

Introduction: The letter from James has not always been appreciated by leaders of the church. Martin Luther thought it was of little value. He said it was an epistle of straw because it didn't seem consistent with Paul especially in considering faith without works to be dead, and it did not specifically mention Luther's major concern that salvation is by grace alone.

Careful examination of the context of both Paul's and James' comments on the relationship between faith and deeds reveals there is no conflict. The perspective from which they wrote were sufficiently different to cause them to use "deeds" or "works" in two different ways. By "works," James means moral deeds performed as a natural consequence of having God-given faith. Luther does not disagree with that. Luther said, "We are saved by faith alone (*not our works*), but not by faith that remains alone." That is what James says.

In Galatians Paul uses the same Greek word to mean works of the law performed with the intent of earning right standing before God. But Paul also commands everyone who receives faith to do good works. Thus both Paul and James say that when God gives a person faith, they will strive to be obedient and pleasing to God, which naturally leads to doing good works having nothing to do with earning right-standing before God. Good works not only accompany faith but are a visible indication that a person has faith.

It is true James does not specifically mention "salvation by grace alone," but the reason is simple. He was not addressing nonbelievers needing to hear about salvation, but Jewish-Christian believers who had already experienced salvation but were wobbling in the faith. True faith is always accompanied by good works. Standing firm in faith and good works remains a significant problem to this day.

We will begin our study of James with a look at background which sets the stage for understanding the letter's contents.

The Broad Issue: Overcoming difficulties caused by spiritual immaturity. James gives a series of no nonsense examples of solutions.

People usually think maturity increases with age. It should, but does not always do so. Not everyone grows "up" in the sense of becoming a mature adult. That is true

spiritually, mentally, and to some extent physically. These are vital issues. Failing to mature spiritually impacts not only relationship with God but all relationships.

The Value of Testing by Trials: James' readers faced a variety of trials. He encourages them to strive for spiritual maturity learning even from their trials. In verses 1:3-4 he says, "*...for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*" Trials put a lot of stress on faith. James says those situations when properly dealt with, provide opportunities for developing steadfastness and growth in understanding. Believers who find it difficult to remain steadfast in the face of trials are of particular concern to James. He gives keen insights both into causes of trials and ways of dealing with the difficulties they produce. These insights are just as pertinent today as they were on the day he wrote them.

Spiritual maturity does not happen automatically. Mature faith requires intentionality and effort. Maturity in faith especially demands deliberate cooperation with the Holy Spirit as He graciously works to transform believers into a likeness of Christ. James informs, instructs, and challenges believers to be people of integrity, people of mature character, with minimum weak spots.

God Must Do Some Things God Must Do but He Enables and Requires Believers to Do Other Things: In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul warns believers they should, "*... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*" Believers are to intentionally work out the implications of the salvation which God is working in them. That is possible only because God continues to work within.

Difficult things must be accomplished. Some things can be done only by God (like regeneration and justification). Other things God enables believers to do and expects us to do them (like resist temptation). He insists believers do the things He enables them to do. Failing to properly differentiate between these two categories is dangerous. Trying to do that which only God can do is frustrating, unfruitful, and doomed to failure. Failing to do what God enables blocks spiritual growth.

A Similar Message from Peter: In 2 Peter 1, Peter gives a similar message, saying it is possible to be a born-again believer and yet be totally ineffective and

unproductive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then Peter describes how to avoid that dreadful situation.

2 Peter 1:3 – 10: *“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”*

God Gives Believers the Latent Potential for Everything Needed for Life and Godliness: This is a wonderful truth. At regeneration, God gives each believer everything they need pertaining to life and godliness. What many don't recognize is that most of what is given is latent and must be made manifest. It seems to me, God's provision of everything needed for life and for godliness is made through what I call spiritual DNA in analogy to physical DNA.

Physically, when the first cell, which will ultimately develop into a human being, is formed, it already contains all the information necessary for developing from that one cell into a mature adult person. The physical DNA of the first cell is a combination of DNA from the father and mother and describes a unique new person.

Most of the physical DNA information is latent. It is made manifest step-by-step, first as the baby develops in the mother's womb. At birth, the DNA instructions continue to direct development from infant to child to adult and all through life. Proper nutrients and exercise are necessary for fulfillment of the latent potential.

I think spiritual DNA is similar. When a person is born again through regeneration by the Holy Spirit, they receive spiritual DNA which in latent form has everything needed for development into a mature spiritual adult. The spiritual DNA information is to be made manifest step-by-step. Proper and sufficient spiritual nutrients and “exercise” are necessary for making each step toward spiritual maturity manifest.

That is the kind of thing I think Peter is talking about when he says God has granted believers everything pertaining to life and godliness.

Making God’s Provision Manifest: Making manifest those things necessary for mature spiritual life takes time (think of a baby developing in the mother’s womb), proper spiritual nutrients, and spiritual exercise. During mortal life no one ever makes manifest all that God has provided. Completion of “making manifest” occurs at glorification. God’s provision is real but mostly latent. He requires us to participate in making it manifest. The Holy Spirit indwells believers to guide and enable the process. Peter says God’s gift of Spiritual DNA contains everything needed for life and godliness.

Believers are to participate in making spiritual DNA manifest. But regeneration, the gift of faith, justification, and sending the Holy Spirit to indwell believers are God’s action alone. With those things only God can do finished, God then requires believers step-by-step to participate in adding to God’s gift of faith an increasing measure of virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, and brotherly affection. As we add these measures of grace, we will be enabled to be effective and fruitful in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has given this provision for life and godliness to each believer, but to make manifest that which has been provided, we must choose to actively cooperate in a right relationship with the Holy Spirit, but that is not automatic. Scripture says it is possible for believers to be out of the necessary right relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Grieving, Quenching, or Walking in Step with the Holy Spirit: A right relationship with the Holy Spirit then is vital, but not automatic. In Ephesians 4:30, Paul says inappropriate thoughts and actions grieve the Holy Spirit. As seen in 1 Thessalonians 5:19 he says our sins can quench the Holy Spirit. On the other hand,

in Galatians 5:25 (NIV) Paul says appropriate thoughts and actions enable believers to keep in step with the Holy Spirit. The life choices we make determine whether we are “in step” or “out of step” with the Spirit. It requires intentionality on our part to be filled with the Holy Spirit and walk in step with Him. We must deliberately focus attention on Him, and deliberately make choices which cooperate with His work as He transforms us into a likeness of Christ. The regenerating work of God changes our innermost being, that which Scripture refers to as our “heart.”

Importance of the Spiritual Heart: In many places, Scripture stresses the overwhelming importance of the condition of a person’s spiritual heart in determining the way they choose to live their life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that lust for a woman was adultery in the heart. Lust in the heart, like murder and anger in the heart, will be subject to judgment. In Romans 12 Paul says, believers’ minds need transforming. Our innermost being, our “mission control” center or spiritual heart needs transforming so that it functions in a godly manner. Fully engaged faith is necessary.

Faith: The gift of faith, which accompanies regeneration, engages and changes the entire inner person (intellect, emotions, imagination, and will). Because outward behavior and speech are determined by the inner person, true faith also engages and changes outward behavior. Thus, it is accurate to say, true faith engages and changes the entire person – body and soul.

Faith That is Intellectual Only is Faith Without Works: People often talk about “intellectual faith” as being cold and useless, describing it despairingly as “mere head knowledge.” More generally, it is true that faith which engages only a portion of the inner person is always incomplete and inadequate. True faith engages intellect, emotions, imagination, and will. Faith which does not engage the whole inner person is incomplete and inadequate. Thus, a purely intellectual faith, a purely emotional faith, an emotional-intellectual faith, and a volitional-intellectual faith, etc. all represent incomplete faith.

James is especially concerned believers practice willful action. Unless the will is engaged, faith at most involves mere thoughts, emotions, and words with no action. Lack of willful action is James concern when he talks about faith without works being

dead. Faith in which the will is not engaged produces no works and is not a true faith. It does not engage the entire inner person. True faith engages the entire person through transformation of the inner person. True faith is trusting in and committing to God with the intellect, emotions, imagination, and will engaged. The result will be seen through obedient thoughts, speech, and actions. From a believer's perspective, their faith is grounded in trust in God and commitment to Him. Love like faith must also be grounded in commitment and trust.

Love: Love is an overarching quality of the spiritual heart which actively involves the intellect, emotions, and will directed toward the best interest of the beloved. People tend to ascribe love to the emotions, but love is at least as much a matter of the will and intellect. Love is perhaps best described as a commitment to work for the best interests of the beloved no matter what the circumstances.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 Paul describes attributes and attitudes of love. *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”* These characteristics are not possible without an active involvement of the will and intellect. Jesus' love for His people was overwhelmingly demonstrated in His willful endurance of persecution, physical suffering, and horrible death on the cross, all for the benefit of those He loves. Human speech reveals much about a person.

Speech: Especially unguarded speech, provides a view into the state of a person's heart (intellect, emotions, imagination, and will). In Matthew 12:34, Jesus said the mouth speaks out of the abundance or overflow of the heart. In fact, controlling the tongue is a necessary major task in cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit as He transforms our heart. In a related way, we cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work when we do as Paul instructs in Philippians 4:8: *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”* All acts of deliberate obedience to God's Word are cooperative.

Biblical Models of a Believer's Relationship with God: In some ways the relationship between God and His people is utter simplicity, yet in other ways it is supremely complex and involves a great deal of mystery. Scripture provides a number of conceptual models as useful aids for understanding our relationship with God. Here are some Scriptural models – (1.) Living stones in a building. (2.) Parts of a body or cells in a body. (3.) Potter and pot. (4.) Branches of a vine. (5.) Shepherd and flock. (6.) Teacher and disciple, (7.) Relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. (8.) Family. (9.) Lord and servant or citizens of the kingdom. (10.) Redeemer and redeemed.

Each model reveals aspects of our relationship with God. While there is overlap between the models, they are surprisingly different. Each model has its place in our thinking and in interpretation of Scripture. We are to use all the models as appropriate. No one model conveys the whole picture.

The models are simple, yet their interpretation can be complex. In one or more of the models each of the following attributes is highlighted: Covenant structure, mutual dependence among believers, all believers in utter dependence on God, love, discipline, Headship, subjection to one another, and other attributes.

Marriage as a Covenant Relationship: Christian marriage is a covenant relationship. Covenants are related to but different from contracts. Covenants are a mixture of law and love. Covenants are intended to establish enduring relationships. Contracts are law, establishing rules for transactions.

In marriage, a husband, as head, covenants to provide for his wife's spiritual and physical needs – to give his life for her if necessary. The wife covenants to be subject to husband, not in a slave to master sense, but as equals before God who are assigned different functions in the family. They each voluntarily and deliberately covenant to take upon themselves the assigned roles for husband and wife as designed by God.

Historical Setting for James' Letter: At the time the letter was written, there was an ongoing persecution of Christians. As described in Acts 8, believers in Jerusalem were scattered largely as a consequence of Saul's (who became Paul) persecutions. Fear of further persecution was a serious problem. Many believers

began to hide their faith. Some denied their faith. Others retreated to a faith which existed only in words, not in deeds. True faith seemed to be vanishing as Christians were hunted down and killed or simply scared into silence. James' letter is designed to prod true faith into the open, out of hiding and inaction.

James' Basis of Comparison for Spiritual Maturity: James focuses on spiritual immaturity and how to become mature. What characteristics does he recognize as being necessary to be a spiritually mature person? His reference book was of course the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. The Old Testament has a lot to say about the kind of character that pleases God. David's Psalm 15, for example, gives a concise description of practical behavioral qualities arising from the character of a true believer. James was no doubt familiar with this Psalm.

Psalm 15:1 – *“O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?² He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart;³ who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend;⁴ in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change;⁵ who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.”*

The words “tent” and “holy hill” are Hebrew idioms referring symbolically to the place of God's presence. The “tent” or “holy hill” is a place of spiritual intimacy with God. The question David asks is: What kind of person can dwell in God's holy presence? Who can maintain intimate fellowship with the Lord? In other words, what are the qualities of a person who is acceptable to remain in the presence of God? Both Psalm 15 and the letter from James deal with issues related directly to our “temporal” experience of salvation. Only indirectly are they related to our “eternal” inheritance. The question is “what characteristics please God in the here and now?”

Some commentators find 10 or 11 characteristics of a godly person in Psalm 15. It is probably better to think of the Psalm as Hebrew poetry using parallelism. Formats of parallelism include simple repetition of an idea, contrasting statements, and the form of “not only this but also that.” With that perspective, there are 6 couplets each of which contains an independent concept.

People whose behavior pleases God will have at least the 6 behavioral characteristics listed in the psalm, namely, character, speech, conduct, values, integrity, and use of money.

A spiritually mature person walks blamelessly and does what is right (that is, remain upright in character and actively engaged in righteousness), speaks truth in their heart and does not slander with their tongue, does no evil to his neighbor nor takes up a reproach against his friend (signifies how to treat people), despises a vile person but honors those who fear the LORD (signifies how we are to regard people's behavior and answers the question to whom do we look to as role models), swears to his own hurt and does not change (signifies integrity by always keeping oaths – being faithful even when it hurts), does not put money out at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent (signifies a right understanding of the value of people and money). Both David's and James' interest is in the inward qualities of heart necessary to produce the desired outward characteristics. Consider now James' identity and when he wrote the letter.

Identity of James and Date of Letter: James is the Lord's half-brother. Matthew 13:54-56 names James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas as brothers of Jesus. It mentions sisters but does not name them. James seems to have been an unbeliever until after the resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-7, Paul reports that the resurrected Lord visited James. From that moment on, James appears in Scripture as a different man. Some 15 – 20 years after the resurrection (i.e. 45 – 50 AD), James wrote this letter to deal with some very practical issues.

Though not a believer until after the resurrection, at the time this letter was written, James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. The letter was written to Hebrew-Christian converts who were wobbling in their faith. It was not written to unconverted people. James writes about practical realities in day-to-day living as a Christian in a time of harassment and persecution.

James emphasis is, ***“If you say you believe, why act as though you don't?”*** That is a lament I suspect every one of us has cried out. Lord, if I am saved, why do I keep doing things I know are wrong? In Romans 7:24, the Apostle Paul near the end of his life felt the same way.

James saw believers being impatient in the face of difficulties, talking but not living the truth, failing to exercise proper control over their tongue, fighting, coveting, and trying to outdo each other in gaining material things (sounds familiar, doesn't it). James recognized these as problems arising from spiritual immaturity. Lack of spiritual maturity remains a huge issue today.

Circumstances at the Time the Letter was Written: James' first readers were living in an increasingly difficult time. Opposition to Christianity had reached the point where openly living their faith often caused believers to be shunned and ridiculed as well as sharply restricted in employment and market place opportunities. You get the right sort of picture, by recalling the situation of the Jews under the Nazis. The Nazis step-by-step prohibited the Jews from owning property, restricted the jobs they might hold and schools they might attend. They were forbidden to mingle with non-Jews, forced to live in designated areas, and so forth. Could something like that happen to Christians in the United States?

Eventually, the Jews were rounded up, transported to prison camps where they were severely abused. If a person was deemed unable to work as a slave, they were executed.

That kind of downward progression was happening to the believers to whom James wrote. At the time, they were still near the beginning of their trials, but they, like the Jews under the Nazis, were destined to be physically persecuted, imprisoned, and martyred. That did happen to them but closer to the end of the first century. James' concern was that the increasing pressure on believers to conform to the dominant non-Christian view of society, plus restrictions placed on them, were causing some to deny or hide their faith. They were also bickering among themselves as those stronger in faith condemned the weaker ones for giving in to the pressure.

What is Next? Comments on James' letter beginning with Chapter 1.