

JAMES – a lesson in SPIRITUAL MATURITY

as paraphrased by Pastor Craig Crawshaw for the Oaks Bible Church of Santa Barbara, CA

Chapter 1: CONFIDENCE IN TURMOIL

1. To my Jewish brothers of all twelve tribes - wherever you might be after having been forced out of your homeland – this letter is from James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, by calling and by choice. Dear brothers:

Confidence in Trials

2-4. Take a different perspective at the many trials you face, seeing the positive in them, rather than the negative. One, your faith is being proven and strengthened. And two, you are developing endurance for the long haul of life. Don't balk at being tested, but hang in there, letting the tests accomplish their Godly purpose: your maturity, that you may be spiritually "buff" without flabbiness or weakness of character.

5. Remember, if you need wisdom (and who doesn't?), just ask God, who gives it abundantly and without making you feel bad for asking. Just ask, and Godly wisdom will indeed be given to you.

6-8. But you have to ask, really believing the answer will come. No doubting allowed! Because if you doubt, you are acting just like the waves of the sea blown around by the wind – up one minute with your belief and down the next with your doubts. This kind of supposed "faith" won't get you anything from God. He doesn't accept on-again, off-again faith, which by the way, indicates instability in other areas of life.

Confidence in Status

9-10. Hey believing brother - how about this for God's "upside down" perspective on wisdom?: If your earthly status is on the "humble" side, be proud that you are standing rich and tall in God's spiritual kingdom. And if your earthly status is on the "well off" side, be proud that in God's kingdom you are just a spiritual beggar. After all, your earthly status is about as secure as flowering grass in the heat of the sun.

11. See the picture? Just like the sun rises, so does your status. Then come the "Santa Anas" of life – and just like the grass withers and the flower falls, so does your status wither and fall. What once appeared beautiful is no more. Our status, and the futile pursuits of achieving it, will soon fade away.

12. So what's worth achieving? - Persevering through the trials of life and proving your Godly character through it all. This is how you will receive the true "crown of life" – God's heavenly reward – which He promises to each one of His lovers.

Confidence in Temptation

13-16. I don't ever want to hear you saying "I am being tempted by God." One, evil can never tempt a perfect God. And two, a perfect God could never lower Himself to tempt anyone. Rather, it's really you that brings on temptation by your own luring lustfulness. Sin comes when you give in to temptation by acting on your lust. And when that sin gets full sway in your life it kills your relationship with God. My dear, believing friends whom I love - don't be sucked in by temptation!

17. Every thing that is good is a perfect gift, especially given to you from God. "Good" is never by accident. The Giver is always our Heavenly Father, and like a bright light he never wavers or compromises in His delivery of good.

18. God exercised His Divine prerogative when He chose to pull us into truth by the power of His Word. This was so that we Jewish believers could be considered as the first ones to receive His special blessing of spiritual victory.

Confidence in Reactions

19-20. Now I'm going to tell you something you already know, but you must apply it to your reactions. One, be quick to listen to others and especially to God. Two, be slow to voice your opinion.

And three, put any tendency to anger on a slow fuse. Pleasing God and getting angry never go well together. The short version: open your ears, close your mouth and chill your anger.

21. You know all that leftover filth of the old life that's still seeps out? Dump it in the spiritual trashcan. You know God's Word that He has planted deep inside of you? Humbly receive its wisdom and let it save you from drowning in your own foolish reactions.

Confidence in Religion

22. It is delusional to think that you are religious by merely hearing the Word, believing it, and participating in a few religious activities. Rather, you prove and demonstrate your true religion by living out the Word actively in every area of your life.

23-24. Hearing the Word and not doing it is like looking at yourself in a mirror and not fixing what needs fixing. Why even look, if you just go away unchanged and oblivious to the need?

25. God's Word is the perfect rulebook for life, with rules to set you free, not tie you down, and therefore worthy of a long and hard look. If you let those rules sink in, and turn your thinking into meaningful action and change, your life will surely be blessed for it.

26. Do you think that your religion is healthy? Then put it to the test by whether you can control your tongue. If you can't, not only is your religion worthless, but you're deceiving yourself into thinking your religion is OK. It's not.

27. I'll tell you what real religion is about. It's about practicing love and care for those with special needs – like children without parents or women who have lost their husbands. Bottom line, true religion is keeping yourself pure from the wickedness of the world!

Chapter 2 : CONVICTION IN ACTION

Conviction in Equality

1. Don't you dare call yourself a believer in our amazing Lord and Chosen One, Jesus, if you treat people differently based on their appearance or background.

2-4. Here's a test. If one person walks into to your church service looking like "a million" and another comes in looking like a "bum," will you treat them the same? Or will you give special attention or seating to the one looking great and ignore the other, even making him or her sit in a place where they might not so easily draw attention. If you'd honestly treat them differently, you fail the test. You would be making an ungodly judgment based on unfair distinctions.

5-7. As my brothers in the Lord, I really do love you. So listen up. Don't we read that God so often has chosen the poor in wealth to be rich in faith and receive His kingdom inheritance? This is exactly what God promises to all who love Him. It doesn't make sense to dishonor the poor person. More often than not, it's the rich one who will give you a hard time, even pulling you into court or using your precious Lord's name in vain.

8-9. The highest law of God's kingdom is this: "Love others as you would want to be loved." If you do this, you're right on. But if you love people differently based on externals, you're practicing sin and guilty of breaking God's #1 law.

10-11. Here's the hard fact. Even if you were to keep all of God's law perfectly, one sin (like favoritism) makes you guilty of all in God's eyes. God forbids adultery, just like he forbids murder. But if you are clean regarding adultery, yet commit murder – you're guilty of adultery, and all the other laws as well. Ouch!

12-13. Now don't be frozen with fear in your words and actions toward others – God's royal law of love is meant to motivate and to free you, not to condemn you. If you show no mercy, then mercy won't come your way. But if you learn to show mercy in your assessment of others, that demonstration of mercy will trump any judgment that is due you.

Conviction in Works

14. Tell me, fellow Christians, what is “saving faith?” If someone claims to be a Christian by their faith, and yet there is little visible sign of that faith in their actions, it seems to me that kind of faith is useless faith – not “saving faith.”

15-16. For example, if a believing brother lacks some basic necessity such as clothing or food and you essentially tell him “Blessings on you, I hope you’ll be okay!” and don’t make an effort to meet his need, I say your supposed faith is a sham.

17. The principle is this: Faith, if it isn’t backed up by action, is dead faith.

18. Now, I can just hear someone say “Some Christians are more private and some are more outgoing in expressing their faith.” Well, if you’re one of those “private in your faith” types, I dare you to prove your faith without any action, while I prove my faith to others by living it out in action.

19-20. You believe that God is one? That’s good, but think of this: the demons, as they shudder, believe the same (and they’re not believers!). Can’t you admit that believing alone without actions to back it up means nothing?

21-23 After all, haven’t we heard Father Abraham was “justified by faith” when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? His faith and works “teamed up” so that his behavior proved his belief to be authentic. This was the fulfillment of the Scripture that says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Remember, this faith matched with action resulted in Abraham being called the friend of God.

24. So here’s the principle said another way: A man is made right with God by action that demonstrates inward faith, and not by actionless faith.

25. Another example would be Rahab, who was once a harlot. But she too was justified (that is, made right with God) by her works. Remember, she welcomed the spies and then hid them, letting them exit by a safe way.

26. To say the principle a final way: Just like a body without a spirit is lifeless, so also faith without demonstrative action is lifeless.

Chapter 3: CONTROL OF WORD AND DEED

Control of Giftedness

1-2. Think long and hard about whether God has called you to be a teacher of His Holy Word. Why? First of all, God will give teachers a stricter judgment when it comes to handling His Word. Secondly, we are all sinners. (And this implies that a teacher will be rightly held to a higher standard by his students, as well.) And thirdly, since teaching uses a lot of words and many words lead to certain stumbling, a teacher will never be perfect in his teaching.

Control of Tongue

3-4. A little bit in a horse’s mouth brings its whole body to obedience. Note too, that great ships can hold their course in a strong wind when directed by just a small rudder controlled by the will of the captain.

5-6. Likewise, our little tongue boasts of grandiose things. It’s like a tiny spark starting a huge, out of control forest fire. Our tongue is like a fire in many ways, a showcase for evil as it burns and ignites. Just like raging fire defiles all in its path, the tongue’s out of control wagging defiles our entire person. Like flames, our words can chart a fiery course, fueled by the very fires of hell.

7-8. Every kind of dangerous and poisonous wild animal, whether beast, bird, reptile or sea creature, can be and has been tamed to some degree. But no one can tame his tongue from danger and poison. It just won’t stop wagging and making trouble.

9-10. Think of the inconsistency. Out of the tongue comes both blessing of our Lord Heavenly Father and cursing of men, made in God's image. What hypocrisy that the same mouth both blesses and curses. Fellow Christians, this is plain wrong!

11-12. A fountain can't give both fresh and bitter water. Neither can a fig tree produce olives or a vine give figs. And the ocean will never give us fresh water. Think about it!

Control of Wisdom

13. Come on, be smarter than that! Do you want to be considered wise? Then let your behavior show your wisdom and let your gentle consideration of others prove your wisdom.

14-16. The two biggest opponents to Godly wisdom are bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. If these two creep into your heart don't be arrogant and call them what they're not. They only bring the wisdom of this world, wisdom of your natural self and wisdom of the demon world. Where you find jealousy and selfish ambition you will find chaos and evil cropping up everywhere.

17. Here are the sure signs of Godly wisdom: first and foremost, it is always uncontaminated in its moral purity. A Godly decision then fosters healthy relationships, is considerate of the implications to others, makes good sense, is accompanied by additional blessings, shows consistency and impartiality in its implementation and rings true in its authenticity. It just plain acts and feels right.

18. Long and short, if you plant seeds of consideration for God and others you will eventually reap a harvest of what is right in the eyes of God and others. Now that's how to control wisdom (and the tongue)!

Chapter 4: CLEANSING OF SELF

Cleansing of Acquiring

1. Where do you think all our bickering and infighting comes from? It comes from the fight within ourselves – the fight between wanting to please God and wanting to please our own selfish desires.

2-3. Here's the predictable pattern: You really want something you don't or can't have, so you do whatever it takes to get it – sometimes going as far as murder! You get envious of others who have it. You still can't get it, so you bicker and quarrel. You don't even think to ask God for it. And if you do ask Him, you don't get what you're asking for because your motives are all wrong, asking out of selfishness.

Cleansing of Compromising

4. You might as well be called what you are: spiritual adulteresses! Don't you realize that when you "play around" with this sinful world that you are being unfaithful to God and rousing His anger? Simply put, to be a friend of this world is to make God your enemy.

5. God pulls no punches in the Scripture when He says that He is the jealous lover who will tolerate no rival to the Holy Spirit He has put within us.

Cleansing of Priding

6. The great news: God gives grace, and more grace. The only stopper to this grace is pride, since God only gives grace to the humble of heart.

7. So here are the 3 keys to God's grace and humility of heart: #1: Let God control your life. This means you must resist the devil's every attempt to usurp that control. Firmly tell him "no" and he will leave you alone.

8-9 #2: Develop a close relationship with God. If you do this, God will make His nearness known to you. Remember, since you are sinners by nature, be sure to let Him "clean up your act." And since you are hypocrites by nature be sure to let Him clean up your hearts as well. Sin is no joke – so grieve over your sin with sincere sorrow and even tears, repenting from your sin so you can be close to God.

10. #3: Change your attitude from self-serving to others-serving. If you humble yourself in this way before God he will surely raise you up to new heights of spiritual maturity.

Cleansing of Judging

11. Don't "put down" a fellow Christian. If your words cut a brother down, criticizing his actions by your standards, in reality you are cutting down and judging the very law of God. You become a critic of the law rather than a doer of the law.

12. Don't forget – the universe has room for only one Rulemaker and Critic of our souls – the very One who has the unique right to save or destroy a soul (God himself!). So give up your judgmental attitude.

Cleansing of Determining

13-14. Come on now, don't be self-determining your future by saying things like: "today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a place and spend a year or so doing business that will make us money." You don't even know what will happen to you tomorrow, much less today. Your life is like a puff of smoke that briefly appears and then is gone.

15-16. Rather, reflect an attitude of God-determination by saying something like: "If the Lord wills it, we shall live and do this or that." Otherwise you are being boastful and arrogant, and this is sin, plain and simple.

17. So here's the important principle you could call "the sin of omission": To know the right thing to do, and then fail to do it, is sin. Think about it!

Chapter 5: CONNECTION WITH GOD

Connection with God by Waiting in Patience

1-6. You who are rich in this world should be crying your eyes out and howling in misery because of what will soon befall you when this life is over. Your precious grains will rot away and your clothing will be as though they were devoured by moths. Your rusted gold and silver will testify against you, consuming your flesh like fire. It's your hoarding that will haunt you in these last days. Likewise, your extortion of money owed to those who labored on your behalf to build your wealth will shout against you. And yes, the Lord of Hosts has heard this outcry. You have lived in earthly luxury, brazenly indulging yourself in whatever you wanted – but you have just been fattening your souls for slaughter. All the while there have been good and Godly examples around you – yet you have ignored them, condemned them and even killed them, though they have done nothing to resist or hurt you.

7-8. So brothers and sisters, here's what you must do in light of all this. First, you must endure these injustices patiently until our Lord returns. Just like the farmer waits for the soil to yield precious produce, patiently waiting for the early and late rains, so you must also be patient in waiting for the soon coming of the Lord, strengthening the resolve of your heart all the while.

Connection with God by Not Whining

9. Secondly, it would be easy to take out our impatience on one another, but don't be a whiner. If you're a complainer you will be judged for it. You want motivation? Then picture God the Judge standing right at your door!

10-11. For an example of being patient and not whining, take our fellow brothers, the prophets who spoke on behalf of God. Take heed that their endurance was worthy of God's blessing, and consider this for yourself. We all know that Job is remembered for his endurance. But don't forget how it all turned out for Job when God showed him compassion and mercy in response to that endurance.

Connection with God by Saying Meaning What I Say

12. Thirdly, and most importantly, don't feel a need to strengthen the promise of your word by making an oath, either swearing by God or something else on this earth. Simply mean what you say, always making good on your word. Live by your "yes" and your "no," otherwise you might be forced to hold to it before a judge – not a good witness!

Connection with God by Wrestling in Prayer

13-15. In addition, be a warrior in prayer If you're hurting, take your hurt to God in petition. If you're doing well, sing your joy to God in praise. If you're struggling spiritually, ask your church leaders to gather around you to pray for the oil of the Spirit to heal and revive you, in the name of the Lord. You can be sure that a believing prayer will receive its intended request, whether it be restoration of the sick, raising up from weakness or forgiveness of sins committed.

16. So be sure to admit your sins to one another and take them to the Lord in prayer so that you may be properly "doctored" from your sinfulness. Know this confidently - the prayer of a righteous child of God can make a real difference.

17-18. Don't forget the example of Elijah, a man with a sinful nature like ours, yet made righteous by God's grace. He prayed in earnest for God to hold back the rain and the drought lasted three and a half years! And when he prayed again for it to rain, it poured, bringing forth the fruit of the earth. Think about it!

Connection with God by Rescuing a Soul

19-20. And here's my final challenge for growth in your spiritual maturity. If a fellow brother or sister strays from God's truth, endeavor to carry out a rescue mission. If you are successful in turning one from error, you will both save this one from ruining his testimony for God as well as prevent many other sins from occurring that would otherwise have been committed – both results well worth the effort!