

JAMES, RIGHTLY DIVIDED & VERSE-BY-VERSE

SESSION 4 | JAMES 1:18-25

JAMES 1:17-27 | THE KINGDOM WAY

Verse 17 – see session 3. This verse is foundational, explaining **every good gift** comes from the Father **with whom there is no variableness**. Upon this truth, the instructions of verses 18-27 are built.

VERSE 18 –

This verse rejoices in the selection God has made of Israel. Note that the pronoun **us** must be taken literally, and leads back to verse 1, **the twelve tribes**. Yet almost all commentaries and sermons apply this directly to the Body of Christ. For example, Harry Ironside, famed dispensational teacher known for accusing E.W. Bullinger of “wrongly dividing the word of truth” (yet himself a consistently “wrong divider”) commented on this passage as follows:

“Our new birth itself was the expression of His good will. He brought the Word of truth to bear upon our consciences, leading us to confess our sins and trust the Saviour He provided. So we became a new offering of first fruits, the pledge of the great harvest to be reaped in due time.”¹

Ironside and other *wrong dividers* who apply James to “us” are, by logic, “backed into a corner” of Calvinism. Furthermore, they are forced to make the Body of Christ into a **kind of firstfruits**, thus robbing Israel of her first fruit status (i.e.: *replacement theology*). Jeremiah 2:3 clearly states that **Israel was...the firstfruits of his increase**. Ephesians 1:12 also speaks of the Jewish believers **who first trusted in Christ**, yet this verse is also often misunderstood as referring to “us” (even though Eph. 1:13 moves on to **ye also**).

VERSES 19-20 –

James speaks to **my beloved brethren**, which must be interpreted (as we have said previously) in light of James 1:1-2, where the **brethren** are **the twelve tribes which are scattered**. Thus, *if it wasn't to us then, it isn't to us now*.

Furthermore, the phrase **every man** has already been narrowed in focus to the **beloved brethren**, and thus cannot be broadened to *all people* status. While doing so in verse 19 would not cause problems, one should remember that *verse 20 comes after verse 19 and is indeed the same sentence*. Verse 20 becomes problematic in the dispensation of the grace of God.

The instruction to the **brethren** is that they **be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath**. In the general population, this would be a generally good proverb. But even in a proverbial usage there would be so many instances in which a Christian should *quickly speak* and *quickly get angry*. (The KJV translation of **wrath** is correct but should not be narrowed to *vengeance* or *indignation* alone, as is seen in Colossians 3:8, where the same Greek word is translated **anger** and another Greek word translated **wrath**).

While verse 19 can be used *proverbially* and *generally* for the Body of Christ, verse 20 is incompatible with the Body. The question for Israel was *how to be acceptable in God's sight*. In Acts 10:35, Israel was told that **he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him**. Psalm 15:2 also spoke of the one that **worketh righteousness** as one who would live in Zion. Isaiah 64:5 says that the one who **worketh righteousness** will meet God.

In verse 20, Israel is told that man's wrath is *not working the righteousness of God*. The wording is slightly different, but the concept follows through in the above verses as in verse 20: *if you want to work the righteousness of God, verse 19 is*

¹ H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Epistles of James*. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1947), 19.

the instruction. We should be reminded that in our dispensation the righteousness of God is *not by works*. Romans 4:5 says, **But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.**

These two verses, taken together, remind us of the danger of taking that which is “similar but not the same” and applying it to ourselves. Inevitably there will be a theological train wreck approaching.

VERSE 21 –

In order to *work God’s Righteousness*, the Israelites were given both a negative and a positive command. In the negative, they were to get rid of the **filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness**. The word **superfluity** refers to *an abundance* and the word **naughtiness** refers to *that which is wicked*. In the 400 years since the KJV, the word *naughty* has lost intensity in the English language.

In the positive, they were to **receive with meekness the engrafted word**. The word **engrafted** is only used here, but means *planted within you and growing*. This **engrafted word** must be **oracles of God** (Rom. 3:2) that **unto them were committed** (Rom. 3:2), therefore, the Hebrew Scriptures (which we often call the Old Testament). In fact, James is arguably the first New Testament book written, and if this be the case, the **engrafted word** can *only* be the Hebrew Scriptures.

James says that this **engrafted word** is **able to save your souls**. But is he talking about the same salvation we proclaim in Christ (the Pauline mystery?). How can he be, for such salvation was not known nor proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Col. 1:26)? In the age of grace, is the word **engrafted** in us, somehow? If so, how? Wouldn’t this (once again) require a Calvinistic concept of salvation?

VERSE 22 –

Adding strength to our assumption that **the engrafted word** (v. 21) is *the Hebrew Scriptures*, now James says that Israel must be **doers of the word**, or they are **deceiving your own selves**. Virtually nobody argues that being a **doer** does not involve works. But those who see this as applicable to the Body of Christ will be forced to either assign this passage into some kind of *rewards* category or *proof of salvation by grace*. I’ve never been able to reconcile the idea that salvation by grace must produce works else it is not real salvation. This moves works one step down the road but keeps them as an essential ingredient to salvation.

VERSES 23-24 –

James gives an illustration to show that those who are *hearers but not doers* are like a man who sees himself in a mirror **and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was** (v. 24).

VERSE 25 –

Once again emphasizing being a **doer of the work**, James says that the one who *continues in the perfect law of liberty* **will be blessed in his deed**.

This **law of liberty** is not defined. It will come again in James 2:12, where it is also not defined but once again in the context of a man being careful what he *does*.

If we take this **law of liberty** in a general sense (*do that which set’s you free*), then it would certainly be true that *the man who does that which sets him free will be generally blessed in his deed*. But there is almost no way of interpreting this passage in such a general, proverbial kind of way.

If we take this **law of liberty** to be the liberty of our dispensation, then it would seem a hard case to defend. Why would James refer to that which is *grace* by the word **law**? Why would he emphasize being a **doer of the work** in the liberating message that shouts NOT BY WORKS?

If we take this **law of liberty** to be the same thing as **the engrafted word** (v. 21), then there is no disharmony anywhere with Scripture. Some may protest that *the Law brings a person into bondage, not liberty!* This point-of-view, however, is only true in our dispensation. Did Moses and the children of Israel bemoan the fact that God gave them the Law? Did David write Psalms about the burden of the Law? Did the prophets give messages about what a great weight of bondage God had put them under? Did Jesus present the Law as something to dread? The answer is wholeheartedly and unanimously "NO!" In fact, Jesus was speaking about the Law and obedience thereof when He said, **ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free** (John 8:32 - note the context in verse 31). Jesus also said **blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it** (Lk. 11:28), words that are very similar to James 1:25.