

CHAPTER 1

After the inscription and salutation (v. 1) Christians are taught how to conduct themselves when under the cross. Several graces and duties are recommended; and those who endure their trials and afflictions as the apostle here directs are pronounced blessed and are assured of a glorious reward (v. 2-12). But those sins which bring sufferings, or the weakness and faults men are chargeable with under them, are by no means to be imputed to God, who cannot be the author of sin, but is the author of all good (v. 13-18). All passion, and rash anger, and vile affections, ought to be suppressed. The word of God should be made our chief study: and what we hear and know of it we must take care to practise, otherwise our religion will prove but a vain thing. To this is added an account wherein pure religion consists (v. 19-27).

~~500~~ JAMES 1:1

INTRODUCTION

We have here the inscription of this epistle, which consists of three principal parts.

I. The character by which our author desires to be known: *James, a servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. Though he was a prime-minister in Christ's kingdom, yet he styles himself only a servant. Note hence, Those who are highest in office or attainments in the church of Christ are but servants. They should not therefore act as masters, but as ministers. Further, Though James is called by the evangelist *the brother of our Lord*, yet it was his glory to serve Christ in the spirit, rather than to boast of his being akin according to the flesh. Hence let us learn to prize this title above all others in the world — *the servants of God and of Christ*. Again, it is to be observed that James professes himself *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*; to teach us that in all services we should have an eye to the Son as well as the Father. We cannot acceptably serve the Father, unless we are also servants of the Son. God will have *all men to honour the Son as they honour the Father* (~~482~~ John 5:23), looking

for acceptance in Christ and assistance from him, and yielding all obedience to him, thus confessing *that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

II. The apostle here mentions the condition of those to whom he writes: *The twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.* Some understand this of the dispersion upon the persecution of Stephen, Acts 8. But that only reached to Judea and Samaria. Others by the Jews of the dispersion understand those who were in Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and other kingdoms into which their wars had driven them. The greatest part indeed of ten of the twelve tribes were lost in captivity; but yet some of every tribe were preserved and they are still honoured with the ancient style of *twelve tribes.* These however were scattered and dispersed.

- 1.** They were dispersed in mercy. Having the scriptures of the Old Testament, the providence of God so ordered it that they were scattered in several countries for the diffusing of the light of divine revelation.
- 2.** They began now to be scattered in wrath. The Jewish nation was crumbling into parties and factions, and many were forced to leave their own country, as having now grown too hot for them. Even good people among them shared in the common calamity.
- 3.** These Jews of the dispersion were those who had embraced the Christian faith. They were persecuted and forced to seek for shelter in other countries, the Gentiles being kinder to Christians than the Jews were. Note here, It is often the lot even of God's own tribes to be scattered abroad. The gathering day is reserved for the end of time; when all the dispersed children of God shall be gathered together to Christ their head. In the mean time, while God's tribes are scattered abroad, he will send to look after them. Here is an apostle writing to the scattered; an epistle from God to them, when driven away from his temple, and seemingly neglected by him. Apply here that of the prophet Ezekiel, *Thus saith the Lord God, Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come,* ^{<3116>}Ezekiel 11:16. God has a particular care of his outcasts. *Let my outcasts dwell with thee, Moab,* ^{<2368>}Isaiah 16:3, 4. God's tribes may be scattered; therefore we should not value ourselves too much on outward privileges. And, on the other hand, we should not despond and think ourselves rejected, under

outward calamities, because God remembers and sends comfort to his scattered people.

III. James here shows the respect he had even for the dispersed: *greeting*, saluting them, wishing peace and salvation to them. True Christians should not be the less valued for their hardships. It was the desire of this apostle's heart that those who were scattered might be comforted — that they might do well and fare well, and be enabled to rejoice even in their distresses. God's people have reason to rejoice in all places, and at all times; as will abundantly appear from what follows.

~~300~~ JAMES 1:2-12

NECESSITY OF FAITH AND PATIENCE

We now come to consider the matter of this epistle. In this paragraph we have the following things to be observed: —

I. The suffering state of Christians in this world is represented, and that in a very instructive manner, if we attend to what is plainly and necessarily implied, together with what is fully expressed.

1. It is implied that troubles and afflictions may be the lot of the best Christians, even of those who have the most reason to think and hope well of themselves. Such as have a title to the greatest joy may yet endure very grievous afflictions. As good people are liable to be scattered, they must not think it strange if they meet with troubles.

2. These outward afflictions and troubles are temptations to them. The devil endeavours by sufferings and crosses to draw men to sin and to deter them from duty, or unfit them for it; but, as our afflictions are in God's hand, they are intended for the trial and improvement of our graces. The gold is put into the furnace, that it may be purified.

3. These temptations may be numerous and various: *Divers temptations*, as the apostle speaks. Our trials may be of many and different kinds, and therefore we have need to put on the whole armour of God. We must be armed on every side, because temptations lie on all sides.

4. The trials of a good man are such as he does not create to himself, nor sinfully pull upon himself; but they are such as he is said to fall into. And for this reason they are the better borne by him.

II. The graces and duties of a state of trial and affliction are here pointed out to us. Could we attend to these things, and grow in them as we should do, how good would it be for us to be afflicted!

1. One Christian grace to be exercised is joy: *Count it all joy*, v. 2. We must not sink into a sad and disconsolate frame of mind, which would make us faint under our trials; but must endeavour to keep our spirits dilated and enlarged, the better to take in a true sense of our case, and with greater advantage to set ourselves to make the best of it. Philosophy may instruct men to be calm under their troubles; but Christianity teaches them to be joyful, because such exercises proceed from love and not fury in God. In them we are conformable to Christ our head, and they become marks of our adoption. By suffering in the ways of righteousness, we are serving the interests of our Lord's kingdom among men, and edifying the body of Christ; and our trials will brighten our graces now and our crown at last. Therefore there is reason to count it all joy when trials and difficulties become our lot in the way of our duty. And this is not purely a New-Testament paradox, but even in Job's time it was said, *Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth*. There is the more reason for joy in afflictions if we consider the other graces that are promoted by them.

2. Faith is a grace that one expression supposes and another expressly requires: *Knowing this, that the trial of your faith*, v. 3; and then in v. 6, *Let him ask in faith*. There must be a sound believing of the great truths of Christianity, and a resolute cleaving to them, in times of trial. That faith which is spoken of here as tried by afflictions consists in a belief of the power, and word, and promise of God, and in fidelity and constancy to the Lord Jesus.

3. There must be patience: *The trial of faith worketh patience*. The trying of one grace produces another; and the more the suffering graces of a Christian are exercised the stronger they grow. *Tribulation worketh patience*, ~~488~~ Romans 5:3. Now, to exercise Christian patience aright, we must,

(1.) Let it work. It is not a stupid, but an active thing. Stoical apathy and Christian patience are very different: by the one men become, in some

measure, insensible of their afflictions; but by the other they become triumphant in and over them. Let us take care, in times of trial, that patience and not passion, be set at work in us; whatever is said or done, let patience have the saying and doing of it: let us not allow the indulging of our passions to hinder the operation and noble effects of patience; let us give it leave to work, and it will work wonders in a time of trouble.

(2.) We must let it have its perfect work. Do nothing to limit it nor to weaken it; but let it have its full scope: if one affliction come upon the heels of another, and a train of them are drawn upon us, yet let patience go on till its work is perfected. When we bear all that God appoints, and as long as he appoints, and with a humble obedient eye to him, and when we not only bear troubles, but rejoice in them, then patience hath its perfect work.

(3.) When the work of patience is complete, then the Christian is entire, and nothing will be wanting: it will furnish us with all that is necessary for our Christian race and warfare, and will enable us to persevere to the end, and then its work will be ended, and crowned with glory. After we have abounded in other graces, *we have need of patience,* ~~306~~ Hebrews 10:36. *But let patience have its perfect work, and we shall be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*

4. Prayer is a duty recommended also to suffering Christians; and here the apostle shows,

(1.) What we ought more especially to pray for — wisdom: *If any lack wisdom, let him ask of God.* We should not pray so much for the removal of an affliction as for wisdom to make a right use of it. And who is there that does not want wisdom under any great trials or exercises to guide him in his judging of things, in the government of his own spirit and temper, and in the management of his affairs? To be wise in trying times is a special gift of God, and to him we must seek for it.

(2.) In what way this is to be obtained — upon our petitioning or asking for it. Let the foolish become beggars at the throne of grace, and they are in a fair way to be wise. It is not said, “Let such ask of man,” no, not of any man, but, “Let him ask of God,” who made him, and gave him his understanding and reasonable powers at first, of him in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Let us confess our want of wisdom to God and daily ask it of him.

(3.) We have the greatest encouragement to do this: *he giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not*. Yea, it is expressly promised that *it shall be given*, v. 5. Here is something in answer to every discouraging turn of the mind, when we go to God, under a sense of our own weakness and folly, to ask for wisdom. He to whom we are sent, we are sure, has it to give: and he is of a giving disposition, inclined to bestow this upon those who ask. Nor is there any fear of his favours being limited to some in this case, so as to exclude others, or any humble petitioning soul; for *he gives to all men*. If you should say you want a great deal of wisdom, a small portion will not serve your turn, the apostle affirms, *he gives liberally*; and lest you should be afraid of going to him unseasonably, or being put to shame for your folly, it is added, *he upbraideth not*. Ask when you will, and as often as you will, you will meet with no upbraidings. And if, after all, any should say, “This may be the case with some, but I fear I shall not succeed so well in my seeking for wisdom as some others may,” let such consider how particular and express the promise is: *It shall be given him*. Justly then must fools perish in their foolishness, if wisdom may be had for asking, and they will not pray to God for it. But,

(4.) There is one thing necessary to be observed in our asking, namely, that we do it with a believing, steady mind: *Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering*, v. 6. The promise above is very sure, taking this proviso along with us; wisdom shall be given to those who ask it of God, provided they believe that God is able to make the simple wise, and is faithful to make good his word to those who apply to him. This was the condition Christ insisted on, in treating with those who came to him for healing: *Believest thou that I am able to do this?* There must be *no wavering*, no staggering at the promise of God through unbelief, or through a sense of any disadvantages that lie on our own part. Here therefore we see,

5. That oneness, and sincerity of intention, and a steadiness of mind, constitute another duty required under affliction: *He that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind, and tossed*. To be sometimes lifted up by faith, and then thrown down again by distrust — to mount sometimes towards the heavens, with an intention to secure glory, and honour, and immortality, and then to sink again in seeking the ease of the body, or the enjoyments of this world — this is very fitly and elegantly compared to a wave of the sea, that rises and falls, swells and sinks, just as the wind tosses it higher or lower, that way or this. A mind that has but one single and prevailing regard to its spiritual and eternal interest, and

that keeps steady in its purposes for God, will grow wise by afflictions, will continue fervent in its devotions, and will be superior to all trials and oppositions. Now, for the cure of a wavering spirit and a weak faith, the apostle shows the ill effects of these,

(1.) In that the success of prayer is spoiled hereby: *Let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord*, v. 7. Such a distrustful, shifting, unsettled person is not likely to value a favour from God as he should do, and therefore cannot expect to receive it. In asking for divine and heavenly wisdom we are never likely to prevail if we have not a heart to prize it above rubies, and the greatest things in this world.

(2.) A wavering faith and spirit has a bad influence upon our conversations. *A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways*, v. 8. When our faith and spirits rise and fall with second causes, there will be great unsteadiness in all our conversation and actions. This may sometimes expose men to contempt in the world; but it is certain that such ways cannot please God nor procure any good for us in the end. While we have but one God to trust to, we have but one God to be governed by, and this should keep us even and steady. He that is unstable as water shall not excel. Hereupon,

III. The holy humble temper of a Christian, both in advancement and debasement, is described: and both poor and rich are directed on what grounds to build their joy and comfort, v. 9-11. Here we may observe,

- 1.** Those of low degree are to be looked upon as brethren: *Let the brother of low degree*, etc. Poverty does not destroy the relation among Christians.
- 2.** Good Christians may be rich in the world, v. 10. Grace and wealth are not wholly inconsistent. Abraham, the father of the faithful, was rich in silver and gold.
- 3.** Both these are allowed to rejoice. No condition of life puts us out of a capacity of rejoicing in God. If we do not rejoice in him always, it is our own fault. Those of low degree may rejoice, if they are exalted to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of God (as Dr. Whitby explains this place); and the rich may rejoice in humbling providences, as they produce a lowly and humble disposition of mind, which is highly valuable in the sight of God. Where any are made poor for righteousness' sake, their very poverty is their exaltation. It is an honour to be dishonoured for the sake of

Christ. *To you it is given to suffer,* ³¹²³Philippians 1:29. All who are brought low, and made lowly by grace, may rejoice in the prospect of their exaltation at the last in heaven.

4. Observe what reason rich people have, notwithstanding their riches, to be humble and low in their own eyes, because both they and their riches are passing away: *As the flower of the grass he shall pass away.* He, and his wealth with him, v. 11. *For the sun has no sooner risen with a burning heat than it withereth the grass.* Note hence, Worldly wealth is a withering thing. Riches are too uncertain (says Mr. Baxter on this place), too inconsiderable things to make any great or just alteration in our minds. As a flower fades before the heat of the scorching sun, *so shall the rich man fade away in his ways.* His projects, counsels, and managements for this world, are called his *ways*; in these he shall *fade away*. For this reason let him that is rich rejoice, not so much in the providence of God, that makes him rich, as in the grace of God, that makes and keeps him humble; and in those trials and exercises that teach him to seek his felicity in and from God, and not from these perishing enjoyments.

IV. A blessing is pronounced on those who endure their exercises and trials, as here directed: *Blessed is the man that endureth temptation,* v. 12. Observe,

1. It is not the man who suffers only that is blessed, but he who endures, who with patience and constancy goes through all difficulties in the way of his duty.

2. Afflictions cannot make us miserable, if it be not our own fault. A blessing may arise from them, and we may be blessed in them. They are so far from taking away a good man's felicity that they really increase it.

3. Sufferings and temptations are the way to eternal blessedness: *When he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, dokimos genomenos* — *when he is approved,* when his graces are found to be true and of the highest worth (so metals are tried as to their excellency by the fire), and when his integrity is manifested, and all is approved of the great Judge. Note hence, To be approved of God is the great aim of a Christian in all his trials; and it will be his blessedness at last, when he shall receive the crown of life. The tried Christian shall be a crowned one: and the crown he shall wear will be a crown of life. It will be life and bliss to him, and will last for

ever. We only bear the cross for a while, but we shall wear the crown to eternity.

4. This blessedness, involved in a crown of life, is a promised thing to the righteous sufferer. It is therefore what we may most surely depend upon: for, when heaven and earth shall pass away, this word of God shall not fail of being fulfilled. But withal let us take notice that our future reward comes, not as a debt, but by a gracious promise.

5. Our enduring temptations must be from a principle of love to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ, otherwise we are not interested in this promise: *The Lord hath promised to those that love him.* Paul supposes that a man may for some point of religion even give *his body to be burnt*, and yet not be pleasing to God, nor regarded by him, because of his want of charity, or a prevailing sincere love to God and man, ~~433B~~ 1 Corinthians 13:3.

6. The crown of life is promised not only to great and eminent saints, but to all those who have the love of God reigning in their hearts. Every soul that truly loves God shall have its trials in this world fully recompensed in that world above *where love is made perfect.*

~~511B~~ JAMES 1:13-18

PROCEDURE AND RESULT OF SIN

I. We are here taught that God is not the author of any man's sin. Whoever they are who raise persecutions against men, and whatever injustice and sin they may be guilty of in proceeding against them, God is not to be charged with it. And, whatever sins good men may themselves be provoked to by their exercises and afflictions, God is not the cause of them. It seems to be here supposed that some professors might fall in the hour of temptation, that the rod resting upon them might carry some into ill courses, and make them put forth their hands unto iniquity. But though this should be the case, and though such delinquents should attempt to lay their fault on God, yet the blame of their misconduct must lie entirely upon themselves. For,

1. There is nothing in the nature of God that they can lay the blame upon: *Let no man say, when he is tempted to take any evil course, or do any evil*

thing, *I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil.* All moral evil is owing to some disorder in the being that is chargeable with it, to a want of wisdom, or of power, or of decorum and purity in the will. But who can impeach the holy God with the want of these, which are his very essence? No exigence of affairs can ever tempt him to dishonour or deny himself, and therefore he cannot be tempted with evil.


2. There is nothing in the providential dispensations of God that the blame of any man's sin can be laid upon (v. 13): *Neither tempteth he any man.* As God cannot be tempted with evil himself, so neither can he be a tempter of others. He cannot be a promoter of what is repugnant to his nature. The carnal mind is willing to charge its own sins on God. There is something hereditary in this. Our first father Adam tells God, *The woman thou gavest me tempted me,* thereby, in effect, throwing the blame upon God, for giving him the tempter. Let no man speak thus. It is very bad to sin; but is much worse, when we have done amiss, to charge it upon God, and say it was owing to him. Those who lay the blame of their sins either upon their constitution or upon their condition in the world, or who pretend they are under a fatal necessity of sinning, wrong God, as if he were the author of sin. Afflictions, as sent by God, are designed to draw out our graces, but not our corruptions.

II. We are taught where the true cause of evil lies, and where the blame ought to be laid (v. 14): *Every man is tempted (in an ill sense) when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.* In other scriptures the devil is called *the tempter*, and other things may sometimes concur to tempt us; but neither the devil nor any other person or thing is to be blamed so as to excuse ourselves; for the true original of evil and temptation is in our own hearts. The combustible matter is in us, though the flame may be blown up by some outward causes. And therefore, *if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it,* ²⁰⁹²Proverbs 9:12. Observe here,

1. The method of sin in its proceeding. First it draws away, then entices. As holiness consists of two parts — forsaking that which is evil and cleaving to that which is good, so these two things, reversed, are the two parts of sin. The heart is carried from that which is good, and enticed to cleave to that which is evil. It is first by corrupt inclinations, or by lusting after and coveting some sensual or worldly thing, estranged from the life of God, and then by degrees fixed in a course of sin.

2. We may observe hence the power and policy of sin. The word here rendered *drawn away* signifies a being forcibly haled or compelled. The word translated *enticed* signifies being wheedled and beguiled by allurements and deceitful representations of things, *exelkomenos kai deleazomenos*. There is a great deal of violence done to conscience and to the mind by the power of corruption: and there is a great deal of cunning and deceit and flattery in sin to gain us to its interests. The force and power of sin could never prevail, were it not for its cunning and guile. Sinners who perish are wheedled and flattered to their own destruction. And this will justify God for ever in their damnation, that they destroyed themselves. Their sin lies at their own door, and therefore their blood will lie upon their own heads.

3. The success of corruption in the heart (v. 15): *Then, when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin*; that is, sin being allowed to excite desires in us, it will soon ripen those desires into consent, and then it is said to have *conceived*. The sin truly exists, though it be but in embryo. And, when it has grown to its full size in the mind, it is then brought forth in actual execution. Stop the beginnings of sin therefore, or else all the evils it produces must be wholly charged upon us.

4. The final issue of sin, and how it ends: *Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death*. After sin is brought forth in actual commissions, the *finishing of it* (as Dr. Manton observes) is its being strengthened by frequent acts and settled into a habit. And, when the iniquities of men are thus filled up, death is brought forth. There is a death upon the soul, and death comes upon the body. And, besides death spiritual and temporal, the wages of sin is eternal death too. Let sin therefore be repented of and forsaken, before it be finished. *Why will you die, O house of Israel!*  Ezekiel 33:11. God has no pleasure in your death, as he has no hand in your sin; but both sin and misery are owing to yourselves. Your own hearts' lusts and corruptions are your tempters; and when by degrees they have carried you off from God, and finished the power and dominion of sin in you, then they will prove your destroyers.

III. We are taught yet further that, while we are the authors and procurers of all sin and misery to ourselves, *God is the Father and fountain of all good*, v. 16, 17. We should take particular care not to err in our conceptions of God: “*Do not err, my beloved brethren, me lanasthe — do not wander*, that is, from the word of God, and the accounts of him you

have there. Do not stray into erroneous opinions, and go off from the standard of truth, the things which you have received from the Lord Jesus and by the direction of his Spirit.” The loose opinions of Sinon, and the Nicolaitans (from whom the Gnostics, a most sensual corrupt set of people, arose afterwards), may perhaps, by the apostle here, be more especially cautioned against. Those who are disposed to look into these may consult the first book of Irenaeus against heresies. Let corrupt men run into what notions they will, the truth, as it is in Jesus, stands thus: That God is not, cannot be, the author and patronizer of any thing that is evil; but must be acknowledged as the cause and spring of every thing that is good: *Every good and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights*, v. 17. Here observe,

1. God is the Father of lights. The visible light of the sun and the heavenly bodies is from him. He said, *Let there be light, and there was light*. Thus God is at once represented as the Creator of the sun and in some respects compared to it. “As the sun is the same in its nature and influences, though the earth and clouds, oft interposing, make it seem to us as varying, by its rising and setting, and by its different appearances, or entire withdrawment, when the change is not in it; so God is unchangeable, and our changes and shadows are not from any mutability or shadowy alterations in him, but from ourselves.” — *Baxter*. The Father of lights, *with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning*. What the sun is in nature, God is in grace, providence, and glory; aye, and infinitely more. For,

2. Every good gift is from him. As the Father of lights, he gives the light of reason. *The inspiration of the Almighty giveth understanding*, ~~Job~~ Job 32:8. He gives also the light of learning: Solomon's wisdom in the knowledge of nature, in the arts of government, and in all his improvements, is ascribed to God. The light of divine revelation is more immediately from above. The light of faith, purity, and all manner of consolation is from him. So that we have nothing good but what we receive from God, as there is no evil or sin in us, or done by us, but what is owing to ourselves. We must own God as the author of all the powers and perfections that are in the creature, and the giver of all the benefits which we have in and by those powers and perfections: but none of their darknesses, their imperfections, or their ill actions are to be charged on the Father of lights; from him proceeds every good and perfect gift, both pertaining to this life and that which is to come.

3. As every good gift is from God, so particularly the renovation of our natures, our regeneration, and all the holy happy consequences of it, must be ascribed to him (v. 18): *Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.* Here let us take notice,

(1.) A true Christian is a creature begotten anew. He becomes as different a person from what he was before the renewing influences of divine grace as if he were formed over again, and born afresh.

(2.) The original of this good work is here declared: it is of God's own will; not by our skill or power; not from any good foreseen in us, or done by us, but purely from the good-will and grace of God.

(3.) The means whereby this is affected are pointed out: *the word of truth*, that is, the gospel, as Paul expresses it more plainly, ^{<4015>}1 Corinthians 4:15, *I have begotten you in Jesus Christ through the gospel.* This gospel in indeed a word of truth, or else it could never produce such real, such lasting, such great and noble effects. We may rely upon it, and venture our immortal souls upon it. And we shall find it a means of our sanctification as it is a word of truth, ^{<4371>}John 17:17.

(4.) The end and design of God's giving renewing grace is here laid down: *That we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures* — that we should be God's portion and treasure, and a more peculiar property to him, as the first-fruits were; and that we should become holy to the Lord, as the first-fruits were consecrated to him. Christ is the first-fruits of Christians, Christians are the first-fruits of creatures.

^{<5119>}JAMES 1:19-27

THE DUTY OF HEARERS

In this part of the chapter we are required,

I. To restrain the workings of passion. This lesson we should learn under afflictions; and this we shall learn if we are indeed begotten again by the word of truth. For thus the connection stands — An angry and hasty spirit is soon provoked to ill things by afflictions, and errors and ill opinions become prevalent through the workings of our own vile and vain affections; but the renewing grace of God and the word of the gospel teach

us to subdue these: *Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*, v. 19. This may refer,

- 1.** To the word of truth spoken of in the verse foregoing. And so we may observe, It is our duty rather to hear God's word, and apply our minds to understand it, than to speak according to our own fancies or the opinions of men, and to run into heat and passion thereupon. Let not such errors as that of God's being the occasion of men's sin ever be hastily, much less angrily, mentioned by you (and so as to other errors); but be ready to hear and consider what God's word teaches in all such cases.
- 2.** This may be applied to the afflictions and temptations spoken of in the beginning of the chapter. And then we may observe, It is our duty rather to hear how God explains his providences, and what he designs by the, than to say as David did in his haste, *I am cut off*; or as Jonah did in his passion, *I do well to be angry*. Instead of censuring God under our trials, let us open our ears and hearts to hear what he will say to us.
- 3.** This may be understood as referring to the disputes and differences that Christians, in those times of trial, were running into among themselves: and so this part of the chapter may be considered without any connection with what goes before. Here we may observe that, whenever matters of difference arise among Christians, each side should be willing to hear the other. People are often stiff in their own opinions because they are not willing to hear what others have to offer against them: whereas we should be swift to hear reason and truth on all sides, and be slow to speak any thing that should prevent this: and, when we do speak, there should be nothing of wrath; for a soft answer turneth away wrath. As this epistle is designed to correct a variety of disorders that existed among Christians, these words, *swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*, may be very well interpreted according to this last explication. And we may further observe from them that, if men would govern their tongues, they must govern their passions. When Moses's spirit was provoked, *he spoke unadvisedly with his lips*. If we would be slow to speak, we must be slow to wrath.

II. A very good reason is given for suppressing: *For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*, v. 20. It is as if the apostle had said, "Whereas men often pretend zeal for God and his glory, in their hat heat and passion, let them know that God needs not the passions of any man; his cause is better served by mildness and meekness than by wrath and

fury.” Solomon says, *The words of the wise are heard in quiet, more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools,* ^{<297>}Ecclesiastes 9:17. Dr. Manton here says of some assemblies, “That if we were as swift to hear as we are ready to speak there would be less of wrath, and more of profit, in our meetings. I remember when a Manichee contested with Augustine, and with importunate clamour cried, *Hear me! hear me!* the father modestly replied, *Nec ego te, nec tu me, sed ambo audiamus apostolum* — *Neither let me hear thee, nor do thou hear me, but let us both hear the apostle.*” The worst thing we can bring to a religious controversy is anger. This, however it may pretend to be raised by a concern for what is just and right, is not to be trusted. *Wrath* is a human thing, and the wrath of man stands opposed to the righteousness of God. Those who pretend to serve the cause of God hereby show that they are acquainted neither with God or his cause. This passion must especially be watched against when we are hearing the word of God. See ^{<301>}1 Peter 2:1, 2.

III. We are called upon to suppress other corrupt affections, as well as rash anger: *Lay aside all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness*, v. 21. The word here translated *filthiness* signifies those lusts which have the greatest turpitude and sensuality in them; and the words rendered *superfluity of naughtiness* may be understood of the overflowings of malice or any other spiritual wickednesses. Hereby we are taught, as Christians, to watch against, and lay aside, not only those more gross and fleshly dispositions and affections which denominate a person filthy, but all the disorders of a corrupt heart, which would prejudice it against the word and ways of God. Observe,

- 1.** Sin is a defiling thing; it is called filthiness itself.
- 2.** There is abundance of that which is evil in us, to be watched against; there is *superfluity of naughtiness*.
- 3.** It is not enough to restrain evil affections, but *they must be cast from us, or laid apart.* ^{<302>}Isaiah 30:22, *Thou shalt cast them away as a menstruous cloth; thou shalt say, Get you hence.*
- 4.** This must extend not only to outward sins, and greater abominations, but to all sin of thought and affection as well as speech and practice; *pasan rhyparian* — *all filthiness*, every thing that is corrupt and sinful.

5. Observe, from the foregoing parts of this chapter, the laying aside of all filthiness is what a time of temptation and affliction calls for, and is necessary to the avoiding of error, and the right receiving and improving of the word of truth: for,

IV. We are here fully, though briefly, instructed concerning hearing the word of God.

1. We are required to prepare ourselves for it (v. 21), to get rid of every corrupt affection and of every prejudice and prepossession, and to lay aside those sins which pervert the judgment and blind the mind. *All the filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness*, before explained, must, in an especial manner, be subdued and cast off, by all such as attend on the word of the gospel.

2. We are directed how to hear it: *Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.*

(1.) In hearing the word of God, we are to receive it — assent to the truths of it — consent to the laws of it; receive it as the stock does the graft; so as that the fruit which is produced may be, not according to the nature of the sour stock, but according to the nature of that word of the gospel which is engrafted into our souls.

(2.) We must therefore yield ourselves to the word of God, with most submissive, humble, and tractable tempers: this is to *receive it with meekness*. Being willing to hear of our faults, and taking it not only patiently, but thankfully, desiring also to be molded and formed by the doctrines and precepts of the gospel.

(3.) In all our hearing we should aim at the salvation of our souls. It is the design of the word of God to make us wise to salvation; and those who propose any meaner or lower ends to themselves in attending upon it dishonour the gospel and disappoint their souls. We should come to the word of God (both to read it and hear it), as those who know it is *the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth*, ⁴¹⁶Romans 1:16.

3. We are taught what is to be done after hearing (v. 22): *But be you doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.* Observe here,

(1.) Hearing is in order to doing; the most attentive and the most frequent hearing of the word of God will not avail us, unless we be also doers of it. If we were to hear a sermon every day of the week, and an angel from heaven were the preacher, yet, if we rested in bare hearing, it would never bring us to heaven. Therefore the apostle insists much upon it (and, without doubt, it is indispensably necessary) that we practice what we hear. “There must be inward practice by meditation, and outward practice in true obedience.” *Baxter*. It is not enough to remember what we hear, and to be able to repeat it, and to give testimony to it, and commend it, and write it, and preserve what we have written; that which all this is in order to, and which crowns the rest, is that we be doers of the word. Observe,

(2.) Bare hearers are self-deceivers; the original word, *paralogizomenoi*, signifies men's arguing sophistically to themselves; their reasoning is manifestly deceitful and false when they would make one part of their work discharge them from the obligation they lie under to another, or persuade themselves that filling their heads with notions is sufficient, though their hearts be empty of good affections and resolutions, and their lives fruitless of good works. Self-deceit will be found the worst deceit at last.

4. The apostle shows what is the proper use of the word of God, who they are that do not use it as they ought, and who they are that do make a right use of it, v. 23-25. Let us consider each of these distinctly.

(1.) The use we are to make of God's word may be learnt from its being compared to a glass, in which a man may *behold his natural face*. As a looking-glass shows us the spots and defilements upon our faces, that they may be remedied and washed off, so the word of God shows us our sins, that we may repent of them and get them pardoned; it shows us what is amiss, that it may be amended. There are glasses that will flatter people; but that which is truly the word of God is no flattering glass. If you flatter yourselves, it is your own fault; *the truth, as it is in Jesus*, flatters no man. Let the word of truth be carefully attended to, and it will set before you the corruption of your nature, the disorders of your hearts and lives; it will tell you plainly what you are. Paul describes himself as in sensible of the corruption of his nature till he saw himself in the glass of the law (ROM Romans 7:9): “*I was alive without the law; that is, I took all to be right with me, and thought myself not only clean, but, compared with the generality of the world, beautiful too; but when the commandment came,*

when the glass of the law was set before me, *then sin revived, and I died* — then I saw my spots and deformities, and discovered that amiss in myself which before I was not aware of; and such was the power of the law, and of sin, that I then perceived myself in a state of death and condemnation.” Thus, when we attend to *the word of God*, so as to see ourselves, our true state and condition, to rectify what is amiss, and to form and dress ourselves anew by the glass of God's word, this is to make a proper use of it.

(2.) We have here an account of those who do not use this glass of the word as they ought: *He that beholds himself, and goes his way, and straightway forgets what manner of man he was*, v. 24. This is the true description of one who hears the word of God and does it not. How many are there who, when they sit under the word, are affected with their own sinfulness, misery, and danger, acknowledge the evil of sin, and their need of Christ; but, when their hearing is over, all is forgotten, convictions are lost, good affections vanish, and pass away like the waters of a land-flood: *he straightway forgets*. “The word of God (as Dr. Manton speaks) discovers how we may do away our sins, and deck and attire our souls with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. *Maculae sunt peccata, quae ostendit lex; aqua est sanguis Christi, quem ostendit evangelium* — *Our sins are the spots which the law discovers; Christ's blood is the laver which the gospel shows.*” But in vain do we hear God's word, and look into the gospel glass, if we go away, and forget our spots, instead of washing them off, and forget our remedy, instead of applying to it. This is the case of those who do not hear the word as they ought.

(3.) Those also are described, and pronounced blessed, who hear aright, and who use the glass of God's word as they should do (v. 25): *Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein*, etc. Observe here,

[1.] The gospel is a law of liberty, or, as Mr. Baxter expresses it, *of liberation*, giving us deliverance from the Jewish law, and from sin and guilt, and wrath and death. The ceremonial law was a yoke of bondage; the gospel of Christ is a law of liberty.

[2.] It is a perfect law; nothing can be added to it.

[3.] In hearing the word, we look into this perfect law; we consult it for counsel and direction; we look into it, that we may thence take our measures.

[4.] Then only do we look into the law of liberty as we should when we *continue therein* — “when we dwell in the study of it, till it turn to a spiritual life, engrafted and digested in us” (*Baxter*) — when we are not forgetful of it, but practice it as our work and business, set it always before our eyes, and make it the constant rule of our conversation and behaviour, and model the temper of our minds by it.

[5.] Those who thus do, and *continue in the law and word of God*, are, and *shall be, blessed in their deed; blessed in all their ways*, according to the first psalm, to which, some think, James here alludes. *He that meditates in the law of God, and walks according to it*, the psalmist says, *shall prosper in whatsoever he does*. And *he that is not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work* which God's word sets him about, James says, *shall be blessed*. The papists pretend that here we have a clear text to prove we are blessed for our good deeds; but Dr. Manton, in answer to that pretence, puts the reader upon marking the distinctness of scripture-phrase. The apostle does not say, *for his deeds*, that any man is blessed, but *in his deed*. This is a way in which we shall certainly find blessedness, but not the cause of it. This blessedness does not lie in knowing, but in doing the will of God. ^{}John 13:17, *If you know these things, happy are you if you do them*. It is not talking, but walking, that will bring us to heaven.

V. The apostle next informs us how we may distinguish between a vain religion and that which is pure and approved of God. Great and hot disputes there are in the world about this matter: what religion is false and vain, and what is true and pure. I wish men would agree to let the holy scripture in this place determine the question: and here it is plainly and peremptorily declared,

1. What is a vain religion: *If any man among you seemeth to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is vain*. Here are three things to be observed: —

(1.) In a vain religion there is much of show, and affecting to seem religious in the eyes of others. This, I think, is mentioned in a manner that should fix our thoughts on the word *seemeth*. When men are more concerned to seem religious than really to be so, it is a sign that their

religion is but vain. Not that *religion* itself is a vain thing (those do it a great deal of injustice who say, *It is in vain to serve the Lord*), but it is possible for people to make it a vain thing, if they have only a form of godliness, and not the power.

(2.) In a vain religion there is much censuring, reviling, and detracting of others. The not bridling the tongue here is chiefly meant of not abstaining from these evils of the tongue. When we hear people ready to speak of the faults of others, or to censure them as holding scandalous errors, or to lessen the wisdom and piety of those about them, that they themselves may seem the wiser and better, this is a sign that they have but a vain religion. The man who has a detracting tongue cannot have a truly humble gracious heart. He who delights to injure his neighbour in vain pretends to love God; therefore a reviling tongue will prove a man a hypocrite. Censuring is a pleasing sin, extremely complaint with nature, and therefore evinces a man's being in a natural state. These sins of the tongue were the great sins of that age in which James wrote (as other parts of this epistle fully show); and it is a strong sign of a vain religion (says Dr. Manton) to be carried away with the evil of the times. This has ever been a leading sin with hypocrites, that the more ambitious they have been to seem well themselves the more free they have been in censuring and running down others; and there is such quick intercourse between the tongue and the heart that the one may be known by the other. On these accounts it is that the apostle has made an ungoverned tongue an undoubted certain proof of a vain religion. There is no strength nor power in that religion which will not enable a man to bridle his tongue.

(3.) In a vain religion a man deceives his own heart; he goes on in such a course of detracting from others, and making himself seem somebody, that at last the vanity of his religion is consummated by the deceiving of his own soul. When once religion comes to be a vain thing, how great is the vanity!

2. It is here plainly and peremptorily declared wherein true religion consists: *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this*, v. 27. Observe,

(1.) It is the glory of religion to be pure and undefiled; not mixed with the inventions of men nor with the corruption of the world. False religions may be known by their impurity and uncharitableness; according to that of John, *He that doeth not righteousness is not of God neither he that loveth*

not his brother, ~~AND~~ 1 John 3:10. But, on the other hand, a holy life and a charitable heart show a true religion. Our religion is not (says Dr. Manton) adorned with ceremonies, but purity and charity. And it is a good observation of his that a religion which is pure should be kept undefiled.

(2.) That religion is pure and undefiled which is so before God and the Father. That is right which is so in God's eye, and which chiefly aims at his approbation. True religion teaches us to do every thing as in the presence of God; and to seek his favour, and study to please him in all our actions.

(3.) Compassion and charity to the poor and distressed from a very great and necessary part of true religion: *Visiting the fatherless and widow in their affliction*. Visiting is here put for all manner of relief which we are capable of giving to others; and fatherless and widows are here particularly mentioned, because they are generally most apt to be neglected or oppressed: but by them we are to understand all who are proper objects of charity, all who are in affliction. It is very remarkable that if the sum of religion be drawn up to two articles this is one — to be charitable and relieve the afflicted. Observe,

(4.) An unspotted life must accompany an unfeigned love and charity: *To keep himself unspotted from the world*. The world is apt to spot and blemish the soul, and it is hard to live in it, and have to do with it, and not be defiled; but this must be our constant endeavour. Herein consists pure and undefiled religion. The very things of the world too much taint our spirits, if we are much conversant with them; but the sins and lusts of the world deface and defile them very woefully indeed. John comprises *all that is in the world*, which we are not to love, under three heads: *the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life*; and to keep ourselves unspotted from all these is to keep ourselves unspotted from the world. May God by his grace keep both our hearts and lives clean from the love of the world, and from the temptations of wicked worldly men.