

“The Christian’s Relationship to the Bible”

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Scriptural Foundation: James 1:18-22, ESV

Testing of Your Faith (Continued)

¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Hearing and Doing the Word

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

The Bible is an amazing book. One wise Christian wrote, “This Book is the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding; its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable.

“Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler’s map, the pilgrim’s staff, the pilot’s compass, the soldier’s sword, and the Christian’s character. Here paradise is restored, Heaven opened, and the gates of Hell disclosed. Christ is its grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. Follow its precepts and it will lead you to Calvary, to the empty tomb, to a resurrected life in Christ; yes, to glory itself, for eternity.”¹

Every genuine Christian rejoices in that description. We know it to be true. We know because we are a people who have experienced the power of the Scriptures in our own personal lives, and as such we have a very unique relationship with our Bible. This Book is so very precious to us. This is not to say that every believer relates to the Scripture in the degree that they should, but every genuine Christian relates to the Bible personally and powerfully. Each one recognizes the value of the Word of God to bring spiritual life to their soul.

David wrote this about the Scriptures in Psalm 19,

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes... ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

David would go on to write, in Psalm 119,

⁹⁷ Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day... ¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Jesus noted that one mark of authentic faith is a love for and a submission to the Word of God. In John 8, Jesus declares to those who had believed in Him,

³¹ ... *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

¹ Anonymous

And again in John 14, Jesus says to His Disciples,

²¹ *“Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he is the one who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him...”* ²³ *...If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him...”*

In James 1:18-22, we are reminded that the authenticity of our faith largely can be measured by our responsiveness to the Word of God. James whole letter presents the nature of authentic faith in opposition to a dead faith. He began his letter by teaching us that one mark of living faith is the way we respond to difficulties and to painful trials in life. Then in James 1:12-17, James teaches us that a second mark of authentic faith is the way we respond to temptations and how we fight against sin. Now James, in Verses 18-22, relates that the third mark of a living, vibrant faith is measured by the way we respond to the Word of God. Our happy, joyful, submissive attitude toward the Word of God is one measure of authentic faith. The true believer loves the Bible and submits his or her life to it.

James discusses the unique relationship that every Christian has with the Bible and he presents three specific ways that the Christian uniquely relates to the Scriptures. The first way is the rebirth of the Christian by the Word. The second is the reception of the Word by the Christian. The third is the response of the Christian to the Word.

Verse 18 presents to us the truth of the rebirth of the Christian by the Word. Let's read that passage.

¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

It is important to remember the context any time that we are studying the Bible. James has explained in Verses 12 through 17 that sin is man's biggest problem because it is inside of us. It is not outside of us. It is inside of us because it is a part of our nature. Furthermore, it brings death to the soul. Man cannot blame God for his sin, for God is absolutely pure, absolutely holy, and absolutely and infinitely righteous. God does not tempt anyone, nor is He tempted by anything. The blame for man's sin lies in the heart of man himself.

James 1:14 tells us,

¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

God does not possess any responsibility for our sin. We are the ones who are absolutely and completely at fault, for we are sinners by nature. This problem is inside of us and it is a part of us, and Verse 15 goes on to explain that we all experience the dire affects of our own sin, when James says,

¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

James is deeply concerned that we not blame God for the deadly affects of sin in our own life. James knows that if we do not accept full responsibility for our own sin, then we will never humble ourselves to receive grace from God that we might be rescued from sin. He writes in Verses 16,

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

James tells us not to be deceived by the temptation to blame God for our temptations, our failings, and for our sin. He goes on to say in Verse 17,

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.

In short, James says, “Do not blame God for your failings and do not blame God for your sins because God only gives good gifts. The only kinds of gifts that come down from Heaven are good. God never gives us anything that would harm us.” James then goes on to prove this assertion in Verse 18, which becomes “Exhibit A” in James' argument. Verse 18 presents to us this new life in Christ that every believer receives from God' that the first piece of evidence of God being the Giver of every good gift is that God imparts spiritual life to His own people. I like the way the New International Version translates this verse,

¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

When the English Standard Version says, “Of his own will he brought us forth...”, he speaking of this new birth that God provides and gives to everyone who believes in His Son. This birth that James mentions is spiritual, not physical, and every genuine, authentic, and true Christian experiences this new birth in Christ. James’ argument to believers is that it is silly for us to blame God for our struggle with temptation and with sin when God is the One who freely given us spiritual life so that we might overcome it and so that we might be forgiven of it and that we might gain victory over it. God, in His good nature, gives spiritual life, not spiritual death and not sin that leads to spiritual death!

As James discusses the truth of the new birth for the Christian he addresses three important questions surrounding this Doctrine of New Birth and of regeneration. The first question is: what does it mean to be given birth? The second question is: who makes this birth happen? Finally, how does it happen?

What does it mean to be given new birth? He chose to give us birth.

James relates that every Christian has been given new spiritual life through this spiritual birth. The Bible refers to this birth as “regeneration”. This doctrine of regeneration runs all through the Scriptures, both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Let me give you a sampling of some of the verses that speak of the regeneration of the life of the believer. In Ezekiel 36:26, God says,

²⁶ “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

Do you know why God says that? He says that because the old heart is too corrupt to be mended and He will give us a heart of “softness”.

Jesus, in speaking to Nicodemus that evening, in John 2:3, says,

³ ...*“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

He was telling Nicodemus that he was religious, he knew the Bible, he was a teacher of the Law, and he was respected, but unless he is born again and becomes regenerate and experience this new birth and possess new life, he cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus goes on to say, in Verses 5 and 6,

⁵ ...*“I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

Jesus is teaching us that a new birth is required in order to be a Christian, in order to be a follower of Jesus, and in order have a home in Heaven. Without regeneration, without a new spiritual life imparted to us, there is no authentic Christianity.

James has just taught us that sin when it is fully grown brings forth death and that is the condition of our own heart in its natural state – spiritual death and separation from God. Romans 3:23 tells us,

²³ All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.

We all are in the same spiritual predicament: spiritually we are dead and in need of the life of God. But, because sin has brought spiritual death to our soul, we need this new life or else we will not be able to relate to God in any meaningful way what-so-ever.

The central question facing us is not, “What church do you attend?” Or, “What doctrinal statement do you affirm?” Or, “Have you prayed a prayer to receive Jesus as your Savior?” Those are not the questions that ought to concern our soul. The central question that ought to concern our soul is: have you been born again? All the other questions hit at the edges while missing the center. This is the one that strikes the center: do I possess the life of God inside of me, a life that has been given me, a life that God has created afresh and anew at some point in my earthly experience? If we cannot answer, “Yes” to that question, then nothing else matters.

Paul also affirms this new life as the core identity of the Christian in Colossians 2. He said, of the believers in Colossae,

¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...

The Apostle Peter also affirms this truth in 1 Peter 1. He says,

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

Jesus, the Apostle Paul, the Apostle Peter, and the Old Testament prophets all point to the necessity of this “new birth”, so what does it mean to be born again? Being born again is the act of God by which God plants His life into our soul so that we become alive to Him, awake to Him, and alive to righteousness. This new life brings a delight in our discovery of God Himself, personally and truly and in great reality, so that we know Him personally and so that we would love Him and that we would be drawn to Him and delight to worship in Him. This new life allows us to walk each day in friendship with our Creator. Friend, you must be born again, and I have to ask you personally, have you been born again?

I wish I could give this new life to you. What a great ability it would be to give that new life, but I cannot. I cannot give you that new life anymore than I can give any other kind of life. Only God imparts life, but here is the truth of the Scripture: God is such a generous God and He delights to give good gifts. He loves to give good gifts and God promises to give this life to everyone who would come to Him and who would believe in His Son.

God is not far from anyone of you, but if you are asking the question, “I go to church and I affirm a good doctrinal creed and I remember praying the prayer when I was little, but I don’t have any idea of what you are talking about; about this life and this animation of soul and spirit that connects me truly and really to God.” I would say to you, search for God with all your heart, and God promises that when you do you will find Him and He will give you life that is truly life. You need not wonder or doubt whether you have this life.

The second question is who makes this birth happen? Again, we look carefully at James 1:18, and the special word that it gives us. You might underline the first four words.

¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth.

We have as little to do with our spiritual birth as we had to do with our physical birth. This new life comes to us from a source outside of ourselves. It comes to us from God. No one is born again because he decides to be born again. We do not possess the power within ourselves to give ourselves this life. The imparting of new life must begin with God and it be completed by God, so that God would deserve all the praise and all the glory for anyone who possesses this life. Our experience of receiving Jesus as Savior is merely a consequence of God’s gracious action of imparting life to a soul.

Listen to John 1:12-13,

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, (God) gave the right to become (His) children... ¹³ (children) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but (who were born) of God.

Did you catch that, “not born of the flesh”? In other words, this new life doesn’t come to us because of the family that we are born into. “Nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man” means that it is not in our bloodline and it is not even in our own resolve to make it happen. No, these are born of God; “of His own will He brought us forth”.

James uses a very interesting word when he talks about “of His own will”. He uses a word that means “accomplishment” rather than “desire”. James is not saying, “Of God’s own desire,” or “Of God’s own wishing He gives us new life.” No, it is of God’s own “desiring” and it is of God’s “accomplishment” that He gives us life. God decides to give us life and then He accomplishes it; He makes it happen!

Again, I like the New International Version of this verse:

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth.

God is not merely wishing upon a star when He looks down and says, “I would love to give that person spiritual life. I hope and I wish that they would receive it.” No, He chose to give us this birth and He accomplished it. This is God acting in sovereign power to breathe new life inside of us. Just as assuredly as God breathed into Adam the breath of life, so God breathes into every true believer, “Wheeew”, and it happens so that God would receive all the praise and all the glory for any life that we experience.

We do not want to misunderstand what Scripture is teaching. People are not saved apart from their own willingness to respond to God in the Gospel, but it is God’s act of regeneration, God’s act of imparting this life to us, that gives us a responsiveness that brings us to faith in Him. This response is not a coercion, but it is a voluntary, joyful reception of Jesus by the soul that has been animated, by the soul that has been given life.

Now, we want to ask the third question: how does it happen? It is the gift of God of spiritual life upon a soul that was dead, and it is a work of God, from first to last, but how does He do it? Notice the last five words of Verse 18,

¹⁸ ...by the word of truth...

The Christian’s relationship to the Bible starts at the very beginning of the Christian’s life with God. God uses His Word as His instrument to bring new life to His people. Without the Scriptures, no one is born again. Listen to what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:23,

²³ ...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...

Peter is using an analogy of a farmer. As essential as the farmer’s planting of seed in his field to his expectation of life later in that field, so is the essential sowing of the Word of God into the heart of a man or a woman to the expectation that someday, and at one point, they would experience life. Apart from the seed there is no harvest. Apart from the seed of the Word of God there is no life. God uses His Word as His instrument to bring spiritual life to us.

The application is share the Word of God. Sow it into your own soul and sow it into souls of the people whom you love. This Book possesses the power of spiritual life and it is the instrument that God uses to bring life to someone.

Someone may say, “Well, my neighbor does not believe the Bible to be true, so it would be vain and it would be empty to sow the Word of God into the heart of a person who does not believe in it.” Wrong, wrong, wrong. One does not need to believe the Bible to be true in order to be transformed by the Bible. Yes, everyone who is born again believes the Bible to be true, but it is God’s work of regeneration that makes the change. We do not have to first convince people that the Bible is true in order to bring the Scriptures to the person and have the Scriptures have a transforming impact upon their life. A person may be resolute and say, “I do not believe the Bible is true! I do not believe the Bible is true!” and when the Word of God hits their heart, God can use that Word so as to bring life to that person who is resistant.

I love the story of the Russian actor Alexander Rostovzev who was converted while playing the role of Jesus in a sacrilegious play entitled “Christ in a Tuxedo”. He was supposed to read two verses from the Sermon on the Mount, then remove his gown, and cry out, “Give me my tuxedo and top hat!” But, as he read the words from the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted,”² Alexander began to tremble. Instead of following the script, he kept reading from Matthew 5. He ignored the coughs, the calls, and the foot-stamping of his fellow actors. He was off-script! Finally, he recalled a verse he had learned in his childhood and he cried, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom!”³ and he was dramatically, eternally transformed at that moment. Such is the power of the Word of God to impart the life of God into the soul of man.

² Matthew 5:3-4, ESV

³ Luke 23:42

The rebirth of the Christian by the Word, that begins our relationship, but secondly, is the reception of the Word by the Christian as we see in Verse 19,

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...

Most often this verse is quoted like one would quote a proverb on social relationships. So, we read in Proverbs 10, for instance,

¹⁹ When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.

That is a “proverb”. That is a great statement. Proverbs 17:28 says,

²⁸ Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.

When we read Verse 19, “Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger”, at first glance, it seems that James is merely reiterating the teaching from the Proverbs regarding the way we are to relate to other people in our lives and regarding the way that we are to interact socially. I have to admit that all my life, this is the way that I understood this verse in James. Surely it is wise for us to be “quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger” in our in our marriages, in our families, among our friends, and in the workplace, but this is not James’ point at all.

Remember the great, interpretive guide: how do we understand what a verse means? It is the very first principle: context, context, context! It is the old real estate agents principle: location, location, location!

In Verse 18, we hear about this new birth through the Word of God and in Verse 21 we read about the “implanted Word” which is able to save our souls. In Verse 22 we read about being “doers of the Word and not hearers only”. That goes all the way until Verse 25. The context has to do with the Christian’s relationship to Scripture. James is speaking about the Christian’s unique relationship with the Word of God, and it is in that context that we read this. In view of that let’s read this Verse over again,

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...

He gives us three commands and all are how we relate to the Scripture. He says, first, “Be quick to hear.” To hear what: the Word of God. How we listen to God’s Word affects so much of our lives. Genuine, authentic faith cannot get enough of the Scripture. Real faith in God delights in learning more from God’s Book and is eager to hear God’s voice. The first challenge this command brings is the challenge of devoting more of ourselves to the hearing of this Book; to being quick to hear, eager to read the Scriptures, to listen to the Scriptures, to learn the Scriptures, and to follow the Scriptures.

I will always remember the interview that Billy Graham gave when he was asked what he would do differently if he could live his life over again. He picked up his Bible and he said, “If I were to live my life over again I would read this book more and other books less.” That is the heart of a Christian.

Dr. David Livingstone, when he started his trek across Africa, seventy-three books in three packs as he began his quest and they weighed about one hundred eighty pounds. After three hundred miles of traveling you think differently about the weight in your pack. After three hundred miles, David Livingstone had discarded every book but one. He kept his Bible.

John Wesley, the godly founder of the Methodist church said, “I am a man of one Book.” Oh, that we all could say that!

George Mueller, who was known for his strong faith and of amazing answers to prayer, confided, “The first three years after conversion, I neglected the Word of God.” As a believer he didn’t have a right relationship with Scripture. That is what James is calling us to. He is saying, “Be quick to hear!” Not every believer is quick to hear. Mueller continued, “Since then I began to search it diligently and the blessing has been wonderful. I have read the Bible through one hundred times and always with increasing delight!” In the one hundredth reading he found more joy in it.

If we are to have a vibrant, growing faith, then we must have this heart attitude toward the Scriptures. There is a caution for us here: it is possible to read the Bible religiously and regularly, but receive no benefit from our labors. You see, we

have to be quick to hear, not just simply quick to discipline ourselves. James does not say, “Be regular in your Bible reading”, but rather he is saying, “Be eager to hear what God has to say through His Word.”

Then James gives a second commandment when he says, “Be slow to speak.” Do not think that you naturally possess the mind of Christ on matters relating to life and godliness and then, in so doing, start spouting off whatever happens to come to your mind at the moment and whatever you have happened to have heard from the latest preacher, teacher, psychologist, or talk show host. He says, “Don’t be quick to speak. Be slow to speak. Search the Scriptures first. Make sure that the words that you are going to say come from God and not from your own imagination. Be slow to speak. Take some time. Be patient with this.”

Dave Beakley, our missionary to South Africa, is the Dean of Students at Christ’s Seminary that trains pastors from all over the African continent for ministry. The first thing they teach them is how to listen to God through a study of the Bible. Dave tells me that one of the most common responses that students have after the first year of learning the Bible is to repent with sorrow for their past sermons. He says that they repent over their past teaching with tears in their eyes. They realized that they were too quick to speak. They had not first listened to what God really said and as a result they repeated lies and they repeated errors. They said, “We used to listen to a sermon by Benny Hinn, or some other false teacher, and then repeat it to our congregation,” little knowing the harmful heresy that they were multiplying among their flock. James urges us to be slow to speak.

James will return to this theme in Chapter Three when he says, in Verse 1,

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Last Sunday afternoon I had the joy of attending a banquet at Bethany Community Church in Washington, our church plant. They are about ready to become independent from us and they wanted to have a banquet to raise money to purchase the land that we have obtained some options to buy. During that banquet, they had several people come up and give testimonies as to what the church meant to them. One was a man who came to the church after the church was planted in Washington, and he remarked what a change and transformation has happened in his spiritual life since being in that church. He said, “Now I have come to understand that my opinions do not matter at all.” He said that he used to go to Sunday school class, eager to share his opinion about what he thought the Bible meant. He continued, “What matters is what the Bible says.” That is a profound statement. It is a statement that the evangelical church has largely lost when they get together in their study group and ask, “What does the Bible mean to you?” “Oh, that sounds great!” “What does the Bible mean to you?” The Bible says that that does not really matter at all. The Bible says, “Be slow to speak. Let’s be quick to hear what the Word says and let’s be quick to find out and discover what God has said.” There is meaning within the text!

Some “evangelicals” cast doubt on whether or not there is any meaning to be found in the text of Scripture at all and whether or not the whole of this Book should be viewed merely as a launching pad for our own subjective imaginations. As a result the church is losing her way in our culture because we are often quick to speak our own minds about life, about God, about salvation, about discipleship, and about doctrine without finding out first what the Bible has to say.

We need to follow the pattern of the prophet Ezra and not the pattern of the emergent church! Ezra knew that there was meaning in the text of the Bible and what did he do? He tells us what he did in Ezra 7:10,

¹⁰ ...Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Do you notice the step-by-step process? It is the same step-by-step process James outlined: be quick to hear. Ezra set his heart to study, to listen, and to learn, and then he said, “I am going to do it. I am going to respond to it, receive it, and plant it. Then I will be able to teach it.”

Finally, now is the response of the Christian to the Word.

The third command James presents is “Be slow to anger.” Why would anyone get angry with the Bible? Well, who among us loves to be told that we are wrong? That is exactly what the Bible does, doesn’t it? Anyone who is accustomed to listening to sound Bible teaching, anyone who is accustomed to opening up their Bible in the morning

and to listening to what God has to say to them, know that the Bible confronts our sin and it confronts our selfishness. The Bible's message to me, almost every day, is, "Ritch, you are wrong. Repent." There are many times that I don't want to be told that I am wrong and I don't want to repent. I want to go down the same path that I am comfortable with.

God's Word corrects our false conceptions about Him and about His ways and about our life. God's Word meddles with our personal decisions and we naturally resent God's meddling in our personal business. Someone has rightly said, "Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them."⁴

Cain was quick to anger and when the Word of God came to his life clearly, he turned away from it in anger and he lost his soul. Why is it so important not to anger? Look at Verse 20,

²⁰ ...for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

If you become angry with the Scriptures, or angry with the teacher or preacher who is explaining the Scriptures, that anger will not produce righteousness in your life, a righteousness that you need to receive the joy and the blessing of God. When you are angry because of what a teacher of the Scriptures teaches, you have to ask yourself, "Why?" There may be a legitimate reason. It is right to be angry if a teacher is teaching that which is false, if a teacher is twisting the Scriptures to make it mean something that it does not. It is right to be angry over that, but if our argument is not with the meaning of the Scripture, but rather with the offense of it, James says, "Be slow to anger, because the anger of man will never produce the righteousness of God."

We close with Verse 21,

²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

The word "receive" means merely to "welcome the Scripture with humility as you would open your doors and welcome a very dear friend into your home."

What a kind friend, the Word of God is! It is able to save our souls. Nothing else can do that!

⁴ Anonymous