

Enriching our Fellowship

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Fellowship has always been a key ingredient in our growth and development as Christians.
 - A. But for fellowship to truly work, it must be BIBLICAL fellowship – meaning it must always be in keeping with the Word of God.
 1. As Christians we are naturally drawn together in fellowship in that we share a common love for one another and a common love for the Lord.
 2. That makes us inter-dependent as a family of believers.
 - B. However, it's one thing to UNDERSTAND the importance of fellowship, but it's another thing all together different when it comes to PRACTICING true Biblical fellowship.
 1. So, in this lesson I want us to look at the practical side of fellowship, and specifically focus on what we can do to preserve it, and some of the things we need to avoid to harm it.
 2. We want to learn what we can do to truly ENHANCE OUR FELLOWSHIP together as a family of believers.

II. There are many places we could turn in the New Testament for a study such as this.

A. In fact, much of the New Testament addresses this subject in one form or another.

1. But in this study, I want to focus mainly on some things we find in "The Epistle of James" – which is believed to have been the first letter written during New Testament times, and penned by none other than the Lord's own brother.
2. More specifically, I want to HIGHLIGHT some of the wonderful truths about Biblical fellowship found in the Epistle of James, and show how we can apply these principles to help us maintain – and even ENHANCE – our fellowship together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

B. From the first verse of this wonderful letter, we find James, the Lord's brother addressing *"the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad"*

(James 1:1)

1. He writes to individual Christians who were living in a somewhat mobile society, much like our own.
2. And because of this, normal channels of association, like family and long-time friends, may have been lacking for many.

- C. This letter is filled with down-to-earth, practical advice – some of it positive, and some of it rather negative.
 - 1. So, let's begin by looking at the NEGATIVE side FIRST, and then finish by taking a look at the POSITIVE.

BODY:

- I. James is painfully FRANK when he speaks of those things we must AVOID in our lives as Christians – all of which can have a DEVASTATING impact on fellowship with God and with each other.
 - A. First, on the list of things to avoid is "FILTHINESS" and what James calls "OVERFLOW OF WICKEDNESS."
 - 1. **James 1:21** – *Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness...*
 - 2. James is addressing the issue of immorality in the life of the Christian – especially immorality that lies beneath the surface of our lives.
 - a. The term "overflow of wickedness" pertains to the matted undergrowth we would find in a garden that has been overtaken by weeds – in this case, the matted undergrowth of SIN in our lives.

- b. Therefore, to rid ourselves of immoral behavior and speech, we need to weed it out by getting down to the roots.
 2. The apostle Paul addressed this issue as well in much of his writing. For example:
 - a. **Ephesians 5:3-6** – *But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; 4 neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.*
 3. Nothing destroys fellowship any quicker than sin.
 4. Therefore, it's IMPERATIVE that we take a close look at ourselves to see what sins may be hidden beneath the surface of our lives so that we can weed them out.
- B. Another item we need to avoid to keep from destroying true fellowship is PARTIALITY (PREJUDICE).

1. Showing respect of persons, either through "partiality," or through its more malignant cousins "prejudice" and "bigotry," makes us sinners before God.
 - a. In fact, James was rather BLUNT about partiality and prejudice.
 - b. **James 2:9** – *...if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*
 2. There is ABSOLUTELY NO ROOM for favoritism, partiality, prejudice or bigotry in the body of Christ.
 3. Fellowship in Christ is designed to bring us TOGETHER as family. But PARTIALITY will ALWAYS create distrust, animosity, and division among God's people.
- C. Another item high on the list of things we must AVOID is MISUSE OF THE TONGUE.
1. The tongue possesses GREAT POWER to destroy, if we are not careful.
 - a. **James 3:5-9** – *See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the*

sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

2. When we misuse the tongue by saying bad things about OTHERS, and then turn around and use our tongue to praise GOD, we show ourselves to be nothing more than RANK HYPOCRITES.
 3. We must ALWAYS watch WHAT we say, and HOW we say it.
 - a. More DEEP and DEVASTATING WOUNDS have been caused by misuse of the TONGUE than we can even begin to imagine.
 - b. The old adage "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is a blatant LIE.
 4. The truth is, almost EVERY DIVIDED CHURCH became that way because SOME felt they should SPEAK UP, when they would have actually done EVERYONE a favor by just keeping SILENT.
- D. Another killer of fellowship among believers and something we need to avoid in our lives is SELFISHNESS.
1. James reveals that the ROOT CAUSE of strife among Christians is nothing more than SELFISHNESS.
 - a. **James 4:1-3** – *Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have. You murder*

and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

- b. Earlier, James wrote: *For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there. (James 3:16)*
 3. Inflated egos, and a desire to have it "my way, or the highway" has ABSOLUTELY NO PLACE among believers in Christ.
 4. If ANYTHING should characterize the life of the Christian, it should be genuine, heart-felt HUMILITY and PEACE.
 5. If we truly desire PEACE and HARMONY in our family as brothers and sisters in Christ, we MUST grow beyond carnality and the selfish self-centeredness that are so characteristic of the world!
- E. Another item that must be avoided is SPEAKING EVIL OF ONE ANOTHER.
1. You would THINK that fellow believers in Christ – brothers and sisters in Christ – would never HAVE this problem.
 - a. But the TRUTH is, we DO. Otherwise, James would have never brought it up.
 - b. **James 4:11-12** – *Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother,*

speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

2. We may not be blatantly OVERT in speaking evil against one another – in fact we're pretty clever about DISGUIISING it in a variety of ways.
 - a. MOSTLY, we disguise it as CONCERN for a brother or sister, when in REALITY we're just passing along a juicy bit of gossip.
3. When we speak evil of our brother and pass judgment on our brother, James says we also *"speak evil of the law and judge the law."*
 - a. We speak evil of and judge the law that says we should "love our neighbor as ourselves."
 - b. And we speak evil of and judge the law that says we should *"do unto others as we would have others do unto us."*
4. This does not preclude the necessity of exercising "discernment" or "judging with righteous judgment," nor does this preclude our responsibility to "judge those who are inside" the family of God (**1 Corinthians 5:9-13**).

5. But we need to avoid the tendency to be quick to see areas of weakness and sin in the lives of OTHERS, while at the same time OVERLOOKING or totally IGNORING areas of weakness and sin in our OWN lives.
 6. That kind of practice will absolutely KILL peace and harmony among believers in Christ – not to mention the fact that it's a SIN.
- II. Now let's turn our attention to the POSITIVE side and look at things we need to DO as believers to maintain fellowship with God and with each other.
- A. First, to enhance our fellowship together, we need to VIEW CHALLENGES AS OPPORTUNITIES.
1. Some of the most MEMORABLE and certainly some of the most BELOVED saints in a congregation are those who maintain a positive perspective in the face of ADVERSITY.
 - a. Their smile and positive attitude never fades because they always have the right perspective about trials.
 - b. **James 1:2-5** – *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.*

2. This kind of positive outlook is absolutely CONTAGEOUS – these are the kind of people we enjoy being around.
 - a. And more importantly, this kind of positive outlook in the face of trials serves as a source of strength and encouragement to OTHERS who are going through trials of their own.
 3. And when trials and difficulties arise within the local congregation – which they always do eventually – this person sees those trials and difficulties as an opportunity for spiritual growth.
 - a. They serve as an opportunity to bring us closer to the Lord, as well as bring us closer to one another – we circle the wagons, so to speak.
 4. So, trials actually have a way of strengthening our OWN faith as well as strengthening our FELLOWSHIP together by making us even CLOSER as a family.
 5. That’s why we can actually greet trials with JOY!
- B. Another thing we can do to help maintain and enhance our fellowship is to constantly PRAY FOR WISDOM.
1. **James 1:5-8** – *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For let*

*not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8
he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

2. Maintaining a THRIVING fellowship requires a great deal of WISDOM – the ability to properly use KNOWLEDGE.
 3. That’s why we should seek the wisdom of God in all matters – ESPECIALLY when peace and unity are being threatened.
 - a. We gain KNOWLEDGE through a study of God’s word.
 - b. But we acquire the WISDOM to properly APPLY our knowledge by praying for it – with the confidence that God will GRANT that prayer.
 4. Wisdom is a key ingredient in PRESERVING peace and unity in the body of Christ, whereas a LACK of wisdom will almost certainly lead to disunity and division.
- C. Along with wisdom, there is another key ingredient we need to have to enhance and preserve our fellowship, and that’s being SWIFT TO HEAR, SLOW TO SPEAK, and SLOW TO WRATH.
1. If there is EVER a time to be EAGER to LISTEN, and SLOW to express our FEELINGS and OPINIONS, it’s when trouble arises within a local congregation.

2. Why? Simply because when trouble or conflict arises in a local congregation the setting is RIPE for TEMPERS to rise and for EMOTIONS to get completely out of control.
 - a. **James 1:19-20** – *So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*
 - b. Short tempers and emotional outbursts NEVER produces the kind of RIGHTEOUSNESS God would desire for us to have.
 3. I will be so bold as to say that EVERY problem that arises in a local fellowship of believers can be gracefully handled and overcome when brethren on BOTH SIDES of the issue display the FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS in their lives.
 4. However, division and a collapse of unity and fellowship will ALWAYS OCCUR when brethren on one or both sides of a divisive issue fail to heed James' admonition to be "*swift to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to wrath.*"
 - a. Disunity and division will occur EVERY TIME.
- D. Therefore, to preserve and enhance our fellowship, we need to always PRACTICE PURE AND UNDEFILED RELIGION.
1. **James 1:22-27** – *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 observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

2. Practicing PURE and UNDEFINED religion involves several things:
 - a. First, we must be DOERS of the Word, and not just HEARERS.
 - (1). It really takes NO EFFORT AT ALL to come here every Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening to sit and LISTEN to a few sermons or sit through a Bible study.
 - (2). But unless we ACT on those things we've heard and DO them, we've just been wasting our time.
 - b. Therefore, secondly, we need to let our ACTIONS speak louder than our WORDS.

- (1). When we see a need for CHANGE in our lives, we need to DO something about it.
 - (2). We can pray beautiful prayers, sing songs with beautiful voices, and talk all the so-called "God-talk," but unless we live it out in our lives our religion is VAIN – it's EMPTY and USELESS.
- c. Third, one way of truly living out a pure and undefiled religion is to respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ when we have the opportunity to do so.
- (1). James used two classes of people who would NEVER be able to return a favor – widows and orphans.
 - (2). Therefore, our motive for responding to the needs of others should never be out of a desire to get something in return – it should be prompted purely by a genuine love and concern.
 - (3). **Galatians 6:9-10** – *And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

d. Finally, to practice pure and undefiled religion we must keep ourselves untainted by the world.

(1). We may be IN the world, but we should never be OF the world.

(2). **1 John 2:15-17** – *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*

3. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a fellowship where everyone is truly practicing THIS kind of religion?

E. And along with this, James mentions something else we need to enhance fellowship, and that is LET OUR LIFE DISPLAY THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT.

1. **James 3:13, 17-18** – *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom... 17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and*

good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. 18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

2. These are the same character traits described by the apostle Paul as the FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT.
 - a. **Galatians 5:22-23** – *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control.*
 2. Can you imagine how WONDERFUL it would be to be part of a local fellowship where everyone demonstrates a wisdom that is: *"...first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy."*
 - a. THIS kind of fellowship is NURTURING, LOVING, CARING, and SUPPORTIVE.
 - b. People THRIVE where these qualities exist in the lives of those who TRULY ARE disciples of Christ.
 3. And these qualities need to be an OUTSTANDING FEATURE in the lives of each and every one of us.
- F. But to further enhance and enrich our lives together, James says we should always PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER.
1. **James 5:13-16** – *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 14 Is anyone among you*

sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

2. Just imagine how wonderful it would be to be in a local fellowship of believers where you feel SAFE to privately confess EVERY SIN in your life to a trusted brother or sister, knowing they will NOT JUDGE YOU, but fervently PRAY FOR YOU.
 - a. That kind of atmosphere brings SPIRITUAL and EMOTIONAL HEALING.
 3. And when we FERVENTLY pray for each other, not only is our fellowship with GOD strengthened, but ALSO our fellowship with ONE ANOTHER!
- G. And finally, James says to truly enrich our lives together we must always seek to RESTORE THE ERRING.
1. **James 5:19-20** – *Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let him know that he who*

turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

2. When people stray from the faith, we lose the benefit of THEIR fellowship.
 - a. We would be deeply saddened if a member of our own family drifted away and never contacted us again.
 - b. And so, we should be just as deeply saddened if a brother or sister in Christ drifts away.
3. *"Turning a sinner from the error of his way,"* is a PROACTIVE approach to maintaining fellowship.
 - a. Sadly, we often WAIT for the lost sheep to RETURN to the fold before we extend our love and concern – when, in fact, we SHOULD BE out trying to actively FIND them and BRING them back.
 - b. The sad truth is that most who drift away from the Lord and from a local fellowship of believers are often too embarrassed to return on their own – they need someone to go OUT and BRING them back.
4. And there's a wonderful benefit for BOTH of us when we restore them by bringing them back to God.

- a. It not only saves THEM, but it blesses US with their renewed fellowship!

CONCLUSION:

- I. What about YOUR relationship with God and with His children – the church?
 - A. When you take a close look at your OWN life, is your relationship with the Lord and with your brothers and sisters in Christ what it should be?
 - 1. The Bible teaches that our fellowship is with the Lord FIRST then we're able to truly have fellowship with ONE ANOTHER.
 - a. If you have NEVER been in fellowship with the Lord, you can change that by coming to the Lord in faithful obedience, surrendering your life to Him, and truly making Him Lord of your life.
 - (1). You will then have fellowship with US who have ALSO made Jesus the Lord of OUR lives.
 - b. And, if you've had fellowship with the Lord in the past, but sin has broken that relationship, you can also change that by coming BACK to the Lord, repenting of those sins and confessing them to the Lord, and be FULLY RESTORED once again.

(1). And, you will also have fellowship with US who have
ALSO had to repent of and confess sins in our OWN
lives.

2. The Lord stands ready, with outstretched arms, to receive you.
And so are we.