

# An In-Depth Study of the Letter of James

## [Part 4]

**James 2:14-17** [NIV] *“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”*

**There is one thing that James cannot stand, profession without practice and words without deeds.**

What use is sympathy for a person in need without some practical attempt to help that person?

To a Jew almsgiving was of paramount importance.

So much so that to a Jew almsgiving and righteousness meant the same thing.

**Tobit 4:7-10** [Jerusalem Bible] *“Set aside part of your goods for almsgiving. Never turn your face from the poor and God will never turn His from you. Measure your alms by what you have, if you have much, give more, if you have little, do not be afraid to give less in alms. So doing, you will lay up for yourself a great treasure for the day of necessity. For almsgiving delivers from death and saves people from passing down to darkness.”*

This practical physical help can also prompt us as Christians to give practical help on a spiritual level.

As Tobit states, our giving, when used to spread the Good News of what Jesus Christ has done for all humanity, can save other humans from eternal death and bring them into the light of God’s Love.

**Galatians 2:9-10** [NIV] *“James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”*

When the leaders of the Jerusalem church agreed that Paul should go to the Gentiles the one injunction that was laid on them was not to forget the poor.

In complete contrast in James’ day, but also down through human history, sympathy, pity and almsgiving is quite alien to human thought and action to the majority of humans.

**One strain of Greek religion, the stoics, aimed at “apatheia,” that is the complete absence of all feelings and all emotion.**

Their aim was serenity and emotion disturbs serenity.

**For the stoic, blessedness meant being wrapped up in your own philosophic detachment and calm.**

**Such a selfish attitude of mind pervades society today, and even invades the thinking and actions of Christian fellowships.**

**Where most offerings are spent on buildings, vestments and social events in a church fellowship, the stoic attitude of mind is creeping into their thinking and actions.**

**At least 50% of offering should be spent on reaching the spiritual “poor” and those in the darkness of Satan’s deception.**

There is nothing more dangerous to personal spiritual growth in a person than repeated experiencing a fine emotion with **no** attempt to put that emotion into action.

**In a sense a person has no right to feel pity and sympathy unless they at least try to put those emotions into practical action.**

An emotion is **not** something in which we luxuriate, it is something which through discipline and sacrifice must become our way of life.

**We cannot earn our salvation by serving others and obeying God.**

**But loving actions that benefit others, shows that our commitment to our Creator God is real.**

Deeds of loving service to others, physical or spiritual in aim, are **not** a substitute for our faith, but a verification of our faith in Jesus Christ for our personal salvation.

**James 2:18-19** [NIV] *“But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that, and shudder.”*

Simply put James is telling us as Christians, when it comes to faith and righteous acts of love, it is **not** either but both.

**You cannot separate faith from loving acts towards others in need, physically or spiritually.**

Just having faith in the existence of a Creator God is **not** enough.

The demons and Satan are very aware of His existence, and fear the outcome of their lives, which lack any thoughts of love and service towards human beings.

The thoughts and actions of Satan and the demons, [angels that followed his example of rebellion against God, **Revelation 12:9**] are selfish, motivated by pride, and totally evil in nature.

The complete opposite to that the life and actions of Jesus Christ and God the Father who are motivated by love. [**1 John 4:8**]

**In a well-balanced human being there must be both thought and action.**

A thinker is only half a person if their thoughts are **not** put into action.

We cannot be a person of Godlike action unless we have first thought through the eternal loving principles on which our action is based.

**Faith must overflow into action, but action can only begin and be rightly directed, when we are, through prayer and study of God’s Word, the Christian Bible, shown by God what our faith is to accomplish in our actions.**

**James 2:20-26** [NIV] *“You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”*

James uses two great examples of faith that lead to action.

Abraham's faith was proved by his willingness to sacrifice his only son at the apparent demand of God. [**Genesis 22:1-18**]

Rahab proved her faith by being prepared to risk her own life to help the men that Joshua had sent to spy out the land that the Israelites were about to invade and take over. [**Joshua 2:1-21**]

Unless Rahab had possessed faith in the God of Israel she would **not** have taken the risk of identifying her future with the fortunes of Israel.

**Faith was indeed the motivating cause of the actions that Abraham and Rahab took.**

Faith and deeds are inseparable, **not** opposites, and both are the two sides of our relationship with the Creator God as our Saviour.

The third example given by James links the human spirit and our spiritual life of faith.

Unless the Holy Spirit is active within our human spirit we cannot have faith, for faithfulness is one of the "fruits" of the Holy Spirit. [**Galatians 5:22-23**]

**James 3:1** [NIV] *"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."*

Teaching was a highly valued and respected profession in Jewish culture and the early Church.

Whenever teachers were mentioned they are mentioned with honour.

**Acts 13:1** [NIV] *"In the church at Antioch there were **prophets and teachers**: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul."*

Teachers ranked with prophets who set apart and sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

**1 Corinthians 12:28** [NIV] *"And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, **third teachers**, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues."*

Teachers listed only second to apostles and prophets.

**Ephesians 4:11** [NIV] *"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be **pastors and teachers**,"*

Apostles, prophets and evangelists were forever on the move, their field of work being the whole Church, they never stayed long in one congregation.

In contrast pastors and teachers worked within a certain congregation.

Their important task was to instruct converts to Christianity and to build up their faith.

**With this position of being a teacher came an awe-inspiring responsibility for they were putting the stamp of their own faith and knowledge on those who were entering the Church.**

Some of the teachers in the early Church failed in their responsibility and their task and became false teachers.

This failure is to be found in the Church throughout its history, and continues even today, as Satan seeks to deceive leaders and teachers, thus bringing deception and error to their congregations.

All teachers and pastors are prime targets for Satan's attack on the Church.

**Acts 15:24** [NIV] *"We have heard that some went out from us **without our authorisation** and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said."*

Here is an example of some setting themselves up as teachers and causing problems as a result.

Some teachers were **not** living example of what they were teaching, thus demoting what they taught. **[Romans 2:17-29]**

**1 Timothy 1:6-7** [NIV] *"Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. **They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.**"*

There were some who tried to teach others before they themselves knew anything.

**2 Timothy 4:3-4** [NIV] *"For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, **they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.** They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."*

There were false teachers who would pander to the desires of the crowd, instead of giving correction, rebukes and encouragement. **[see verse 2]**

The Christian teacher entered into a perilous heritage, taking the place of the rabbi in the eyes of Jewish converts.

A rabbi was treated in a way that could ruin the character of any man, their very name means "my great one."

It is true that a rabbi was **not** allowed to take money for his teaching, that he was supposed to work at a trade to support his bodily needs.

But his work was held in such high esteem that he would be taken into the household of a rich family and given every support and care.

It was very easy for a rabbi to become the kind of person Jesus depicted as a spiritual tyrant.

**Matthew 23:4-7** [NIV] *"They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. **Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market-places and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'**"*

No profession is more liable to beget spiritual and intellectual pride.

**Two things a true teacher must avoid at all costs:**

a) Must take care to teach the truth **not** his own opinions or even his prejudices.

To avoid this error a careful reliance on God's Word, the Christian Bible, is essential.

b) Always a teacher must allow scripture to interpret scripture, this is why I always seek to base every comment I make with scriptures.

**2 Peter 1:20-21** [Jerusalem Bible] “... we must recognise that *the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a matter for the individual, for no prophecy came from human initiative. When people spoke for God it was the Holy Spirit that moved them.*”

**Isaiah 28:9-10** [Amplified Bible] “Whom will He teach knowledge? And whom will He make to understand the message ... for it is His prophets repeating **precept upon precept, rule upon rule, here a little, there a little.**”

The above is a very good guide to understanding scripture.

We should **never** base a doctrine on only one scripture, but allow the Word of God, the Christian Bible, to interpret itself, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. [**John 16:13**]

A teacher must be very careful that the way he is living his life is **not** contradicting his teaching.

**You cannot teach another person that God is love, merciful, patient and faithful, unless you are expressing these qualities in your own life.**

James’ final comment is that every teacher must be constantly aware that they will be judged more strictly than those who do not become teachers of others.

**James 3:2** [NIV] “*We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.*”

James in this verse sets before us two truths.

a) There is **no** person in the world who does **not** sin in some way.

**Romans 3:23** [NIV] “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*”

We all fall short, through sin, to be acceptable to a holy, glorious God.

**Romans 3:10** [NIV] “*As it is written: “There is **no-one righteous, not even one;**”*”

This is a quote from **Psalms 14:1-3**.

**1 John 1:8** [NIV] “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*”

If we think we have **not** sinned we are blind to our real spiritual condition.

**Ecclesiastes 7:20** [NIV] “*There is **not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.***”

These are but a few of the scriptures that remind us of our spiritual condition, a sinner who is seeking forgiveness from a loving Saviour.

b) There is no sin into which it is easier to fall, and no sin which has graver consequences than the sin that our tongue brings on us.

**Matthew 12:36-37** [NIV] “*But I tell you that **men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.***”

A “careless” word is one that we utter without thinking deeply first what effect it will have on those hearing it.

**Proverbs 15:1-4** [NIV] “*A **gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly. The eyes of the***

**LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good. The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.”**

**God is well aware of every word that we utter and if we are saying them in love or otherwise.**

**Psalms 139:1-4 [NIV] “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.”**

God is even aware of our thoughts that motivate what we say.

**No person can say, if they have studied God’s Word, the Christian Bible, that they have not been warned of the dangers that are ours through the use of our tongue.**

**James 3:3-6 [NIV] “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”**

Two simple illustrations are given by James to back up his statement about the dangers of the tongue.

We know that if we put a bit in a horse’s mouth we can control the direction and attitude of the horse’s whole body.

**Therefore, if we control our tongue we will be able to control the actions of our whole body.**

If our tongue is uncontrollable then our whole life will be out of control.

James is **not** saying for a moment that complete silence is better than speech.

What James is seeking is for us to always think deeply what the effect of what we say will have on others who hear it.

What we say will effect the way others look on us, as a fool or a person of wisdom.

The damage that an uncontrollable tongue can cause is likened to how a small spark, just one word given out of place or not in love, can destroy a whole forest.

**Proverbs 16:27 [Amplified] “A worthless man devises and digs up mischief, and in his lips there is a scorching fire.”**

There are two reasons why the damage the tongue can do is like a fire.

a) **A fire can be wide-ranging.**

The danger is that the tongue can do damage at a distance.

A chance word spoken in one end of the country can spread until it has brought damage, pain, grief, hurt and heartache to the other end of the country and beyond.

**Psalms 73:9 [R.S.V.] “They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongue struts through the earth.”**

**The modern internet has given the words of fools and perverts the ability to do great damage to vast numbers of people worldwide.**

**Proverbs 18:21** [NIV] *“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”*

The effect of the tongue can bring life, but also death, to millions of other people as it is spread through the internet.

The internet is a powerful tool being used by God to spread the gospel message worldwide, is also being used by Satan to blind people to the truth and promote his evil intentions.

**b) A fire can very soon become uncontrollable.**

In the tinder-dry woodlands and scrub of Palestine, a forest fire was almost immediately out of control.

There are three things that we cannot bring back.

A spent arrow, a spoken word and a missed opportunity.

**There is nothing which is so impossible to kill as a rumour.**

There is nothing so impossible to obliterate than an idle and malignant story, even if we apologise for spreading such a story the scar will always remain.

**Once a word is spoken it has gone from our control.**

Although we cannot retrieve our spoken words we must always be aware that we will have to answer for them.

The word translated “*world*” in this passage of scripture in James is “*kōsmōs*” can have two meanings.

a) “*Kōsmōs*” can mean adornment, so this phrase could mean that the tongue is the “*adornment of evil.*”

The tongue can make evil fatally and fascinatingly attractive.

By the use of the tongue people can gloss-over, defend or justify evil.

By the use of the tongue people can persuade, seduce or lure other people to indulge in what is sinful.

b) “*Kōsmōs*” can also mean the world, society as a whole.

In the New Testament most often when the word “*kōsmōs*” is used it is referring to an evil world.

**John 14:17** [NIV] *“the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”*

The world is composed of those who cannot receive the Holy Spirit to enable them to overcome the influence of Satan.

Christians are **not** to be part of the evil world.

**John 15:18** [NIV] *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”*

This evil world will hate Jesus and His disciples.

**John 15:19** [NIV] *“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”*

**John 18:36** [NIV] *“Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”*

The Kingdom of God is **not** part of this evil world.

**1 Corinthians 1:20** [NIV] *“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? **Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”***

Paul condemns the wisdom of this world.

**Romans 12:2** [NIV] *“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.”*

We are **not** to conform with this world.

Hence when the word “*kōsmōs*” is used it is referring to a world **without** the influence of the Creator God.

**An uncontrolled tongue is likened to a world that is hostile to and ignorant of the Creator God.**

The tongue is the part of us that disobeys, defies and rebels against God.

“*The whole course of life*” – the phrase literally means the wheel of life, our whole being.

This can be describing three different parts of life.

- a) **A wheel is a circle**, a complete whole, so it can depict the totality of life, everything that is contained in our living.
- b) **A wheel when moving** any particular part of it is either moving up or down.

This depicts the ups and downs of life, the chances and the changes.

- c) **A wheel is circular** – therefore it can refer to the coming and going of generations. Human existence being forever repeating itself without any real progression.

**The use of our tongue can then have an influence on all of our life but also future generations.**

The word translated “*hell*” is “*gēēnna*” referring to the Valley of Hinnom, which was used as Jerusalem’s garbage dump and was continually burning up all that was useless and discarded.

Indicating that the tongue too often produces things that were of **no** eternal value.

**James 3:7-8** [NIV] *“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but **no man can tame the tongue.** It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”*

Right from the creation of the first human beings, God has provided animals that humans were to tame for their benefit.

**Genesis 1:28** [NIV] *“God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. **Rule over** the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

This taming of animals was a blessing from God for the first human beings.

**Genesis 9:2** [NIV] *“The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands.”*

God even built into certain animals a fear of humans that would assist in our taming of them for our use.

Tame means to control and James says that humans have always been able to accomplish this taming of animals.

But humans fail when it comes to the tongue for God has **not** aided humans in this respect.

**James 3:9-12** [NIV] *“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig-tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”*

To James this lack of control was unnatural but all too often it happens.

Scriptures give us many examples of this happening.

**Matthew 26:33** [NIV] *“Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.”*

Peter boasts of his loyalty.

**Matthew 26:69-74** [NIV] *“Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” she said. But he denied it before them all. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.” He denied it again, with an oath: “I don’t know the man!” After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, “Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.” Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!” Immediately a cock crowed.”*

**Peter’s tongue curses the very same person to whom he had acclaimed his total loyalty.**

**Luke 9:51-56** [NIV] *“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.”*

This was the same John who later in life told people to love one another. [1 **John 3:23**]

**What had made the difference?**

**I believe the only way we can control the tongue is through our being submissive to the work of the Holy Spirit in us.**

**Galatians 5:22-23** [NIV] *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”*

One of the “fruits” of the Holy Spirit in us is “self-control” and this includes the most uncontrollable part of our nature, the tongue.

**Once again we see our total dependence on allowing the Holy Spirit to work within us to bring us to a place where we are acceptable to a Holy Creator God.**

**Galatians 5:24-25** [NIV] *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. **Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.**”*

This is our part, following the lead of the Holy Spirit.