

An In-Depth Study of the Letter of James

[Part 3]

James 1:19-20 [NIV] *“My dear brothers, take note of this: **Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.**”*

The wisdom books of the Jewish and Christian texts are full of sayings related to the above verses.

Ecclesiasticus 5:11-12 [Jerusalem Bible] *“**Be quick to listen and deliberate in giving an answer. If you understand a matter, give your neighbour an answer, if not, keep your hand over your mouth.**”*

Proverbs 10:19 [NIV] *“**When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.**”*

This proverb even hints that talking too much could be a sin, when not allowing at least half of the conversation being our listening contribution.

Proverbs 13:3 [NIV] *“**He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.**”*

When we fail to put our mind in gear before we open our mouth, we are courting trouble.

Proverbs 17:28 [NIV] *“**Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.**”*

Too often we speak on a subject we are **not** fully qualified to do and show our foolishness.

It is better to ask others questions and their opinions than to give our own unfounded comments.

When we talk too much and listen too little we communicate to others that we think their ideas are **not** as important as ours.

This attitude can cause anger to erupt as egos are bruised.

We need to put a mental stopwatch on how long we speak compared to how long we listen.

The Christian **should** become angry when we see others hurt by their own sin and that of other people.

But we should **never** be angry as Christians when we fail to win an argument, feel offended or neglected.

Selfish anger **never** helps anyone.

Remember God created us with two eyes, two ears but only one mouth, shouldn’t that tell us something?

A tribute was once paid to a great lecturer and linguist that he could be silent in seven different languages.

“Don’t scold” is good advice to any preacher or teacher, for they lose their effectiveness whenever they do not make it clear by every word or gesture that they love those that are in their class or congregation.

James 1:21 [King James] “Wherefore **lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.**”

The Greek word translated “lay apart” is “*apotithemi*” referring to taking off a garment and setting it aside to enable you to do a job of work.

Acts 7:58 [NIV] “*dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.*”

Same words used of those who were about to stone Stephen to death.

Isaiah 64:6 [NIV] “*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*”

God looks on even our righteous acts as soiled garments.

All words that James uses refer to defilement.

“*Filthiness*” is the Greek word “*rhuparia*” refers to moral dirtiness.

“*Superfluity*” is the Greek word “*pērisseia*” meaning abundance.

Medically the Greek word means a cancerous growth on the body which needs to be cut out.

“*Naughtiness*” is the Greek word “*kakia*” meaning depravity.

There is an interesting connection with the root word of “*rhuparia*” which is “*rupos*” which is used in the medical sense to have wax in your ear, making it hard for you to hear.

It is possible that James is wanting the readers to retain this meaning, for he is telling them to get rid of anything that will stop them hearing God’s words.

When wax builds up in your ear it makes you deaf so when sin builds up in your life you become deaf to what God wishes you to hear.

“*Engrafted*” is the Greek word “*ēmphutōs*” which can also be translated “*planted.*”

Two thoughts are expressed here:-

It is the grafted part of a fruit tree that produces the desired fruit, not the stump onto which it is grafted.

Romans 11:17 [NIV] “*If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,*”

Paul is referring to Gentiles, those who do not know God, being grafted into root stock, the Israelite nation that was chosen first by God.

The Gentiles can then feed on the Old Covenant prophecies and promises and produce New Covenant fruit.

Matthew 13:1-8 [NIV] “*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed*

*fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still **other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop, a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.***

This is what could be in the mind of James.

God offers his love and forgiveness through the holy scriptures, the Christian Bible, as seed that He wants to bear fruit.

But fruit will **only** be produced in a mind that with meekness accepts that planted seed.

We have to welcome the Word of God into our lives and meekly follow what it teaches us.

Only then can we allow the Holy Spirit to produce in us the fruits of righteousness. [**Galatians 5:22-23**]

Such a teachable spirit is without resentment and anger, so is able to face the truth.

A teachable spirit is **not** seduced by laziness, but with a self-controlled mind will accept the discipline of learning.

The Greek word translated “*meekness*” is “*praiitēs*” meaning a serenity and the power **not** to be led away by our emotions, but to control our emotions as right reason dictates.

James 1:22-24 [NIV] *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”*

James presents us with a vivid picture, the person who goes to church meetings listens to the reading and expounding of scripture and really believes that this has made them a Christian.

Such a person has deceived themselves and are blinded to what is involved in becoming a true Christian.

To attend church meetings and diligent study of God’s Word, the Christian Bible, is **not** even halfway to becoming a Christian.

James illustrates this with a daily practice of looking into a mirror, seeing smuts that disfigure our face and then omits to do anything about it.

James 1:25 [NIV] *“But the man who looks intently into the **perfect law that gives freedom**, and continues to do this, **not** forgetting what he has heard, but doing it, he will be blessed in what he does.”*

The law which James refers to is **not** the law of the Old Covenant, which Paul rightly tells us has come to an end of how we seek righteousness with Jesus Christ. [**Romans 10:4**]

Matthew 5:17 [NIV] *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but **to fulfil them.**”*

Jesus Christ by His life, death and resurrection fulfilled the Old Covenant law perfectly for all humanity, who had never, nor ever will be, able to keep perfectly.

Matthew 5:20 [NIV] *“For I tell you that **unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.**”*

A Christian has to have righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisee who dedicated their lives to strict obedience to the Old Covenant law.

How do we do this?

The same way as Abraham did before the Old Covenant laws were given.

Galatians 3:15-25 [NIV] *“Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no-one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds”, meaning many people, but “and to your seed”, meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: **The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.**”*

The Old Covenant law with all its days and regulations was added to the perfect law that Abraham kept by faith in the promise God made to him and all humanity.

Why added?

Because of the people’s sins.

What was and still is the aim of the Old Covenant laws?

1 Timothy 1:8-11 [NIV] *“We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers, and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”*

How is the Old Covenant law, specifically the Ten Commandments, used properly?

Romans 7:7 [NIV] *“What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! **Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law.** For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”*

The law exposes exactly what sin is and what the end result of sin is, death.

What then is the “perfect law” that James refers to?

Romans 13:8-10 [NIV] *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” **Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.**”*

Love towards other human beings fulfils all the law, for this is the way we can show our love towards our Creator God.

This law of love is the **perfect law** because it cannot be bettered.

When we fulfil this law of love, that Jesus Christ showed us by His life and death, we also will know the real purpose of our existence, and the reason God has called us to become a Christian [which literally means “*a little Christ*”] at this very time in the history of humanity.

Matthew 22:36-40 [NIV] *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

It is on this statement of Jesus Christ Himself made that both Paul and James base their understanding of the Old Covenant laws, and their use today.

James tells us that obedience to this **perfect law of love** will give us freedom, what does this mean?

If we were basing our righteousness on the keeping of the Old Covenant laws and regulations we would never know if we were keeping them perfectly, so we would always be a slave of doubt, not free in our heart, mind and human spirit.

Real freedom comes only from knowing and fulfilling God’s will for our existence, to love Him and other human beings.

James 1:26-27 [NIV] *“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*

The Greek word translated “*religion*” is “*thrēskēia*” which means an outward expression of our worship of our Creator God.

True worship does **not** lie in elaborate vestments, noble liturgy, magnificent music or carefully wrought order of service in a special building or place.

True worship is Christian love and charity towards the needs of other people, within or without of our Christian fellowship.

What James was telling us was not new.

Psalms 68:4-6 [NIV] *“Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds, his name is the LORD, and rejoice before him. A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.”*

Three things that God focuses His care on, fatherless, widows and those who are prisoners of their own sins.

Zechariah 7:8-10 [NIV] *“And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’”*

The correction that God gave to His people through Zechariah was very similar to that of James.

Micah 6:6-8 [NIV] *“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And **what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**”*

All through the history of humanity, people have in the past and continue today to make ritual and liturgy a substitute for personal sacrifice and service of other human beings.

Noble and splendid praise of God in song and reading of the Christian Bible within a building dedicated to worshipping God is **not wrong, unless** it is a substitute for expressing love for God outside of the church building, to non-Christians.

Romans 12:1-2 [NIV] *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

This is true religion and worship of our Creator God.

Laying down our life, that is time and substance for other human beings, and resisting the influence of this evil society by a remaking of our thought patterns that lead to our actions.

Matthew 25:31-40 [NIV] *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”*

Note what those who will receive eternal life as an inheritance and a place in the created family of God will be doing in this present physical life.

James 2:1-4 [NIV] *“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, **don’t show favouritism.** Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” **have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?**”*

Paying special attention to someone because they are rich, influential, powerful or popular is a sin, because we are placing ourselves in the Creator God’s position because **only** He is the judge of all humanity.

2 Corinthians 5:10 [NIV] *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”*

One thing Jesus Christ will judge us on is our attitude towards and judgement of other human beings.

Matthew 7:1-2 [NIV] *“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*

Showing partiality is a judgement that we are making.

Acts 10:34-35 [NIV] *“Then Peter began to speak: “I now realise how true it is that **God does not show favouritism** but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”*

Peter had to learn this lesson being shown very clearly by God. [**Read Acts 10:9-28**]

Paul was convinced that all humanity will be judged exactly the same by God.

Romans 2:11, 16 [NIV] *“For God does not show favouritism.” ... “This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”*

Read the whole passage for clarity of Paul’s belief. Also **Ephesians 6:1-9** and **Colossians 3:16-25**.

James 2:5 [NIV] *“Listen, my dear brothers: **Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith** and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”*

James is **not** just talking about those who have little money and possessions but also whose simple values are despised by much of our affluent society.

People who prefer to serve than to manage other people, prefer peaceful human relationships to financial security and power.

For such people it is easier for them to acknowledge their need for salvation through Jesus Christ.

John 15:4-5 [NIV] *“Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; **apart from me you can do nothing.**”*

This is a statement made by Jesus Christ that is hard for a rich person to accept.

But an insignificant believer knows this to be a fact by personal experience.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 [NIV] *“**Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”***

It is a simple fact that the gospel message offers much more to the poor and demands much more from the worldly rich.

Mark 10:17-23 [NIV] *“As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “**what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No-one is good, except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “**One thing you lack,**” he said. “**Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**” **At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.** Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”*

This man’s opening words showed his attitude towards eternal life.

“What must I do...” not realising you **cannot** buy eternal life, for eternal life is a close relationship with Jesus Christ and hence the Father.

John 17:3 [NIV] *“**Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.**”*

Also eternal life is a gift from God.

Romans 6:23 [NIV] *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

James 2:6-7 [NIV] *“But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”*

This insult was done by showing favouritism to the rich person.

The rich still exploit the poor and oppress them today as they did in James’ day.

Notice the number of moneylenders who advertise on TV and in the press, from banks to other little-known firms whose small print is difficult to see because it mentions very high rates of interest, some even as high as 900%.

Such people and firms do slander the Creator God who has given them life and sustains their life.

James is **not** condemning riches but riches without sympathy for the poor.

James 2:8-9 [NIV] *“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers.”*

James calls this the “royal law” as it could be the law that makes us fit to be kings in the created family of God. [**Revelation 5:10**]

A Christian has to love every other human being, treating them as we would like to be treated.

We should not ignore the rich, because that would be withholding our love.

But we are **not** to favour the rich for what they can do for us, while ignoring the poor who can offer us little if anything in return, for that would be a sin in God’s eyes.

James 2:10-11 [NIV] *“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a law-breaker.”*

James is still on the topic of relationships with other human beings.

No matter how good we may be in other directions, if we do not have equal respect towards other human beings we have broken the law of God, that law of love.

John 3:16-17 [NIV] *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*

God offered salvation through Jesus Christ to the whole world, both rich and poor equally.

James 2:12-13 [NIV] *“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”*

This should be the driving force of our day-to-day conduct, for **only** those who show mercy will themselves receive mercy from God on Judgement Day.

Unlike the Pharisee, orthodox Jew, or an orthodox Christian, a true Christian is **not** governed by an external pressure of a whole set of rules and regulations that are imposed on them from without.

A true Christian is governed by the inner compulsion of love for the Creator God and the rest of His human creation.

A true Christian is governed **not** by man-made laws but by God-given love, one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit working in and through their lives. [**John 7:38-39; Galatians 5:22**]

Matthew 5:7 [NIV] *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”*

Love and mercy go hand-in-hand in a Christian’s life. [Also read **Matthew 18:22-35**]

I hope by now in this study of the letter of James, directed to all Christians, is showing how very practical his instructions are to our day-to-day Christian living.

James continues in the same practical theme and really this is a letter we should study often and apply daily.