

The Path to Spiritual Maturity

The epistle of James is a remarkable document. He was the skeptical half-brother of Jesus who became a key leader in the church in Jerusalem. While Jesus was going through his season of public ministry, James thought he was mad. Then we discover that the risen Christ 'appeared to James' (1Cor.15:7). Resurrection from the dead was enough to convince and transform skeptical James. He became a passionate follower of Christ and a leader who longed to see all who called themselves Christian living sold out lives for God.

The first chapter of his epistle starts as he means to go on. He gets right into the nitty gritty of life, but he does not want to simply offer pragmatic instructions. James' great concern was spiritual maturity. He wanted his readers to live fully for God.

So he launches into the issue of the various kinds of trials we face in life. James sees trials as inevitable – for he does not write, 'if you face trials,' but 'when you face trials.' James sees trials as painful – for otherwise why would he tell the reader to 'count it joy when you face trials.' That kind of processing resulting in a bottom line evaluation that this is a joyful thing is not an automatic response to suffering. But James also sees trials as purposeful and fruitful. Trials lead to steadfastness, which in turn brings about maturity.

That is a great promise, but how can we 'count it all joy?' How do we get there? After all, most of us naturally will 'count it all misery' when we suffer. How can we get the perspective that James' is advocating, and thus how can we move toward maturity?

First James counsels the reader to ask God for the perspective, or the wisdom, that is needed in times of trial (see vv5-11). God is a loving father who loves to give good gifts, including the trials that mature us, so we need only ask. Actually James really is at pains to underline the importance of pursuing 100% God's perspective in these times. Our natural approach will be to make sense of our trials from our own perspective, or with worldly wisdom. Our natural approach will be to blame our lack of resources, or rely on our own resources to face the things that we have to face. But James wants his readers to go 100% for God's perspective.

God wants to give perspective to us in times of trial, and also hope to help us remain steadfast in the midst of it all (see v12). But don't miss where he goes next, for this is not describing some kind of Christian fatalism. Yes God gives good gifts, including ones that feel negative, but God never gives us temptation. I am more than capable of generating enough of that from my own heart, but it is a comfort to know that God has never once tried to get me to sin. He gives good gifts like a Father loves to give his children good food. He gives good gifts like a father loves his child and therefore gives the nasty tasting cough medicine when it is needed. He gives good gifts – tasty food, nasty medicine, but never poison. God is consistently and persistently a loving Father, so we should look to Him for perspective and hope in the midst of trials.

But when we ask for God's wisdom in the midst of our trials, how do we hear from Him? The end

of the chapter shifts from vv19-25 to address the role of the Bible in our journey toward spiritual maturity.

The Bible and spiritual maturity

He seems to begin with some slightly random relational wisdom – be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Maybe you have worked or lived with someone who is slow to listen, quick to speak and quick to become angry. It is very difficult. Maybe you are that person around others? Know that this is a description of natural humanity, or what we are like in our spiritual immaturity. James is not giving random relational insights, he is addressing the issue of our response to God's word. Verses 20-21 make it clear that he is addressing our natural default response of self-protective anger when confronted or challenged by God's word.

Instead of flaring up in anger when God's word challenges us, let us instead receive the implanted word of God with meekness or humility. Notice two things here. First, the word is 'implanted' – which refers to it not being acquired, but natural. James is speaking of salvation and how the Spirit of God plants within us the word of God, through which we are saved. That means that we are now heart-level Bible people ... we don't instantly know everything, but we now have a heart-level resonance with the Scriptures. We start to find them beautifully attractive, and personally relevant. The Bible is not just an object to be studied, but a means to an encounter with God to be enjoyed and experienced.

Second, notice the attitude with which we are to receive this implanted word – with meekness. This is a humility that is not defensive, not self-protective, not angrily resistant, but instead humbly receptive to how God wants to put His finger on issues in our life.

Putting it into practice

James goes on to describe a further aspect of truly receiving God's word. We are also to put into practice what is shown to us as we look intently into the Bible. This is the living word of God that will pinpoint issues in us that God invites us to responsively address. James wants 'doers who act' in response to the Bible. Notice two things in verse 25 that are really important as we mature spiritually.

First, he advocates a persevering approach to gazing into the word of God. Like a man looking in a mirror, we won't easily or naturally see ourselves clearly. Instead our inclination will be to see what we want to see in the mirror of the word. But James wants the readers to really look intently and to get a clear sense of God's perspective on us. Seeing ourselves clearly in the mirror of the word of God is vital, but it is not enough. In fact, to miss James' point here and focus on ourselves would be dangerous.

Second, notice his reference to the 'perfect law' which he calls the 'law of liberty.' This is not just a reference to the standard of God's written word. It is, I believe, a reference to the fulfilled law that we find after Christ came – a law no longer written on tablets of stone, but now etched into our newly living hearts, indwelt by the Spirit and characterized by intimacy with God. It's not that we must simply receive the word with humility and respond to it. No, we go into our Bibles for more than information and self-diagnosis, we are to receive the word with humility and respond to Him.

An invitation

The pathway to spiritual maturity is littered with trials – little ones like losing our keys, and big ones like losing a loved one. How are we to engage with these trials? By engaging fully with God. We should ask Him for wisdom, relying solely on His character and goodness, not simply mixing that in with our self-protective narratives and self-reliant resources. We ask Him for wisdom, and look to the Bible to hear his answer.

How easily we can make this passage a pragmatic set of suggestions, but really it is an invitation into a sold out, all for Jesus, God and God alone, fully-His relationship. May we be people that seek God's perspective alone in the trials of life. May we be those who persevere in His word so that we hear from Him, and act on what He shows us. Maybe then our lives and ministries will be reflective of His character as James summarizes at the end of the chapter – concern for God's values and care for others, a genuinely Christlike maturity.



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