants you to live the Christian life this way. Satan is perfectly fine with your profession of faith, as long as you live it out, powered purely, entirely, by the flesh, with no trace of the spirit at work in your life at all.

There is no greater advertisement against the truth of God than flesh-powered religion, counterfeit religion, because, as James says in verse 16, where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will

be disorder and every vile practice.

if you've ever been in a dysfunctional church, and if you've been in one of those churches, you will never forget it. It will leave a mark on you.

You know exactly what this means. Emotional and relational chaos, nasty behavior, cover-up culture, that hides and perpetuates immoral and abusive activity.

reality. The world looks on and the world says, if that's what the Christian religion looks like, I want nothing to do with it. And James says, yes, exactly, because this is no way to live the Christian life.

[28 : 03] Then James tells us that the real wisdom, the wisdom from above, the wisdom that can only be given when we ask God, it can't come from within ourselves.

It is so common in the world of psychology and therapy to say the wisdom comes from within since the days of Freud. That's what we've been saying. We just need to unlock that wisdom from within. That's not where real wisdom comes from. It's from above. James says in verse 17, the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

The first thing James says about the wisdom from above is that it's pure. That's the first item and he puts special emphasis on the word pure.

And that seemed interesting to me. I was mulling over this list. Why does he say pure first? I think one angle to think about that from is by asking pure from what?

[29 : 18] Pure from what? Pure means without contamination. It's a wisdom that is not contaminated by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

It is not contaminated by passions and demands that show up as bitterness, irritation, frustration, anger towards others when they don't play along with us.

Second, this is a little subjective. I think that the wisdom from above not only is pure, but for those who know the Lord, love the Lord, and love His law, whose consciences are sensitive to the things of God.

The wisdom from above feels pure. Sometimes when I counsel people, they're struggling to let go of their flesh-powered way of handling relationships, especially difficult relationships with many years of hurt and resentment and shame.

And one question I ask is, what if you could come out of your next conflict with a conscience and assurance that your conscience is absolutely clean, that even if the other person doesn't agree, even if they treat you badly, you have the sense, I did what the Lord called me to do.

[30 : 40] There's a cleanness to that. It's like you're breathing fresh air, even if it didn't go the way you wanted. If someone truly is a Christian, if they're truly aware that they've been living life in the flesh, then they know.

They know what it means to leave a conversation feeling like something was wrong, the way I showed up wasn't good, like maybe most people would say, hey, you were fine, but just in my heart, there's something missing about it.

There's an impurity, there's something defiled about the way I was responding. Even if it was 90% the other person at fault, I'm not comfortable with my 10%.

Even though my cause was right, there's something not good here. But when we enter conflict with the wisdom from above, James says, that what we do is clean, it's pure.

We do the right things. It's that simple. James says, we talk and we conduct ourselves in conflict in a manner that is peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

[31 : 57] We have the posture of those who make peace. peace. We have a way of moving towards harmony, towards relationships of meekness and gentleness.

In Galatians 5 verse 23, Paul gives a very similar list of behaviors, fruits of the spirit, and he concludes, against such things there is no law.

What he's saying is that when you possess the wisdom from above, you'll do the right thing. against such things there is no law. And that gives you a sense of confidence in conflict.

The kind of confidence and contentment that a Christian is meant to have, even when other people are proving difficulties, different from the restlessness of that bitter jealousy and the selfish ambition.

things. Think of the contrast with the earthly and unspiritual tactics of the flesh. It's been a little while. I remember mentioning in at least one past sermon an example of this from the Gottman

Institute.

[33 : 12] This is one of those things where it's like even the secular world can tell what the works of the flesh are a lot of times. The Gottmans work with couples, but their observations as I look at them are like, this pretty much applies to any relationship ever.

whether in family, whether in the church, whether at work, they notice that relationships are destroyed over time when what they call the four horsemen start showing up.

The first one is criticism. Criticism meaning not just voicing a complaint like, you know, hey, we've all got complaints against each other, okay? That's life.

Nobody's perfect. But it's not just voicing a complaint, but voicing it as an attack against another person at the core of their character, using accusations, shame, to win an argument.

Criticizing the other person. Second, contempt. Treating others with disrespect, showing that they are inferior to you. Mocking them with sarcasm, ridicule, calling them names, mimicking them, using body language such as rolling eyes, scoffing noises, sighing, just to show that they are less than you.

[34 : 37] Defensiveness is a third. Always feeling, always reacting as though you're unjustly accused, fishing for excuses, reversing blame, playing the innocent victim instead of accepting responsibility.

And doing it so that the other person will just back off. Just back off and leave me alone. Finally, stonewalling. Withdrawing from the conversation, shutting down, acting busy or distracted, no longer responding.

That one is usually a response to all of the rest. These build on each other. The flesh turns to these four horsemen in order to triumph, in order to win, in order to protect yourself so that the other person won't triumph and win.

These are the weapons of a boasting war. These behaviors do not make peace. They escalate the conflict and they destroy relationships.

James says they are earthly, unspiritual, demonic. But what if, instead of criticism, what if your words were peaceable and gentle?

[35 : 49] What if, instead of contempt, your words and your body language were full of mercy and good fruits? What if, instead of defensiveness, your words were open to reason and impartial?

What if, instead of stonewalling, your words were pure and sincere? What if, instead of fear, what if this is how you could show up in conflict situations with your spouse, your children, your in-laws, with that difficult church member sitting a couple rows over?

Your words and your actions would be pure, uncontaminated, a wisdom from above against such things, there is no law.

That's what the law of liberty, that's what the royal law is meant to look like when it is lived out God's way. When a flesh-powered person gets a hold of this law, we saw in Romans 7, when a flesh-powered person gets a hold of this law, it only uses the law as a way to supercharge the flesh, to produce more works of the flesh.

We have a way of taking a good thing and twisting it to produce even more ugliness, even more horsemen. The law alone is not enough.

[37 : 22] We long for God to save us, to give us that wisdom from above. just as the prophet Isaiah talks about.

In Isaiah 32, verses 15 through 18, he talks about that, he longs for the day, he says, until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field, and the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness, and trust forever.

My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. And so James echoes this language in James 3, verse 18, when he writes, a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

It is people who have the wisdom from above, who know how to make peace. And Isaiah says it happens when the Spirit is poured upon us from on high.

[38 : 42] That's what Jesus came in part to do. He died, he rose again, he ascended into heaven so that he could give his Spirit to us, so that we could not only be born again, not only be forgiven of our sins and washed clean, but now be empowered to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully

pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

That's the wisdom from above. It is a peacemaking wisdom, a Romans chapter 8 wisdom, a wisdom that brings a contentment and a confidence, a meekness and mercy in the middle of conflict.

Look, anyone can show up that way in a relationship with a person you easily get along with. That's what Jesus says, even the tax collectors love those who love them.

You get, you know, it tells you nothing if you just show up really well in a relationship with people you naturally get along with and who agree with you on everything. Sorry, no points for that.

But it's in a church full of difficult people. It's in difficult family relationships, difficult work relationships.

[40 : 00] That's when the spirit-led wisdom makes all the difference. When people are working together in spirit-led harmony, Isaiah says, the wilderness becomes a fruitful field.

Believe it or not, it just, it spills over from you and your relationship. It spills over into the environment you're living in. It spills over into your community. It becomes a place where justice will dwell, a place of peace, quietness, and trust forever.

Oh, how wonderful a relationship to become when you can just trust each other. Even the most difficult conflicts become possible in a spirit-led environment of justice, peace, quietness, and trust. It brings secure dwellings and a quiet resting place. Or as James puts it, a harvest of righteousness. That's what happens in time when a spirit-led, wise peacemaker sows seeds of peace.

There are two ways to live the Christian life. Triumphantly trying to win and elevate ourselves and keep ourselves safe from others, that's the way of the flesh.

[41 : 19] But the good way, the true religion, making peace with gentle wisdom, that is the way of the spirit, and only God can give it.

Let me pray. Our God and our Father, we know that we need these things. I pray that you may in time show it to us, this way of living.

I confess it is sometimes easier to see in other people when they are not spirit-led, when they are living in the flesh.

Sometimes harder to notice in myself. The Lord, many of us have tasted, we've experienced those moments when we were walking, keeping in step with your spirit, led by your spirit, filled with your spirit.

And what was coming out of us was this goodness and mercy, this good fruit. And we ask more of that, Lord, please. We do not know how to live that way.

[42 : 28] Oh, that you would show us. We need your help. Have mercy, Lord God. Have mercy on us, we pray. Amen.