

Shepherding Notes

James

By Steve Schultz

The book of James can be easily misunderstood without its proper context. So, to start us off with a right perspective, here is a brief overview of the epistle.

James is writing to Jewish believers who have been dispersed throughout the Roman Empire by persecution. The Church is young and this letter is the oldest book of the New Testament. Because Christianity is just starting out and is a very delicate worldview and structure that will face all sorts of opposition from the flesh, the world and the evil one, James is determined to influence God's true followers to get things right from the beginning. Failure to do so will destroy the Church.

As one reads through this book, it is easy to get the sense that James is just stringing together a series of wise and practical moral instructions, each functioning independently of each other. This is far from the case. In his efforts to keep the Church on track and pure, James is offering an assessment composed of tests designed to reveal either authentic or counterfeit faith.

Each section of James must be read this way. You will be served well by reading each instruction and asking, "In light of these words, what marks a true Christian and what marks a counterfeit one?"

"Each section of James must be read as a test designed to reveal either authentic or counterfeit faith."

Welcome to one of the more challenging but pragmatically rich epistles of the Bible! So challenging that even Martin Luther, prior to further study, questioned whether it should belong in the canon. So pragmatic, though, that it is rare that a day goes by without my referencing its wisdom and insight in my own spiritual sojourn.

Test #1: The Test of Perseverance in Suffering

James is writing to a predominantly Jewish audience that has been dispersed through persecution, who are also followers of Christ. He begins by addressing a matter that we all face and need God's accurate perspective on: trials — hard times; circumstantial difficulties both big and small.

While discomfort tends to elicit grumbling and complaining, misery, hopelessness, and despair, as if our uncomfortable circumstances are purposeless happenstance, God makes it clear that He is the author of them in the believer's life, that they are designed for specific purposes, and they should produce joy in us rather than hopeless misery.

James begins by commanding the believer to "count it all joy when you run into various trials." The word "count" comes from a Greek term literally meaning "lead with authority." A trial is amoral — neither good nor bad. It is our interpretation that assigns moral value to it. If we miss that the trial is under the umbrella of God's goodness and sovereignty, we will conclude that it is bad. If, on the other hand, we see the trial as being initiated and directed by our good and sovereign God, we can perceive it as good. It is a decision — an "authoritative leading of the mind" — by which we conclude such things.

Trials are good for us because they produce something: steadfastness. Every time we go through a trial, perceive it faithfully as God's work, and survive it, we come out the other end seeing that God has broken us of sinful strongholds and built godly character into us. We are to be holy like Christ, and trials get us there — closer and closer to perfection and completion.

As we travel through the trial, we will need God's perspective — that we call wisdom. However, if we allow ourselves to trust Him for some trials but then have other things to fall back on that are earthly and sinful (rage, substance abuse, fleshly indulgences, etc.), we are not fully trusting Him and are exposed as "double-minded." When we trust God this way, we cannot trust Him for anything — not because He is unfaithful but because we are unstable in all of our ways.

James then goes on to apparently stick it to the wealthy. This is not a Marxist rant and does not justify being jealous or envious of the rich. James makes it clear in chapter 5 that the rich whom he is rebuking are doing particularly bad things, including causing others misery and relying on their wealth rather than on God. They are failing this test because they are placing their faith in the wrong thing.

Test #2: The Test of Blame in Temptation

It is easy to become miserable and act out sinfully under the pressures of trials, thus blaming God for our actions. However, James heads this one off by saying that we must not blame God for our sinful responses but realize that we sin because we act on our own internal sinful desires.

James warns us not to be deceived — fooled into thinking that God can be the author of our sin. God is the provider of every perfect gift and does not shift between goodness and evil, much like shadows shift throughout the day with the movements of the sun and moon, over which God is lord.

Test #3: The Test of Response to the Word

James addresses an understandably prominent dynamic within the ranks — nerves are shot and tempers are short, thus leading to expressions of anger that are not of God. They neither edify nor produce righteousness.

While we are to be doers of God's word in all things, the immediate context is a particular application to this anger problem which we see in verse 21, and it stems from a filthiness and wickedness problem tapered only by meekly (humbly and gently) receiving God's word — the only thing that can lead us to the redemption of our souls.

He ends with reminding the believers that doing the word is indicative of an eternally changed heart, not just hearing the word. One who is actually changed by God will manifest it through their actions, especially under very trying circumstances. James identifies one area in particular where sin is clearly seen — the improper use of the tongue. He points out that you can talk a good game spiritually but if you cannot bridle your tongue, what you claim to believe is worthless and you are deceived into thinking that you believe something that you actually don't.

The sincerity and, thus, authenticity of your faith is manifest through works that reveal humble compassion and service to those in need.

"Trials are like the scalpel of a perfect surgeon doing what is best for the patient. While painful, they are designed to produce Christ-likeness in us."

Notice that just like in the first chapter, James addresses his audience as "brethren." This is both an identification of who is to receive the truth of his instruction and a term of endearment, which is always useful in correcting and instructing so that the listener remains receptive and not defensive.

Test #4: The Test of Impartial Love

James continues in chapter 2 to address injustices extended by those he refers to in chapter 1 as "the rich." Again, this is not commentary against all rich people in general, but against these particular rich people who are using their wealth and power in abusive ways.

The believer here is warned against showing partiality to some and not to others based on wealth and power. There is nothing wrong with developing a circle of friends with whom you are closer than with others. However, when it comes time to extend privileges, favors, ministry, etc., we are to do so according to need and wisdom, not according to any advantage I can gain based on the status or resources of the recipient. Violating this principle reveals ulterior motives for calling oneself a Christian.

It is evident by James' wording in verses 8–11 that those showing partiality may not be aware of the magnitude of its sinfulness as they would be with committing adultery or murder. James points out that God's judgment is not based on violations of individual stipulations in the Law but rather on the violation of the Law as a whole. Whether one breaks the Law by committing adultery or murder, or now by committing partiality, one has broken the Law in general.

James instructs us therefore to function as those under the law of liberty from which we extend and receive mercy. Mercy extends kindness equally to all peoples, not just to those who might be able to give me an advantage in society.

Test #5: The Test of Righteous Works

We now come to a bit of text that has been at the center of much controversy and confusion throughout the ages. Upon an initial and surfacy glance, the remaining verses from 14 to the end could influence one to think that salvation is the result of works or at least works plus faith. A careful examination combined with a consideration of the entirety of Scripture, however, will lead to another conclusion.

In verse 14, James is not saying that works save, but rather that a faith that does save, if authentically present, will be evidenced by the good works it produces. If I become sick, am given medicine that is 100% guaranteed to heal the sickness, and there is no evidence over a stretch of time that I am getting better, it is quite reasonable to question whether I ever consumed the medicine.

In our modern church age, it has become regular practice to walk an aisle, pray a prayer, and then claim salvation without ever repenting of sin and following Christ in daily living. One who claims salvation through faith but never manifests the fruit of the Spirit is likely a liar and is playing a very dangerous game.

Many say they are Christian. James' retort would be: the worst examples we could think of — demons — believe in God, and their response is appropriate: they shudder in fear because they know who God is and that their demise at His hand is sure. Having faith that doesn't produce holiness, righteousness, and good works is a dead faith — an impotent acknowledgement of God's existence that has no translation into responsive action.

"A faith that does save, if authentically present, will be evidenced by the good works it produces. Dead faith produces nothing."

This next test, while just as important as all the others, may be more relevant than all the others considering our times, our nature, and the far-reaching consequences of failing it.

Test #6: The Test of the Tongue

If you forget everything else, remember this: ugly speech, ugly heart. True faith will be shown through the control of the tongue or, in this day and age, the keyboard. What is put into words — either orally or written — is fueled by the heart.

According to John MacArthur, "Nowhere is the union of faith and works more visible than in our speech. Every one of us is carrying around a concealed weapon." Any time the word "tongue" is used in this chapter, it is not referring to the oral muscle alone. It represents all forms of communication that are an expression of the heart — spoken, written, typed, texted, or manifest through vocal intonation or body language.

James connects teaching with judgment because bringing oneself under God's judgment increases as words increase. That is why the pastor must be so meticulous in his teaching of God's word. Not only is the tongue hard to control, but its effects when used improperly are very destructive — a great forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.

James points out the difficulty in taming the tongue, calling it "a restless evil" — meaning it doesn't stop and is chronically looking for its next victim — "and full of deadly poison." The tongue is also hypocritical: "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God." Righteous and unrighteous speech cannot come from the same source.

Test #7: The Test of Humble Wisdom

Wisdom and understanding, while communicated through words, are not necessarily demonstrated through words. The speaker of wise words might be expressing those words by simply regurgitating wise things he has heard others speak. Wisdom and understanding is actually displayed in meekness of wisdom. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are rooted in pride. Just like clean and unclean words cannot come from the same source, humility and pridefulness cannot come from the same source.

So-called wisdom that comes up from the world is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Wisdom that comes down from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. A mark of authentic wisdom that has come

from God is the mark of seeking peace — not peace that results from sweeping problems under the rug, but rather by addressing them in a peaceful way. The approach is gentle, not harsh or abrasive. Because it is humble, it is open to reasoning through dialogue and doesn't jump to conclusions without investigation.

James concludes this section by contrasting the great forest set ablaze by the tongue and the harvest of righteousness sown in peace by the peacemaker. True wisdom that is the result of being saved, having true faith, and thus having God's Holy Spirit reside in the soul, will guide the true believer's words and actions as a pattern, as a habit of life.

"Ugly speech, ugly heart. True faith will be shown through the control of the tongue — or, in this day and age, the keyboard."

James begins this next section by asking the rhetorical question, "What causes quarrels and conflict among you?" It is likely that James is anticipating his audience to respond with, "The other guy is a jerk and did X to me first." James immediately states: "It's you." The source of skirmishes and wars is not the other guy. It comes up from the same heart that burns whole forests down with the misuse of the tongue.

Test #8: The Test of Worldly Indulgence

The way that our hearts are responsible for fights in the Church is that we want what we want and we want it now — whether that be material things, accolade, freedom to sin, or a broad array of other things that we simply wish to spend on our own passions. Our hearts are willing to do atrocious things to feed our fleshly desires.

James equates this hunger for worldly indulgence with spiritual adultery that culminates in making one an enemy with God. When I want anything in such a way that it creates conflict with a brother or sister in Christ, I make myself an enemy of God. God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud. Pursuing things of this world with such fervor that we neglect or oppose God's design for us will only result in miserable opposition from God.

The solution to this problem is not to get away from the jerk, or tell them off, or gossip to our friends, but to mourn and weep over my own sin that influences me to desire and pursue things of the world at the expense of the brethren. I must humble myself such that I easily receive His instruction, deny my flesh and love for the world, and then trust God with the result.

Speaking evil against another will take on many different forms — false accusations, assigning evil motive when there is none, slander and gossip. This places the speaker above the law rather than subject to it. This is not an admonition not to judge actions and behavior — we know this because in Matthew 7:1–5 the Lord instructs us to judge, but to do so wisely and with a clear eye. This is an admonition to judge others without examining and taking responsibility for oneself first. Your ability to extend grace and mercy to others is directly proportional to how much grace and mercy you understand you have received from God.

Test #9: The Test of Dependence on God

There is nothing wrong with making plans as long as we are ever mindful that the culmination of those plans are ultimately under the permission or ordination of God Himself. With our planning must come dependence on God to either carry out our plans or to steer us in a different direction.

Do we have to actually articulate the words "if the Lord wills" every time we make a plan? No, that is not the point. The point is to constantly maintain that mindset — that my plans may or may not be in sync with God's plan and I am willing to subject my plans to whatever He wills, trusting that He will either bless my plans or change them.

"Your ability to extend grace and mercy to others is directly proportional to how much grace and mercy you understand you have received from God."

James reminds those who are arrogantly caught up in self-reliance that all the stuff they are placing their trust in is going to burn, and the injustices they have committed towards others in their acquisition of it have not gone unnoticed by God.

Test #10: The Test of Patient Endurance

In worldly efforts to make life comfortable now, those with resources have committed atrocities towards those without resources instead of patiently waiting for the Lord's rescue and being righteous in their treatment of others. This again is not a license to hate on the wealthy — rather, this is a rebuke of this particular group of wealthy who have "lived in luxury and self-indulgence" at the expense of the righteous person.

Patiently waiting for the coming of the Lord the way a farmer waits for his crops to grow is extolled as virtuous in this text. Failing to patiently wait manifests itself in grumbling against one another, unrighteous and unjust behavior, and doubting that the Lord's compassion and mercy will come through. Failing this test looks like turning to addictions to kill pain, cheating to get desired outcomes, and unrighteous treatment of others to satisfy selfish desires. The heart that is right with the Lord will patiently endure, trusting that satisfaction will come through the Lord's provision.

Test #11: The Test of Truthfulness

People have a variety of clever ways to commit to things without actually committing to them. Pinky promises, swearing on one's mother's grave, the old noble handshake — all ways man has devised to convince someone else of the veracity of their commitment. Yet we still need contracts and lawyers.

James commands us to just say what we mean and mean what we say. Let your yes be yes and your no be no without any qualifiers or loopholes. To mean anything other than "yes" when you say "yes" is a lie. Anyone who needs pomp and circumstance to convince you of their commitment to what they have said they would do lacks faith in their own simple yes or no. Beware.

Test #12: The Test of Prayerfulness

If you read this final section without understanding its purpose as a test, you could go off in all sorts of directions including but not limited to heresies that we have seen in the prosperity movement. This is not instruction on how to solve mental and physical health

problems. Rather, this is a reminder that when there are mental and physical ailments, the first place to turn is God through prayer. Failing to first turn to God through prayer reveals a lack of true, saving faith.

If you suffer — pray. If you are cheerful — praise. If you are sick — have the elders pray. Unfortunately, in our desire to be healthy and not miserable, our emphasis when reading this passage always goes to that end. James does not share the same emphasis. His is on faith, not healing. It was not faith that magically healed the paralytic but rather the faith that got the paralytic in the presence of Christ who then healed him.

With true, saving faith, the one who is sick will be saved and raised up — but not necessarily in a physical sense. If physical healing were the emphasis here, then no Christian would ever die, and the guilt for those who did die would rest upon those who didn't have enough faith. Further support for this being a spiritual and not physical reference is that forgiveness of sin is coupled with it.

Finally, James points out that if you bring a wandering soul back to the truth you will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. That is what Christ does! But it all begins with communication with God through prayer.

"If you suffer — pray. If you are cheerful — praise. If you are sick — have the elders pray. James' emphasis is on faith, not healing."