

# BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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## JAMES 1-2 – THE SPIRITUAL MIRROR; FAITH & WORKS



It is remarkable, as Jesus parables were, that the principals in James' epistle can be compared to a string of pearls, with each spiritual truth leading to the next. Of course, James learned from his older half-brother, Jesus, how to illustrate spiritual truths. In the last study, we saw how James' first pearl of wisdom went to the heart of what true Christianity is all about: how to develop spiritually mature character before God. He said only by overcoming trials will we be able to do so and this is why they exist. For God is seeking to grant to those who overcome, the crown of eternal life and an entrance into His glorious kingdom.

In order to overcome, James knows it's important to know the difference between being tested and being tempted. He explains God may test us to develop more of that righteous character, but on the contrary, He will never tempt us to sin, which is against His righteous nature. Rather, we are the ones who yield to temptations, so we fall into sin. As Paul advises: "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:11).

James emphasizes about God's true nature: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every 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. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:15-17). So, nothing, such as temptations, can come from God, who is the giver of good and all blessings. God the Father never changes His benign, patient and loving character. Neither does Christ, as Hebrews 13:8 notes: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

This, of course does not mean everything will be "peaches and cream" for the brethren. James explains there will be difficult trials, seductive temptations and sometimes even tragedies. But he emphasizes we can develop a stronger and more mature spiritual character by overcoming those difficulties, which is the overall goal. As Paul puts it: "For I consider that the *sufferings of this present time are not worthy* to be compared with *the glory* that is to be revealed *in us*" (Romans 8:18).

This is in line with what God is producing: the *firstfruits* of His spiritual harvest—those He *first* calls by revealing to them His truths: "Of His own will He 'brought us forth' [Gk. *apokueo* -- begotten] by *the word of truth*, that we might be the *firstfruits* of His creatures" (James 1:18).

So, despite our imperfections, He has *begotten* us through His spirit to one day be part of His marvelous kingdom. Only through the Scriptures can we understand this purpose. When we are baptized, He begets us through His spirit, to begin a new life that prepares us for His kingdom. Notice the Bible is called here, the "word of *truth*" because God cannot lie and has revealed to us His truths through His Word. The result is we will be made "His firstfruits," meaning the firstfruits of all of mankind to enter His kingdom. This *analogy* of "the firstfruits" is taking from Lev. 23:15-18 and the symbol of Pentecost, which is also called the Feast of Firstfruits (Num. 28:26). In the N.T., it is at Pentecost when the Church "of the firstfruits" begins (Acts 2:1-4).

The following pearl of truth James gives explains the need to receive the truth of God with the *right attitude*. Instead of resisting it, he says we should humbly accept it and more importantly, carry it out. He says: "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive *with meekness the implanted word*, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:19-21).

So, James stresses it is not enough to just hear the word of God, but to *apply* it. He adds: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 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; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 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" (James 1:22-25).

Now he compares intently reading the Bible to looking into a mirror. Back then; mirrors were

made of polished bronze or silver and opaque. It was hard to see the image well. So they had to bring the mirror up close and concentrate hard to see what needed to be done to the face, whether it was dirty or if the hair was unkempt.

As with a mirror, some can look into God's Word and know what they should do, but fail to apply it, thus deceiving themselves into thinking all is fine with God. Yet as Paul said: "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:13).

I never forgot what I learned from Herbert Armstrong about this principle, where he wrote in his booklet, *Why Were You Born?* "Knowledge is of no use except as it is used. Not the hearers, but the doers of the law shall be justified. The command to STUDY is for the purpose of putting the instruction into action that we may 'show' ourselves approved unto God. And, it is written 'A good UNDERSTANDING have all they that do His commandments' (Ps. 111:10). Since the purpose of the knowledge is to *do*, the doing is the *condition* to acquiring right knowledge. Bible study is of value only in proportion as the knowledge revealed is incorporated into your character is actually *living* it."

Next, James also calls God's law "*perfect*," from the Greek *teleios*, which means "complete, lacking nothing" (*Word Study Dictionary*). As Paul says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete [*perfect* in the KJV], thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). So, God's laws, plus His grace, are the way to reach that promised kingdom.

James also describes it as *the law of liberty* -- not the law of slavery, as many label it. Christ said a similar thing: "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and *the truth* shall set you free" (John 8:31-32). So, God's laws are not a burden or enslaving. John stressed, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments *are not burdensome*" (1 John 5:3). Hence, the person guided by God will have this type of an attitude.

Consequently, what does God's law free us from? First, from sin, that enslaves and damages us so much. And, what is sin? 1 John 3:4 defines it, "Whoever sins is *guilty* of breaking God's law, because sin is a *breaking of the law*" (GNB).

David in Psalm 19 and 119 glorified God's laws and is a reason God called him, "A man after My own heart, who will *do* all *My will*" (Acts 13:22). David's right attitude is expressed in Ps. 19:7, "The law of the Lord is *perfect*, converting the soul." In Ps. 119:45 he adds, "I will walk at *liberty*, because I have sought your precepts."

James ends chapter 1 with another pearl of wisdom. He said: "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. 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" (James 1:26-27). In other words, it tells us that true faith will produce *good* results.

James tells us there will be four practical consequences of applying God's commandments. First, it has to do with the tongue, and watching out with what is said. As Christ states, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt. 12:34). So, you can tell a lot about a person by whether he or she can control what they say.

Second, one should be concerned for the needy and sick in the Church. We are to do good to all, but as Paul said, "let us do good to all, *especially* to those of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10).

Third, we must keep ourselves "unspotted from the world," which means not defiling ourselves with the sins of the world. How can it be achieved? David said the best way was to faithfully keep God's laws and stay close to Him. He notes, "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to *Your word*. With *my whole heart* I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!" (Ps. 119:9-10).

The fourth example of keeping God's law is not being a respecter of persons, or not to show favoritism to a person because of his appearance or influence. James explains: "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with the gold rings, in fine

apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, 'You sit here in a good place,' and say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or, 'Sit here at my footstool,' have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?" (James 2:1-7).

James makes it clear that a person should not be favored because of his looks or riches, for in spiritual terms, it is often the rich who have more problems than the poor. It is easy for them to hide their sins by gaining favor with money or influence. They too can take advantage of the poor who almost have no way to defend themselves. Moreover, it is easy to prosecute the poor and take away their property. But above all, few of the rich humble themselves and convert to the faith. Instead, most look down on the one who humbles himself, puts God first and is a follower of Christ.

Specifically, James was addressing a problem that had arisen in the congregations, where a rich newcomer was favored and given the best seat while the poor were made to stand, or even had to sit on the floor! It was a common situation in Judaism, mentioned by Jesus about their leaders, "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi'" (Mt. 23:6-7). The Jews taught that if one was rich, it showed God was blessing them and they must be esteemed by Him. Yet, if one was poor, it was a curse from God. But James says this thinking is wrong and we should treat the poor with the same dignity as the rich when they come to Church.

He adds, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (James 2:8-9).

We see clearly that for James, the apostle who was in charge of the mother church in Jerusalem,

the laws of the Old Testament were not abolished at all! Here he mentions one law in particular, that of not being a respecter of persons, which is given in Leviticus 19:15, 18: "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor... you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

James compares God's laws to links in a chain, when if one is broken, the chain is useless. He says, "For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law" (James 2:10-11). Alex Ross explains: "The law of God is a unified whole and disregard of one commandment means that you are disobedient to the Lawgiver. So, do not entertain the delusion that the keeping of one isolated commandment of the Decalogue will compensate for the breach of some other of its requirements" (NICNT, p. 48). This is so clear. Therefore, not keeping the Sabbath, which breaks the Fourth Commandment (Ex. 20:8), is as serious before God as breaking any of the other Commandments. That is what the Bible, that perfect spiritual mirror, is telling us.

James ends this section with one last great "pearl" of wisdom when he says: "So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the *law of liberty*. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:12-13).

Notice, for the second time he calls God's law "the law of liberty" -- and certainly not of slavery. He also reveals something vital -- that we will be judged before the throne of God by that "law of liberty" of God's Word and *not* by the religious laws or decrees of men, whoever they may be.

So, if we keep God's law of liberty, he says we will learn to be merciful, for they are based on this very principle, as magnified by Jesus. As Lev. 19:18 says, "You shall *not* take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall *love* your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." These are principles all based on mercy.