

Growing Right? Or Growing Wrong?

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[0 : 00] I turn now to our Bible reading for this evening, and Willie is continuing his series through! The letter of James. So please turn there in your Bibles. If you don't have a Bible with! You have plenty of visitor Bibles at the back or at the side. Please do grab a Bible so you can see what we're reading together. So James comes just after Hebrews and before 1 Peter, page 1011 in the visitor Bible. So James chapter 1, and I'm picking up the reading in verse 17. So James 1 and verse 17.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Know this, my beloved brothers. But every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he's like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror, for he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

[2 : 27] Amen. May God bless to us his words this evening. This evening. We've seen the last few weeks that James is writing to churches and Christians who he senses are in real danger. Danger of wandering away from the true faith in Jesus, and therefore wandering away from their true destiny of salvation. And his purpose, as the very final paragraph of the letter, tells us is to turn them back from wandering, to save their souls from sin and from death. Now James knows that they're facing hard times. Verse 2 of chapter 1, trials of many different kinds. But he knows also that the real problem is not in the trials from the world outside, although these are ever-present, but from the temptations that emanate from their own hearts.

And like an honest heart doctor, he tells them, and he tells them the diagnosis very straight. The problem isn't just in their heart, he tells them it is their heart itself. It's so corrupt by nature that all it can give birth to, all it can conceive even, is sin and death. Verse 14, people are tempted when they're lured, when they're enticed by their own desire. Our sinful inclinations deep within lure us and entice us into breeding sinful thoughts and words and deeds. Indeed, so dire is the pathology that the only hope actually lies in the transplantation of a wholly new and healthy heart.

But that is what has happened to Christian believers. Look at verse 18. It tells us of a new birth from above. God's generous gift bringing forth, bringing to birth a wholly new life through the word of truth.

God's word of salvation in Jesus Christ. So that we should be his very own children sharing his own nature. We should be his first fruits, the first fruits, the special ones of all his creatures set apart for him. And that is something truly wonderful. But we are also born into battle because our old nature, our old sinful heart is still here. And it is seeking constantly to reject the new nature that God has implanted into us. He wants us to wander away from this new life back to the old.

And so only if the new heavenly life in us grows and strengthens, will it overcome, will it eclipse the remnants of that old nature as God intends for it to do. Because birth is just the beginning of life, isn't it? It's not the end. And just so with the new birth of Christian faith. It's just the beginning, the very beginning of God's purpose for our lives. Question one of the shorter catechism reminds us, doesn't it, of man's chief end, his chief purpose, which is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

[6 : 17] So God's goal for his precious first fruits is to produce in us what James calls here in verse 20, the righteousness of God. That is that we will glorify God by reflecting his righteous beauty in our lives. And it's as we fulfill that destiny, even now in our daily lives, amid varied and different trials, it's as we do that, that we will find the true enjoyment of God. Also, as verse 25 says, we'll be blessed in our doing of God's perfect law, of God's liberating instruction for life.

It says the beauty of God, our father is enfleshed in our life more and more in his people, that the blessing of God will be enjoyed more and more by us as his people.

But the question is, how do we grow in faith that's fruitful like that, that is productive of real righteousness and therefore is proven to be real faith that issues in real love for God, the faith that does receive the crown of life? Well, the answer James gives us is that the word of truth that brought us to new birth, the new birth described there in verse 18, and that remains implanted in us, as verse 21 says, that word is able, it is powerful to save us utterly and ultimately and powerful to bless us every step of the way as we walk in it, in the obedience of faith. That is, as we hear and as we receive and as we respond wholeheartedly to it as the guiding rule in our lives. And that's the message of these verses before us this evening in verses 19 to 27.

You'll see it's all about ongoing response to God's word, to the word of truth, to this implanted word, to the word as it's called just verse 22 and verse 23. Or verse 25, God's perfect law, the law of liberty that sets us free for that life. He uses similar terms in chapter 2, in fact, all through the letter. It's very clear James is simply talking, just like the rest of the New Testament, about God's whole revelation to us. All his gracious commands right from the very beginning, but wonderfully complete now in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the word made flesh.

This is the word of life. This is the means of your growth in life. Apostle Peter uses almost identical language in his first letter where he tells his readers in perhaps the end of chapter 1 that having been born again through the imperishable seed, the living and enduring word of God, that along for the pure spiritual milk that he says will make you grow up into salvation.

[9 : 23] And in his second letter, Peter reminds us that God's given us everything we need for life and godliness in those great and precious promises in the scriptures of both the Old Testament, but also now the witness of the apostles in the New Testament. And yes, James says, in just the same way we shall grow up, we shall go on as we receive and as we respond to our Father's word of truth.

And that's what this passage here tonight is all about. But we've got to be very clear what that really means and what that growing faith really actually looks like. Because James says it's possible to deceive ourselves.

It's possible, he says, to be regular hearers of God's word, I suppose, in a church like ours where we are constantly hearing the word of God read and taught. It's possible to be regular hearers, but not to be developing lives of enduring real righteousness. But instead, he says, living deceived lives.

Nothing more than empty religious ritual. And that was James' real fear, for many at least, in these scattered churches that he's writing to.

And surely the danger remains for churches and Christians today. That must be why the Holy Spirit has preserved this letter in the scriptures for us, mustn't it? And these verses then give a really challenging question, I think, to all of us.

[10 : 57] Are we growing right into lives of enduring righteousness? Or could we be going wrong? Just living lives of empty religion.

Could our religion be worthless in God's sight? It's a very important question, isn't it? Whether we're growing right or going wrong. And we need James' wisdom to help us understand both the real source of the growing new life, and also the signs that will confirm or perhaps even negate whether that is happening.

Look first at verses 19 to 25, because the focus here is on the real source of this growing new life. And the source is in receiving responsively the Father's word.

Paul, in writing to the Romans in chapter 10, says that faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ in the gospel. That is the birth of true faith, and its ongoing growth, its ongoing development, comes through the saving power of the personal voice of the Son of God in His word. Well, the problem is, as Paul says right there in Romans chapter 10, Israel heard plenty. But he says they did not obey.

[12 : 23] It's not automatic, you see, is it? And James says the same here. Just as he said that blessing through trials is not automatic, it all depends on our attitude to them, whether we allow them to lead us on in triumph, or in fact to lead us back into temptation.

Well, so in exactly the same way, Christian growth is not automatic through the word of God being spoken. It must be received responsively.

The word of truth that brought us the new birth, as verse 18 says, which is verse 21, says God has implanted in us, it will bear fruit for righteousness.

And he's changing his metaphor here from a seed in the womb to a seed in the ground, isn't he? But he's saying it must be received the right way. Like you receive a friend when they come and visit you.

You welcome them in, don't you? You entertain them. You give them attention to nourish your relationship with them. You don't get very far in developing a relationship, do you, if you just shut the door in somebody's face?

[13 : 31] Or if you just let them in, but then completely ignore them. Give them no food. Pretend they're not there. So you see, if James has to command people to receive with meekness the implanted word, why is that?

What might prevent responsive reception that will grow that word of God and bear fruit in our lives?

Well, the paragraph before verse 21 and the paragraph after it tell us.

Each of these paragraphs begins with a but. You can see it in verse 22, but be doers of the word.

But the ESV and many other translations for some reason miss it out in verse 19.

Paul read it. The Greek text of verse 19 has a full stop after, Know this, my beloved brothers. I think that concludes verses 17 and 18. Just as, do not be deceived, my beloved brothers, in verse 16 concludes verses 13 to 15.

But at any rate, it should read after that a new sentence. But, let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. What will prevent the word bringing growth of the new life?

[14 : 50] Bringing it to mature faith in the presence of God's open word. What will prevent that?

Well, James says two things. Arrogance.

You just don't really listen. Or indolence. You don't really respond. Look at the second half of verse 19 to the first half of verse 21, where James is saying, don't let arrogance prevent real attentive listening.

Reception of God's word requires a penitent attitude, not one that's full of pride. Arrogance and anger, he says, will lead only to self-destruction, not to salvation and life.

So, verse 19, he says, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. Now, clearly, he means be quick to hear God's word.

And that means not thinking, well, I know all this. I've heard this many times before. It can be easy to think that, can't it, when you listen to a sermon and a bit of the Bible you know well or you're in a Bible study like that.

[16 : 01] You say, well, I know all this. You might very well think, well, I know better than he does, the preacher or the Bible study leader. And that may be so. It's actually quite often the case for an experienced preacher listening to somebody who's much less experienced, isn't it?

I might think that very often when others are preaching. But here's the thing. God's word is not past history just to be learned. God's word is a present power to be received today by me and by everybody else listening.

Meekly, says James. Not rejected, not ignored arrogantly. Received penitently, not pridefully. Or even with anger.

human pride is very deep inside us, isn't it? And it can so easily result in us becoming angry so that we reject the very thing that's able to save us.

Rather like somebody refusing a life-saving operation because they don't like the surgeon or his manner. But arrogance and anger can very often make us refuse to really listen to God's word.

[17 : 10] I don't want to hear this. You might say about some clear command in God's word that offends your way of thinking or that you don't want to hear because you think you know better.

Or maybe it challenges your way of life, your sexual behavior, or an attitude of bitterness in your heart or your use of language or whatever it might be.

people often react like that when they hear somebody speaking God's word in a sermon perhaps.

Or maybe when they hear from a friend who's just being faithful to challenge them about their life.

Don't want to hear that. Get angry. And I think that helps us see that there's actually more here than just direct refusal to listening to God's word being proclaimed.

Alec Mateer points out that James is implying here that going on with God is very much tied up with how we get on with others. It's very clear all through James' letter that he's dealing with big relational problems.

[18:18] In fact, there's real relational pathology in these churches. People are very quick to want to be heard. Quick to want to be speaking and teaching others.

People are very quick to be quarreling with others. They're not listening to one another. They're wanting to voice their own complaints, their own grievances. It's very obvious as you read on. But you see, that kind of arrogance, that kind of anger among believers in a church is simply not conducive to a receptive spirit towards God's word.

Anger and sin are rarely far apart, are they? Paul warns us about that explicitly in Ephesians chapter 4. We always think our anger is righteous, of course, don't we?

But I think if we're honest, usually the truth is it's not so. And the truth is, if people wouldn't listen to one another, if people are just talking over one another, they're very unlikely also to listen receptively to the word of God.

[19:26] I came across recently something written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer about listening. He says, Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either.

They'll always be talking, even in the presence of God. The death of the spiritual life begins here, he says. And he goes on, there are those who think their time is too precious to spend listening but they will never really have time for God and others but only for themselves, for their own words and plans.

Perceptive comment. Could that be you or me? Could our arrogance be preventing attentive listening to God and others listening to the very thing that is able to save us?

Some people will only listen to others so that they can hear their own view affirmed and if they don't hear their own view affirmed they'll just speak and speak and speak until they get the response that they want which is agreement with me or the apology that I want or whatever it is.

And the thing is, you see, if that's the way we are with other people it's very likely, isn't it, that that's the way we're going to be with God. But, verse 20, arrogance, anger does not produce the righteousness of God in us.

[21:01] It leads to self-destruction because that attitude will prevent you hearing and receiving the word of life. As someone puts it, when anger comes in, listening flies out.

I know that's true, isn't it? And so, James says, all these wrong attitudes must be put away if real listening is to return.

Verse 21, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness. Pride must give way to penitence. Put away, put off.

That language is so common, isn't it, in the New Testament. Put off the old self, says Paul in Colossians 3. Like putting off old and dirty clothing and putting on the proper clothes of your new life in Christ.

And actually, the word here, filthiness, is the same word, it's the adjective that's used in chapter 2, verse 2, of shabby clothes. Put off those shabby clothes.

[22:02] But it's not just a one-off, you see, it's a constant daily need. And that word, rampant wickedness, it doesn't mean, it doesn't mean especially heinous sins.

The NIV's translation, the sin which is so prevalent, is maybe better. And the picture is of a seed bed that you've planted, but there's a constant encroachment of weeds that are going to choke and suffocate the good seed from growing.

And all that has to be put away constantly if that life-giving word is going to be received so as to bear fruit. And reception of the truth, true reception, includes repentance, turning away from all that is false and wrong.

That's what he's saying. Peter says almost exactly the same as I said in 1 Peter 2, putting away all malice, all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up to salvation.

But you have to keep on doing that. because of what constantly will be leeching out of our natural hearts. Just like in verse 14, desires, conceiving sin.

[23 : 22] Well, so here, wickedness constantly sows weeds, doesn't it? To choke the good seed so that it won't grow. One of the dreads of any gardener is those kind of awful perennial weeds that you just can't get rid of that are ineradicable.

The absolute worst of the worst is horsetail or mares tail. You cannot get rid of it. It's one of these prehistoric plants. The roots apparently go tens of meters deep into the soil.

They'll go everywhere. They're resistant to almost every kind of weed killer. I've discovered after long researches that there is something that will kill it or at least damp it down.

It's called diamond. If you want to know where to get it, I'll talk to you quietly back at the end of the service. It does it, but you've got to keep on spraying. Every time the stuff comes up out of the soil, you've got to spray it.

If you can't spray it, you've got to keep pulling it. You've got to keep on and keep on and keep on. It's the only way of weakening the thing. It will not die, but you will keep it out with constant vigilance.

[24 : 23] And that's what James is saying here. God's word is powerful. It is able to save, he says. To save us ultimately and to make us grow up to full salvation.

Able to produce the righteousness of God in us, to use James' words here. But you've got to be quick to hear. It's got to be received attentively, with meekness, not with pride.

All arrogance, all anger has to be constantly put away. And we must submit to that word. Especially to the parts that we don't like.

The parts that challenge our thinking and our behavior and our view of life and our pockets and everything else. Sometimes when people ask me about bits of the Bible that are difficult to understand, I say to them, well, the bits I really have difficulty with in the Bible are not the bits I can't understand.

It's the bits I can understand and I don't like. Those are the bits that I have real trouble with. But you see, to receive meekly the word of transforming power, we need to be praying like James tells us back in verse 6.

[25 : 41] In real faith, not being double-minded, saying, Lord, open my eyes that I may see wondrous things out of this, your law, and my answer will be yes, not no, or yes, but.

Not resisting the word, but receiving it. And not receiving it just with interest, just with academic interest to pontificate about. God's word is not given to us for discussion, but for doing.

And that brings us to the second but. The second hindrance to growth through God's word. Verses 22 to 25 deal not with arrogance, but with indolence.

James is saying, don't let indolence prevent real active response. Reception of God's word means doing, not being deceived. Mere observation without obedience just leads to self-deception, not to the blessings in life.

So be doers of the word, not hearers only. You see, ever down to earth, James is insistent that true Christian faith means not just attentiveness to God's word, but action, obedience in life.

[26 : 58] Now, people sometimes think that James is a little shaky in his theology, in his grasp of salvation by faith alone, compared to Paul's clear understanding. So just in case anybody here might think that, listen to Paul, the apostle of faith alone in Romans chapter 2.

Paul says, it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

just like James. Maybe you think Paul was having a little lapse there himself into works religion. So, if you think that, perhaps when you go home, have a read of the Sermon on the Mount and listen to our Lord Jesus.

Do you remember there in Matthew chapter 7? Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father.

Therefore, whoever hears my word and does them is like the man, the wise man who builds his house upon the rock. But the one who hears my word and does not do them is like the foolish man whose house collapses on the sand.

[28 : 06] And so, on it goes, of course, from the lips of the Lord Jesus all the way through the Gospels. My mother, my brothers, are those who hear the word of God and do it.

Do it. And yes, says James, the brother of the Lord, who by the way back then was one of those who was hearing the word of the Lord and not doing it. But now he was.

Unless you're a real doer of the word, he says, you're deceiving yourself. You're like a fool who has no idea what a mirror is for. Be clear, by the way, about this mirror in verses 23 and 24 and verse 25 and see what the contrast actually is.

It's not that the hearer only is somebody who just treats the scripture superficially, who has a cursory glance, whereas a doer is somebody who looks more carefully at it.

No, look at verse 23. He looks intently at his face but the problem is he doesn't do anything about it. He just goes away and forgets what he was like.

[29 : 14] Maybe he thinks he looks fantastic and so things can't be improved and he goes off smugly and forgets or maybe he doesn't like what he sees so he wants to try and forget it as quickly as he can and hope for something better.

I don't know. But what he doesn't do in either case is do anything by way of response. Do you see? He doesn't act. He doesn't understand that the purpose of a mirror is not just admiration.

It's action. It's to comb your hair. It's to shave your face. It's to notice if you've spilled gravy down your shirt before you go out. A mirror, if you're a man anyway, is what you need if your wife's not around when you're about to go out so you don't deceive yourself.

Sometimes the mirror can be a little gentler but there we are. But if you don't act on what you see, you might as well not have one. A mirror, I mean, not a wife, obviously.

But you see what he's saying? God's word is not given to us just for admiration. It's for action. It's not just for observing. It's for obedience in life. And that is the whole purpose of God's whole revelation.

[30 : 22] Remember, Moses says the secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things revealed that is in the scriptures are for us and for our children forever so that we may do all the words of this law and find blessing in life.

And so says Jesus. And so says James here. That is the road to growth. That's the road to the blessing of verse 25. Do you see? The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, keeps company with it as one writer puts it, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

In his doing. The purpose of God's word is not just to inform us but to transform us. And it's as we obey that we discover that God's perfect law, God's perfect Torah, his instruction for life is the instruction that liberates us into a life of blessing.

The yoke of God is not a yoke of slavery as the world wants to tell us. It's a way of liberating blessing. Come to me, said the Lord Jesus, you who are burdened under a yoke of real slavery and I'll give you rest because my yoke is easy, it's kind and my burden is light, it's liberating.

God's law is the perfect expression of God's nature and therefore it's the perfect vehicle of expression of true human nature because we're made in God's image.

[32 : 03] And true freedom, friends, is living out the life that we were created for and that now as believers we've been redeemed for in Jesus, imaging the glory of God, His goodness, His generosity, His grace.

It's the perfect law of liberty. And Alec Mateer says that is because it safeguards, it expresses and it enables the life of true freedom into which Christ has brought us.

And it's as we live in obedience to the Lord under the rule of our Creator and Redeemer in Christ that we will be blessed in our doings, says James, and not otherwise. It's not good hearing and receiving and even looking intently into God's Word merely intellectually.

That's all we do. We might come to know an awful lot more about God but we will never become those who truly know God. And we'll never be those who are transformed to be like God.

You know, it's the fruit of obedience, of doing the Word that proves that faith is real. Faith, says John Calvin, is properly that by which we obey the Gospel.

[33 : 20] Obedience is the mother of knowledge of God. And to know God truly, to walk with Him in obedience to His Word is to find true blessing in life.

It's God's own nature that determines His purpose for us. And that's a promise as well as a command upon our lives. You shall be holy, He says, because I, the Lord, am holy.

And so that's always going to be the real test of true faith and of growing faith. Is there a growing family likeness to our Father in Heaven? Especially in His perfect nature expressed in the human life of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is there a growing resemblance in our lives? That's the real test. Because as one writer puts it, it is possible to have an abundance of doctrinal correctness, but a scarcity of biblical godliness. And that's why you see in verses 26 and 27 now, James gives us some real tests to help us to tell if we are deceiving ourselves, if we really are growing right with a growing likeness to our Heavenly Father, or in fact, are we going very wrong?

[34 : 39] Our life is not a worthy reflection of the Father. But in fact, it's just worthless religion like the world's. So having shown us the source of the growing life of faith, which is responsibly receiving the Father's Word, He turns here to the real signs of the growing new life.

Which is that we are recognizably reflecting our Heavenly Father those ways. And verses 26 and 27 here are giving us, if you like, three tests of true paternity.

Do you see how the critical thing that divides self-deceiving religiosity from what James calls pure and undefiled religion is that the latter is all about being in a relationship with God the Father.

It's about living, verse 27, before God the Father. That's exactly how Jesus speaks, isn't it, about the righteousness that is true in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 6.

Read it later on. He contrasts that to all mere human religion. True righteousness, he says, is living in every way before God the Father.

[35 : 49] It's doing what we do for Him and not for us and not for anyone else, not to impress anybody else. but just because we love Him. Remember, he says the religious Pharisee prays very publicly and he does that to manipulate other people's attitudes to Him.

He wants their praise. That's the reward that he wants to be thought very well of by other people. That's the Pharisee. Then he talks about the pagans who pray long, extensive prayers in order to manipulate the attitude of God.

They think they'll be heard, says Jesus, because of their many words. But no, Jesus says, the true child of God prays to the Father very simply, seeking to submit to the Father's will.

Thy will be done. Thy kingdom come in the world but also in my personal life. And you see, where that is our true prayer, then the true family relationship will be seen and heard, won't it?

The religion, that is the expression in life of what we really think about God and what we really know of God. It'll be seen not as worthless religiosity, but it will be a worthy reflection of God our Father.

[37 : 08] God's character, as verse 18 here shows us, is marked by loving care for the helpless. It's marked by His word of truth. It's marked by His treasuring of His people's holiness.

And so the character of His true children will surely be marked also by the same things, by love of the needy, by treasuring holiness that's untainted by the word, and by words of truth, not by an unbridled tongue.

See, the three things that James highlights here, they're not arbitrary. And by the way, of course, he's not saying that just these three things alone will save somebody or make them righteous.

Of course not. But what he is saying is that since these things reflect so clearly God our Heavenly Father, if these traits are not there in our lives, then we can hardly claim to be His two children, can we?

We'll be deceiving ourselves. True righteousness, the righteousness of God, verse 20, that means a true reflection of God in those that He's brought to birth, His children.

[38 : 16] And that's what he sees and he recognizes as belonging to Him, as reflecting His pure, undefiled nature in human flesh. Look back at verses 17 and 18.

Do you see how the close connection there with God the Father, the Father of lights, who gives every good gift, perfect gift from above? That's how the Father treats helpless and needy human beings.

He gives gifts to them. He doesn't seek gain from them. And He talks to them with His word of truth. He brings to birth. He fathers us.

Not words that foment bitterness and fighting. They're words of life, aren't they? Not words of death. And what does He treasure in His people, His firstfruits? Well, holiness.

Setting them apart as His holy people from heaven, not from hell. And for heavenly behavior, not for hellish behavior. Well, look again at verses 26 and 27.

[39 : 20] Do you see how it looks for exactly this same reflection in God's children? Verse 27, in their treatment of people. Not seeking gain from the weak, from widows and orphans.

Not cherishing their own status, but serving the needy. Like God, Father of the fatherless. Protector of widows who sets the solitary in a home, says the psalmist. That's our Father.

And in their treasure in life. Second half of verse 27. Both for themselves and others. The wisdom from above, the wisdom from heaven. Not the worldiness from below that's ultimately hellish. No, unstained from all of that way of the world.

Serving God, not serving unrighteous mammon, as Jesus says, which is impossible. Well, verse 26, you see, what is their talk about others and to others?

[40 : 19] What's it like? Is it words of truth like God's? Seeking not provocation of one another, but seeking peace? You see how each of these tests is like a mirror, to use James' illustration.

And the question really is, well, whose image do we see in that mirror? Is it a reflection of the generous, giving, gracious Heavenly Father?

Is it a worthy reflection of Him that we see? Or if these familial traits of our Father are barely discernible or absent, well, is it in fact just worthless religion that we see?

And even more importantly, what is it that the Heavenly Father Himself sees? It's the one who sees in secret and sees right into our hearts. Years ago, when I used to, in my medical work, be doing cardiac ultrasounds, patients would often say, oh, can I see the picture?

I'd turn the monitor around and they'd have a look at it and they'd see all the squiggly lines and the flashes of color and all the rest of it, not really know perhaps what they were seeing. Sometimes they'd say, well, how does it look, doctor?

[41 : 36] And sometimes, well, you could smile and say, oh, it looks fine. But sometimes that question made you gulp because it wasn't fine. And you had to show them where the heart was badly damaged perhaps.

It was all floppy or valves were leaking or whatever it was. And friends, you see, that is what James is doing here in this letter. He's focused down on these particular areas.

How they're talking to one another in the church. How they're treating one another. Where their real treasure is for themselves and for one another. Because the truth is he knows that their heart is very badly diseased in all of these areas.

The signs of growing new life are in fact sadly lacking among them. Although very stunted at the least. And these two verses you see lay out the test that he's going to have to explore now in much more detail in the following chapters to show them just how bad things really are.

And that's what the rest of the letter does in chapter 2. He goes in depth into their treatment of others which seems to be far more focused on status just like the world than on service.

[42 : 53] Chapter 3 talks about their talk not least in their teaching which again is marked out not by peace and righteousness but by provocation and rancor. And chapter 4 and 5 certainly exposes the fact that far from being unstained by the world they're actually tainted with just the same love as the same world they treasure as the very people in fact who are hating them and persecuting them.

Now at this point you see here in chapter 1 we're still in the consulting room. Dr. James hasn't yet got us on the examination couch but by chapter 2 he's starting to strip the patient down and he's starting to wield some very uncomfortable looking instruments to probe ruthlessly to reveal the truth about what's on the inside to expose the real pathology that he's got to face the patient with if he's going to be able to help him at all.

And it's an unnerving thing. It's unnerving isn't it? I'm sure many of you have experienced this to have an initial consultation with your doctor.

Maybe you've gone reluctantly because your spouse or a friend has pushed you into going because you haven't been doing too well. Nothing very specific maybe. You're managing but you go to the doctor and they ask you all sorts of questions and they look at you your face and your tongue and your eyes and your hands and your fingernails and they sort of prod around and go hmm uh huh and then he says well I'm going to order some tests I think you need to come back in a couple of days.

And you go home and your spouse says well what did the doctor say and you say well he asked me a lot of questions and examined me and I think he might think there's something serious.

[44 : 54] And he kept looking at my tongue muttered things about my blood and my heart and asked me if I had fevers and things and he was looking at my fingernails I don't know why. Medical students you can give me your differential diagnosis later on.

You can actually tell a lot about the heart you know and the circulation by looking at somebody's tongue if it's pale if there's hemorrhages on it if it's swollen things like that.

Please don't come and show me your tongue after the service. I don't want to see. But maybe maybe we do need to examine our own tongues our talk about others our talk to others. It's interesting isn't it? James puts that test first here in the list and then actually doesn't elaborate it further to chapter 3 and I think that's because he knows that the tongue does actually reveal so much about our spiritual hearts.

I suspect he remembers very well the Lord Jesus' words out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks and by your words says Jesus you'll be justified and by your words you'll be condemned.

[46 : 14] What is how I talk about others and to others? What does it reveal about whether I'm growing in a way that recognizably reflects the Father in Heaven?

Could it perhaps indicate that I'm wandering away into worthless religion? See relationally destructive talk among Christians and in churches is not a sign of maturity it's not a sign of responsive reception of the word of truth is it?

It's a sign of rejection of it. Self-deception leads to destruction. That couldn't happen here could it? That couldn't be you. Or me? Or me? James saw it in his churches a little more than a decade after the day of Pentecost in the original apostolic church.

Striking. What about our treatment of others in the church? The kind of people we bother with or don't bother with. Do we have any time, any inclination to serve the unrewarding type of people, the needy people?

[47 : 37] Those who don't have anything to share with you except their own misery? The ones that our Heavenly Father gladly shares His generous grace with, as He did with you and with me.

And what about our real treasures in life? That too tells us, doesn't it, where our heart is. Is it cherishing the holiness that really does reflect our Father's ways as His children above all other things?

or actually, are we just like the rest of the world? Valuing the things, valuing the people that are rewarding to us in the world's terms?

And caring very little for the kind of people that the world scorns? The very ones that our Father in Heaven delights in, if we believe His Word. Are we really growing right?

Right? Or could we in fact be going wrong, deceiving ourselves, living not lives of enduring righteousness, but just empty religion?

[48 : 48] The outward signs might not be glaringly obvious, you see. At least at first, they can be very subtle, like signs of heart disease. But they are significant. And it's very often the daily pressures, isn't it?

The daily pressures are just small things. It causes us to begin to drift. Let me finish with this quotation from Alec Mateer. He says, it's more than likely true that if life were all large decisions, few of us would go far wrong.

Yet faced with the world's ceaseless bombardment of our eyes, ears, thoughts, and imaginations, the world's insidious erosion of values and standards and clamor for our time, our money, and energy, it's easy to adopt a general way of life which sort of avoids the open pitfalls of sin, yet is not discernibly different from the style of one who does not know Christ.

We may well decide to belong to Jesus, and yet fail to carry that decision through with the rigor which alone proves that it was a real decision. It's one thing to yield our lives to him, he says, but it's another to live each moment of the day on his side of the great divide with the world.

James says there is a way of beauty and blessedness, the word of truth. It's powerful to save our souls if we go on receiving it responsively.

[50 : 28] But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. And be doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

Do this, he says, and you will be blessed in your doing. Amen.

Well, let's pray together. Almighty God who shows to them that are in error, the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return into the way of righteousness.

Grant unto all of us in this fellowship of Christ's church that we may turn away from things contrary to our profession and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.