

James 1

Dear Brethren and Sisters, we have recently been reading together the epistle of James, and our thoughts this morning are on his first chapter. The writer of this book was almost certainly James, the Lord's brother, the spokesman and leader of the ecclesia at Jerusalem. This epistle is generally considered the earliest, written, it is thought about 45 AD, although some date it a little later than that. It was written to Jewish believers of the dispersion outside of Palestine throughout the Roman Empire.

It is very similar in its form of teaching to the teachings of Christ. There is more imagery from nature than in all of Paul's epistles put together. We know that was a method by which Christ taught.

God uses different instruments for different purposes.

James gives very concise expression to basic principles and problems of character. Certain typical passages will come to mind to illustrate this, of which his book is full. He had the faculty of expressing basic truths very forcibly and strikingly. He goes right to the heart of things. His words are fairly simply, but actually very deep. His tone is positive and decisive. This short book contains over 50 commands.

After a brief salutation of just one verse, he begins his message with an arresting command. Verse 2 – "*Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations.*" Now, *trial* expresses the meaning better, as the Revised Version and most modern versions have it. "*Count it all joy*"—rejoice, be thankful when you are tried, "*knowing that the trying of your faith worketh patience.*" And this MUST happen, if we are to be accepted by God. He here goes immediately to the root of the purpose of our present mortal dispensation—the development of character by trial.

Patience is a very beautiful thing. It is intelligent self-control and self-discipline—doing what is right and not what we desire. It is the triumph of the wisdom of the spirit over the evil of the flesh. "*Let patience have her perfect work,*" says James. Patience is character. It is the only true strength. Impatience is weakness, babyishness, immaturity—lack of strength.

In verse 5, James tells us that God will give wisdom liberally—abundantly—to any who seek. This wisdom, of course, is the Spirit guidance in the way of life. We can profitably connect this promise with what he has just said about patience. He has counseled joy and patience in every problem and trial, because that is wisdom.

The wisdom God will give is the wisdom to understand these things and to manifest the joy and the patience to be spiritually developed. We see that the spiritual lesson here is the same as that which the book of Job is designed to teach us—joy, patience, and spiritual wisdom, lovingly bestowed by God who understands and controls everything. The process sometimes is very hard, but the result is beautiful.

This leads James to a warning in verses 6-8. It is as if some had said, "We have tried this and nothing has happened. We are just the same as we were before. We are no closer than ever to the joy and patience and wisdom of the spirit." James says, "*A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.*" Such receive nothing from God. Only those receive whose eye is single—who seeketh with their whole heart. Those who face the

great decision—the things of the world, the things of the flesh, the things that we desire OR the things of God—and having made the decision, faithfully hold to it, their course unshakably established. These alone are NOT double minded. These alone receive the wisdom. They are the only ones in whom God works, building them unto Himself in holiness and grief.

Verses 9-11 – The natural conditions of men in which they find themselves—rich and poor. This aspect of life is incidental. The Truth and the Eternal Purpose is so great that it entirely eclipses all natural differences of condition. They are absolutely unimportant. The time is so short. Let the poor glory in His great exaltation and the limitless riches of infinity and eternity to which he is related, as a son of God. And, let the rich glory in that he has been taught the emptiness of the present—the meaninglessness of position and possession in this life, and the wisdom and beauty of the humiliation that sees man as a perishing creature of dust for all his pomp and pride. Both have had their eyes opened to the true wisdom that shows them that present position in life means nothing. This life will be looked back on as but a brief flash of time, in which the only thing that mattered was the development of character. Therefore, our external circumstances do not justify either disappointment or glorying.

Verses 12-18 concern temptation—what it consists of, where its roots run, that all evil is from beneath—from within—and all good is from above—from without. *“Blessed is the man that endureth temptation.”* For him, there is a crown of life at the end. This crown of life, says James in verse 12, is for those that love the Lord.

What is the connection between loving the Lord and enduring temptation? Only those who love will be able to endure, because love is the only power that can overcome and control evil. Every effort—no matter how noble or how determined or how agonizing—will fail, if it is not based upon love. The crown is just for those who love the Lord with all their hearts.

Verses 14-15 of this section describe the basis of evil more simply and concisely than we find anywhere else. *“Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”*

The Apostle Paul says in connection with the memorial bread and wine, *“Let a man examine himself.”* And here is one of the basic tests to examine ourselves by—one of the basic insights that teach us what we are and why we act as we do and what we must do about it.

James’ figure is very striking. As soon as lust is embraced in the mind, conception of something begins. It is the beginning of bringing something to birth. Then, it grows within us—growing upon our own life blood for its development. And so sin comes to a birth. And sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. *Finished*, here, means mature or fully grown. The sin, to which we give birth, itself at last gives birth, and its offspring is death. This is the inevitable course of development. And it all comes from the first concession to lust. The beginning is the important thing.

Continuing in verse 16 – *“Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.”* There is nothing good from beneath, or within. All good is

from God. “*Do not err.*” Do not be deceived. In the flesh—in the natural mind—in what we think naturally, there is no good thing. It’s all suffering. All good must come from without—from above—from learning what God has said. God stands waiting before our course.

Verse 18 – “*Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*” Here is the same figure of conception and birth used for the other side of the picture. Here is the spiritual birth unto holiness and life. Of His Own will, He begat us. The Word sown in the heart begins the conception of the new man of righteousness within us. God Himself has begun all this within us for His Own holy purpose.

“*Wherefore,*” continues James, verse 19, seeing that God has initiated a glorious process within us, by bestowing His Divine Word in our hearts by the enlightenment of the Gospel, “*let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak.*” The thought is the same as in Ecclesiastes 5:2 – “*God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore, let thy words be few.*” God is above; we are beneath. God knows everything; we know nothing. Our purpose in life is to learn and to develop—to grow in knowledge and in godliness.

Let us clearly perceive the apostle’s point. “*Be swift to hear, slow to speak.*” Realize your abysmal ignorance; realize the vastness of God’s wisdom. Earnestly fill your time with the true learning that you may modify just a little the depth of your natural ignorance—that you may be of some use and pleasure to God. As we are naturally, we are absolutely of no use to Him.

The words of a man of God will be few, cautious and well weighed. He would always be examining himself, checking his own knowledge, very slow to form opinion, very slow to be dogmatic, seeking and crying for the wisdom of God with all his heart and soul, never trusting his own thoughts.

To “*slow to speak*” James adds, “*slow to wrath.*” This naturally follows. For among other things, anger is an assumption that we know everything. If we think it over, we will realize it is true. Anger is an assumption that we are in possession of all the facts and are qualified to judge.

“*The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God,*” he says in verse 20. What depth of meaning there is there! What countless evils have been committed under the cloak of what is called righteous indignation! Human anger is a presumptuous evil, and evil can only breed evil. It is never good.

“*Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness,*” verse 21. Let us not just skip over this, because of its strange wording, or because we assume it refers to some excess of evil we have nothing to do with. Let us stop and try to find out what James really means, because it is clear his exhortation up to this point has been a general one to all, based upon the basic evil of all flesh.

Filthiness refers to everything that is defiling to holiness. We may not regard ourselves as filthy, but in our natural state, God does. Unless we are cleansed by His Word, we are filthy. James has just drawn a contrast between the motions of sin—the natural reactions of the flesh—all the filthiness of human evil, anger, and presumption

(self will)—and the Divine good that is engrafted from above. He has shown that anger is foreign and defiling to the process of godly self-discipline and control.

Superfluity of naughtiness – when the Authorized Version was translated, *naughtiness* meant wickedness. Words gradually weaken with use. *Superfluity* seems to refer to a malignant growth, or a destructive fungus that will, if permitted to get a foothold, at last destroy all power to resist, and finally, life itself. Cancerous, or parasitic growth, of wickedness is the meaning here of *superfluity of naughtiness*.

“*And,*” he continues, verse 21, “*receive with meekness the engrafted word.*” The spiritual meekness contrasts with the natural anger, which he condemned. The engrafted Word is a beautiful contrast to the life sapping cancer of wickedness, against which he warns. Here also is something which once engrafted into the fleshly tables of the heart will grow and grow until it permeates and transforms the whole body. But this time the process is life-giving and beneficial, not destructive.

Verse 22-25 deal with the doing of the Word instead of hearing—just passively believing and offering but lip service to godliness. The exhortation is again emphasized by a striking figure—a man looks into a glass, and sees himself very clearly, just exactly as he is. While he confesses the truth of what he sees, and then immediately goes on his way and completely forgets? He forgets. Do not we do the same, time after time after time? We become engrossed in something else, and right away we forget. We forget that the basic purpose in life is spiritual development and self-discipline, and nothing else—not self-pleasing or self-comfort. We forget that we are only growing spiritually while we are consciously doing as unto the Lord whatever we are doing, to please Him, and not to please ourselves. It is possible to be deeply engrossed, even in the work of the Truth, and still be completely forgetful of the basic purpose of our life—why we are doing the work.

Verse 25 – “*Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty; and continueth therein...this man shall be blessed in his doing* (middle margin).” What is the *perfect law of liberty*? The sense in the original is expressed a little better by rendering it as the Revised Version does, “*the perfect law, the law of liberty.*” In chapter 2, James terms it, verse 8, as *the royal law*, and defines it as, “*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*” He again uses the term *law of liberty* in connection with it in 2:12. We know this law in its fullness, as Jesus expressed it, “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind and strength and soul, and thy neighbor as thyself.*”

There is a law of liberty in many ways. It is contrasted with the law of bondage—Moses’ law, which was given to bring all under condemnation and to teach men their hopelessness and need. It is the law of liberty from the slavery of the evil motions of the flesh, but by it God gives a spiritual way of life and the power to walk in it. It is the law of liberty from the law of sin and death—the general constitution of evil that comes in the train of Adam’s sin.

Verse 26 – “*If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.*” Unless the tongue is bridled, religion is vain. James does not mince words. His teaching is blunt and straight forward. No amount of religious activity and zeal are of any avail or have any meaning or value, if there is not a true and real control and direction of the tongue within the framework of divine instruction. When we talk without thought, we are sinning, that is without spiritual

thought. James returns more fully to this basic and serious problem later in the epistle. Nothing could be more plain spoken and decisive than his words here.

There is much instruction in the Scripture concerning the use of the tongue. The Scriptures speak of grace and praise and meekness and sobriety and gravity and wisdom and gentleness and kindness of the tongue. And on the other hand, there is evil-speaking and clamor and bitterness and foolish talking and jesting and worldliness and ungodliness. James' strong words show us here that it is preeminently a case of obedience being better than sacrifice.

"In the multitude of words, there wanteth not sin." Realizing the propensities of the flesh, the quick untamed wildness of the tongue, and the requirements God has laid down in various places concerning the bridling, or proper use and control of the tongue, we can see how true this statement must be. In the multitude of words, there is bound to be sin. Unless words are carefully chosen, they are bound to be sinful, because they are naturally of the flesh.

The man of God will, therefore, be marked by great reserve and carefulness of speech. He will constantly re-examine himself to see if the fountain is flowing with sweet water or bitter—wisdom or foolishness, spirituality or natural fleshliness. Knowing that upon the answer will be determined whether or not his show of religion is a vain and empty shell.

Verse 27 – *"Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."* Another wonderful example of James' Spirit-guided ability to express great divine truth in simple, striking, graphic words. Here he sums up all that is a true and living religion. He does not, as some argue, preclude belief of the Gospel, of baptism, and breaking of bread, and all the other pattern of divine instruction. He concisely sums up the purpose and principle and inner heart.

All good to others is embraced in the first phrase, *"to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction."* All self-control and spiritual self-development in the second, *"to keep himself unspotted from the world."*

The beauty of these teachings is in their limitlessness. We never fully plumb their depth nor fulfill their requirements. But if we grow in grace and spiritual knowledge, we find the engrafted Word gradually expanding in our hearts and lives. More and more, we shall find the gentle pressure of the growing Word within us. More and more, it will purify our hearts and reactions and motives and desires and the expressions of our tongue. More and more, the divine picture will unfold. More and more, the beauty of holiness will impress us, the ugliness of all that is natural to the flesh, the beauty of that transforming way of good that is entirely from above. *"Let patience have her perfect work."*

Bro. G.V.Growcott