

***P.S. 2020 Lessons We're Learning***  
***"We're Learning that we are not in control!"***  
August 30, 2020

**Overarching theme:** In 2020, FUMC will be a **GO** church!

**Instructions:**

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. *The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.*

**Core Point:**

The past is the past. There is nothing that can be done about it. The past can only be used to gain wisdom for the future. What can change is the future. When we, as God's people, are willing to follow God in our daily lives, God will make a good way in the future. The way may be bumpy at times and have curves, but the process will be filled with God's love and grace.

**James:**

An examination of the letter points to James "brother of the Lord" as its likely author. The letter shows that its author, who writes with authority and calls himself a teacher, is comfortable in the worlds of both Judaism and early Christianity. He demonstrates a detailed understanding of the OT, and his message reflects Jesus' teaching, especially the Sermon on the Mount.

A number of themes are woven throughout the letter. Probably the most significant is the argument that faith on its own has to be alive by expressing itself in good actions. Throughout the letter James outlines for his readers various values and actions they should express in their lives because these values and actions give expression to their faith. Another central theme is the importance of choosing friendship with God over "friendship with the world". For James, "the world" symbolizes whatever is ethically opposed to God. A series of contrasts runs throughout the letter: asking in faith versus asking with doubt; poverty versus riches; being "doers of the word" versus only hearers; faith that's dead versus faith that's alive; wisdom "from above" versus wisdom that's earthly; and friendship with God versus "friendship with the world". In summary, this letter commends a humble, practical faith that is rooted in God's enduring wisdom and sovereignty, over and against a human-oriented worldly wisdom that is centered in short-term gain and the illusion of control. -adapted from the CEB study bible, pp 453-54 (NT)

**Reflect on this Scripture:**

*James 4:13-15 NRSV "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making*

money.”<sup>14</sup> Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.<sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.”

### **Commentary:**

James summons the people (“come now”) to a consideration of their lack of wisdom from above. Once more, they are given speech to express their plans of future travel, trade, and profit. At the most obvious level, the traders are criticized for their arrogant assumption that they can depend on the future as though it were secure. But at a deeper level, they show that they operate by the wisdom of the world, which is the logic of envy; by selling and getting a profit, they will secure their own future. James responds to them first in the way that the teacher “Qoheleth” of Ecclesiastes would, by reminding them of the evanescent quality of human life. How can they plan for the next year when they cannot guarantee that they will even see tomorrow? The awareness that human existence itself is a “mist that is here and gone” encourages modesty concerning human plans and projects.

James also challenges the very view of reality assumed by such friends of the world. Their speech shows that they see the world as a closed system of limited resources, available to their control and manipulation, yielding to their market analysis and sales campaigns. When James tells them that they should say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that”, he is not simply recommending a more pious form of speech. Rather, he calls for a profoundly different perception of reality. He is recommending the view provided by faith and friendship with God that the world is an open system, created by God at every moment and infinitely rich in resources provided by God for humans to exist and to prosper, in cooperation rather than in competition and mutual elimination.

– adapted from the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol XII, p 216

### **This week –**

We’re learning that **we are not in control.** Most of us have no overt messianic pretensions. We logically know that a person who walks around today thinking that they are God or Jesus are delusional. Clearly all evidence points to the fact that 100% of us are mere mortals and that our sphere of control is very limited. We are not God.

But part of the human condition is to try to usurp the place of God and exert control. This tendency is as old as Genesis 3:5 as the woman and man were tempted by the taste of power and autonomy – “*you will be like God.*” If Dr. Phil had been there, he would have surely asked his signature question of our forebears in the aftermath of their disastrous pursuit – *how’s that working for you?* Even though there is abundant evidence that human controlling behavior is not working for us, we tend to lapse into thinking that we have way more control than we actually have. Consciously or subconsciously, we tend to grasp for control,

particularly when we feel threatened by lack of control (i.e. strange hoarding tendencies in the early days of the pandemic).

James, likely half-brother of Jesus, does not mince words as he addresses our human tendency. His letter is a full-on frontal assault on the temporal values of a human centered culture in which mortals flatter themselves that they are in control. He gets at the root of our hubris by reminding us of our mortality ("*you are a mist that appears for a little while...*"), and then calls us to repentance, trusting in the only One who is all-powerful and all-loving (Psalm 62: 11-12). If we lived our lives by the admonition of verse 15 ("*if the Lord wishes*"), would we not live more abundantly whether in pandemic-mode or not?

### **Questions to Ponder for accountability in the group:**

As you think about this passage, how can you respond to this Scripture:

1. Why do you think we humans tend to lapse into "control mode" (thinking we have more control than we actually have)? Do you think this tendency is conscious, subconscious, or a mixture of both?
2. Do you see a connection between the Genesis 3:5 grasp for autonomy/power and our control issues? Why or why not?
3. What is it about a crisis that leads some people to become more hyper-controlling and some to become more trusting of God? How do you tend to respond?
4. James challenges us to reflect deeply on our lives and mortality ("*you are a mist*"). Why do you think James brings this topic up? What impact might this awareness potentially have on your control issues?
5. James ends verse 15 with this admonition - "*If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.*" What is one area of your life that could use some "*if the Lord wishes*" work? Be specific.

### **Activity for the life of a disciple:**

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMC.
2. Ponder and pray on this Scripture this week: James 4:14-15  
*<sup>14</sup> Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. <sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."*
3. Consider this and other lessons that you are learning in this season, and share with a friend. Remember to pray for one another.