

“Christian Commitment” Lesson 24  
James 1:1 – 2:26

Well, we've finished our study of Paul's letters and the letter to the Hebrews, and we'll have an exciting finish to our year by looking at the personal, but powerful, letters of James, Peter and Jude.

The Bible is composed of some 66 books and throughout them are two prominent themes: the way to God and the walk with God. The **first** is directed to the lost, those dead in sin – it tells them how they can be saved. The **second** is aimed at the Christian, explaining how to live in a manner pleasing to God. The book of James is a primary guidepost in the second category.

Generally speaking the book of James is not a great doctrinal statement. The name of the Lord Jesus Christ appears only twice, and the author never mentions the cross, the resurrection or the Holy Spirit. So this letter wasn't meant to establish basics of the faith; its intention is to drive home the importance of living out the truth.

Just a little background information on the book of James: Who was he? There are five men named James mentioned in the New Testament. Most scholars agree that the author of this book was Jesus' half-brother, born and raised in the same family. Matthew 13:54-56 tells us Mary and Joseph had other children besides Jesus . . . "His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas and His sisters, are they not all with us?"

In John 7:5 we're told that as Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, "not even His brothers were believing in Him." But in 1 Corinthians 15:1-7 we learn that the resurrected Lord Jesus visited many believers and in Galatians 1:19 James had become an Apostle. In fact, he became one of the most significant leaders in the church, serving the Lord until he was martyred in the year 62 A.D. according to Josephus.

We've talked over and over again about the persecution the early Christians were undergoing. Many were displaced persons (we would probably call them refugees). They'd lost jobs, homes, possessions and were hated by the Jews because in becoming Christians they had deserted the faith of their fathers; and hated by the Romans because they were loyal to a King other than Caesar.

It's been said that "persecution purifies, but constant suffering crushes." That's what was happening . . . many were buckling under the pressure of constant persecution. With their words they might profess to believe; but with their actions they were denying the faith.

James does not begin by identifying himself as "Jesus' brother." That would be name-dropping, if indeed that was the author's relationship. Instead, he calls himself "a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

The book of James gives us four lessons on real faith:

Chapter 1 - When stretched, it doesn't break.

Chapter 2 - When pressed, it doesn't fail, but shows real love.

Chapters 3/4 - When expressed, it's with control and humility.

Chapter 5 - When distressed, it doesn't panic but produces patience.

Well, our lesson today is on chapters 1 and 2 –faith that is stretched and pressed.

I read an interesting observation of faith – “Faith is a little boy who ties a rope swing onto a tiny branch of a sapling. Then, noticing that the seat of the swing rests on the ground, goes to get the garden hose and begins to water the sapling.” That’s childlike faith . . .

Remember when you were little how your arms and legs were always showing little bruises? Like the one you had when you fell out of the tree you weren't supposed to be up in? And how about the one that swelled up on your shin when you rammed into the coffee table playing tag in the house? Or that time you had the wind knocked out of you playing rough-house? Being a child meant having a body constantly changing with a variety of cuts, scrapes and bruises.

Even as adults, we still make mistakes and "scrape our knee" so to speak. We get the wind knocked out of us by unfaithful marriage partners, crippling accidents, or the sudden death of someone close. We may have traded climbing trees for climbing corporate ladders, but it still hurts when we fall. We don't cut our fingers much anymore, but we do hurt from cutting remarks that leave us bleeding on the inside.

Nowadays it's our heart, not our arms and legs that are mottled with black-and-blue marks of daily troubles.

These believers knew the bruised and bloodstained misery of troubles that wouldn't go away. So James went to work setting fractured and disjointed attitudes and binding bruised spirits with the Great Physician's truth about troubles.

Verse 2 "Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials." We notice he didn't say if but when. . . "Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." (v.3)

Trials do have a purpose. We're kind of like God's ironing (I know, you younger ones are asking, "What's an iron?") God's ironing . . . think about that . . . we're washed in the blood and rinsed in the water of the Word but our wrinkled and messy lives sometimes need the ironing heat of trials to smooth out the wrinkles of spiritual immaturity.

God isn't interested in watching our faith get torpedoed by trials . . . they're an approval testing to produce endurance. Like the tag we sometimes see on a new iron that's been tested for quality or like the heat of a purifying refining process, we come through the testing and get that seal that says not "Good Housekeeping," but "Good Faithkeeping Seal of Approval." It's designed for those who persevere and are brought to maturity . . . that's God's ultimate purpose for our lives.

"Joy" is not a word we associate with trouble. Sometimes we read that and think it says we're to "enjoy" trouble. That isn't what God is saying. No one enjoys trouble, but we can "count it all joy" because God is still in control even in times of trouble. We most often cannot

change our circumstances, because we do have control over our attitude. And very often, it's that joy or peace we exhibit as Christians, even in trials, that is so attractive to the unbeliever. They wonder, "How can they do that?"

Some people have a symbolic "trouble hook" by the front door . . . before they enter the house, they hang the troubles of the job or the troubles of the day there. Home is a place of refuge and renewal and joy. Those troubles can always be picked up if they're still there the next morning, much like a child's backpack on the way to school. And the great thing is that by asking Jesus, He'll even carry the backpack for you.

There's a lot to be said for a positive attitude in trials and it's probably a true saying that, "there's no danger of developing eyestrain from looking on the bright side of things." We can choose to seek the joy of the Lord even in the midst of trials.

Having said that, and knowing that's good advice, we also all know what it's like to flunk a trial. We remember wrong responses we made, resistant attitudes we displayed, and our temper tantrums demanding instant relief from God (Why me? You're God, do something about this!) – it advanced nothing but our immaturity.

So why do we fail?

One, lack of wisdom (vs. 5) – We need to pray and ask God what we're meant to learn from this experience.

Two, lack of faith (vs. 6-8) – We’re double-minded . . . wanting our own will and God's will at the same time. Some are still, down deep inside, having reservations about being completely yielded to God's will. Being double-minded is like one who wants to succeed in a career, yet always take the easy way; or who wants early Quiet Time with the Lord, but likes to sleep late.

But there are promises to those who handle problems God's way – the first is seen in the word “Blessed” (vs.12). That means genuinely happy. And second, the promise of the "crown of life."

Like the crowns of achievement given at athletic events, or those worn by royalty, we have a victory in this life **and** in the life to come and a dignity worthy of a child of the King. You probably know that there are five crowns for believers mentioned in Scripture, but I’ll mention them again here:

**The crown of joy or exultation or soul-winner’s crown**

(1 Thessalonians 2:19)

**The crown of righteousness** (2 Timothy 4:8) for those who look for/love His Second Coming

**The crown of life** (James 1:12) for those who persevere under trials

**The crown of glory** (1 Peter 5:4) for the faithful pastor

**The imperishable crown** (1 Corinthians 9:25) for those who run to win and are not spiritual spectators

Christians will receive these crowns as rewards in heaven and in turn lay them at the feet of Jesus (Revelation 4:10).

Next James talks about temptation. There are several things we need to recognize:

1) Temptation is always present in life . . . again, James says “when.”

2) Temptation is never prompted by God . . . man is naturally inclined to shift the blame from himself to God for his moral failures.

3) Temptation follows a consistent process:

The bait is dropped . . . Satan is a skilled angler, he knows exactly what bait will lure each one of us away from God. Then our inner desire is "enticed" to the bait. Bonhoeffer said, “Satan doesn't fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.” Sin occurs when we actually yield to temptation. And sin results in death . . . sometimes that could be a real physical death, but it's certainly true that there is a death to the fellowship relationship with the Lord. Our guilt, doubt, and rationalizations drive us away from Him until we repent and confess and restore that precious bond He died to give us.

Every time we say "yes" to temptation, we make it harder to say "no" the next time. It's good to remember, “No” is a complete sentence.

I'm not an animal lover and don't have any pets (typically, however, I'm the person they always jump up on first when I enter a room), but I've been told that we can learn a good lesson from training a dog to obey.

A bit of meat is placed on the floor near the dog and the master says, "no!" which the dog knows means not to touch it. The dog will usually take his eyes off the food, because the temptation to disobey

would be too great, and instead the dog fixes his eyes on the master's face. That is the lesson for us too, isn't it? Always look to the Master's face.

James is a practical book. He's warned against temptation and now he tells us how to overcome it.

First, victory comes through dwelling on God. (vs.17) God gives us "every good and perfect gift."

Philippians 4:8 "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, pure, lovely, of good repute, if anything is worthy of praise . . . let your mind dwell on these things." If we sow these thoughts consistently, we should crowd out the weeds of temptation and harvest more fruit of the Spirit.

Second, victory comes through living the truth as we know it from God's Word. Psalm 119:9 "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Thy word." Psalm 119:11 "Thy word I have treasured in my heart that I might not sin against Thee." When we sow God's Word into our daily living through obedience, then temptation will lose its foothold in our lives.

But, you know, getting truth down into our lives requires a few things from us too . . . and James describes them.

- 1) A Clear ear ... be quick to hear.
- 2) A Controlled tongue ... slow to speak.
- 3) A Calm spirit ... slow to anger.

4) A Clean heart ... put aside all filthiness.

A clear ear – that means be ready to listen. Listening isn't just passive hearing. It's paying genuine attention to the other person. That means you don't grab the conversation as soon as the first breath is taken; you look the other person in the eye; you don't interrupt or criticize; you don't try to top the other person's story or joke; and you ask appropriate questions such as, "What happened then?" or, "How did you feel?" or validate their feelings by saying, "Yes, I see what you mean." These are just a few things that will help you become a better listener. And as they say, "a good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something."

A controlled tongue – They say the lowest level of conversation is about people, then about things/events and the highest level of conversation is about ideas/truth. We need to discuss ideas and events more and people less. James has a lot more to say about the tongue in next week's lesson, so we'll just leave it with a thought about important words.

The 6 most important words - I admit I made a mistake.

The 5 most important words - You did a good job.

The 4 most important words - What is your opinion?

The 3 most important words - I love you.

The 2 most important words - Thank you.

The most important word - We.

The least important word - I.

A calm spirit – Anger is an emotion. Emotions aren't bad, they're a part of the unique way God made us. It's how we react to those emotions that can cause us to sin. Someone put it like this, -- "it's okay to get angry, just don't hit." Anyone can become angry. That's easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, and in the right way, that is not easy. It's what's called "righteous anger." But if the truth were told, most often ours isn't righteous anger . . . ours is lack of self-control and lack of a calm spirit. James has the emphasis on being "slow" to anger. A long fuse gives us time to pray about the situation, and the people involved, to listen to God's counsel about the circumstances and to forgive others before the outburst of anger ever sets fire in our lives.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "For every minute you are angry you lose 60 seconds of happiness." They don't co-exist together and a gentle answer turns away wrath according to Proverbs 15:1. Anger, like fire, finally dies out, but it usually leaves a path of destruction.

A clean heart – We're told to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. Again, this is an issue of self-control and desiring the pure things of God. You've probably heard Bob Munger's analogy of the dirty house that he asked Jesus to come in and clean, yet he kept

one locked closet he wouldn't let the Lord into. We have to unlock every area of our lives and let Him fully "clean house."

Vs. 21 "In humility receive the Word implanted, which is able to save your souls." How do we respond? By being doers of the Word, and not merely hearers of the Word, that's how.

It's obedience, not knowledge that is the yardstick of one's spiritual condition. Like a mirror, God's Word reflects the genuineness of our Christianity. We study the Word for 1) traits to cultivate, 2) sins to avoid, 3) warnings to heed, 4) commands to obey and 5) promises to claim.

Verse 27 has a special meaning for me personally. Over the years I've been a care-giver to a number of people. I took care of my sister-in-law, Beverly, for over 30 years of mental illness. I cared for my friend Dick and his estate for over ten years. Whenever I'm tired and feel like grumbling about being a servant, this verse reminds me . . . care for those in distress - that's what God wants from you, Carol. This is the witness of your faith.

So what have we learned in chapter 1? When trials come, and they will, we're to pray for God's wisdom and yield ourselves to His will that we might gain some maturity through perseverance. The reward for a stretched faith is victory and happiness in Christ.

When temptations come, and they will, we resist Satan's bait and yield ourselves to God's Word and pursuit of the good. We keep our ears clear, our tongues controlled, our spirits calm and our hearts clean.

And then the ultimate summation . . . we are doers of the Word and not merely hearers. Our walk matches our talk.

Now in chapter 2 James talks about a faith that might be pressed, but should respond in love.

The first issue he deals with is prejudice. People were making distinctions out of evil motives to preserve class distinctions. We know prejudice is wrong because . . . 1) It's inconsistent with God's methods. (vs.5) "Didn't God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" Abraham Lincoln said that God must love common people because he made so many of them.

2) Also, it ignores the fact that sin is universal – the wealthy are sinners just as much as the poor – they both need grace.

3) And it is sinful because it's inconsistent with Scripture – the royal law is to "love your neighbor as yourself." When you show favoritism, you break that law and verse 10 says, "for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

Does that mean that prejudice is as bad as committing murder? Dave Wyse once said something I have written in my Bible margin for this verse . . . "There are levels of sin for man, but the fact of sin is for

God." We may think there is a difference, but to God, sin is sin. Lack of love makes us lawbreakers.

Prejudice leads to being judgmental, doesn't it? How would you respond if you suddenly found out your closest friend had a background like the woman at the well, or the Apostle Paul? Would it change your love? Probably not. Then why are we so quick to condemn others with similar backgrounds who we hardly know? Why is it harder to forgive or accept them? The reason is prejudice. We must heed verse 13, "For judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Someone once said that faith is like calories: you can't see them, but you can always see their results! Or a lie is like being pregnant – eventually results are going to show. That's the major theme of James' letter . . . results. Genuine faith is going to show and produce genuine works.

This little section of Scripture has caused a lot of confusion even to people like Martin Luther. To Luther in the Reformation era the battle cry was "Justification by faith alone." To him James' cry of "Justification by works" was heresy. So what was the emphasis of Paul's writing in Romans versus the writing of James?

First of all, let me repeat once again the definition of justification. "The sovereign act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous while he's still in his sinning state." In other words, because

you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, because of what Christ did on the cross for you, God declares you have met His standard of righteousness even though you are still a sinner. Your profession of belief in Jesus as the Son of God is an act of faith and it is the root of your salvation. You are positioned “in Christ.”

On the other hand, justification as James uses it means "to validate or show evidence." The works or deeds you perform after being saved are the fruit of your salvation. We see proof of conversion in the life and works that are evident in you. Another analogy might be that faith is the fire in the fireplace and smoke coming from the chimney (your works) proves there's fire in the fireplace.

So what kind of works validate our faith? James illustrates four marks of genuine faith:

- 1) It is not indifferent . . . it is involved (vs.15-16) -- if a person needs food or clothes, you take care of it.
- 2) Genuine faith is not independent . . . but in partnership with works.
- 3) Genuine faith is not invisible. . . but on display. We don't do good works to "show off." The point is that it does matter whether there is evidence of our Christianity to the world. They see our good works and glorify our Father in Heaven.
- 4) Genuine faith is not just intellectual. . . but from the heart.

Demons have their religious facts straight, they believe in one God, but

they're still demons. James is not ridiculing intellectual faith (we need to know what we believe and why), but he's talking about those who just want to debate religious truth and have no plans whatsoever to commit themselves to following Jesus in obedience. So, genuine faith is not indifferent, not independent, not invisible and not just intellectual.

To emphasize his thoughts, James gives us some examples of genuine faith: Abraham as he offered Isaac, and Rahab as she protected the spies and put out the scarlet cord to save her household. Likewise, we put our faith out for all to see. Faith is believing God . . . and doing what He commands.

Finally, James summarizes 2:26 "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." When there is separation, there is death. It's true when the body dies, the soul separates from the body to be with the Lord; and it's true spiritually, when faith is separated from works. Without works, faith is just a corpse – an empty shell. Kind of like decorated eggs some people make at Easter time. They drain out the white and yolk and decorate the shell. It may look useful, but the egg won't make a cake or an omelet. Faith and works are a part of the whole of our Christian testimony.

Faith like calories can't be seen, but James says you can always see the results. What results do others see in your life? Think back about the characteristics of genuine faith. How does it match up with your own?

Remember James isn't saying our salvation is dependent on our works; nor is he trying to make us produce more works out of guilt or fear. He's only questioning those whose lives never show any evidence of that faith.

Like the old song "Love and Marriage" lyrics . . . you can't have one without the other. Jesus told us we're to be the salt of the world. Faith and works are like the two chemical ingredients of salt, which is composed of two poisons: sodium and chlorine. If we ingest either of the two poisons, we would die. But if we combine them properly, we have sodium chloride, which is common table salt that gives flavor to our food and indeed life and health to our bodies. So, too, to be the salt of the world, our faith and works are inseparably linked together.

If you have not found your way to God by agreeing with God that you are a sinner, accepted the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ as your salvation and making Him your Savior, then following in obedience by being baptized . . . if you're not sure, please make that decision now. I'm here, all the leaders are here to answer any questions or make any arrangements necessary to give you that precious peace of knowing you are a child of God. 1 John 5:11-13 "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may KNOW that you have eternal life."

If you are indeed a Christian, take these words from James to heart. Let all the world know who you are by what you do and the life you lead. The Lord gave us the gift of life and the gift of eternal life that we might make a difference. When you leave this church parking lot, you are entering the mission field.

Let's pray.