



4. James describes how things progress, from something challenging or questionable to something much worse. See the progression in verses 3-4: testing > perseverance > maturity > completeness. Then see the progression in verses 14-15: enticement > conception > birth > sin > death. Compare these progressions with those found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-22. How have you experienced these progressions in your own life? What have you found to be helpful in stopping these progressions from becoming worse?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns that since anger and insult may start a progression that could lead to murder, they must be controlled. Self-control is a virtue frequently stressed in Proverbs (25:28), and is a consequence of wisdom. Biblical wisdom is really godliness. So Biblical self-control is part of a progression from faith, perseverance, and the Holy Spirit added to fellowship, dialogue, prayer, wisdom and godliness.

## DAY 2: Read James 1:16-18

1. In verse 16, James writes “Do not be deceived.” How are we deceived when it comes to temptation? What are some common excuses we use to shift the blame from ourselves when we give in to temptation?

We are deceiving ourselves when we blame something on God and become depressed, instead of, in everything, giving thanks to God, who is always with us and will be with us as we work our way through trials. (1 Thessalonians 5:18) The verses are also saying that God the creator made the stars, the sun, the moon and the planets to mark the seasons, to warm the earth, etc. But, while there are eclipses, and while the shadows of the sun do shift, God does not shift. We deceive ourselves when we ascribe great merit to some accomplishment without giving thanks to God who brings every good and perfect gift.

2. What do verses 17 & 18 say about what God the Father does for us? See also Psalm 119:142 and John 17:17.

We receive many gifts from God as an expression of his generous spirit, giving us what he wants us to have, what is perfectly right for each of us. We can trust in the consistency of his light, which illuminates his own purpose. He created us by his word, and also gives us spiritual rebirth by his word of Good News. Someone born into a less than desirable setting might ask, *Why me?* We can be confident that however painful our lives may be, we nevertheless have a part to play in God’s purpose. He wants us to be *first fruits* wherever we find ourselves.

### ***To Dig Deeper: The first fruits of creation.***

Verse 18 refers to humankind as a kind of *first fruits of creation*. What do you think this means? See Ex. 23:16 and Leviticus 23:9-14. The first bit of grain ready for harvest was called the “first fruits”, and that portion belonged to the Lord, and was to be dedicated to Him and brought to the Tabernacle. Similarly, Christ was called *the first fruits of the resurrection* (1 Corinthians 15:20). Believers are called *the first fruits* as they receive the Holy Spirit and are dedicated to God and belong to him (2 Thessalonians 2:13, Revelation 14:4.) The teaching about first fruits occurs again and again in the Scriptures.

3. Note that James stresses *the truthfulness* of the word. Can you picture how the early Christians in cosmopolitan Israel, a crossroads of cultures, could be caught up in controversy and intense debates?

Jonathan Edwards wrote that *The Holy Spirit, a divine and supernatural light, imparts a true sense of the divine excellence of the things revealed in the word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them thence arising.* (from sermon: *A Divine and Supernatural Light*) Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we can represent the truth of God in today’s maelstrom of competing points of view, just as early Christians did.

### DAY 3: Read James 1:19-21

1. Verse 19 provides helpful instructions for our lives. What are they? How have these instructions been a challenge for you, and what have you done or are you doing to meet these goals?

Today we can take courses in *listening skills*, which teach that we should listen more than speak, and above all, control our anger and other negative feeling. Acquiring such skills is hard work and takes time.

2. In verse 20, what does it mean when James writes that the anger or wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God? See also Matthew 5:22 in Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. What does Jesus see as the outcome of our wrath?

See question 4 below.

3. What kinds of anger are appropriate? What kinds are inappropriate? How does this teaching relate to Romans 12:19: "*Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.*"

See question 4 below.

4. What is James' answer to anger in verse 21?

Verses 19-21 are very important verses. The literal translation of verse 20 is: *The wrath of a man does not work (or produce) the righteousness of God.* What this means is that reacting from one's anger does not bring about or further the *rightness*, or *justice* of God. This raises the whole issue of human anger. Prov. 29:11: *A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.* Anger is a problem in Scripture because, on the one hand, it can lead to murder (Matthew. 5:22). It is also an indication of godlessness (Job 36:13), and can be an expression of arrogant oppression.

Psychologically speaking, anger is a response to an attack on one's ego. Since faith in God conduces to humility, faith helps reduce anger.

The Scripture is filled with God's righteous anger against everything contrary to his will, especially human disobedience. But we are not to imitate God's anger, which is of a completely different nature than human anger. Jehu is the king of Israel who sought to right the wrongs of Ahab & Jezebel, but he went way overboard, and was condemned for his excesses. (II Kings 9 & 10) We can experience righteous indignation when we see, for example, injustice, brutality, or wrongdoing, but we are not to take matters into our own hands. To do so may be revenge or retaliation, and is forbidden. (Romans. 12:17-21) As individuals, we are to turn the other cheek and forgive. As citizens, we are to seek redress through courts of law. We are to be *the blessed peacemakers, the agents of reconciliation.* We are to *humbly accept the word planted in us, which can save us.* (James 1:21) Jesus said, *Blessed are the meek.* (Matthew 5:5)

Here is an example of the significance of these verses to current life, as experienced by several Central College volunteers. Think about what happens in our prisons. Anger is the number one problem of men behind bars. Uncontrolled anger got some of the men there in the first place. Or, if they didn't wrestle with anger before they were incarcerated, there are many provocations afterwards. Uncontrolled anger leads to bad behavior, which results in black marks on an inmate's record, which means transfer to a more and more secure prison, extended sentences, and worse and worse living conditions.

For many reasons, gaining faith in Christ can make all the difference in a prisoner's behavior. The Holy Spirit can occupy the dark hole where anger previously resided. Christ can reach men and women behind bars.

Christian support on the outside is also important. We on the outside have responsibilities. We can work to alleviate two obvious problems. Something like a quarter of inmates are emotionally disturbed and should be receiving therapy. When the big mental hospitals were closed in the 1980s to save money, the prison

system simply took over that function. Something like another third are drug addicted, and need therapy. We can also work for shorter sentences, reducing unnecessary lock-ups, better access to mental health counseling, and the de-criminalization of poverty.

#### **DAY 4: Read James 1:22-25**

- 1. One of the most important points in the book of James is his call for us to not just be hearers of the word, but doers. How can we deceive ourselves by 1) hearing the word without responding to it? Or 2) becoming aware of an area of personal shortfall and then doing nothing about it?**

Since the word *to deceive*, or in the passive tense, *to be deceived*, occurs in verses 16, 22, and 26, it deserves our attention. Especially so since in each case James uses a different word in the Greek language to get at this meaning. But what he is saying and wants to stress is clear. It is our capacity to deceive ourselves into thinking we are more obedient followers of Christ than we really are. Psychologists have long stressed how difficult it is for one to look at his or her own weaknesses. There is no question but that God's demands are radical. God is always drawing us ahead of ourselves and out into and beyond our comfort zone. But being naturally comfort-loving people, our most natural tendency is to assume that we are doing more for God than we really are. The truth of Scripture never fails to challenge us! Note how vividly James contrasts *deceitfulness* with *the words of truth* (vs. 18). There are sins of *omission*, *not doing things we ought to do*, as well as *commission*, *doing things we ought not to do*. Sometimes when we feel we have a fairly clean slate in the latter, we tend to forget the former.

- 2. According to verse 25, how is God's law perfect and liberating? How does living in harmony with God's law bring blessing?**

God's law is perfect because it comes from God. Psalm 19:7 says because God's law is perfect it *revives one's soul*, that is, gives us purpose, meaning, and direction. We receive the blessings of being liberated from the depression of meaninglessness, and also of having resources to free us from the slavery of sin, which is the bondage to negative forces. By right guidance one will tend to do right things, and such healthy living gives one satisfaction and confidence, which are profound blessings.

- 3. Why should one upset her inner peace by getting involved in a world that is sometimes sordid and often disappointing? Is love a feeling or a verb? Can one express love by working on systems as well as relationships?**

When we look into the mirror and see imperfections in ourselves and in our world, it may become obvious that things need to be done. With the gifts God has given us, we can work to improve things, and avoid frustration. The very meaning of love is not only to stand with others in times of hard luck, but also to struggle to improve an environment which may not be favorable to healthy Christian living, but contributes to human poverty and misery.

***To Dig Deeper: God's perfect and liberating law: James 1:25 says God's law is perfect and liberating (or gives freedom). How is this so? What does this mean? See Psalms 19:7-11; John 8:31-32; Galatians 2:4; 6:2; Romans 8:2 and 1 Peter 2:16.***

In the Old Testament and New Testament God's Word is called "law". God's law is perfect – it is the moral law based on the 10 commandments but brought to completion by Jesus Christ. The NIV Study Bible states this in verse 25 as "the perfect law that gives freedom". This seems like a paradox since law seems to imply restraint thus lack of freedom – not so God's law. The sinner is a slave to sin (John 8:34). The one who obeys Jesus teaching know the truth which sets him/her free (John 8:31-32). Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life . . ." (John 14:6). Knowing Christ in salvation sets us free from being enslaved to sin (Romans 8:2). "As the Holy Spirit applies the principles of Scripture to believers' hearts, they are freed from sin's bondage and enabled to obey God." (John MacArthur, James, page 21)

We fulfill the law of Christ and live in freedom by carrying each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2), by living as servants of God (1Peter 2:16), and not allowing other Christians who falsely teach a legalistic way of

living enslave us again (Galatians 2:4). Psalms tells us God's perfect law revives our souls, makes us wise, gives us joy, enlightens us, and warns us. When we keep God's law we are rewarded. How freeing is that?

James, himself, teaches us that the Word of God (God's law) is the means of regeneration (1:18), a mirror reflecting a person's defects (1:24) and the ethical guide of Christian living (1:25). (taken from the NASV Bible footnote on James 1:25). Irving L. Jensen in James, on page 50 writes this quote from the Wycliffe Bible Commentary, "Law of liberty, probably means that it is a law that applies to those who have the status of freedom, not from law, but from sin and self, through the Word of truth. The man who looks into this law and makes a habit of doing so . . . will become a doer of the word and find true happiness."

## **DAY 5: Read James 1:26-27**

- 1. Why do we need a rein on our tongues? (Note that some translations use the word "bridle" instead of rein.) What are the ways in which our loose tongues are displayed? (James will bring up this subject again in chapter 3.)**

Control of the tongue is of particular interest to James, who also deals with it in 1:19, 3:2-12, and 4:11-12. One wonders if there may not have been a considerable amount of grumbling or questioning in the Jerusalem congregation of which James was the chief elder. Here he is warning that guarding one's mouth is a part of doing the Word. If one thinks he is an obedient Christian but is not making the effort to bridle his tongue, he is only deceiving himself.

- 2. What does James say in verse 27 about religion that is pure and faultless?**

Think of the Old Testament's *quartet of the vulnerable: widows, orphans, aliens and the poor*. (Zechariah 7:10) In today's terms, this might mean women without adequate means of support, children from dysfunctional families, immigrants, and the poor. If we are going to be *doers of the word*, how should we be working to improve their lot? James only mentions *orphans* and *widows*. It is entirely possible that since James was writing primarily to Jewish Christians who would have been well versed in the Old Testament, he was assuming that his readers would know that he was referring to all four of the vulnerable. It may have been that in his day as in ours to mention the last two might have been irritating to the Roman authorities.

- 3. In verse 27, what does it mean to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world? (See also Romans 12:2, James 4:4, II Peter 1:4, 2:20, I John 2:15-17)**

Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17:15 is: *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one*. Jesus wants us to out there caring for the needy and vulnerable and working for just administration of the law. But this has never been easy for Christians – or for Old Testament Jews.

**If the Biblical notion of *The World* include its institutions and customs, then to what extent should we examine the way we earn our money, fight our wars, and socialize, which in some way may impact the lives of others?**

One way to influence our culture for Christ is to become active in civic and social organizations, like local civic groups, planning commissions, or school or library boards. Those of Christian European origin need to hear how other people are thinking by meeting with Black people, Muslims, and other minority groups. Those who are affluent need to listen to the poor, Christians with non-believers, straight with Gay, those with a clean record with ex-offenders or those struggling with addiction. We need to learn what the worries of other people are, and then step in and get involved. You may find that you are joining Jesus, who may already be there.

**Can religious people participate in public life and remain unpolluted?** The 16th century Anabaptists said no, and that tradition has continued on today in some Baptist circles and a few other Christian groups. The British Puritans, on the other hand, believed that the Bible contains principles that can be applied to public life. Disgusted with the corruption and arbitrary nature of the British monarchy, they yearned for a more just society. They were also upset with the harsh enforcement of the state church in 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Those who migrated to New England sought not only to worship freely, but also to draft just laws and to choose rulers who would enforce them impartially. They also sought to embody an over-all, general consistency with Biblical norms in private and public life. It was a profound ideal. They recognized from the beginning the siren song of wealth in the New World drawing people away from such ideals. Which force is winning today, the love of Biblical norms, or the love of money? Do you agree with the Puritan's thinking, or do you think that biblical norms have no place in public, especially business, life?

**DAY 6: Reread James 1:12-27**

- 1. What does James say in these verses about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Write down two or three ideas about discipleship from this passage.**

James writes that discipleship might include *enduring temptation* (v. 12); *not being deceived* by temptation (vss. 13-15); *being thankful for God's gifts* (vss. 17-18); *being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger* (vss. 19-21); *being doers of the word and not merely hearers* (vss. 22-25); *bridling one's tongue* (vs. 26); and *caring for orphans and widows* and the like and *avoiding worldliness* (vs. 27).

- 2. Identify a verse in this passage that is particularly meaningful or significant, write it down, and memorize it. (Perhaps verse 19 or 22)**