

James 1: The Trials of Life

Did you ever tell the truth in the wrong way or at the wrong time so that it did not do anybody any good? If you tell the truth in the wrong way or at the wrong time, people will not thank you for it. James 1:2-4 tells us, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Yet suppose someone tried to apply this Bible verse to your life in a particular situation. Suppose you are ready to make the dream trip of your lifetime, when, just two days before you are ready to take off, you break a bone in your foot. Then somebody else hears about it. He is very sorry for you and he thinks he must come and give you some comfort. So he says, "Consider it pure joy, my brother. You must consider it pure joy as you face this trial." You see, people can use a verse like this to wound people, rather than comfort them. One of my friends lost his fiancé in an automobile accident and somebody read this to him and it was not helpful. At a time like that, it is better to say that God loves you and I love you. You can talk about James when they are ready to talk about James. Romans 8:28 is the same way, that all things work together for good for those who love God. That is true, of course, but first there is a time to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn.

Because I knew that this verse was used on a friend of mine and used on me and various other people in this unhelpful way, I had a certain aversion to the opening section of James and even that very statement. The statement can be understood in a fatalistic way, or in a hard-hearted way. So I avoided it. Then I studied the book of James a number of years ago and realized that it has a rather different purpose. The passage is actually not about how to respond to one particular trial, like coming down with a disease or losing a job. It is rather a truth for all of life. James is using it as an opening motif for his book. He is writing to set the stage for his entire description of what the Christian life might be. The first cycle of the book of James is how to use trials, or count trials, as a joy. The one thing you need to make the most of your trials is wisdom, and then he talks about wisdom. He talks about physical poverty and physical riches and how they can both try us, and then he closes by saying that the man who perseveres even in a trial is blessed.

The opening section of the book then tells us how to respond in times of hardship. When things are difficult for you, do not blame God as if God sent this trial to drag you down and show you how weak you are. If you stray in a time of trial, it is your own sins that lead you astray. God's intention, even in a trial, is to give you a good gift because He is a God who does give gifts. If nothing else, a trial will show you your weakness and show your need of His grace. In that manner, He will give you new birth. Then above all what we need to do when we are in the middle of a trial is to hear the Word of God and to do it and thereby prove our faith to be real. That is what James is trying to do in the opening blast of the book of James. And it is not just the opening section of James. Really it is his first perspective on the Christian life as a whole. As he writes to people who are Jewish Christians who are strong in knowledge but weak in life, they need to hear this correctly, that it is precisely in the trial that you prove that you do have life in God. It is not simply the knowledge of doctrine. Trials are what will push you to action, not just talk, and not just doctrine. Trials will reveal what is really in your heart. They will test you. They will probe whether you have wisdom or not and whether you have the faith to persevere or not, because really James wants to tell us that all of life is a trial.

According to James 1:9-11, poverty tries us. The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his humble position. James talks about the person who is poor. The person who is poor is in physical need and perhaps suffering mental anxiety. He is treated poorly. He is often powerless. He may be abused verbally. Chapter 5 of James mentions that if those who are rich hire him for a day and want to

withhold his wages, there is often very little that he can do. So poverty is a trial. But riches are a trial too because riches can cause someone to become proud, to be puffed up, to forget God and to despise the poor, or to be hard hearted. So riches are a trial.

Knowledge also tries us because the more we know, the more we are responsible to do. If we know of a need, chapter 2 says we are obligated to use that knowledge to help our brother whether he is hungry or thirsty or lacking proper clothes. And if you know enough to teach others, James 3:1 says you will be judged with more severe judgment because if you know enough to teach you should know enough to do it yourself. Anything we know, we ought to practice, James says. Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and does not do it sins, according to James 4:17. Also it is important to refrain from using our knowledge to judge others, says James 4:11-12. So riches, poverty, knowledge, and our abilities try us.

The tongue is a powerful thing. It boasts great things. It can accomplish great things, but it is a fire devouring all in its path and potentially set on fire by hell itself. The quest for enjoyment and pleasure can cause us to forget others. The energy and ambition that cause us to make plans and say, "I am going to go to this city or that city," and make money and get rich, that very ambition tries us. In fact, the more successful you are, the more you are going to be tried because you will be tempted by your very success to forget God and forget to say "if the Lord is willing." We could add other things as well. Athletic ability or physical abilities or managerial ability and all other abilities and skills try us. The lure of the world tries us, James 4 says. Illness tries us. If we fall sick, we can be laid low in despair, become weary, and give up. But instead of simply experiencing that, test yourself when you are sick. Examine yourself for any sin. So what James is doing with this opening statement in James 1 is not saying simply that when something hard comes, rejoice in that trial. But he is saying to do that in the every day course of life.

The basic counsel, then, is to rejoice in trials and let them do their work. That seems a little bit counter intuitive. Do we not rejoice when things are easy and rejoice when all goes our way and delay our trials? Is that not the way we should think? I guess that is true in a way. But again we need to see if we can ponder it and understand the logic here. The logic that is at issue here in these opening verses is that your trials can develop perseverance and maturity and make you complete so that you lack nothing.

Let me illustrate the point personally of how a trial can show us how to become mature and complete how we can lack nothing. Before I came to teach at the seminary in the early 1990's, I was a college professor for about five years and my kids were little during those years. One of them was born and they were four years old and one and a half years old when I started. Little children like that need lots of parental attention. When I worked for the college, I only walked four blocks from the college campus to my house. I loved that short commute. I would tend to leave my office when things got quiet after everybody left at about 5:15, walk those few blocks, and I would get to my house around 5:25. That is the worst hour of the day in families with small children, because they are kind of tired, and maybe they are too old to be taking a nap, but they are still tired and they need that boost from their evening meal. And mom is trying to make dinner and so she cannot really keep them from squabbling or getting agitated or getting bored. That is just the worst time of the day when the children are little.

But when my children were seven years, four years, and one year old, I could look at them and play the wise father. The wise father knows how to calm the savage child. The wise father knows that sometimes when the kids are just quarrelling with each other, they do not really mean to be bad, so you just walk in and give them hugs and wrestle with them on the floor and tickle them and it is just great fun. Other times, however, they are really being naughty and they are being mean to each other and you must discipline them. But there are different ways of discipline. You could discipline by kneeling down and

looking them in the eye and saying, “Honey, you know that is not right.” And there are times when they will be just like putty in your hands because they feel so bad for disappointing their dad. At other times you have to use the voice of authority, with a certain edge to it. During these years I began to think, “Why cannot everybody be a wise father like me?” I never quite said that, but there was a little bit of that kind of thought rolling around in the back of my head for a few months. Then my wife had a disk problem in her back. She had to go to the hospital for about a week. So our youngest child was weaned instantly. It was gone. It was over. Mommy was in the hospital now. But the bad part was that they kicked her out of the hospital before she was better and she had to lie on the floor all day. So I had to take care of three kids, teach my classes, play nurse, cook, and clean the clothes and iron them. Before this I could make a hamburger, but it is not quite the same as making 21 meals a week.

In the first week, I was still a wise father. I still looked them in the eye and used the right voice. In the second week, I started to not really yell in anger, but saying things with an edge like, “I called you for dinner. Where were you?” I was not exactly blowing it completely, but I was not such a wise father. One of those times when I shouted, trying to communicate all the way around the downstairs with one mighty yell for dinner, my wife did not say a word. She just caught my eye and that look in her eye said, “Where is the wise father now?” And I realized I was not quite as wise as I thought. This is what trials do for us. Trials expose our weaknesses. If we never had a trial, we would never know our own flaws. We would never know where we need to grow to maturity.

Let me define a trial just for the sake of discussion. We divide up the things that come into our life in different ways, such as the temptations and the sins. There are some temptations that are fleeting. There are other temptations that last longer because perhaps we invite them into our lives. We do something that brings sin in. I am going to define a trial. It is not hidden in the Greek word or anything, but I am thinking of a trial as something that lasts. Martin Luther said we cannot keep birds from flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building nests in our hair. That was his description of temptation. I will call a trial when somebody else builds a nest in our hair and says we cannot get rid of it. It is something that lasts; that is what points our weaknesses to us. And James’ point is that these trials can show us almost anything. There is nothing that God cannot do to you or for you through a trial. Whatever your weakness may be, God can get at that through some trial. He does not say that when we are in the middle of a trial we should say, “At least I will learn patience.” James does not say that. What he says is there is nothing God cannot do through some trial. Whatever your sin or weakness or immaturity may be, there is a trial that will show you your need and drive you to the Lord.

It is not just a general statement, however, “Rejoice in trial.” There are some specifics. First of all, James tells us who should count suffering or trials as a joy. It is “my brothers.” That is to say, it is Christians who know God’s hand in all that occurs in their lives. A non-Christian can be strengthened to greater resolve perhaps, but a non-Christian can also become bitter and angry and fatalistic and despairing and give up or become an escapist. It is not a general truth that everybody gets stronger through trial. Some are broken down by trials, but a Christian should consider it joy. “Consider it joy, my brothers.” They consider it joy because the test will develop and prove character and endurance. Again, there is nothing that God cannot do for us through some trial. Any virtue may come about as we look at a trial. Let endurance finish its work as you know God is doing His work through a trial.

Avoid asking the wrong questions. What is the wrong question we ask in trials? Why is this happening to me? What is the right question? What can I learn from this? What purpose does God have in what is happening to me? Is it perhaps because of my sin, my folly, or because of Satanic opposition? Those are fair questions to ask, but above all the testing of your faith is vital because it reveals your weaknesses. It reveals where you need to grow.

James says perseverance must finish its work so you are mature and complete lacking nothing. But then he gives us one of these little paradoxes, one of these little playful uses of language that are unfortunately often obscured in our English translation, but they are all over the place in the original. James says, "You will be mature and complete lacking nothing." Then immediately he says, "if any of you lacks wisdom." That little word 'lack' is actually being used in two ways. He is saying the goal will be perfect maturity, so you will lack nothing. But if you want to lack nothing, then the one thing you better not lack is wisdom because it is only by wisdom that you will be able to see the point of trial. That is the only way you will be able to learn what God would have you see.

It is not simply that we should, however, go and get wisdom as if we have to strive for it and labor in some way and go to school and so on. He actually says something different about wisdom. He says if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God for it. I want you to join with me for a moment in looking very carefully at James 1:5 and look for the encouragements that are present in it about asking God for wisdom. Look at it carefully. What are the encouragements or the descriptions of the way in which God gives? If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God. How does God give? What is the encouragement? Above all, He gives generously. He gives without finding fault. He gives to all. The way in which the sentence is actually set up in the Greek goes like this, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask the giving God." He is not simply the God who gives. He is the giving God. It is His nature to give. This is part of who He is.

Let me define a couple more of these words. The word 'generously' is actually a word that is often translated 'simply' or 'purely' in the Bible, that is to say 'without mixed motives.' Can you understand how it is possible to give not simply or not purely? It is possible to give with mixed motives. When you give with mixed motives or with complexity, you give hoping for something back.

One of the oddest things that happened to me was when I used to pick up hitchhikers. I used to live in a small town that had a lot of roads and it was kind of sensible to help hitchhikers get from one road to the other. I would pick them up and so often they would say to me, "If I ever see you on the road, I will pick you up." I felt like telling them they missed the point. I wanted to say, "It is raining. You are wet. You had your thumb out. You were going my way. I did not pick you up so you would pick me up later. I just wanted to give you a ride. You looked wet. That is all. I do not want anything back from you." But I also understand why they said that because so many people think that whenever somebody gives them something the other person wants or expects something back. That is the way the world works. But that is not the way God works. He gives simply and purely. He just says, "Here, enjoy it." He gives to all. He will give to all who ask. And he gives without finding fault. Is it possible to give and find fault simultaneously? Yes, you do that by making a person feel guilty: "I will give it to you, but you do not deserve it." A student once gave me his definition of giving and finding fault: "If you had done it right the first time, you would not have to ask me for help. If you had used the money right, the money I gave you last week, you would not be asking me for money now. If you did it the way I told you, you would not be asking me to get you out of this trouble." That is giving and finding fault. But God gives without finding fault, without reproaching. He gives the way we are all supposed to give. He gives. It is His nature. He gives simply. He gives to all. He gives without finding fault. That is the way in which God gives wisdom to those who ask Him.

Now it is true, however, that there are some things for which we both ask and work, like our daily bread. God tells us to work, but He also says He will give it to us and we are supposed to ask, "Give us this day our daily bread." I do think wisdom falls in that category of things that God gives and yet things we also work for. How do we work for wisdom? We work for wisdom by watching for wisdom. Let me give you just a few statements that some people made about wisdom. A man named Bruce Waltke said "wisdom

is skill in the arts of living.” Alvin Plantinga said “wisdom is the knowledge of God’s world and the knack of fitting oneself into it.” The Bible states how the world is, not how it ought to be. How do you gain wisdom? You gain wisdom by watching, by watching the world, by observing the world, but you also do it by asking God to help you see the world rightly because it is possible to see it wrongly. You gain wisdom by watching the wise. James 3:13 says those who are wise will show it by their beautiful lifestyle.

When I taught at a Christian college, I taught the Bible introduction class along with another professor who taught the same class in another section. There was a rumor that we would never give anyone an A, which was not true, and sometimes students who received poor grades would get angry. They would come down the hall to my office or Professor McMillan’s and I observed my own tendency get defensive when they would shout, “How dare you give me a C-?” I would say something or other, but I did not stay as calm as I would like all the time. When they went to Dr. McMillan’s office, however, no matter how angry they were, when they came out, you could just tell by their voice that they were all smiles. And I was amazed at this. It just happened over and over for two years. No matter how angry the footsteps were, no matter how loudly they knocked on the door, and whatever the first words were, they were always happy by the end. It was so remarkable that I decided to ask my colleague, who was much older and wiser than me, 30 years my senior, if he would leave the door open a little bit. Then the next time that happened I would just park my chair by my door and listen to what transpired. The way it went was he would say to them something like, “Tell me what is bothering you.” And he would listen until they were done. He would hear them out because I learned that wise people do not answer too fast. If somebody is angry, let them talk. When they are all done, then give an answer. But if you start giving an answer too early, they say, “You do not understand. You are not listening.” But he would show them the grade book and look at it with them. He would say, “On the first test, you got a 64, which would be a D. On the second test, you took it late and we only docked you eight points although we were supposed to dock you 20 points, so your score was a 41. On the next test, you got a 72. That is a wonderful improvement to go from a 41 to a 72.” He would say that without any sarcasm. And they would feel good that they went from a 41 to a 71. He would continue, “And then on the final—I am sure you had many finals to prepare for—you got a 66. So the overall average on your quizzes was 73 and so your average for the course was 65. Do you think we were too hard to give you a C-?” They would say, “Well no, I guess not. Thank you for giving me a C-.” He did it every time. He had a beautiful lifestyle. So you watch those who are wise and you gain wisdom in that way.

What was happening in that negative story about myself? I think God was giving me a desire to be wise. I asked God, but I also had to work at learning from this wise man. I thought about what I heard and what we talked about repeatedly. But God gave me the desire to want to be wise and to ask for it. He gave me ability by showing me the right person. But then I had to listen to that right person and that is indeed the way in which we gain wisdom. The active side of gaining wisdom does begin with fearing God, with fearing His displeasure. It is revering His wisdom and His understanding and not loving our own. Fearing God means that when we are in a hard place, we do not say, “I will escape any way I can.” We fear God enough to say that whatever the way out is, it is not the way of disobedience. We humble ourselves before the Lord and still endeavor to live within the parameters that He gives us for our lives.

In Solomon’s prayer for wisdom, he asked for a discerning heart. But Solomon also used his eyes and ears. I Kings 4:33 says he observed plants and animals. He observed mothers to know what to do and how to handle it when those two mothers came with one child between the two of them. Wisdom begins with a fear of the Lord, but it also proceeds by observing. Proverbs tells to us observe an undisciplined child and a disciplined child. Observe how pleasant words bring healing and how harsh words stir up strife. Observe the ant working in the summer is safe in the winter. Observe the sluggard, turning like a

door on its hinges as he lies on his bed. Observe that the sluggard as he lowers his hand into the dish. He is too lazy to pick it up again. Observe how his poverty comes on him like an armed man as a consequence. Observe the animals and gain wisdom. James is really the heir of Proverbs because he tells us to fear and trust God and to observe, to ask for wisdom and to listen. James calls for observation in his own way. He says to listen, in James 1:19: "Be slow to speak, slow to anger, and quick to listen." Observe those with a beautiful lifestyle. Gain wisdom.

The discussion of trials continues on in James 1:9-11 when it describes the rich and the poor. The poor man's humble circumstances can try him. They can put him to the test and yet the status of the poor man is open to another view. The other view is that the poor man should boast. James 1:9 says, "Let the poor man in humble circumstances take pride in his high position." What is the high position mentioned here? What is he thinking of? We might say it is because we are created in the image of God. That is true but actually something is stated in James 2:5, which says, "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?" The riches of the poor man are that he is rich in faith and an heir of the eternal kingdom of God.

The rich man, however, should do the opposite. The poor man takes pride in his high position as an heir of the kingdom. The person who is rich should take pride in his low position. We might think, "What should a rich person be humble about?" Maybe we would think the answer to that is sin. That again is a true answer, but it is not exactly the answer James is going to give. The explanation James gives about the low position in James 1:10 is, "You will pass away like a wildflower because the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the plant, its blossom falls, its beauty is destroyed; so in the same way, the rich man will fade away while he goes about this business." That is an illusion to Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 56 and 57. Isaiah 40 says, "All men are like grass. Their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the Word of God stands forever." The rich man is tempted to think, "I can take care of myself. I can carve out my own destiny. I have my money. I have my friends. I have my power. I have my connections. I have all that money can buy and I will take care of myself." But no, the rich man should exult in his humiliation because he knows in this life you cannot take care of yourself. You are going to die a rich man and you are going to die pretty soon, maybe not in one day like a wildflower, but in 70 or 80 years. The older you get, the shorter life seems. It is going to be over fast and you cannot do anything about that. Rejoice that God has shown you that if you are rich. Rejoice that God has also given you something better, which is eternal life. James 1:12 says to believe that God means to bless you. Believe God when He says, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life whether rich or poor." Whether tried hard or tried easy we will all receive the crown of life. The crown of life is the crown that we all receive. Life is the crown. We will all receive eternal life. That is the blessing. Our faith is future oriented. Hebrews says that and James says it as well.

Not everybody will take things that well. The second part of this great insight into the nature of the Christian life is what happens if somebody is not really interested in taking these trials and growing through them. What shall we say then? Are there not some people who get angry at God because of a trial? James 1:13 tells us that God does not single anyone out for a trial. If you are in the middle of a trial, do not say "God is tempting me and it is all His fault." God is not evil. He cannot be tempted by evil. Nor does He mean to tempt you by evil. He may mean to test you, but it is not His desire to destroy you. So if you should fall in a temptation, what that reveals is not something about the character of God, but about your character. If you fall, James says, if you do indeed sin, it is because you are tempted by your own evil desire and dragged away and enticed. There has to be something in you that responded to that temptation. Our desires, our own lusts, which can be physical lusts or mental lusts or spiritual lusts, they drag us away. The words that are used there in the original language are words from fishing and

hunting, lures and baited hooks. Your own sin lures you away. The sin within you drags you out. It is not God's responsibility. So if you fall, take it as a diagnosis and take warning from it. If the sin goes unchecked, the result will be death. "When desire conceives, it gives birth to sin and sin gives birth to death. Do not be deceived then, brothers. God is the one who gives every good and perfect gift." That refers back to the earlier statement. He is the God who gives gifts. What is His gift? In the trial, even if you fall, there is a gift. The gift is it shows your need of His grace.

Some people say there is no grace in James. If you believe that, I would say you are not reading carefully enough. It is true that James does not have the cross and does not tell you that you are a sinner in need of the atoning blood of Christ, but it does tell you that you are a sinner in need of the grace of God. James says that what God wants to do through these trials is give birth to us "by the word of truth that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created." Now that little phrase, 'word of truth,' is used exactly four times in the New Testament. This is one of them. In two of the others, the phrase 'Word of truth' is identified as the Gospel. The Gospel is the Word of truth. Ephesians 1:13 says, "You also heard the word of truth, that is, the Gospel of your salvation." The word of truth is the Gospel of your salvation. Colossians 1:5 says, "On account of the hope laid up for us in heaven, which you heard about in advance by the word of truth, the Gospel." The word of truth is the Gospel and Paul goes on to talk about those who rightly divide the word of truth. In context it is clear that the word of truth that we rightly divide is the Gospel of salvation. So what he says is we get rebirth by the word of truth. What he means is we are reborn by the Gospel. What he is saying, therefore, is that the trial, even if it leads us into sin, is meant to be a gift. The gift is showing us our need of the Gospel. If someone responds poorly, it is a call to faith and the Gospel that says there is grace even for the one who sins. We might call this a Gospel of regeneration.

James 1:19 continues along this theme. After saying we should know this to be true, he then goes on to add a little bit of a proverb. He says everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry, probably referring back to chapter 1:13-15. To the person who is prone to become angry at God for dragging him away or for giving him a trial that is too difficult, he is saying to him, "Do not get angry at God. You're not going to get anywhere by becoming angry with God. He is slow to be angry. See what God would do. He would save your soul."

James 1:21 says again to get rid of all moral filth. Do not blame it on others or on something else. Get rid of it and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. Again we have a theology of salvation. Every time you see sin in your life it is a call to salvation. It is a call to put your trust in Christ. James is probably writing to a congregation that is mostly but not exclusively Christian. If James was writing when most think people he was, about the year 50 AD, Jews and Christians often worshiped together, still in the temple precincts and in various synagogues. There might be a synagogue that was mostly Christian, but some Jews would still come and that is why later on in the book he does not call everybody a brother. Later in the book he says simply, "you rich" or "you adulterous people" and so on. That does not sound like he is addressing Christians. He kind of mixes it up.

In talking about trials here, you might say verses 2 to 12 are for Christians and then James 1:13-21 is for non-Christians. He is saying that some of you do not know how to respond to trials. Then he tells them how to do so. I remember preaching in a big church a couple years ago when the pastor leaned over to me just seconds before I was supposed to stand up to preach and told me there were probably 200 unbelievers there. There were 1600 people altogether, so there were a lot of people. And he was trying to tell me not to address all my remarks for the Christians. There was a small church full of unbelievers here. I needed to say something for them too. A wise preacher will take care not to simply say, "All you

visiting non-Christians can listen in if you want, but I am going to ignore you.” I think that is what is happening here in James.

Is a Christian capable of getting angry, grumbling and blaming God? Of course we are. Unfortunately we probably all know that from experience. But it looks to me like James is thinking of non-Christians when he says this. We know it is not only for them because in verse 18 he says “that we might become the first fruits of all He created, He gave us birth through the word of truth.” Of course, that is true of a Christian. We are reborn by the word of truth. But a non-Christian needs to hear that. That is something that is good for a non-Christian. Of course it is true for a Christian that we should get rid of all filth and accept the word planted in us which can save us. But the language “which can save you” sounds like it is a little bit more for a non-Christian. For a Christian, you would say “which does save you” or “did save you” or “is saving you.” It makes sense that there would be both kinds of people in a synagogue in the year 50 AD, Christians, Jewish Christians, and Jewish non-Christians, just as it would be in the church today.

The next section describes how we should indeed grow. One of the things that we do if we want to grow in trial is not merely listen to the Word, but it is something we should do. The book of James has a pattern that certain critics were not so fond of because they thought it was kind of shallow and stringing things together in an illogical pattern, maybe using key words in a simple way. But actually the book of James follows the basic pattern of rhetoric that was used in the ancient world and the next few verses are ones that we can see very readily fit the pattern. The pattern is first you give your thesis and then you give your reason, that would be the main reason, and then you embellish. Embellishment means more reasons and includes answering objections and especially using illustrations from nature. And then you give a conclusion to wrap it up. If you look at James 1:22-25, you can see that pattern is actually there. The thesis is stated right away. Do not merely listen to the word. The first reason is given. The reason is so you will not deceive yourself, because if you just listen and you think that is good enough, you are self-deceived because there is no value in merely listening. Now he gives an additional reason in the next line: “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.” That is the embellishment of the pattern.

It would be silly to look at the Word of God and see yourself in it and then forget what you see. Is it not silly to see not your physical face but to see your soul reflected back to you, to gaze into it and then forget? But it is blessed to look, to remember, to gain freedom, to do what it says. That is the conclusion. That is God’s blessing for you to walk in His ways. It is tempting sometimes to think the law constrains or constricts us. But James says no, it is the path of blessing.

James 1:26-27 describes his concluding thought about religion and true faith as it appears in this first chapter. He says, “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.” Did you hear the three marks of true religion there? The first mark is to control your tongue. It is a negative side. You do not have true religion if you do not control your tongue. The second sign of true religion is to look after widows and orphans. Look after the poor, the defenseless, and those who have the least. The third mark is to be unstained by the world. Only one mark is positive: do good to those who are needy. There are some Christians who do not like the word ‘religion.’ James says religion that is pure in God’s sight is this. Some people do not like the word ‘religion’ because what they think of when they hear the word ‘religion’ is manmade religiosity and the trappings of religion. It is what people sometimes call “smells and bells, incense and robes, fancy sounds and vaulted ceilings.”

It makes them nervous and I understand why they are made nervous, because the show can supplant the inner reality. But James says essentially, “The show of religion worries you; no show of religion worries me. Real religion shows itself; real religion is visible, concrete. Do not give me your confession, saying ‘I have religion. I have doctrine.’ Instead, show it to me like something visible.” Controlling the tongue, using it well, caring for widows and orphans, and staying unstained by the world are the ways to show and practice the true religion of the Christian faith.