

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But 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.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

Pure Religion Is This

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James 1

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to James 1. We will spend the next two Sundays in the Epistle of James and so I want to provide you with just a little bit of background on the letter as a whole before we address the specific passage in front of us.

The letter was written by James the brother of the Lord Jesus who became the first Bishop or Pastor of the church in Jerusalem. He says that he is writing to Jewish Christians who have been scattered. From this we believe he means that after the persecution that is mentioned in Acts 8:1 many of the Jewish Christians under James' care were scattered to the four corners of the Roman Empire and more still were scattered in subsequent years under other outbreaks of persecution. James is thus writing to his flock in exile. He had a congregation in Jerusalem but he maintained care over his people who had been forced in small groups to flee to other places. His letter is thus, unsurprisingly very pastoral in tone. It is full of practical advice on how to grow in and live out the Christian faith.

Sometimes, over the years, liberal scholars have unfairly contrasted this letter from James with letters by Paul and they have suggested that James and Paul did not see eye to eye on the Gospel but this suggestion has been rejected by orthodox Christian scholars in every generation. The truth is that they wrote to different people for different reasons and so their letters have different emphases but they share the same Gospel. James is writing to small groups of people that he receives and treats as truly saved and he is telling them how they should live as truly saved people. Paul is working as a missionary among Gentiles and so he spends a lot of time in his letters explaining the Gospel but then he too almost inevitably makes a turn and begins to teach on how this Gospel faith must be lived out in the life of the true believer. You see these wonderful hinges in Paul's letters usually marked out with the word "Therefore." Think of Romans 12. Paul spends the first part of the letter explaining the Gospel and then he says: "Therefore I urge you brethren, in view of God's mercy to offer yourselves as living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God for this is your reasonable service of worship." And then he goes on to give 5 chapters of ethical teaching which line up very well with the 5 chapters in the Epistle of James.

All the letter writers of the New Testament tend to take their lead from the pattern of Jesus. Jesus said to his disciples: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15. NKJV) Paul spent a little more time on the first side of that equation – he spent time encouraging people and helping people enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ through the Gospel but then he went over on to the other side and said: "Now here is how we keep his commandments". James spends a little less time on how to enter a relationship with Jesus because he is talking to people who have already done that and he moves directly on to how we must live so as to keep his commandments. In fact this whole letter really has one guiding theme; it seeks to show truly converted people how to live AS truly converted people. It encourages believers to be rightly religious. "Right Religion" would be a pretty decent title for this letter. Obviously there is a bad way to be religious, we hear lots about that today; of course it is wrong to be hypocritical, it is wrong to be legalistic, it is wrong to be formalistic – we don't need another sermon on that; we all agree that **WRONG RELIGION IS WRONG**. But the Bible says that there is a right, and even a necessary way of being religious, we don't hear much about that nowadays, but James will spend 5 chapters commending this **RIGHTLY RELIGIOUS** way to his scattered flock.

Because James is less a systematic theologian and more of an old Jewish Pastor we will approach his letter differently than we might a letter from the Apostle Paul. I think it will be best to read the entirety of chapter 1 straight through and then to attempt to draw out what I think are the five main encouragements that James is making in this first section of his letter. Let me read to you from God's Word.

¹James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.

²My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,

³knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

⁴But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

⁵If 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.

⁶But 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.

⁷For 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.

⁹Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation,

¹⁰but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away.

¹¹For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.

¹²Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

¹³Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.

¹⁴But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

¹⁵Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

¹⁸Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

¹⁹^eSo then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;

²⁰for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

²¹Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

²²But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror;

²⁴for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.

²⁵But 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.

²⁶If anyone ^famong you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion *is* useless.

²⁷Pure 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. (James 1:1-27. NKJV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. One of the first things that James wants his scattered flock of truly converted Christians to understand is that:

1. Embrace lowliness, trials and suffering as being from God and for our good

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you fall into various trials! Blessed is the man who endures temptation! Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation! James is saying that if you are a true, born again believer you should embrace these trials, these times of lowliness and suffering as a gift from God and as an encouragement to your faith. Isn't the Bible just a wonderful cure for all of the modern pseudo-Christian heresies that have cluttered up North American Christendom? How unlike the TV preachers is the brother of the Lord. Joel Osteen would have you believe that if you are a believer in Jesus then you should begin experiencing your best life now. Your real estate deals should all end up in your favour, your investment portfolio should always be on the rise, your kids should always be healthy and happy and your smile should look like it is fuelled by a nuclear power plant. You should be happy and circumstantially favoured! James, the brother of the Lord Jesus and the inspired author of Holy Scripture writes to a group of persecuted, scattered and impoverished TRUE BELIEVERS and he says pretty much the EXACT OPPOSITE THING. He says, if you are truly saved you will face trial and tribulation. You will experience lowliness and loss. You will look at the unsaved rich man and be tempted to think that he is having a better life than you. Do not be fooled. The rich man will perish and fade away, but you are being transformed and glorified and made ready for an eternity of blessedness. The unsaved man truly lives his best life now – eternity for him will be a nightmare, but you are being prepared for your best life then. Exult in that! Glory in that! God is at work in you and this lowliness, this tribulation, this trial is actually proof that you have been born again into the family of God.

The author of Hebrews which may well have been Paul said exactly the same thing. In Hebrews 12 we read:

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;

⁶ *For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”^E*

⁷ *If^E you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?*

⁸ *But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.*

⁹ *Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?*

¹⁰ *For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.*

¹¹Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:5-11. NKJV)

The author says that the chastening we receive through trials and tribulations and lowliness is actually the disciplining hand of our father preparing us to partake eternally in the experience of his holiness. You see, my friends, hard times and lowliness are not proof that God doesn't love you; they are proof that he does and that he means to spend eternity with you. Thank him for that!

I've told this story before but when I was a teenage boy my mother was very vigilant in attempting to protect me from harmful influences. There was a house party down the road from us that she knew that I wanted to go to but she had told me that I was not allowed to go. There was to be drinking there and no parental supervision and she knew it would be trouble. So I went to bed in the appearance of obedience but I had a plan for mischief. After I was sure that my parents were in bed I opened my bedroom window and crawled out onto the roof. I knew that I could jump from the roof to the ground below and I intended to go to that party. However the flaw in my plan was that I had estimated the jump in broad daylight and now, in the dark it seemed much more hazardous. I had to land in a rock garden and I could no longer see the rocks. I knew that if I landed on the rocks the wrong way I would break my leg and so I lay peering into the darkness trying to see a safe landing spot but it was all for not. Now, unbeknownst to me, my mother was standing in the shadows beneath the roof with a broomstick in her hand. Her plan was to smack me over the head with that broom as an expression of her deep concern for my continued growth and perseverance in Christian faith.

James is saying, if a good parent uses appropriate discipline and chastening to advance your character, why would we expect God to do any less? God loves you too much to give you your best life now. He is preparing you for something better. A truly saved Christian understands that, welcomes that and in that develops perseverance, strength and godliness in anticipation of the world to come.

Now this topic of trials and tribulation is a major one for James and he spends much time unpacking it. Let me just say a few more things about trials before we move on to his next section of teaching. In verses 12-15 James explains the difference between a trial and a

temptation. James has said that we must accept trials and lowliness as coming from God but he wants to safeguard his people from thinking that means that God tempts us to sin, because when we are suffering we are very inclined towards sin. Does that mean God tempts us? James says no. To bring out his teaching on this in our English translation we render the Greek word *pi-ras-mos* sometimes as trial and sometimes as temptation. The Greek word can mean either. Here is what James is saying. He is saying that God initiates and ordains trials and lowliness, loss and suffering for the believer. God authors it. His intention in that is entirely benevolent. He wants you and expects you to prayerfully reach out and take hold of his grace so that you grow and become stronger and more prepared for the experience of his holiness in heaven. The devil however meets you in those times of lowliness and suffering and he tries to tempt you to become angry at God, to become selfish, petty or jealous.

So imagine that God made a man poor, as he did to Job for example. God's purpose in that was to teach the man to trust in God alone and to save him from the idolatry and distraction of riches. The devil shows up and whispers into the man's ear: "God must not love you. He is punishing you for something. He withholds good from you. God is not good." Or he says: "Look at that other fellow. He is doing pretty well. Why should he have more than you? You are a better man than him". This is how a trial becomes a temptation but God is not the author of the temptation. He is the author of the trial. The devil seeks to stir up your natural jealousy, your inherent selfishness or your prideful anger in the trial and to make you rebel and reject the Lord.

James then tells his people the attitude they must have as Christians when they go through these inevitable trials:

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

¹⁸Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

¹⁹So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;

²⁰for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (James 1:16-20. NKJV)

Don't forget that God is good, don't be deceived into thinking otherwise. He is giving you good things, in fact he is giving you the best thing, just hold on and persevere and you will see! Remember your salvation through the word of truth. Go back to that truth when you are suffering. See Christ on the tree and remember that the road to glory always passes through a cross. So, when you are carrying a cross be swift to hear. Ask God: "What would you have me

learn?" The fastest way to end a trial is to learn the lesson. Be slow to speak. The more you speak foolishness in your trial the more you are telling God you need more trial. Shhh. And don't get angry. Don't get angry with God. The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. The truly saved man does not get angry at God nor hate him in his trial. He thanks God and is glad that he is being treated as a son.

Secondly, in verses 21-25 we see the truly saved man or woman; the rightly religious person will:

2. Receive, apply and press into the saving word

We need not say too much about this as it was the content of our message last week. The Bible is remarkably consistent on this point. Truly saved people do not park out in the merge lane of Christian faith. Truly saved people do not want a 57th sermon on the ABCs of Christianity. They want to press in, they want to apply and they are blessed in their doing. Truly saved people want to do more than HEAR the word, they want to LIVE THE WORD. They are hungry to press in and DO. Look at verse 25, one of our memory verses from earlier this year:

²⁵But 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. (James 1:25. NKJV)

The blessing of the Christian life, according to James is for the person who presses deep into the word of God and DOES IT. There are no blessings to be found in Christianity for those who want to be constantly amused by the basics or by the rudiments or by introductory matters. The blessings are found all the way inside, they are given to those who press in and who live out.

Thirdly, truly converted, real believers in Jesus living out right religion will:

3. Be consistent in the use of their tongues to worship the Lord

Look at verse 26:

²⁶If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion *is* useless.

The Greek word used for “religious” here is *thrace-kos* and it can also mean “demonstrative in worship”. We think it is related to the word for making a clamour or a great noise. James is saying: “Do you think you are a passionate worshipper? Do you think that because you sing loudly and raise your hands that you are making a good show of your faith? All of that is disqualified if you slander, gossip or lie. If you slander in the lobby you might as well not sing in the sanctuary.” Rightly religious people worship God with their tongues at all times. They speak truth. This sounds rather like how we were taught to love people when we studied Leviticus 19, do you recall? To love our neighbour we were told meant to tell the truth in business and law and also to rebuke our neighbour if he was doing wrong. Truth telling and love are connected in Leviticus 19 and here truth speaking and worship are connected in James 1. There is a good way of being religious and it involves learning to speak the truth in the lobby and in the sanctuary.

4. Increase in practical love, particularly towards those in need

Again, this is right in line with what we talked about two weeks ago in Leviticus 19 and last week in terms of the manifest evidence of saving faith. We remember that Paul believed the Thessalonians to be truly saved because he saw their growing faith, their increasing love and their persevering under trial. Similarly the author of the Hebrews is confident that his flock will not apostasize because he sees their love and acts of service one to another. Real Christians who are truly saved increase in their love for the brotherhood, particularly those in need. Again we recall the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus said that on the last day, judgment day, he would walk among the peoples gathered before his throne and he would separate them one from another as a shepherd separates sheep and goats. At the end of the process he explains to the sheep how he knew them to be truly saved people. He says: “I was hungry, and you fed me. Thirsty and you gave me drink. Naked and you clothed me. Sick and you visited me.” The sheep cannot recall ever having done these things for Jesus and he says:

‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of **the least of these My brethren**, you did *it* to Me.’
(Matthew 25:40. NKJV)

When we show love to the lowly and the hurting and the vulnerable among the brotherhood of Christ it is received as worship unto Christ himself and it is received as proof of saving faith.

James says to his scattered flock: “Do you think yourselves Christians? Than love the least of Christ’s sheep. Love the orphan and visit the widow. This is right religion”.

With all due respect to my fellow shepherds in the Evangelical church, who love to tell us that “religion” is somehow a barrier to our walk with Jesus, whatever that means, I think that we could use a little more religion in this place, amen? We could use a little more love for the brotherhood. We could use a few more self important yuppies bringing soup to the shut ins. We could use a few more narcissistic self aggrandizing irreligious therapeutic deists to start living out their so-called faith in Jesus with some practical works of mutual love and service among God’s people. Real saving faith is lived out in simple ways and in loving ways among simple and lowly people. That’s right religion and I think we need more, not less of it among those who claim to walk with Jesus.

5. Keep themselves unstained by the world

The Greek word for “unstained” in verse 27 is *as-pee-lon* and it is kind of funny because it sounds like what it means in English. It sounds like what a person would say if they tipped over a cup of coffee and made a stain on their favourite shirt: “Oh no, I spill on me!” The idea is that a truly saved person learns to develop a certain sanctified cowardice with respect to the world. He or she realises that there are certain places they simply should not go because the chances of getting spilled on are very high. You need to keep a safe distance. The world is contagious and if you get too close it will infect you. Mature Christianity is reflected in a wisdom about how to be in the world but not of it. We need more of that. The church has been spilt on, amen? I’m sure it was accidental but it resulted from a foolish and prideful accommodation. We thought we could get closer without becoming stained. We were wrong. Its time to pull back. We need more distance. Real believers understand that, James says. They find a way to live on the margins of society, in but not of, like desert prophets rather than palace courtiers they can speak truth to power because they have not themselves been corrupted by it. Faithful to God but calling to people.

That is the kind of Bride Jesus is preparing for himself - pure and SPOTLESS, holy and SET APART. Jesus said that was what he wanted; he never told us to try and imitate the world in order to get as many people as possible into the church. He told us that he knew those who were

his and that he would call them and they would come. He told us to be holy. When did we start thinking we could do this better than Jesus? When did we start thinking that we had a better plan? When did we say to ourselves: “This whole holiness plan of Jesus’ won’t work. Most people won’t like it. We’ll get a few, sure, but we can do better than a few. If we just took a step or two towards the world maybe we wouldn’t lose so many in the hand off. Maybe more would be able to make the jump.” That has been the basic rationalization behind every stupid decision made by the church since 1960. In 1960 we began to fear that fewer people were coming to church and the collective wisdom of God’s shepherds was that we just needed to move the church a little closer to the world and then we could turn that trend around. How’s that working out? There are far fewer people coming to church now than in the 60’s and the church has been utterly compromised and thoroughly discredited. It didn’t work. It could never have worked; Jesus said:

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. (Matthew 5:13. NKJV)

Jesus said that the cause of the Kingdom is actually best served by our maintaining a critical differentiation with respect to the world. Evangelism works BETTER when we are apart, OTHER and HOLY, imagine that. When the church loses her saltiness, her differentness, she is thrown out and trampled underfoot. She is abused and trampled because she has become worthless to the world and unusable to God and so no one comes to her defence! The world doesn’t want a church that is a mirror image of herself, we have proved that again and again and again. The liberals and the social intellectuals come into our churches and they say that if we just accept Darwinism people will come! If we just talk about gender and sexuality like the world does, people will come. If we just tone down the whole exclusivity of the cross thing, people will come. And churches do that. Foolish churches who do not love the truth do that and they charge head long into ruin. The United Church of Canada has heeded that advice several times in the last 80 years and they are the fastest shrinking religious body in North America. The world would rather we thought just like them but when we do they despise us as spineless and they perceive us as irrelevant and they stay away in droves. More devastatingly the Holy Spirit perceives us as compromised and as apostate and he stays away entirely. Let us become FOOLS AGAIN for the sake of the cross. Let us be despised again in the eyes of the world. The wisdom of the world is perishing and I say let it perish! Let the world choke to death on all of the things

she has loved instead of the Lord and let us live differently at the margins as the fragrance of life among those who are perishing.

Oh my friends, I am so convinced that what we need today is a rightly religious church. We need a church that understands that our best life is in glory and who will forsake the riches of this world for the sake of the world to come. We need a rightly religious church who pulls back from the dying world and presses into the saving Word, a church that talks differently and loves extravagantly. We need a church that is SALT and LIGHT, DISTINCT and HOLY and we will need to seek God's grace and help if we are to be that ever again. Let us as a needy and erring people seek the Lord for help and the grace of renewal. Worship team will you come and lead us in that?