

From Hearing to Action

Week Two
July 5– July 9

**A Daily Study of the Book of James
Summer 2021**

*Every good gift and every perfect gift
is from above, coming down from the Father of
lights, with whom there is no variation or
shadow due to change.*

James 1.17

Cornerstone Assembly of God
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Monday, July 5.....James 1.16-18

The Father in the Heart of Creation

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Following verses 13-15, how does James contrast the negative birth of sin with the positive birth through the word?

2. After the previous section we are left asking, if God does not send temptations, then what does He send?

3. All God's gifts are good. James ultimately emphasizes one particular gift: being born anew (v. 18).
 - a. Reflect on this verse in light of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3). What stands out to you?

 - b. Remembering the Messianic community to whom James is writing, how would they see new birth as a manifestation of God's goodness?

4. How would James' Jewish audience have understood their new life in Christ as being a kind of firstfruits of God's creatures (Exodus 23.19a; Deuteronomy 26.1-11)?

• PRAYER POINT •

CELEBRATING GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN THE PAST AND PRESENT

- Take some time and consider the incredible blessings God has poured out on your life. Thank Him for His generosity and love.
- The Israelites were called to rejoice as they brought their firstfruits before the Lord in what God was doing in their life, the spiritual community and the stranger (Deuteronomy 26.11). Pray about how you can publicly declare God's goodness in your life, your home, your Church and your community.

COMMENTARY

v. 16: **Do not be deceived**... James drives his previous section home, where he introduced two important ideas: 1) that God does not tempt and 2) there are two different paths before us all, one that leads to life and the other that leads to death.

James intentionally takes his imagery to a macro-scale. The word that implies deception here, was commonly used for wandering celestial objects. Objects in the sky have their proper orbits, and can be tracked across space and time. Our days can be measured by the sun. The moon consistently follows her phases. But on occasion there would be objects cutting across the night sky that did not appear to follow a set course. They wandered. James urges his audience to not be like wandering planets, deviating from their proper path.

Often we have a tendency to idealize the early Church, reimagining them as super-saints who never struggled with doubt or everyday concerns. As Scot McKnight reminds us, 'James was a pastor to a community filled with typical human questions, problems, and sins.' James will use this keyword one more time in 5.19 at the conclusion of his letter, urging the congregation to actively care for those brothers and sisters who may wander away from their faith.

beloved...James the pastor is drawing his audience close, with the use of sincere familial language. He does not take a higher or holier-than-thou position, but speaks to his beloved brothers and sisters as a member of the same family.

v. 17: **Every good gift and every perfect gift**...Some scholars see this phrasing as a pre-existing proverb or line of poetry. The parallelism is readily visible and builds on God's established generosity in every act of giving and every gift (1.5). The first word for gift is *dosis* which focuses more on the intention the giving, while the second, *dorema*, implies the act of distributing the gifts. For example, Paul describes the intention of giving that drove the believers in Philippi to support his ministry financially (Philippians 4.15) which created a chain-reaction among the churches and continues to be a driving force in missionary support today.

Bo Reicke notes that making donations and distributing gifts is not new to humanity. During the day of James and the messianic community, the wealthy sought "to gain favor with the masses" through temporary philanthropy. "Such gifts, however, have no lasting value." But as James will continue to reveal, this is completely different from God's motivation and character. His gifts are good and complete, for our good and for His glory (see Romans 8.28 again).

from above, coming down from the Father of lights...Once again, James the preacher creates an image, an up and down illustration that incorporates the heavens and the earth connected through the generosity of God's gifts flowing from above

cascading continuously down on his children. His impartial extravagance on his sons and daughters is like a waterfall on a parched land. One could easily parallel the imagery of Ezekiel 47, where the river flows from the Temple, down to the Dead Sea, creating and restoring life along the way.

God as the Father of lights (plural) draws his hearers imagination further into the cosmos, introduced in v. 16 to remember how God made the sun, moon, stars and heavenly objects (Genesis 1.1-5,14-19; Psalm 136.7-9). These lights are objects of His divine creation, but they do not share in His divinity.

with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change... James brings his astronomical imagery to its fullness here. Introduced in his call for his hearers to not wander like straying planets James now uses the skies to help his audience understand the immutability of God. God made the lights, the sun, moon and stars, but there is not wax and wane with Him. There are no phases of His orbit ('variation') or shadowy eclipses in His nature (shadows due to change).

These words apply to the natural course of the sun, moon, stars and planets, but they do not apply to God. This is an important distinction for the dispersed Messianic community James is writing. These Jewish Christians were daily interacting with different people groups who worshiped diverse deities, revering these capricious celestial beings as divine. These gods and goddesses were fickle and inconsistent, and left unchecked their influence was creating confusion within the church. James is clear: God cannot be eclipsed; He is not mercurial or vacillating; He does not tempt or trip up His people (and as will be seen, He loves to create and restore).

v. 18: He chose to give us birth... God's action of salvation is a product of His purpose. It is rooted in His character and will. The Messianic community hearing James' words would have recognized in them the God who creates and commissions in the Torah is the same God who recreates and redeems in the Gospel.

God the Creator stands in contrast to the created humanity's destructive desires. Where our corrupted desires give birth to sin which leads to death God the Father gives birth salvation which leads to life.

through the word of truth... The word of truth is the good news of redemption. God the Father is redeeming His people and His word stands as an enduring testimony across space and time to this truth.

that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures... James here expands on the established worldview of his Jewish Christian audience. They know the practice of bring their first fruits as an offering to God (Exodus 23.19a; Deuteronomy 26.1-11). This was a celebration of God's faithfulness to His people and the fulfillment of His promises to them.

When the people of Israel were brought into the promised land, they were to bring their best of their firstfruits they harvested as a public declaration, remembering 1) the harshness and humiliation of their slavery in Egypt, 2) the mercy of God that responded to their cry, 3) God's manifest power on display when he brought them out and 4) how He brought them and others into the promised land.

James reminds His hearers that they are themselves a firstfruit offering of God's plan of salvation for all people. They are consecrated, holy before the God brought by Jesus Christ before the Father.

Tuesday, July 6.....James 1.19-20

The Speed of New Life

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Long before social media and the ease of global communication it was difficult for people to be quick to listen and slow to respond.
 - c. What examples from the men and women in the Bible come to mind—good or bad—when reflecting on this proverb?

 - d. How can you learn from those positive and negative examples?

2. James' injunction to slow to speech echoes the wisdom of Proverbs. Identify the overlap with the following proverbs:
 - e. Proverbs 10.19:

 - f. Proverbs 17.27-28:

3. How can being slow to anger avoid or reorient a dispute?
 - g. Proverbs 15.1:

 - h. Proverbs 14.29:

4. Why can't our anger produce God's justice? Reflect on Moses' failed attempt in Exodus 2.11-15 in light of verse 20. Write your observations.

• PRAYER POINT •

APPLYING GOD'S WISDOM IN THE SPEED LIFE

- Prayerfully start by considering God's word. Where is the Spirit leading you to immediately respond to Jesus' words?
- Invite the Holy Spirit to show you where your anger has disrupted your ability to hear God's voice and serve His people.

COMMENTARY

v. 19: **Know this**...Alongside his pastoral call to his brothers and sisters, James transitions to a new section by reinforcing the importance of his next statement, affirming they should already know it and practice. James appears to be modifying a proverb from Sirach (a book of wisdom) his Jewish audience would have known: “Be quick to hear, but deliberate in answering; if you have understanding, answer your neighbor; but if not put your hand over your mouth,” (5.11-12).

As the firstfruits born of God’s redemption plan they should know and apply these commands: quick to hear, and slow to speak and anger. Scot McKnight expresses this well: “Because [James’s audience] knows the divine origins of their community and that their destiny is to be the firstfruits, they are to live a life of justice. Their eschatological destiny is to shape their present existence.”

be quick to hear...Christians should be quick to hear. The word translated ‘quick’ carries the idea of immediacy, swiftly responding without delay. Christians should be quick to listen to God and others. Oecumenius, a 10th century bishop, believed James was not talking about “simple listening” when he commands us to be quick to listen, but to live with an “eagerness to put into practice what has been heard.” Therefore, we as followers of Jesus should be quick to listen to God’s Word and the Spirit’s promptings.

slow... The word slow is used twice here by James to contrast the word ‘quick.’ James is calling his audience to be unhurried and take deliberate time as they prepare to speak and safeguard against anger which leads to violence.

Luke is the only other New Testament author to use the word translated here as “slow” (24.25). Jesus was addressing a slowness of heart in the grieving hearts of his disciples on the Emmaus road, not a deliberate and prayerful response encouraged by James, but a slowness of heart to apprehend and believe the God’s plan revealed through the prophets.

slow to speak...As James calls his hearers to be quick to listen he enjoins them to be slow to speak. It is better to hear than be heard, particularly in the fellowship of believers. It is important to remember that James is writing to an audience, communities of men, women and families that are seeking to know Jesus and make Him known to others. James’ command to be slow to speak is not just proverbial advice but a direct address to people’s rapid responses to real life situations. This is causing confusion in the Church and outside as well because of unharnessed tongues (which will be explored more in 3.1-12).

slow to anger...Likewise, the congregations receiving James’ circular letter to the Messianic communities were dealing with recurring disputes and discovering anew that

their unbridled wrath was not producing God's justice. Law suits and violent actions were not bringing about God's righteousness. James echoes Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount again (Matthew 5.21-26). It has been argued by Ben Witherington and other scholars that James was expressly calling out loudmouthed men in the synagogue who were giving vent to their anger in destructive and divisive ways, misdirecting the community that was to be known as God's people who care for the widow, orphan and stranger (Exodus 23.20-23; Isaiah 1.17, 23; Jeremiah 5.28; Zechariah 7.10)

v. 20: **for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God**...James explains specifically why we should be slow to anger: anger (specific) does not produce God's righteousness. This verse follows a similar structure to the Septuagint (the 2nd C. BC Greek translation) of Isaiah 46.12-13. Through Isaiah, God reproves people for their stubborn and unyielding hearts being far from righteousness. He calls them to hear, shows them where their obstinacy is creating distance between them and righteousness, and announces that He is preparing to bring His righteousness near as He brings about His plan of salvation.

Wednesday, July 7.....James 1.21

A Wonderfully Imbalanced Exchange

²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and with meekness receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does James call us to take off the burden of the world?

2. Consider the similarities between James' call to take off the soiled garments of our former lives and those of Paul and Peter.
 - i. Ephesians 4.22-24

 - j. Colossians 3.8

 - k. 1 Peter 2.1

3. Why is meekness (strength under control) essential to removing the filthiness and wickedness of this world from our lives and receiving the Word of God? And why is this refreshing?

• PRAYER POINT •

OVERCOMING THE WORLD

- “You cannot do good unless you have cleansed yourself of evil first. Filthiness refers primarily to external things which corrupt our hands, whereas wickedness refers primarily to internal things which corrupt our souls. Both must be overcome if we are to do good.” (Bede, 9th century)
- Invite the Holy Spirit to identify the external things in our homes and relationships we must remove as we draw closer to Jesus.
- Now, invite the Holy Spirit to pinpoint the root causes of those external things, the places that require a deeper meekness to renounce. Confess the internal corruption that is impeding your spiritual growth.
- Lastly, celebrate with humility and joy as you exchange those former things for the good news of Jesus Christ and that you have been grafted into the Kingdom of God.

COMMENTARY

v. 21: **Therefore**...In light of the previous verses, understanding that our anger cannot produce the righteousness of God, we must actively clean out wrath from our lives, to shed it and our former lifestyle like old soiled clothing. This is a common image for the early Church seen in the writings of Paul and Peter (as seen above). Understanding this establishes an important hinge moment for believers: they must remove and put away the filth and stain of this world so that they might receive completely the good news of Jesus Christ.

put away all filthiness...The followers of Jesus were called to put away the ways of their former lives. The word used here carries a meaning of casting aside, renouncing, and removing as if taking off clothes. The first noun translated filthiness builds on this image. We are called by James to remove the stained and soiled clothes ruined by personal temptation and inborn sin. This filthiness (Greek: *rhyparía*) only used by James this one time is a moral filth, the desecration of our souls made in the image of God. In humility of spirit we must remove this muddy layer from our souls in pursuit of right relationship with our redeemer, Christ Jesus.

[put away] rampant wickedness...Along with renouncing the tattered morally stained former way of life we must also put away overabundance of evil that easily overwhelmed us before Christ. The word rampant here is comprehensive. Wickedness in this world is in superabundance. Renouncing the moral filth on our souls, and removing the inherent evil that degrades our character takes intense meekness.

with meekness receive...Craig Blomberg states that a “case could be made that James intentionally places this phrase in a hinge position to refer to the attitude one should have both while divesting oneself of sinfulness and while receiving our new selves from God.” In meekness we remove, confess and renounce; and in meekness we receive. There is a beauty in this interpretation of James’ word placement in the original language.

By receiving James’ call to welcome and humbly surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit we find restoration. We embrace the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, born from the redemption and salvation found in Christ Jesus, with gentle strength. Admitting one is wrong is not easy and receiving the absolute charity of God in its place is humbling. This leads us to a robust understanding of biblical meekness.

Meekness is a pivotal Christian concept. Meekness was not a Greco-Roman virtue and stood in contrast to the common worldview surrounding the early Church. First expressed in the words and character of Christ, Matthew shares the virtue of meekness as God’s strength under His control in the sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.5). Calling to his disciples and the crowd around Him, Jesus encourages them to take up His yoke for He was meek and humble in spirit, inviting them to rest for their souls

(Matthew 11.29). Lastly, Matthew cites the Greek translation of Zechariah 9.9 at Jesus' triumphal entry fulfilling the prophet's words that the Messiah would ride into Jerusalem meekly riding a donkey (Matthew 21.5). Along with Matthew and James, Paul and Peter place meekness as an important aspect of their theology (i.e. 1 Corinthians 4.21; 2 Corinthians 10.1; Galatians 5.23; 6.1; Ephesians 4.2; Colossians 3.12; 1 Timothy 6.11; 2 Timothy 2.25; Titus 3.2; 1 Peter 3.14-15)

Jorge Mario Bergoglio states that the appearance of meekness is simple when all is calm, but is much more difficult in the face of violence, injustice and growing passions. By choosing meekness, gentle strength, the follower of Jesus learns "to defend their peace, their relationship with God and the gifts of God: mercy, fraternity, trust and hope." This is counter-cultural and too easily rejected in the face of systemic failures and frustrations. Instead of seeking the meek Jesus on the cross we create liberation theologies that give vent to our anger and refute the new life Jesus offers us.

the implanted word... The concept of implanted is difficult to easily ascertain as, once again, James is the sole New Testament author to make use of it. Taken in context James is clearly drawing a parallel with his previous words about how corrupt desires conceive sin that leads to death, thus the implanted word conceives salvation in us which leads to life. Implanted, therefore, means to bring to life through connection to something already living. Jesus words in John 15.1-11 and Paul's argument for Gentile believers in Romans 11.11-31 come to mind. Jesus is the true vine and God the Father is the keeper of the vineyard. God grafts (what James refers to as implants) us to Jesus. This implanted word, this grafted connection allows for us to develop and grow.

[the implanted word] which is able to save your souls...The implanted word, the good news of Jesus Christ, saves us. This salvation delivers us from the decay of personal temptation that leads to death.

Thursday, July 8.....James 1.22-25

Active Listening Leads to Action

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. James challenges us, as he did the Messianic audience who first received his letter, to ask ourselves: “Where is the change?”
 - l. If I am listening to the voice of God through Scripture where am I applying it? What difference is there in the actions I’m taking?

 - m. If I am hearing the Word of God at church where is it resulting in greater obedience in my walk with Jesus? How am I celebrating that with those who don’t know Him?

 - n. If I am meeting with God in worship in fellowship with other believers where is it visible in increased righteousness throughout my week and witness?

2. James builds on one of Jesus’ beatitudes: “Blessed are those hearing the word of God and take care in keeping it!” (Luke 11.28). Jesus was responding to a woman in a crowd, inviting all those around her to move from being spectators of His ministry to become active participants in it. How does James parallel Jesus’ words in his letter?

3. How is God’s promise to bless in 1.12 similar to His promise to bless in verse 25?

• PRAYER POINT •

NOT HALFWAY SOLUTIONS

- Solomon Andria believes, “if we stop partway through the listening process we will fail and will live disordered lives. Where have you adopted halfway solutions in your walk with Jesus that are limiting your spiritual growth?”
- Ask Jesus how He is calling you to live your faith today, not just with an internal belief but in external actions born from belief?

COMMENTARY

Scot McKnight demonstrates that this unit has a chiasmic structure (mirroring its message, beginning and ending the same, with emphasis on the central point):

- a. the need to hear and do (1.22), with a warning about deception
 - b. illustration (1.23-24)
- a'. the need to hear and do (1.25), with a promise of blessing

v. 22: **But be doers of the word...**The word translated 'doer' is used four times by James in this short letter (1.22, 23, 25; 4.11), once by Luke (Acts 17.28) and once by Paul (Romans 2.13). The word is the noun *poiétés* and is the root of our word 'poet.' It is derived from the verb *poieó* meaning to make or do. Therefore, a 'doer' is a maker, a composer, like a performing poet presenting his work. James is calling his hearers to be more than hearers, to stand up and become proclaimers of the word as well.

In the midst of the Areopagus, Paul drew his audiences' attention to the words of their own poets (*poiétés*), the performing artists and thought-leaders of their culture. He then drew on their proclaimed words and contrasted them with their idol-making action. Through his public witness to the unknown God (Acts 17.23) some joined and believed the gospel (Acts 17.34). Later in Paul's ministry he wrote to the established church in Roman, reminding them (in words very similar to James') that it is those doers (*poiétés*) of the law that are justified not just those who hear it (Romans 2.13).

[doers] and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...For James it is important for his audience to take an active role. They are not only hearers who come to listen to the orator presenting his poetry, but are called to participate in the work as well. To be a hearer only is to miscalculate the gospel of Jesus. People in the Kingdom of God cannot afford to falsely reason that listening is the sole requirement for new life in Christ. According to Paul, the Colossian believers were in danger of being deluded by persuasive and plausible arguments, leading them to miscalculate the implications of the gospel (Colossians 2.4). Truly knowing Christ is vital to the Christian faith and that faith must be put into action to evade self-deception.

In the words of Alan Perkins this verse confronts us where we are "convincing ourselves that we know God, when in fact we know only about him; persuading ourselves that we have spiritual life, when we possess only the appearance of it. Such is the condition of those who "listen" to the word, who read, study, discuss, and even preach it, but who fail to submit to it in practice." (Alan Perkins)

James will return to this point in 2.19, stating that "even the demons believe all the right doctrines but it does them little good," (Witherington). Our active listening must lead to action.

v. 23: **For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror...** James the preacher provides his audience once again with an illustration to imagine, a man looking in a mirror. If James is building upon his previous image of a poet performer, then the illustration shows how intently an orator would look at his physical appearance before going into public to ensure he looks his best as not to distract from his message.

At the time when James' sermon was first delivered mirrors were not made of glass but of highly polished metal. Because of this mirrors were not as clear and required a more intent look. James' word we translate as 'look' implies a concentrated gaze, to fix one's eyes on something. This kind of look requires consideration, like when Jesus calls his disciples to consider how much more God cares for them than for the birds and the flowers (Luke 12.24-27). This is not an invitation to a fleeting thought but a sincere time of earnest reflection. Luke uses the same word again in Acts describing how intently Peter looked at the diverse animals in his rooftop vision (Acts 11.6).

Followers of Jesus cannot give a brief glance only to forget moments later. This is what hearers only do. This is like men and women today who call themselves Christians but do not reflect the truth of Jesus, His Kingdom or His good news.

[natural face]...This phrase is more meaningful than it appears at first glance. In the original language it is 'the face of his genesis' (*prosopon tes geneseos*). *Geneseos* means birth, existence, and life. It is the word used of Jesus' birth (Matthew 1.18). In James then a hearer only means more than a momentary mirror gazer, but someone who fails to reflect on his or her existence. What then is the origin of humanity's existence, her beginning? It is in Genesis, where we were made in the image of God. The image of God must shape how we see our Creator, ourselves and our fellow image bearers.

James will return to this theme in chapter 3 verse 9 where he underscores our incomprehensible behavior of praising God in one breath and then cursing those made in his image in the next. This is double-minded behavior.

v. 24: **For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like...**The image James is painting is broken when the audience hears that poet performer who has looked at himself intently in the mirror but then forgets what he was doing it for in the first place, leaving his hair a mess and his face dirty. This is like hearing a sermon on Sunday or reading a devotional like this one only to forget it after reading, never taking the time to process it in prayer, reflect on it with the Holy Spirit and incorporate it into our lives.

James will build on this, surely making his messianic Jewish audience uncomfortable, in 2.10: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." Underneath the full weight of the law that had been used as a cultural distinctive and security perimeter—a kind of spiritual mirror—then to stumble in

one small aspect is to fail the law completely. Augustine asks, “Is it possible that the person who has discriminated between rich and poor is guilty of murder, adultery and sacrilege? That does indeed seem to be the conclusion which James is drawing. Such a man is guilty of every crime, because in one point he has become guilty of them all.”

v. 25: **But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing**...The contrast between hearers-only and doers is now flipped. Doers, those poet performers, look intently and then obey. They fix their appearance and reflect on their message. They persevere and act. Following the chiasmic structure the warning transforms into a promise. In Scot McKnight’s phrasing, “to welcome the implanted word is to become hearers and doers of the word.”

perfect law, law of liberty...James brings his audience back to the teachings of Jesus once again, reminding them about the nature of Jesus’ law (Matthew 11.29). As Craig Blomberg highlights, “this law does not trap, bind or weigh one down.” The law of Jesus is freedom, it is liberty. This is the fulfillment of the Old Testament law and the prophets as Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith (Matthew 5.17–20, 48; Galatians 5.13–14; Hebrews 12.2).

perseveres...Those who persevere, who remain in Christ and abide in Him, staying in close relationship with Jesus and His people, are blessed. To persevere in this context is the opposite of forgetting. The ‘hearers only’ walk away and immediately forget what they were supposed to do. The doer however, looks at the law of liberty and endures.

blessed in doing...God continues to pour out blessings on His people. He blesses those who persevere under trials and promises the crown of life (James 1.12). He blesses those who persevere in action of true religion (James 1.26-27) with His divine favor.

Friday, July 9.....James 1.26-27

Purified Action

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why does an unbridled tongue make a person's religion worthless?

2. Considering the social constrictions on widows and orphans:
 - o. Why is God's heart for the widow and orphan?

 - p. What biblical precedent do we find in Scripture for this position?

 - q. How can we identify the widows, orphans and strangers whom God is calling us to serve?

3. How can we keep ourselves unstained by the world while serving the disenfranchised?

4. How is a Christ-centered and others-focused life a personal faith that is pure and undefiled before God the Father? How can this refresh our spirits?

• PRAYER POINT •

THE PRACTICE OF GENUINE FAITH

- St. Oecumenius wrote: “If you want to be truly religious, do not demonstrate this by your knowledge of the law but by the way you put it into practice.”
- As you pray for the Father’s kingdom to come and His will be done, be sensitive to the leading of His Spirit as He guides you to those who need your religion to be put into practice.
- Jesus tells us that everyone will know that we are His disciples because our love for one another (John 13.35). How can you bless someone today in the midst of difficulty?

COMMENTARY

v. 26: **If anyone thinks he is religious...** James carries forward the themes he developed in all the previous verses (1.1-25) into a single term: religious. He returns here to the poor, the call to righteous living and harnessed speech as components of genuine religion.

The Messianic community scattered across the Roman Empire surely desired to be known as God-fearing men and women. It is important to note that the vast majority of people in the Roman world would have also sought to be seen as religious. The distinction comes in what makes a person truly religious. For the Greek it would have been the appropriate pantheon of deities, similar to the Romans who added imperial worship. For the Jew the Law called everyone to “defend the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow,” (Isaiah 1.17; see also Psalm 82.3); to love the disenfranchised alien, giving him food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10.18).

James’ use of the Greek adjective translated religious is its sole occurrence in the New Testament. It implies a careful observance of beliefs, a devotion to a truth. But as James will purport, thinking that you are devout while leaving your tongue ungoverned is a distorted impression of reality.

James develops in these two verses three aspects of a sincere and true religion: 1) to bridle one’s tongue, 2) to care for disenfranchised and marginalized by society, and 3) to be a holy people. All of these we see in the ministry of Jesus. Although Jesus is unyielding in His rebuke of the false religion of the power He never fails to show compassion to the oppressed and downtrodden (Luke 7.11-15; Matthew 8.3; 20.34). He is Holy and we are called to be Holy in the same way (1 Peter 1.15-16; see also Leviticus 11.44-45; 19.2; 20.7). Jesus’ religion was the perfect example because he chose to become poor, so that through His poverty we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8.9).

does not bridle his tongue... Here James introduces his image of a bridle for the human tongue, to which he will return in chapter 3, expanding on this verse and 1.19-20. It has been argued that some Messianic Christians were not tempering their speech, even as they were passionately defending their positions.

but deceives his heart... James’ phrase here echoes that of Jeremiah (“the heart is deceitful above all things,” Jeremiah 17.9) as the prophet delineates between the way of life and the way of death (17.1-11). Through Jeremiah, God addressed the stubborn hearts of his people whose descendants are to whom James is preaching.

By deceived, James is implying that the hearts of his audience are prone to being led into error thinking their religion was pure and righteous. Paul parallels this idea in his letter to the Ephesians using the same word about being deceived (v. 6), this time by

hollow words of heart-twisted teachers like those James is confronting who are excusing all kinds of immorality in the church (Ephesians 5.1-7)

This should be a companion phrase to describe one who does not bridle his tongue, together forming a worthless religion.

this person's religion is worthless...The unbridled tongue and self-deceived heart have no hope of producing a worthy religious life. Worthless in the Greek is used 6 times in the New Testament and adjectivally describes something ineffective, powerless, idle. Everywhere the word is used connotes a uselessness and fruitlessness; for example, the Lystrans useless gods (Acts 14.15) or the useless wisdom of the “wise” (1 Corinthians 3.20). A Christian life marked by ungoverned speech and corrupted motivations is aimless, ineffective and shallow. This sort of religion is not a faithful representation of the gospel of Jesus Christ leaving the world with an inadequate witness.

v. 27: **Religion that is pure...**James, however, does not leave his listeners without hope. He defines what kind of religion God is pleased to bless. He starts by bringing his Jewish audience back to the Torah, interpreted through Christ. Purity was central to Jewish religious life, illustrated well in Leviticus. If the diaspora were Torah-observant then calling them to purity would have been language with which they were well acquainted. But he does not leave them with the external appearance of purity but, like Jesus, calls them to internal purity.

The purity of our religion should be visible, working from within where the Holy Spirit is actively transforming us into the image of Jesus (Romans 12.2), recognizable by our community as we oppose injustice, oppression and wordiness—all things that distort and dehumanize those made in the image of God.

[religion that is] undefiled... Undefiled is used with pure to describe true religion. Where the ‘purity’ in Greek describes the cathartic purging that purifies, the word undefiled means that something has not been stained or polluted. Together they reinforce the Psalm of King David’s description of a person able to ascend the mountain of the Lord: one who has a pure heart and clean hands (Psalm 24.3-4). Like the righteous of the psalm, the pure and undefiled will receive blessings from the Lord (24.5).

God the Father...Like Jesus and his fellow apostles James referred to God as Father. David saw God as a compassionate Father (Psalm 103.13). The prophets wrote, in the midst of divine judgment and exile of God as a loving Father, ready to redeem His repentant children (Isaiah 63.16-17; 64.8-9), pouring out mercy (Jeremiah 31.20). Jesus drew on this language, teaching his disciples to pray to God as their Father (Matthew 6.9; Luke 11.2). God’s fatherhood used as an image for understanding our relationship with God is also important for how we approach others.

visit orphans and widows in their affliction... If God is our Father, and God cares for the fatherless and the widow, then we should take responsibility for the marginalized of society. We should be actively looking for the disenfranchised who are suffering under the pressure of a soul-corrupted world (Ezekiel 22.6-7). We should prioritize their needs above our own, recognize their traumas and where social restrictions have without options, as we seek to keep ourselves unstained by the world (Isaiah 1.16-17).

James defines pure and undefiled religions as a *visiting* the orphan and widow. Luke uses this same word 'visit' in the song of Zechariah, praising the Lord, the God of Israel because he visited His people and redeemed them (Luke 1.68, 78). Likewise, Matthew uses the same word in Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The King separates the two groups whether or not they came to visit Him in his affliction (Matthew 25.36, 43). The author of Hebrews goes so far as to marvel at the love of God who visits humankind (Hebrews 2.6). This means that visiting does not solely seeing someone but caring for them too.

In the second century, a small book called *The Shepherd* was circulated among the believers written from the perspective of a former slave. In one of its parables the narrator encourages Christians to not be consumed with the pursuit of personal wealth or neglect looking after widows and orphans but to see them as kinds of fields and houses they should spend their riches on. One easily sees the influence of James on this book of Christian piety.

keep oneself unstained from the world... Along with being present with the marginalized, followers of Jesus should seek to be holy, above reproach, set apart and spotless (1 Timothy 6.14; 2 Peter 3.14); not conforming to evil desires or the patterns of this world, but made holy in the blameless and spotless blood of Jesus (1 Peter 1.13-19).