

# James 1:16–27

## 1 Introduction

Let's begin with some preliminaries.

### 1.1 Purpose of James

First, James' writing is ultimately about blessedness (or “happiness”) and joy.

- Count it all joy, my brothers ... (James 1:2)
- Blessed is the man ... (James 1:12)
- He will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:25)

So if you like being unhappy, foolish, or immature, what I have to say will not interest you. You may now leave.

### 1.2 Background

In order to follow what James means in our text today, we need some background information. James does not shy away from the fact that we live in a fallen world. He begins by talking about the trials of life. He says that:

- trials bring steadfastness (1:3),
- steadfastness brings maturity by teaching what James will call “wisdom from above” (1:5),<sup>1</sup> and,

---

<sup>1</sup>James 3:17.

- the wisdom from above leads us to receiving the crown of life (1:12).

Now, turn with me to James 1:16.

There are two key points in this text, each with two key sub-points. what leads to joy and happiness are:

1. a right mind, and,
2. right behavior.

## **2 Right Mind**

### **2.1 Don't be Deceived**

James begins (16): “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers ...” Deceived about what?

James is continuing the theme that he touched on earlier. Earlier in the chapter, he wrote about those who are unstable in the faith (1:6).

The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.<sup>2</sup>

In 13–15 he gives an example of such an unstable person.

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

---

<sup>2</sup>James 1:6–8.

Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

It's important to note that our two words "trial" and "temptation" are the *same word* in Greek. Trials produce steadfastness, wisdom, maturity, and ultimately the crown of life. But temptations lead to yielding to our own desires, which leads to sin, which leads to death.

**What turns a trial into a temptation?** It is the one who shifts responsibility and blame for their sins from themselves to God. It is the old sin of Eden!

[Adam] said [to God], "the woman / whom you gave to be with me, / she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Do be fixed on the truth

"Don't be like this", says James! Don't be double minded, faithless, like the one who is "a wave of the sea ... driven and tossed by the wind". Instead, depend on what God is by nature: the gracious giver of good and perfect gifts.

Compare verses 15 and 18. Our desires give birth to sin. His desire for us is to bring us forth—literally "to give birth" to us—by the word of truth. Instead of death, the ultimate result is "the crown of life".

James is using a play on words here by using astronomical terms.

- We are likened to wandering planets (16).
- God, who made the lights in the sky, even the wandering ones, is our Father (17).

---

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 3:12.

- However, he himself is not like one of those objects, the orbit of which can shift in the sky, even seeming to go backwards on occasion(17).<sup>4</sup>
- He is not even like the majestic sun that can be obscured by the orbit of the tiny moon(17).<sup>5</sup>
- He is unchanging and invariable(17),<sup>6</sup> steady and unwavering.<sup>7</sup>
- Instead of our deception and falsehood, he speaks the word of truth(18).
- His words are the words of life,<sup>8</sup> which give birth to eternal life in us(18).
- Don't be deceived!
- Know the word of truth!

## 2.3 Application

James is exhorting us to have a “right mind”. The deceit of which he speaks is self deceit. And frankly, we like to deceive ourselves. In a twisted sense, we need to deceive ourselves.

---

<sup>4</sup>For example, Mercury and Mars appear to move backwards in the sky (among others). Venus actually does. See [earthsky.org/space/what-is-retrograde-motion](http://earthsky.org/space/what-is-retrograde-motion) and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apparent\\_retrograde\\_motion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apparent_retrograde_motion).

<sup>5</sup>*Aposkiasma* also related to changes in light from moving planetary bodies, “literally shadow as caused by an object that blocks rays of light”. Friberg’s Lexicon, #3240.

<sup>6</sup>*Parallag8* can be used of planetary shifting, the “periodic ‘change’ of a heavenly body”. Moulton, Milligan, “Vocab of the Gk. NT”, #3191. Related to our word ‘parallax’, Arndt and Gingrich, #4844.

<sup>7</sup>I’m reminded of the hymn: “Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father, There is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not. As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.” (Thomas Chisholm, 1925)

<sup>8</sup>See Philippians 2:14–16 and 1 John 1:1–3.

In order to have the right mind about which James is speaking, we need to leave our deceptively comfortable perch of independence from God and throw ourselves into the arms of our father.

Think of a frightened child who has climbed up a tree and has discovered that he cannot climb down. His father stands below, just underneath him and calls for him to let go. His father can easily catch him. However, out of fright, the child refuses to let go of the branch to which he is clinging.

If the child had “a right mind”, he would be able to analyze these facts:

- He cannot stay in the tree forever,
- Dad cannot climb the tree because he will break the branches,
- Dad is big and strong and has caught him before.

Instead, the child has the wrong mind. He is self deceived.

- At least he is not falling yet.
- Dad is too far away.
- This branch isn't *that* uncomfortable.
- And letting go means falling, the thing most feared.

Blessedness, happiness, and joy require the right mind.

### **3 Right Behavior**

In the early years of our marriage, I had the privilege of being mentored by a wise pastor. I wrote about this in the most recent Evangelist. He only mentored people who were teachable and willing. These are exactly the characteristics which James exhorts us to have when he talks about right behavior.

## 3.1 Teachable

Right behavior is something that is learned and one learns first by being teachable, which James defines here. Even though James uses a kind of catchall bucket when he says “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness”, as he exhorts his readers to put away sin, he starts with (19):

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

“If you ain’t listening, you ain’t learning.” “When your mouth is open, your ears are closed.” Having spoken about “the word of truth” (18), he now encourages the reader to receive it “with meekness”, because it “is able to save [our] souls” (21).

We want to receive God’s word, don’t we? Or *do* we? In theory we do, but in practice ...?

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.<sup>9</sup>

James uses here the analogy of a mirror, in which we see ourselves as we really are. That mirror of God’s word is like someone who criticizes us.

When we are criticized, our first response is often to build defense, perhaps before the person has even finished their first sentence. So, “slow to speak”!

Or perhaps in anger, we reject not only the criticism, but also the person who is giving it. “What did they know? Who do they think they are? If only they could get a good look at themselves!” But “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God [in us]”.<sup>10</sup> Anger blocks our ability to meekly receive the living word of God. So, “slow to anger”!

---

<sup>9</sup>Hebrews 4:12.

<sup>10</sup>James 1:20.

The perfect law of liberty (25) shows us what we are really like.

Listen first. React second, if necessary. Be angry rarely. This is teachability. This is what helps us receive wisdom from God.

## 3.2 Willing/Obedient

Right behavior is being teachable and is always coupled with being willing to obey. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” (22)

Marva Dawn, in “How To Reach Out Without Dumbing Down”, observes that our culture has come to believe that hearing and agreeing with something is the same as doing something about it. Thus, Christians can sit in church Sunday after Sunday, nod their heads about whatever it is they agree with, and yet change absolutely nothing in their lives.

James tells us that this is not faith. It’s self deceptive folly. It is false religion. It’s not true discipleship. James clearly couples the idea of listening well with self deceit (26).

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.

Note that being quick to speak can be a sign of worthless religion! And remember that James wants us to be blessed, happy!

The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres (*there’s the idea of ‘steadfastness’ again!*), being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing (1:25).

How can obedience to the law be blessedness? The law of God is our instruction manual. Ignore it at your own peril! Don’t read it and remain self deceived! Disobey it and break the equipment!

Not being willing and obedient starts with not being teachable. Therefore, be teachable! Be willing.

## 4 Conclusion

James now ends this section with a summary of the two tables of the law (27).

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

### EXPLAIN TWO TABLES OF LAW COMMENT.

Does your religion feel worthless? Does it feel dead?<sup>11</sup> If you say ‘yes’ to either of these questions, then ask yourself:

1. Do I have the right mind, infused with the life-giving word of God, or am I self-deceived.
2. Do I have the right behavior, being both teachable and willing?

Remembering that we are still in Easter, we are still answering the question: “what does Easter have to do with us?”

The answer is, “a great deal”!

This is all of grace. The joy and happiness of which I speak isn’t going to come upon us like some sort of chemical reaction. James mixes together blessedness, happiness, and joy with the characteristics of wisdom, maturity, and steadfastness/perseverance. It’s a process of growth.

And it all is from God. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians:

---

<sup>11</sup>James 2:14–17.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.<sup>12</sup>

- The grace is from him.
- The faith is from him.
- Even the good works that we do are from Him.

Our every attempt at trying to muscle up your Christianity, to do better in your own power, to define happiness by your own standards, to do or be anything apart from the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, is not merely doomed to failure. It is calculated to draw you farther from God, rather than closer.

God is the one who graciously gives every good and perfect gift. James began his letter on the theme of dependence on God. That is where I end this sermon today.

If any of you lacks [the right mind, or the right behavior], let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.<sup>13</sup>

*The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting.  
It has been found difficult; and left untried.*<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Ephesians 2:8–10.

<sup>13</sup>James 1:5–8.

<sup>14</sup>G.K. Chesterton, “What’s Wrong with the World”, Part I, Chapter V..