

Putting Off and Putting On: Scripture repeatedly says believers should discern and choose the good and reject the bad in all areas of life. Distinguishing between right and wrong is vital to biblical wisdom.

When we consider biblical principles, we should remember believers are to be devoted to and follow the example of the person of our Savior. Our devotion is not to a system of rules. We obey biblical principles in order to follow Him.

Paul in Ephesians 4:17-24 says, *“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

In all areas of life, believers are instructed to discern and “put off” the bad, and to discern and “put on” the good. God enables believers to do that, though no one can say doing so is easy. Financial status is one area where attitudes and emotions can develop which hinder spiritual development.

In the next passage, James comments on the effects of wealth or poverty on spiritual health. The overall point is that neither wealth nor poverty nor anything in between establishes or controls a person’s spiritual path through life. In all financial conditions, believers should look to the crown of life promised to those who remain steadfast in their love and obedience to God even when under fierce trials.

James 1:9-12: *“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.*

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”

Boasting: This passage begins with a surprising command to boast. The Bible emphasizes the value of being humble. Most boasting is forbidden. What type is permitted? In Jeremiah 9:23-24 we find an answer, *“Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”*” Paul, in Galatians 6:14 (NIV) captures this truth when he says, *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Is James’ command in 1:9 consistent with Jeremiah and Paul? Yes! The point is that believers, regardless of their financial status, have in the past received the most valuable gift available in the universe – salvation “in Christ.” Both the financially poor and wealthy need wisdom and faith.

God is steadfast in love. His promises are sure to come to be fulfilled. Those challenged by being poor in worldly goods have God’s wisdom to remind them their riches in Christ are far greater than the trials and challenges that confront them.

Life is fragile for both wealthy and poor believers. God intends for all believers to respond to troubles and difficulties with wisdom and in faith. The worst challenges for wealthy believers will come if their wealth is lost or if trials come for which wealth is no help. All worldly wealth is transitory.

Their only lasting security is in their relationship with Christ. Both materially wealthy and materially impoverished believers are spiritually rich in Christ. Only that wealth “in Christ” will last.

Pitfalls of Wealth and Poverty: Neither abundance nor insufficient worldly goods is of direct spiritual significance. Both can affect spiritual health, but neither necessarily does. Neither can, of themselves, keep a person on the straight path of godliness nor jar them off that path. Worldly wealth, power, and pleasure as well as poverty can be a source of spiritual problems. The overall point is that extremes of

poverty or wealth are, in general, not good for spiritual health. Both “too much” and “too little” tend to bring problems. Sufficient is best!

Believers poor in worldly goods may develop feelings of grievance against God if they have strong desires for worldly things whose cost is beyond their means to possess. An abundance of worldly goods, and the pleasures they can bring, may cause a wealthy believer to think they personally have everything under control. The truth is no matter how a person is fixed in the world, no one has everything under control, and everyone needs Christ. Everyone sins. All are susceptible to lust, greed, and covetousness. Each believer is a sinner saved by grace through faith.

The best defense against pressure arising from worldly situations is a wealth of spiritual maturity. Everyone faces eventual death and judgment. In life, in mortal death, and in the life to come, it is God’s view, not the world’s view, which is of ultimate importance.

What is God’s view of me, of you? When He looks at us, does He see our sins and spiritual shortcomings? Or because of the gift of salvation, does He see sinless Christ and His perfection? Our need for Christ and His righteousness cannot be overvalued. Temptation is a threat to all people. Where does temptation come from?

James 1:13-15: “Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

Temptation Increases Step-by-Step: Temptation is like a “slippery slope.” Once started down that slope, it is not easy to stop. Temptation knows no limits and is no respecter of persons. Temptation originates in a person’s inner being driven by internal desire. James moves from considering perseverance under external “trials” to considering a person’s moral endurance in trials arising from internal temptation. In doing so, he answers the question “what are the inner workings of temptation?”

The first point is seen in the phrase “*when he is tempted.*” The issue is not “will I be tempted but when?” Temptation is certain. The question is when and how, and what will be my response? Everyone will be tempted in some way at some time.

The second point is God never tempts anyone, not even indirectly. The source of temptations is elsewhere. God sends trials to develop perseverance through testing, but temptation is not a product of trials. Temptation, associated with trials, is found in the way a person chooses to respond to the trials. God's absolute goodness and holiness assures He is not a tempter. God's holiness cannot be affected by evil nor can evil come from His holy nature.

James third point is temptation is a systematic process. It develops step-by-step. Temptation originates in the inner being. If accepted and acted upon, temptation begets sin. Temptation begins with desire. ***“Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.”***

Temptation itself is not sin, but an enticement to sin. Temptation arises in our inner person as a consequence of lust or desire for something not possessed. That something may be a person, thing, status, or an idea. When sufficiently strong, desire gives birth to sin. Committing a sin makes the next one easier. Repeated sin becomes habitual. The penalty for unconfessed, unrepented sin is death. James says, when sin is fully developed, it brings forth death. What does he mean?

He does not mean that sin necessarily condemns a person to eternal spiritual death. God is gracious and forgiving, pardoning sins which are confessed and repented. It is unconfessed and unrepented sin that gives birth to death. First comes spiritual separation from God, then in God's timing comes mortal death. Unconfessed, unrepented sin at mortal death leads to eternal separation from God. Christ has taken to Himself all believers sins, past, present, and future, and paid the due penalty of death on the cross.

Good news for believers. Temptations can be resisted. 1 Corinthians 10:13, ***“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”***

Saved by God's Grace Apart from Works: Thanks be to God, we are saved by God's grace through faith apart from works. We do not earn righteousness. We receive Christ's righteousness. Ephesians 2:8-9, ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*** Because of God's grace in saving us through faith,

Romans 8:1 can say, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

Living Death: In Jewish thought, death can refer to severe degradation of quality of life rather than termination of mortal life. Believers follow Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. People who walk apart from Christ do so in a form of “living death.”

Life enabled by the Spirit is a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Life like that is possible only in Christ. A person’s love for God provides spiritual motivation to choose to continue to trust and obey Him even in dreadful circumstances. Believers are to practice remaining “steadfast” under all circumstances, so that they will be able to stand fast during difficult trials. Jesus says in Revelation 2:10 that a believer’s crown for spiritual success is life eternal. Jesus says, *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

Temptation is a Continuing Threat for Everyone: Temptation is a real and present danger to everyone. Temptation never comes from God. Temptation follows a pattern – an object of lust or desire comes before a person’s physical senses and/or imagination and triggers internal desire. Internal desire grows and if sufficiently powerful will give birth to sinful action.

The lures of temptation are powerful and come in enticing forms. Temptation is especially effective in times of spiritual weakness. How can temptation’s deception be avoided? Constant focus on the truths of God. Know in detail what God requires. Stay in tune with the Holy Spirit. Temptation thrives on deceptive thoughts filled with empty promises. Stand fast! Resist!

Some Fail When Trials Come: Not every believer remains steadfast in every trial. Some fail. Even mature believers sometimes fail. Those who fail often feel God is to blame. Israel’s history provides examples of blaming God for problems. A well-known example is problems experienced in the wilderness (Exodus 17:2, 7).

James 1:16-18: *“Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. “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 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”*

All God’s Gifts are Good: Do not be deceived. How easily believers are deceived by messages designed to tickle our ears. Temptation and sin are never from God. But every good and perfect gift does come through the will of the Father. Evil things can come through wrong desire, but God gives only good gifts.

A believer’s spiritual birth into God’s family is no accident. God of His own will brings people into His family by His word of truth. God is the creator of the universe, the Father of the heavenly lights. All created things change, but God Himself does not change. In God’s loving hands, He shapes even the evil done to us to our benefit. God uses life’s trials to grow believers spiritually when they are met in the light of God-given wisdom, standing fast in faith.

Wisdom is one of God’s good and perfect gifts. God’s greatest gift is incarnate Jesus, whose salvation work enables all who believe to have eternal life “in Christ.” In His goodness, God gives “new birth” through the truth of the gospel even to people in rebellion. God is in no way compelled to make His righteousness available to sinners as a gift apart from obeying the Law.

In the beginning, God created light and life through His creative Word. Today, through His creative Word, He creates new life in believers. Jesus says that from those to whom much is given, much is expected. No other gift is as great as the gift of eternal life in Christ.

A believer is given new life “in Christ” for a purpose. That purpose is that the believer might become holy as God is holy. Believers are to be transformed into a likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of what God has done, it will be the privilege of believers to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

James 1:19-27 – *“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 that God requires.²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save*

your souls. 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.* 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."*

What's the Problem? Being born again spiritually provides legal righteousness but does not eliminate our sin nature. The sin nature continues to exist and oppose things of God. But the environment in which the sin nature operates has changed. After rebirth, the old sin nature is opposed by a new godly nature. From the time of regeneration to the end of mortal life, a believer undergoes the process of sanctification gradually subduing the old sin nature. Glorification completes the process, and the sin nature is eliminated. James gives instructions aimed at speeding spiritual growth from "new birth" to "mature new life." He says being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger encourages the new nature and discourages the sin nature. LISTEN intently to God's Word and LIVE AS THE WORD COMMANDS.

A person's natural fallen heart is incapable of receiving saving faith. The Holy Spirit regenerates the spiritual heart making it capable of receiving saving faith. The result is so astounding that regeneration is referred to as "being born again."

Obedience: In 1:22, James says, "*be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*" Hearing the word without striving to understand, and obey is self-deception. A believer's task is to HEAR the Word with understanding, and be faithful in DOING that Word. Scripture does not yield its wisdom and power to mere hearing or reading. Grasping, understanding, and action are necessary.

Even though we hear, read, and understand God's truth, we tend to disobey it. Believers become adept at devising good sounding reasons for why they can't obey now but will in the future. Intentions are good, but follow-through is often not so good. James says that in this we are like a person who sees their dirty face in a mirror,

studies it carefully, realizing how dirty it is, and then does nothing to clean their face. Unless our dirty face is repeatedly seen in the mirror, we soon forget it is dirty.

God's Word is a mirror, which will show us our dirty life. We need to frequently examine ourself in the mirror of Scripture to remind us of our "dirty" inner being which needs cleaning. Obedience to truth found in the Word will cleanse our lives. What God's Word commands, the Holy Spirit enables (for example, temptation need not lead to sin).

An unbridled tongue is a moral problem. An unbridled tongue may indicate that progress in holiness is not happening. A true believer, through the wisdom God gives, will control their tongue, care for the helpless, and avoid worldly defilement. ***“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.”*** The consequences of new birth enable both outer trials and inner temptations to be seen in their proper place. The goal of God's gift of new spiritual life is holiness.

Principles and Practices: James encourages believers to know “godly principles” and steadfastly “practice them.” God's “born again” gift of new spiritual life enables believers to be “quick to hear,” “sure to understand,” “slow to speak,” and “slow to anger.” Believers are to put away all wickedness. They are to be hearers who understand God's Word and doers who rightly do what God's Word says.

As mentioned earlier, the human will enables thoughts and emotions to be controlled. “The will” is that faculty or aspect of mind which enables making voluntary choices.

Feelings, Moods, and Attitudes: Human emotions include feelings, moods, and attitudes.

- (1.) Feelings are responses to particular situations.
- (2.) Moods are broader than feelings. Moods establish a trend for experiencing feelings of a particular type – happy or sad, mad or glad.
- (3.) Attitudes are broader than moods. In a sense an attitude is a willful choice of mood and feelings.

(4.) Temperament is broader than attitude. It establishes an emotional direction in life. We learn to control our emotions step-by-step by learning to control “feelings,” then “moods,” and then “attitudes.”

Feelings spring into our mind beyond our control. But God has enabled people to choose to express or not express feelings. When an angry feeling toward someone arises, we can’t avoid the feeling, but we can avoid expressing the feeling.

Choice, Umbrella Decisions, and Self-control: Knowledge, understanding, and wisdom form a hierarchy of information use. A similar hierarchy for making decisions is: (1.) individual “choice,” (2.) “umbrella-decisions,” and (3.) “self-control.”

- (1.) Individual choice deals with single decisions – choices between alternatives.
- (2.) “Umbrella-decisions” deal with related decisions which must be made over an extended period of time. An umbrella-decision establishes a pattern. Occasional exceptions are fine and to be expected. The “rule” however is established by the umbrella decision.
- (3.) Self-control is the highest level of decision making and establishes guidelines for life.

Decision Making: Making good “choices” is the first level in decision making. The next level is “attitudes.” The top level is “self-control” in all areas.

- (1.) Choices are familiar to everyone. What will I wear today? What time shall I leave for my appointment? What do I want for breakfast? These are choices of limited scope.
- (2.) Umbrella-decisions are choices which impact an area of life for lengthy periods of time. Umbrella decisions establish precedent for all decisions in a life area. Here are examples of umbrella decisions from my own life.

On October 16, 1959 I made a most important umbrella decision (in this case a covenant) to love, honor, and be faithful to my wife. The covenant establishing that umbrella decision was made before God. I covenanted, that unless death separated us, I would exclusively love her as my wife, protect her even if it meant losing my own life, and provide for her physical and spiritual needs.

In the long years since then, at the right times, I made umbrella decisions to live my life such that I set a good example for my children, grandchildren, and now great grandchildren.

Many years ago my wife and I realized that when we waited until Sunday morning to decide whether or not we would go to church and Sunday school, we often found reasons or emotions for not going that day. To avoid that situation, we made the umbrella decision to go every Sunday unless illness or travel kept us away.

(3.) Self-control is the highest level of decision-making. Our degree of self-control impacts our entire life. Self-control is an overarching set of decisions establishing guidelines for all of life. Self-control establishes criteria for individual choices and umbrella decisions. In making these decisions, intellect, emotions, and imagination and will mutually interact, but the will has final say.

Principles from Scripture: As we read and study Scripture, we find many principles for living. These scriptural principle are fundamental truths or propositions stating requirements for discipline in some area of our life. They show the way that should be followed in various areas of life.

Wisdom follows God's principles. As James make clear, knowing and understanding a principle is of value only if there is corresponding "practice" or obedience that makes the principle real in our life.

Believers follow Christ. We obey the moral law in order to follow Him. In John 14:15 Jesus says, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*" The principle of love for Jesus is demonstrated by intent to obey. The corresponding "practice" is actually obeying.

As far as I know, there is no way given in Scripture to gauge love for Christ other than obedience to His commands. Practice and principle interact. For a principle to be of functional value, the corresponding practice must be possible and useful.

What's Next: James chapter 2: Partiality and prejudice. Faith at work.