

James

This epistle of James is one of the most instructive writings in the New Testament. Being chiefly directed against particular errors at that time brought in among the Jewish Christians, it does not contain the same full doctrinal statements as the other epistles, but it presents an admirable summary of the practical duties of all believers. The leading truths of Christianity are set forth throughout; and on attentive consideration, it will be found entirely to agree with St. Paul's statements concerning grace and justification, while it abounds with earnest exhortations to the patience of hope and obedience of faith and love, interspersed with warnings, reproofs, and encouragements, according to the characters addressed. The truths laid down are very serious, and necessary to be maintained; and the rules for practice ought to be observed in all times. In Christ there are no dead and sapless branches, faith is not an idle grace; wherever it is, it brings forth fruit in works.

Chapter 1

Chapter Outline

- How to apply to God under troubles, and how to behave in prosperous and in adverse circumstances. (1–11)
- To look upon all evil as proceeding from ourselves, and all good from God. (12–18)
- The duty of watching against a rash temper, and of receiving the word of God with meekness. (19–21)
- And of living according thereto. (22–25)
- The difference between vain pretences and real religion. (26, 27)

Verses 1–11

Christianity teaches men to be joyful under troubles: such exercises are sent from God's love; and trials in the way of duty will brighten our graces now, and our crown at last. Let us take care, in times of trial, that patience, and not passion, is set to work in us: whatever is said or done, let patience have the saying and doing of it. When the work of patience is complete, it will furnish all that is necessary for our Christian race and warfare. We should not pray so much for the removal of affliction, as for wisdom to make a right use of it. And who does not want wisdom to guide him under trials, both in regulating his own spirit, and in managing his affairs? Here is something in answer to every discouraging turn of the mind, when we go to God under a sense of our own weakness and folly. If, after all, any should say, This may be the case with some, but I fear I shall not succeed, the promise is, To any that asketh, it shall be given. A mind that has single and prevailing regard to its spiritual and eternal interest, and that keeps steady in its purposes for God, will grow wise by afflictions, will continue fervent in devotion, and rise above trials and oppositions. When our faith and spirits rise and fall with second causes, there will be unsteadiness in our words and actions. This may not always expose men to contempt in the world, but such ways cannot please God. No condition of life is such as to hinder rejoicing in God. Those of low degree may rejoice, if they are exalted to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of God; and the rich may rejoice in humbling providences, that lead to a humble and lowly disposition of mind. Worldly wealth is a withering thing. Then, let him that is rich rejoice in the grace of God, which makes and keeps him humble; and in the trials and exercises which teach him to seek happiness in and from God, not from perishing enjoyments.

Verses 12–18

It is not every man who suffers, that is blessed; but he who with patience and constancy goes through all difficulties in the way of duty. Afflictions cannot make us miserable, if it be not our own fault. The tried Christian shall be a crowned one. The crown of life is promised to all who have the love of God reigning in their hearts. Every soul that truly loves God, shall have its trials in this world fully recompensed in that world above, where love is made perfect. The commands of God, and the dealings of his providence, try men's hearts, and show the dispositions which prevail in them. But nothing sinful in the heart or conduct can be ascribed to God. He is not the author of the dross, though his fiery trial exposes it. Those who lay the blame of sin, either upon their constitution, or upon their condition in the world, or pretend they cannot keep from sinning, wrong God as if he were the author of sin. Afflictions, as sent by God, are designed to draw out our graces, but not our corruptions. The origin of evil and temptation is in our own hearts. Stop the beginnings of sin, or all the evils that follow must be wholly charged upon us. God has no pleasure in the death of men, as he has no hand in their sin; but both sin and misery are owing to themselves. As the sun is the same in nature and influences, though the earth and clouds, often coming between, make it seem to us to vary, so God is unchangeable, and our changes and shadows are not from any changes or alterations in him. What the sun is in nature, God is in grace, providence, and glory; and infinitely more. As every good gift is from God, so particularly our being born again, and all its holy, happy consequences come from him. A true Christian becomes as different a person from what he was before the renewing influences of Divine grace, as if he were formed over again. We should devote all our faculties to God's service, that we may be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.

Verses 19–21

Instead of blaming God under our trials, let us open our ears and hearts to learn what he teaches by them. And if men would govern their tongues, they must govern their passions. The worst thing we can bring to any dispute, is anger. Here is an exhortation to lay apart, and to cast off as a filthy garment, all sinful practices. This must reach to sins of thought and affection, as well as of speech and practice; to every thing corrupt and sinful. We must yield ourselves to the word of God, with humble and teachable minds. Being willing to hear of our faults, taking it not only patiently, but thankfully. It is the design of the word of God to make us wise to salvation; and those who propose any mean or low ends in attending upon it, dishonour the gospel, and disappoint their own souls.

Verses 22–25

If we heard a sermon every day of the week, and an angel from heaven were the preacher, yet, if we rested in hearing only, it would never bring us to heaven. Mere hearers are self-deceivers; and self-deceit will be found the worst deceit at last. If we flatter ourselves,

it is our own fault; the truth, as it is in Jesus, flatters no man. Let the word of truth be carefully attended to, and it will set before us the corruption of our nature, the disorders of our hearts and lives; and it will tell us plainly what we are. Our sins are the spots the law discovers: Christ's blood is the laver the gospel shows. But in vain do we hear God's word, and look into the gospel glass, if we go away, and forget our spots, instead of washing them off; and forget our remedy, instead of applying to it. This is the case with those who do not hear the word as they ought. In hearing the word, we look into it for counsel and direction, and when we study it, it turns to our spiritual life. Those who keep in the law and word of God, are, and shall be, blessed in all their ways. His gracious recompence hereafter, would be connected with his present peace and comfort. Every part of Divine revelation has its use, in bringing the sinner to Christ for salvation, and in directing and encouraging him to walk at liberty, by the Spirit of adoption, according to the holy commands of God. And mark the distinctness, it is not for his deeds, that any man is blessed, but in his deed. It is not talking, but walking, that will bring us to heaven. Christ will become more precious to the believer's soul, which by his grace will become more fitted for the inheritance of the saints in light.

Verses 26, 27

When men take more pains to seem religious than really to be so, it is a sign their religion is in vain. The not bridling the tongue, readiness to speak of the faults of others, or to lessen their wisdom and piety, are signs of a vain religion. The man who has a slandering tongue, cannot have a truly humble, gracious heart. False religious may be known by their impurity and uncharitableness. True religion teaches us to do every thing as in the presence of God. An unspotted life must go with unfeigned love and charity. Our true religion is equal to the measure in which these things have place in our hearts and conduct. And let us remember, that nothing avails in Christ Jesus, but faith that worketh by love, purifies the heart, subdues carnal lusts, and obeys God's commands.

Chapter 2

Chapter Outline

All professions of faith are vain, if not producing love and justice to others. (1–13)

The necessity of good works to prove the sincerity of faith, which otherwise will be of no more advantage than the faith of devils. (14–26)

Verses 1–13

Those who profess faith in Christ as the Lord of glory, must not respect persons on account of mere outward circumstances and appearances, in a manner not agreeing with their profession of being disciples of the lowly Jesus. St. James does not here encourage rudeness or disorder: civil respect must be paid; but never such as to influence the proceedings of Christians in disposing of the offices of the church of Christ, or in passing the censures of the church, or in any matter of religion. Questioning ourselves is of great use in every part of the holy life. Let us be more frequent in this, and in every thing take occasion to discourse with our souls. As places of worship cannot be built or maintained without expense, it may be proper that those who contribute thereto should be accommodated accordingly; but were all persons more spiritually-minded, the poor would be treated with more attention than usually is the case in worshipping congregations. A lowly state is most favourable for inward peace and for growth in holiness. God would give to all believers riches and honours of this world, if these would do them good, seeing that he has chosen them to be rich in faith, and made them heirs of his kingdom, which he promised to bestow on all who love him. Consider how often riches lead to vice and mischief, and what great reproaches are thrown upon God and religion, by men of wealth, power, and worldly greatness; and it will make this sin appear very sinful and foolish. The Scripture gives as a law, to love our neighbour as ourselves. This law is a royal law, it comes from the King of kings; and if Christians act unjustly, they are convicted by the law as transgressors. To think that our good deeds will atone for our bad deeds, plainly puts us upon looking for another atonement. According to the covenant of works, one breach of any one command brings a man under condemnation, from which no obedience, past, present, or future, can deliver him. This shows us the happiness of those that are in Christ. We may serve him without slavish fear. God's restraints are not a bondage, but our own corruptions are so. The doom passed upon impenitent sinners at last, will be judgment without mercy. But God deems it his glory and joy, to pardon and bless those who might justly be condemned at his tribunal; and his grace teaches those who partake of his mercy, to copy it in their conduct.

Verses 14–26

Those are wrong who put a mere notional belief of the gospel for the whole of evangelical religion, as many now do. No doubt, true faith alone, whereby men have part in Christ's righteousness, atonement, and grace, saves their souls; but it produces holy fruits, and is shown to be real by its effect on their works; while mere assent to any form of doctrine, or mere historical belief of any facts, wholly differs from this saving faith. A bare profession may gain the good opinion of pious people; and it may procure, in some cases, worldly good things; but what profit will it be, for any to gain the whole world, and to lose their souls? Can this faith save him? All things should be accounted profitable or unprofitable to us, as they tend to forward or hinder the salvation of our souls. This place of Scripture plainly shows that an opinion, or assent to the gospel, without works, is not faith. There is no way to show we really believe in Christ, but by being diligent in good works, from gospel motives, and for gospel purposes. Men may boast to others, and be conceited of that which they really have not. There is not only to be assent in faith, but consent; not only an assent to the truth of the word, but a consent to take Christ. True believing is not an act of the understanding only, but a work of the whole heart. That a justifying faith cannot be without works, is shown from two examples, Abraham and Rahab. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness. Faith, producing such works, advanced him to peculiar favours. We see then, ver. #(24), how that by works a man is justified, not by a bare opinion or profession, or believing without obeying; but by having such faith as produces good works. And to have to deny his own reason, affections, and interests, is an action fit to try a believer. Observe here, the wonderful power of faith in changing sinners. Rahab's conduct proved her faith to be living, or having power; it showed that she believed with her heart, not merely by an assent of the understanding. Let us then take heed, for the best works, without faith, are dead; they want root and principle. By faith any thing we do is really good; as done in obedience to God, and aiming at his acceptance: the root is as though it were dead, when there is no fruit. Faith is the root, good works are the fruits; and we must see to it that we have both. This is the grace of God wherein we stand, and we should stand to it. There is no middle state. Every one must either live God's friend, or God's enemy. Living to God, as it is the consequence of faith, which justifies and will save, obliges us to do nothing against him, but every thing for him and to him.

Chapter 3

Chapter Outline

- Cautions against proud behaviour, and the mischief of an unruly tongue. (1–12)
- The excellence of heavenly wisdom, in opposition to that which is worldly. (13–18)

Verses 1–12

We are taught to dread an unruly tongue, as one of the greatest evils. The affairs of mankind are thrown into confusion by the tongues of men. Every age of the world, and every condition of life, private or public, affords examples of this. Hell has more to do in promoting the fire of the tongue than men generally think; and whenever men's tongues are employed in sinful ways, they are set on fire of hell. No man can tame the tongue without Divine grace and assistance. The apostle does not represent it as impossible, but as extremely difficult. Other sins decay with age, this many times gets worse; we grow more froward and fretful, as natural strength decays, and the days come on in which we have no pleasure. When other sins are tamed and subdued by the infirmities of age, the spirit often grows more tart, nature being drawn down to the dregs, and the words used become more passionate. That man's tongue confutes itself, which at one time pretends to adore the perfections of God, and to refer all things to him; and at another time condemns even good men, if they do not use the same words and expressions. True religion will not admit of contradictions: how many sins would be prevented, if men would always be consistent! Pious and edifying language is the genuine produce of a sanctified heart; and none who understand Christianity, expect to hear curses, lies, boastings, and revilings from a true believer's mouth, any more than they look for the fruit of one tree from another. But facts prove that more professors succeed in bridling their senses and appetites, than in duly restraining their tongues. Then, depending on Divine grace, let us take heed to bless and curse not; and let us aim to be consistent in our words and actions.

Verses 13–18

These verses show the difference between men's pretending to be wise, and their being really so. He who thinks well, or he who talks well, is not wise in the sense of the Scripture, if he does not live and act well. True wisdom may be known by the meekness of the spirit and temper. Those who live in malice, envy, and contention, live in confusion; and are liable to be provoked and hurried to any evil work. Such wisdom comes not down from above, but springs up from earthly principles, acts on earthly motives, and is intent on serving earthly purposes. Those who are lifted up with such wisdom, described by the apostle James,

is near to the Christian love, described by the apostle Paul; and both are so described that every man may fully prove the reality of his attainments in them. It has no disguise or deceit. It cannot fall in with those managements the world counts wise, which are crafty and guileful; but it is sincere, and open, and steady, and uniform, and consistent with itself. May the purity, peace, gentleness, teachableness, and mercy shown in all our actions, and the fruits of righteousness abounding in our lives, prove that God has bestowed upon us this excellent gift.

Chapter 4

Chapter Outline

Here are cautions against corrupt affections, and love of this world, which is enmity to God. (1-10)

Exhortations to undertake no affairs of life, without constant regard to the will and providence of God. (11-17)

Verses 1-10

Since all wars and fightings come from the corruptions of our own hearts, it is right to mortify those lusts that war in the members. Wordly and fleshly lusts are distempers, which will not allow content or satisfaction. Sinful desires and affections stop prayer, and the working of our desires toward God. And let us beware that we do not abuse or misuse the mercies received, by the disposition of the heart when prayers are granted. When men ask of God prosperity, they often ask with wrong aims and intentions. If we thus seek the things of this world, it is just in God to deny them. Unbelieving and cold desires beg denials; and we may be sure that when prayers are rather the language of lusts than of graces, they will return empty. Here is a decided warning to avoid all criminal friendships with this world. Worldly-mindedness is enmity to God. An enemy may be reconciled, but "enmity" never can be reconciled. A man may have a large portion in things of this life, and yet be kept in the love of God; but he who sets his heart upon the world, who will conform to it rather than lose its friendship, is an enemy to God. So that any one who resolves at all events to be upon friendly terms with the world, must be the enemy of God. Did then the Jews, or the loose professors of Christianity, think the Scripture spake in vain against this worldly-mindedness? or does the Holy Spirit who dwells in all Christians, or the new nature which he creates, produce such fruit? Natural corruption shows itself by envying. The spirit of the world teaches us to lay up, or lay out for ourselves, according to our own fancies; God the Holy Spirit teaches us to be willing to do good to all about us, as we are able. The grace of God will correct and cure the spirit by nature in us; and where he gives grace, he gives another spirit than that of the world. The proud resist God: in their understanding they resist the truths of God; in their will they resist the laws of God; in their passions they resist the providence of God; therefore, no wonder that God resists the proud. How wretched the state of those who make God their enemy! God will give more grace to the humble, because they see their need of it, pray for it are thankful for it, and such shall have it. Submit to God, ver. #7. Submit your understanding to the truth of God; submit your wills to the will of his precept, the will of his providence. Submit yourselves to God, for he is ready to do you

good. If we yield to temptations, the devil will continually follow us; but if we put on the whole armour of God, and stand out against him, he will leave us. Let sinners then submit to God, and seek his grace and favour; resisting the devil. All sin must be wept over; here, in godly sorrow, or, hereafter, in eternal misery. And the Lord will not refuse to comfort one who really mourns for sin, or to exalt one who humbles himself before him.

Verses 11-17

Our lips must be governed by the law of kindness, as well as truth and justice. Christians are brethren. And to break God's commands, is to speak evil of them, and to judge them, as if they laid too great a restraint upon us. We have the law of God, which is a rule to all; let us not presume to set up our own notions and opinions as a rule to those about us, and let us be careful that we be not condemned of the Lord. "Go to now," is a call to any one to consider his conduct as being wrong. How apt worldly and contriving men are to leave God out of their plans! How vain it is to look for any thing good without God's blessing and guidance! The frailty, shortness, and uncertainty of life, ought to check the vanity and presumptuous confidence of all projects for futurity. We can fix the hour and minute of the sun's rising and setting to-morrow, but we cannot fix the certain time of a vapour being scattered. So short, unreal, and fading is human life, and all the prosperity or enjoyment that attends it; though bliss or woe for ever must be according to our conduct during this fleeting moment. We are always to depend on the will of God. Our times are not in our own hands, but at the disposal of God. Our heads may be filled with cares and contrivances for ourselves, or our families, or our friends; but Providence often throws our plans into confusion. All we design, and all we do, should be with submissive dependence on God. It is foolish, and it is hurtful, to boast of worldly things and aspiring projects; it will bring great disappointment, and will prove destruction in the end. Omissions are sins which will be brought into judgment, as well as commissions. He that does not the good he knows should be done, as well as he who does the evil he knows should not be done, will be condemned. Oh that we were as careful not to omit prayer, and not to neglect to meditate and examine our consciences, as we are not to commit gross outward vices against light!

Chapter 5

Chapter Outline

- The judgments of God denounced against rich unbelievers. (1-6)
- Exhortation to patience and meekness under tribulations. (7-11)
- Cautions against rash swearing Prayer recommended in afflictive and prosperous circumstances, Christians to confess their faults to each other. (12-18)
- The happiness of being the means of the conversion of a sinner. (19, 20)

Verses 1-6

Public troubles are most grievous to those who live in pleasure, and are secure and sensual, though all ranks suffer deeply at such times. All idolized treasures will soon perish, except as they will rise up in judgment against their possessors. Take heed of defrauding and oppressing; and avoid the very appearance of it. God does not forbid us to use lawful pleasures; but to live in pleasure, especially sinful pleasure, is a provoking sin. Is it no harm for people to unfit themselves for minding the concerns of their souls, by indulging bodily appetites? The just may be condemned and killed; but when such suffer by oppressors, this is marked by God. Above all their other crimes, the Jews had condemned and crucified that Just One who had come among them, even Jesus Christ the righteous.

Verses 7-11

Consider him that waits for a crop of corn; and will not you wait for a crown of glory? If you should be called to wait longer than the husbandman, is not there something more worth waiting for? In every sense the coming of the Lord drew nigh, and all his people's losses, hardships, and sufferings, would be repaid. Men count time long, because they measure it by their own lives; but all time is as nothing to God; it is as a moment. To short-lived creatures a few years seem an age; but Scripture, measuring all things by the existence of God, reckons thousands of years but so many days. God brought about things in Job's case, so as plainly to prove that he is very pitiful and of tender mercy. This did not appear during his troubles, but was seen in the event, and believers now will find a happy end to their trials. Let us serve our God, and bear our trials, as those who believe that the end will crown all. Our eternal happiness is safe if we trust to him: all else is mere vanity, which soon will be done with for ever.

Verses 12–18

The sin of swearing is condemned; but how many make light of common profane swearing! Such swearing expressly throws contempt upon God's name and authority. This sin brings neither gain, nor pleasure, nor reputation, but is showing enmity to God without occasion and without advantage. It shows a man to be an enemy to God, however he pretends to call himself by his name, or sometimes joins in acts of worship. But the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. In a day of affliction nothing is more seasonable than prayer. The spirit is then most humble, and the heart is broken and tender. It is necessary to exercise faith and hope under afflictions; and prayer is the appointed means for obtaining and increasing these graces. Observe, that the saving of the sick is not ascribed to the anointing with oil, but to prayer. In a time of sickness it is not cold and formal prayer that is effectual, but the prayer of faith. The great thing we should beg of God for ourselves and others in the time of sickness is, the pardon of sin. Let nothing be done to encourage any to delay, under the mistaken fancy that a confession, a prayer, a minister's absolution and exhortation, or the sacrament, will set all right at last, where the duties of a godly life have been disregarded. To acknowledge our faults to each other, will tend greatly to peace and brotherly love. And when a righteous person, a true believer, justified in Christ, and by his grace walking before God in holy obedience, presents an effectual fervent prayer, wrought in his heart by the power of the Holy Spirit, raising holy affections and believing expectations and so leading earnestly to plead the promises of God at his mercy-seat, it avails much. The power of prayer is proved from the history of Elijah. In prayer we must not look to the merit of man, but to the grace of God. It is not enough to say a prayer, but we must pray in prayer. Thoughts must be fixed, desires must be firm and ardent, and graces exercised. This instance of the power of prayer, encourages every Christian to be earnest in prayer. God never says to any of the seed of Jacob, Seek my face in vain. Where there may not be so much of miracle in God's answering our prayers, yet there may be as much of grace.

Verses 19, 20

It is no mark of a wise or holy man, to boast of being free from error, or to refuse to acknowledge an error. And there is some doctrinal mistake at the bottom of every practical mistake. There is no one habitually bad, but upon some bad principle. This is conversion; to turn a sinner from the error of his ways, not merely from one party to another, or from one notion and way of thinking to another. There is no way effectually and finally to hide sin, but forsaking it. Many sins are hindered in the party converted; many also may be so in others whom he may influence. The salvation of one soul is of infinitely greater importance than preserving the lives of multitudes, or promoting the welfare of a whole people. Let us in our several stations keep these things in mind, sparing no pains in God's service, and the event will prove that our labour is not in vain in the Lord. For six thousand years He has been multiplying pardons, and yet his free grace is not tired nor grown weary. Certainly

Divine mercy is an ocean that is ever full and ever flowing. May the Lord give us a part in this abundant mercy, through the blood of Christ, and the sanctification of the Spirit.