

Lesson 1 | March 5, 2023

Practicing True Religion

Study Text: James 1:1–27

Central Truth: Christians can benefit from trials by remaining true to God’s Word.

Key Verse: James 1:22

Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves (KJV).

Don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will use their trying times as opportunities to rejoice and grow.
- Students will see God not as a source of temptation but as the Giver of perfect gifts.
- Students will live out their faith by studying and obeying God’s Word.

Introducing the Study

Say: Today we are beginning a five-lesson unit on the Book of James, most likely written by a brother of Jesus (see Matthew 13:55; Galatians 1:19). It is a short, practical letter addressed to Christians who were scattered throughout the known world as a result of the persecution that followed the stoning of Stephen (Acts 11:19). Life was not easy for these early believers. This letter was an encouragement to them to stand firm in their faith and live it out in practical ways.

Opening Activity—Joyful Suffering

Ask. What examples can you give of someone who exhibited joy and lived out their faith in spite of great difficulty?

Say: When someone faces deep loss or severe suffering yet remains faithful in living out God’s Word, he or she becomes a strong witness to other believers and to unbelievers. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The original audience of this letter faced severe persecution, which could have easily tempted them to turn their backs on the faith they had embraced. They desperately needed the instructions James gave them as they endeavored to live out their newfound faith in an evil world.

The words of this letter are just as timely today as believers face ever-increasing evil in our world. In some countries, persecution is rampant, but even when we are free to worship openly, pressures are mounting to abandon our faith. We still need the encouragement and instruction James gave the Early Church.

Part 1—Rejoice in Trials

Growing through Trials

James 1:1–4

Say: Most people are not eager to welcome troubles of any kind into their lives. However, troubles are inevitable. What we as Christians do with our trials will define us. The instruction James gave to the Jewish believers is comparable to saying, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!” He instructed them to consider their trials as an opportunity to rejoice. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

James opened his epistle not by identifying himself as a brother of Jesus—which he most likely was—but as a servant (KJV) or slave (NLT) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He then identified his audience as the Jewish believers who were scattered throughout the world. He challenged them to take advantage of the opportunities being presented to them as they faced temptations.

Resource Packet Item 1: Introduction to James

Distribute the information sheet and summarize it as you begin the study.

The word translated “temptations” (KJV) generally implies a temptation to sin. While James emphasized that later in this chapter, James 1:2 refers to another aspect of the word. It can also be translated as “troubles” (NLT), the disruptions that occur in our lives. They may come from difficulties, persecution, or temptations to sin. In the first part of this chapter, James is referring to the trials of life.

While some today indicate that problems in the lives of believers are the result of sin or lack of faith, James indicated that all believers, regardless of the faith they exercise, will face difficulties in life, often as a result of believing in Christ. How we respond to these difficulties brings spiritual maturity.

In what may seem like a paradox, James instructed his readers to “consider it an opportunity for great joy” (verse 2, NLT). In verse 3, the word “patience” (KJV; “endurance,” NLT) includes the idea of remaining steady under a heavy load. Christians become stronger and more patient as they endure trials. Our perseverance in trials results in our becoming “perfect and entire” (verse 4, KJV) or “perfect and complete” (NLT). We gain spiritual maturity as we experience trials in our lives. And as we mature in Christ, we become complete in our Christian walk.

Discuss

? Why can Christians experience joy in trials?

? How can you use your troubles as an opportunity for spiritual growth?

Faithful in Trials

James 1:5–8

Say: When overwhelming trouble strikes, our only hope is in God. When we seek Him for wisdom as we encounter the trials of life, He will not disappoint. In fact, When overwhelming trouble strikes, our only hope is in God. When we seek Him for wisdom as we encounter the trials of life, He will not disappoint. In fact, He is “our generous God” (James 1:5, NLT) who gives wisdom “liberally” (KJV). We can receive wisdom from the all-powerful, all-wise, and all-knowing God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

During trials, we need wisdom to know how to respond. But God has not left us without help. Trials help us as believers to recognize our dependence on God. Facing trials victoriously and developing spiritual maturity through those trials do not come through our own efforts. James encouraged believers to seek the Lord for wisdom when encountering the trials of life (verse 5). We may feel insecure and unsure of how to handle adversity when it strikes, but God will help us make godly decisions and live according to biblical precepts. He understands our situations and will generously provide wisdom if we will ask. And He will not upbraid or scold those who ask for wisdom in faith without doubting.

In verse 6, James said that one who doubts is like a wave tossed about by the wind. Such a doubter will not receive the answer to his request (verse 7). In verse 8, James further characterized this person as being “unstable in all his ways” (KJV). The term “double minded” depicts a person trying to face two directions at the same time. Doubters with “divided loyalty” (NLT) are unsettled, becoming ineffective in prayer and “unstable in everything they do” (verse 8, NLT).

Thankfully, we do not have to be double-minded. God cares for us and can help us become focused only on Him. He will help us move past our trials and temptations to a life of stability and faith in Him.

Resource Packet Item 2: Growing through Trials

Distribute the worksheet. Divide the class into groups, assigning each group one of the three persons who experienced growth through their trials. Have the groups look up the passages and discuss the questions. After a few minutes, have a spokesperson from each group explain what they learned to the class.

Discuss

? How does James describe the character of God in these verses?

? How would being double-minded or having divided loyalties affect our lives?

Part 2—Understand the Source of Temptations

Source of Temptation

James 1:12–15

Say: In spite of the benefits of enduring temptation, believers should seek to avoid temptation rather than always living “on the edge.” Part of being wise during temptation is knowing its source. While God helps us in our temptation, He does not initiate the temptation. Sometimes it comes because we have made wrong choices. At other times temptation may be the result of satanic activity. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

After a brief discussion of the insignificance of the believer’s economic status in the eternal plan of God (James 1:9–11), James again reminded his readers that their endurance during trouble would be rewarded. Already, he had pointed out the spiritual growth they would experience, but now he spoke of the final reward for believers: the “crown of life.” The word translated “crown” in verse 12 refers to the crown or wreath that is given to the victorious athlete. When we come through life’s trials victorious in Christ, we will receive our crown—eternal life with Christ.

Some of the recipients of James’s letter may have been blaming God for their temptation. Perhaps they felt He could have removed the source of their temptation. James wanted his readers to realize God is not the author of temptation. Verses 13–14 assure us temptation does not come from God, but “from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away” (verse 14, NLT). The phrase “drawn away” (KJV) provides the imagery of a fish that sees bait and is attracted to it. Similarly, our sinful desires entice us to sin.

God is holy, both in character and actions. “God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else” (verse 13, NLT). He desires for people to be holy and act holy. In fact, He has provided everything believers need to keep from sinning.

In verse 15, James presented the results of yielding to temptation. Using the illustration of conception and birth, James indicated that lust conceives and gives birth to sin. If we don’t resist sin, it brings death.

This is in contrast to the perseverance that brings spiritual maturity and life. God does not expect us to overcome temptation alone. He provides His Word, His Spirit, and a way of escape.

Discuss

? Why can we be confident that our trials and temptations do not come from God?

? What practical steps can we take to avoid yielding to temptations?

Source of Good Gifts

James 1:16–18

Say: Satan is deceptive. If he can get us to believe God is the source of trials and temptation, he can cause us to doubt God’s love and His power to help us be victorious

over sin. However, quite the contrary is true. God is the Source of all good things in our lives. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

James did not want his readers to be deceived (James 1:16) but to see God as the Source of all good gifts (verse 17). Rather than being a God of darkness and sin, God is the “Father of lights” (KJV). In fact, He is the Creator of “all the lights in the heavens” (verse 17, NLT). The movement of the earth in relationship to the sun and moon creates shifting shadows and light. But God is not like the shadows caused by the sun. He does not change. He does not sadistically punish us at times and lovingly bless us at other times. All of God’s gifts are good for His children. They are intended to help us mature in our walk with Him.

To show that God gives good gifts, James reminded his readers of their salvation. For no reason other than His desire to bless His children, God provided the “word of truth” (verse 18, KJV; “his true word,” NLT). And because they had accepted the gospel, they became “his prized possession” (verse 18, NLT; see also 1 Peter 2:9) or the “firstfruits” (KJV) of all who would believe in Christ. Firstfruits refers to the first portion of the harvest that was dedicated to God. It is a symbol of an abundant harvest. These believers would be the first of many who would believe in Christ and experience God’s salvation.

Discuss

? Why does God delight in giving good gifts to His children?

? What are some gifts God has given to His Church to help believers become spiritually mature?

Part 3—Be Doers of the Word Exercising Self-Control

James 1:19–21

Say: In order to resist the inevitable temptation that will come into our lives, we must be vigilant to avoid behaviors and attitudes that will lead us toward sin. We do not earn our salvation through our actions. Faith is a gift from God. However, our love and gratitude toward Him should foster a desire in our hearts to live in a way that is pleasing to Him. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Not only did God give us the gift of salvation; He also provides us with resources for overcoming sin, as outlined in James 1:19–21.

Sometimes people react quickly and inappropriately when they face temptation. In verse 19, James gave some important advice for living victorious Christian lives: “You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry” (NLT).

Listening before speaking (or doing) can often prevent us from becoming entangled in sin. As Christians we must listen to God, His Word, and godly people. When we listen to

God's instructions, we can avoid trouble. The same Word that brought the news of salvation will give us direction in daily living. And the Holy Spirit warns us of impending danger if we take time to listen to Him.

Believers are also to be "slow to speak." If we are always talking, we will not hear God's instructions. At times we need to sit quietly in His presence and allow Him to speak to us. When we think about what we are going to say, we can often avoid hurting someone by our words.

Controlling our anger also helps us avoid temptation. Our emotions can be subjective and not based on objective truth. We cannot afford to let emotions, especially anger, have control in our lives. Anger does not produce a righteous lifestyle (verse 20).

In order to receive God's Word and allow it to change us, we must get rid of any impurities in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit (verse 21). Sin hinders our ability to hear and obey God's Word. As we remove moral filth and evil from our lives, we are better able to receive God's Word with humility.

Pride keeps us from receiving God's Word because it blocks us from recognizing our need for God and fosters our desire to control our own lives. We are to remove all that is evil from our lives, as we would remove and throw away a filthy and ragged coat. When we humbly open our hearts to God's Word, it becomes "engrafted" (KJV) or "planted" (NLT) in us. The Word takes root and grows, changing us into Christ's image.

Discuss

? Why are the actions in James 1:19 important in allowing God's Word to become part of our lives?

? Why is it important to control our emotions?

Living Out God's Word

James 1:22–27

Say: Listening to God's Word is important; in fact, the most important book we will ever hear or read is God's Word. But it will change our lives only if we go beyond hearing or reading it. We must practice the principles it teaches. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Believers in Christ are to read and meditate on the Word regularly. In James 1:22, James let his readers know the danger in merely hearing the Word and not obeying it. Individuals who disobey God's Word are deceived because they hear God's commands and choose not to put them into practice. James compared this behavior to a person who looks carefully into a mirror, sees something that needs to be changed in his appearance, yet turns away and does nothing (see verses 23–24). He does not look deeply into the meaning of God's Word and stunts his spiritual growth.

The doer, however, applies the truth of God's Word in his life each day and is blessed (verse 25). He seeks understanding and obeys God's Word. Note that God's Word is called "the perfect law that sets you free" (verse 25, NLT). God's Word will never bring a person into bondage. Rather, it will set us free from sin.

Verses 26 and 27 contrast true and false religion. The believer's true relationship with Christ is manifested in his speech. James had earlier admonished his readers to be "slow to speak" (verse 19, NLT). The words we speak reflect the state of our hearts, so one who claims to be a believer but does not control his tongue does not have true religion. He only has an outward form. A truly religious person will speak kind and loving words, whereas a person who cannot or does not speak kind words has a worthless religion.

True religion is more than words. It is also demonstrated in loving actions. If Christians are truly growing in their walk with God, they will demonstrate spiritual maturity through a desire to help others, especially those who are in desperate need. They will also endeavor to obey God's Word and live in purity and holiness. Doing our best to keep ourselves pure from the defilement of the world is a sign that Christ truly dwells within us. As we grow in our obedience to God's Word, He will help us overcome temptation and experience victory.

Discuss

? How should the believer's life demonstrate obedience to the Word?

Resource Packet Item 3: Overcoming Temptation

Distribute the worksheet and divide your class into four groups, assigning one section to each group. Then ask each group to share principles for resisting temptation.

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: No one is immune to the troubles of life. In fact, believers may even face trouble because of their faith in Christ. But we can be the most victorious people in the world because we know our strength comes from God. We can demonstrate God's grace in our lives in the way we deal with trials and temptations. God is not the author of our trials. Instead, He is interested in our welfare and spiritual maturity. We can trust Him. In all things, we must obey God's Word, regardless of our feelings. Obedience will strengthen our relationship with Jesus Christ and help us live victoriously.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Find a way to rejoice this week rather than complaining.
- Encourage another believer who is experiencing trouble.
- Commit to doing something you find in God's Word rather than just hearing or reading it.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

The First Temptation.
Genesis 3:1–8

Tuesday:
Drawn Away by Lust.
2 Samuel 11:1–5

Wednesday:
Steadfast in Trial.
Job 23:1–12

Thursday:
The Promise of Jesus.
John 16:29–33

Friday:
Comfort in Trials.
2 Corinthians 1:3–7

Saturday:
Humanity Fades; God's Word
Endures. 1 Peter 1:22–25