

“James with Paul” – James 1:18-23

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take a Bible and let's meet together in James 1...

I'm recording this on Saturday evening because we had to make the difficult decision on whether or not to have in-person services this morning. If you are seeing this, it is because the decision was made to cancel those gathering because of the inclement weather. Unfortunately, forecasts are not perfect and all the precipitation that was projected was for in the early morning. Maybe it came. Maybe not. As someone who has a lot of experience with snow, it's quite difficult to know.

What I do know, however, is that most of you do not have a lot of experience with snow and the city of Tyler doesn't really have the means to do much for the roads. Dirt and gravel are not the same as salt. And we saw recent evidence of this, just this past week, when somewhere around a hundred cars were involved in a single accident related to ice. Many lost their lives. So if you are seeing this, we are erring on the side of caution. If the forecast doesn't come to fruition, we hope you will understand the decision. And if it does, we hope you will exercise caution on the roads and even avoid them, unless absolutely necessary. Needless to say, our Sunday evening activities are all canceled.

Fortunately for us, we have had people graciously outfit us with a means of distributing our sermons in video format during the pandemic, so here we are. We praise God for that generosity. And we are delighted that it affords us the opportunity to consider God's Word together, even remotely. So let's do just that.

Last week we examined that controversial section of chapter 2, where James says that Abraham was "*justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac*" (2:21). We saw that the language of "justification" in the Bible (and in the Greek language) is used in different ways and what James has in mind is not really the doctrine of justification per se, but the secondary way that language is used to communicate evidence or proof or vindication. Abraham's faith was vindicated (proven) because of the profound obedience he exhibited to the command of God.

We also considered and contrasted how Paul and James draw on the life of Abraham to make different points. Paul is focused more on Genesis 15 to make his point that sinners are counted as righteous before God through faith alone, while James is focused more on Genesis 22 to make his point that this faith demonstrates itself and is confirmed by works that result. So in the end, when certain considerations are taken into account, James and Paul are not contradicting each other, but are quite compatible (cf. sermon, "James vs. Paul"). I want to consider further their compatibility with you today.

I mentioned last week that Martin Luther, of Protestant Reformation fame, is infamous for saying some negative things about the Epistle of James. The most well-known of these is what he wrote in the preface of his German translation of the New Testament in 1522. He stated, "St. James's epistle is really a right strawy epistle, compared to the others [Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Peter, and 1 John], for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." Ouch.

Now we should mention that this was early in Luther's career and he did remove that statement from all of the subsequent editions, but, to my knowledge, there was never a plain retraction of that sentiment issued. Indeed,

his writings are a bit inconsistent. At times he will make negative statements about the content of the Epistle and at other times he will draw upon it favorably. But that “epistle of straw” label is generally what people think of when they think of Luther and this letter. He hasn’t been able to shake it for centuries. And I suspect he never will.

David Mathis, the Executive Editor at desiringGod.org, wrote a very helpful article a few years back that formatted as an “Open Letter to Martin Luther”. In it, among other things, he clarifies what Luther meant (and didn’t mean) by “epistle of straw”. Luther was not questioning James’ “inclusion in the canon of Scripture,” but he did seek to clarify “its place with regard to expressing the gospel (in particular, justification by faith alone).”¹ When Luther said “straw,” he had in mind 1 Corinthians 3:12, where Paul said, “*Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw ...*” He wasn’t ready to cut James out of the Bible, but he was “seeking to make distinctions about whether he unpacks the Christians gospel.”² And I think distinctions are appropriate to note, but in this case I think the distinction is not *whether* the Gospel present, but *how* its presence is detected. As Mathis writes,

“James clearly does not lay out any extended exposition of Jesus’s person and work, like Paul does in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians. That is certainly true. James’s short epistle is a call to Christian action, to *living out the gospel* we profess, not just believing it. James does assume massive truths, and that’s okay. No single biblical book or apostolic epistle — not even Romans — tells the whole story on its own, or provides all the essential details. God, his Son, his gospel, his world, and the Christian life are more richly complex than a single epistle.”

And then he says, remember addressing Luther directly (because this is an open letter):

“Would every individual letter in your corpus hold up to your criticism of James? Different parts of the body of holy Scripture have their differing roles to play. ‘The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you”’ (1 Corinthians 12:21).

To clarify that James is a different part than, say, Romans is a fine observation. We should have plenty of space in our understanding of Scripture to say as much. However, you claim more than that, and I acknowledge it’s the tendency of pioneering persons like yourself to change the world through overstatement. Yet it’s also the prerogative of those who come after them, and love them most — like your Melancthon and Geneva’s Calvin — to refine and nuance such claims so that the effect does not produce an equal and opposite error.”³

In a way, that is my goal today. I want to show that it is not correct to claim that James evidences nothing of the Gospel. And then I want to show that it is also not accurate to suggest that the heart and emphasis of James’ argument is absent in the rest of the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s writings since they are so often pit against one another (but that we will consider next week). My hope is that this effort will increase our confidence that same Gospel is believed and expounded by both James and Paul.

And this brings us to James 1, where I think we can demonstrate how incorrect Luther was to say that the epistle of James “has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” Let’s look at the text together. I’ll begin reading in verse 18. Follow along as I do. Remember that this is God’s Word...

“*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.* 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.* ²³ *For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.”* (James 1:18-23)

Now, we have looked at the verses in great detail in the past, so today I want to limit our attention to one key term. It's the word "word". You'll notice it occurs four different times in the verses I just read (1:18, 21, 22, 23). Let's consider each of them.

In verse 18, James says,

"Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth. That we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." (James 1:18)

What does James mean by "word of truth"? "This 'word of truth' is not simply true facts about the world, or even holy writ, but that which is the center and sum of the Bible, none other than the message of our Lord's life, death, and resurrection for sinners."⁴ We might say that it is the message of the Gospel. Why? Because James says that it is 'by the word of truth' that God "of his own will brought us forth". This is, as we've seen, regeneration language. He's talking about being "born again," to borrow the language of Jesus. And we are not born again by just any old truth, even any old biblical truth. We are born again by "the truth" of the Gospel. Indeed, Paul sometimes refers to the Gospel simply as "the truth," especially in what are known as his "Pastoral Epistles" (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus). Here's just one example from each:

*"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of **the truth**." (1 Timothy 2:1-4; cf. 3:15; 4:3; 6:5)*

*"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of **the truth**, ²⁶and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." (2 Timothy 2:24-26; cf. 2:18; 3:7-8; 4:4)*

*"Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, ¹⁴not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from **the truth**." (Titus 1:13-14; cf. 1:1)*

In each of these cases, Paul has in mind the truth of the gospel, the word of truth. In context this is clear. But in other Pauline letters it is clear even without context. For instance, he says to the Ephesians...

*"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹²so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you heard **the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation**, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." (Ephesians 1:11-14)*

So what is "the word of truth" for Paul? It's "the gospel of your salvation." Similarly, Paul says to the Colossians...

*"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in **the word of the truth, the gospel**, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth..." (Colossians 1:3-6)*

There again we see the overlap in language. "The word of truth" for Paul is "the gospel".

Peter also uses language that is reminiscent to this....

*“Having purified your souls by your obedience to **the truth** for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding **word of God**...” (1 Peter 1:22-23)*

And just in case we should wonder what Peter means by “*the living and abiding word of God*”, Peter adds a couple verses later,

“And this word is the good news that was preached to you.” (1 Peter 1:25)

Remember that “*good news*” language is “*gospel language*” in Greek. The word Gospel means good news.

All of that to say, that it would not be unusual for James to say “*word of truth*” and mean Gospel, particularly since he uses it in connection with his regeneration language (i.e., God “*brought us forth by the word of truth*”).

Next, consider with me what James says in verse 21...

“Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” (James 1:21)

What does James mean by “*the implanted word*”? Well, almost certainly it is the same “*word of truth*” that brought us new life in verse 18. So if it’s the gospel there, then it seems likely that this is what James has in mind here. And just to make that Gospel connection more clear, he adds that this “*word*” is “*able to save your your souls.*” Clearly this has to be a reference to the Gospel, which elsewhere in the New Testament is described as “*the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*” (Rom. 1:16). But here in James we see that this same gospel “*word*” that stands behind the new birth (verse 18) is also planted inside of the believer (verse 21). This is language that echoes certain Old Testament promises related to the New Covenant (i.e., the covenant that Christ inaugurated for His people), promises that are found in places like Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:24-32. “In the gospel,” Mathis explains, “God writes his law on our hearts as he plants and grows the message of his grace in us. Such gospel growth inevitably gives rise to action, yet it does not begin with action, but with reception of the message in the soul by faith.”⁵ That’s important to keep in mind as James’ argument progresses and he talks more and more about the importance of works.

John Piper draws an analogy between the Word and the Spirit based on this language we find in verse 21...

“[The Word] is treated here the very same way that the Bible treats the Spirit of God himself. We are born again by the Spirit (John 6:63), and we are born again by the word of God. The Spirit dwells in us, and the word is implanted in us. This indwelling Spirit is God’s way to keep us and bring us to heaven. The implanted word is God’s way of preserving and saving our souls in the end. You could not say anything more important about the word than this.”⁶

Indeed, listen to Paul’s language to the Thessalonian church...

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

You see this word is at work in them. The message they received, the Word of God, the Gospel, is now implanted and working *in* them. When it was received, it took up residence (cf. 1 John 2:14).

And yet James, who describes this word as “*implanted*” in us, also says that we are to “*receive*” this word. That sounds strange, does it not? How do you receive something that is already implanted? Piper points out that we

wouldn't speak of other things in this fashion. Take your kidneys for example. Our kidneys were given to us by virtue of our first birth. They are implanted. They are part of us. No one needs to do the work of 'receiving' their kidneys. You probably don't give them much thought. They just do their thing without much notice, unless something is wrong with them.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of this implanted "word" like we think of our kidneys. Piper writes,

"James says, 'Receive the implanted word.' It is already in you. And you should receive it. It is rooted and planted in you. It brought you life. It is there sustaining that life by feeding faith in Christ. But it is not there like kidneys. It is there like oxygen. It gives life and in giving life, it makes you breathe, and in breathing you receive oxygen. No one says, 'I have oxygen; look how well it is working in me; it makes me alive; I don't need to receive oxygen.'

The implanted word of God and the external word of God are so united that we live by having it already implanted and we live by receiving it. It is at work in us, as Paul says. And the work it does in us is it makes us want to receive it. Receiving the external word replenishes the power of the implanted word, and the implanted word creates the hunger to receive the external word. And then to make us very respond to the truth of God's Word. serious about this process, James adds at the end of verse 21 'which is able to save your souls.' What saves our souls? The implanted word, which we receive."⁷

The Gospel—the message we received from God, that Christ died to save sinners—does indeed saves sinners. But we don't graduate from the Gospel. We go on receiving it. The entire Christian experience is propelled by the Spirit of God using the Gospel of God in the people of God. We need the Gospel like we need oxygen. We breathe it in and out. We don't merely hear it. We must accept it for it to have any benefit for us. And in James 1, as we have seen in early weeks, there are three things he calls for to help facilitate our acceptance of God's Word—a listening ear, a controlled tongue, and a calm spirit. He says in verse 19, "*let each person be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.*" But that's a whole different sermon.

We are focused on this "word" language. We've seen that in verses 18 and 21, James seems to have the Gospel message in mind. But notice that verse 21 flows right into that famous "*doers of the word*" section (verses 22-25). So we should ask, "What 'word' does James have in mind?" And the answer, it seems to me, in this context is the word of the Gospel. If we listen to many of Martin Luther's statements about the Gospel, then we might think that James calling us to "be doers of the word" is roughly equivalent to "be doers of the law." But given what we have seen, would it not seem more appropriate to read James as saying, "be doers of the gospel"?⁸

I think so. I don't think James' point is that we would be "law-keepers." I think his point is much the same as Paul's point when he said to the Philippians,

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God...." (Philippians 1:27-28)

I think James has something similar in mind—"let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ..." He's calling his readers to conduct themselves in a manner that is "*in step with the truth of the gospel,*" to borrow the language of Galatians 2:14. So I believe Luther was absolutely wrong when he claimed that James' letter has "nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."⁹

In the end, we cannot forget what James says in chapter 1, when we get to that controversial section at the end of chapter 2. If we do, we are more likely to misunderstand what he is teaching. What he presupposes in chapter 2 is what he has hinted at in chapter 1, namely, that his readers have been born again by the word of the Gospel, which has been implanted in them, and shapes their "doing." Being "*doers of the word*" has everything to do with the why the Gospel shapes our ways of life. And we can't forget that when we get to chapter 2 and hear

James call us forcefully to a life of “*works*.” These aren’t any old works, your garden variety law keeping. They are the works of faith, the works that flow from a life that has been resurrected by and implanted with the Gospel, the word of truth. And, in reality, this is no different than what other New Testament writers teach, even if James is emphasizing different aspects of the Gospel’s work in our lives (or at least emphasizing them more predominantly than the other writers).

Ultimately, we need to learn the lesson that James is teaching us. Works should follow in the life of someone who possesses saving faith. Do you see that evidence in your life? If you are questioning that, then you need to look to Jesus. He was sent to this earth to lay down His life on the cross as a substitute for sinners like us. He took upon Himself our sin and, with it, the condemnation that we deserve. He rose from the dead so that we might be justified before God—counted as righteous. He got the condemnation we deserve for a life of sin and the believer gets what Christ Himself deserved because of a life of perfect righteousness. This gift of righteousness comes to us freely when we trust in Christ alone (and not ourselves or efforts) for salvation. Trust in Him. He’s mighty to save. And He saves all who see their need and put their faith in Him.

And in this way, Abraham, sets us an example, as James pointed out...

“... ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God.” (James 1:23)

Abraham was called God’s “*friend*” in Isaiah 41:8 (cf. 2 Chron. 20:7). What a special privilege! What a legacy, to be known as “*a friend of God*.” How amazing is it then, that this is how the Lord views His people. Jesus said of His disciples, “*You are my friends*” in John 15. But He adds a condition. Listen to the words in context:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.” (John 15:12-17)

This is what James is teaching too. We are friends of God through faith in Jesus Christ. But the evidence of that is, at least in part, that we do what the Lord commanded us. We, as people of faith, are to be “*doers of the word*,” bearing the fruit of obedience. May God work that in us increasingly. And may the evidence of that grace remind us that we too have been called “*friends of God*.”

Let’s pray...

¹ David Mathis, “The Gospel of James: Open Letter to Martin Luther,” accessed as of the day of preaching at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-gospel-of-james>. Much of what I say in this sermon was influence by this article as will be apparent in the footnotes.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Piper, “Receive with Meekness the Implanted Word,” a sermon preached on January 6, 2008, and accessed on February 14, 2021, at: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/receive-with-meekness-the-implanted-word>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mathis, “The Gospel of James...”

⁹ Ibid. And we can see this in other ways too, as Mathis explains: “Apart from simply tracing the gospel-word concept through this key section in chapter 1, we should note good-news revelations made of God and his good-news promises. Consider just the specific expressions of grace to weary souls in chapter 1. For those lacking wisdom, God ‘gives generously to all without reproach’ (James 1:5). To the one who keeps the faith in trial, ‘he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him’ (James 1:12). ‘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’ (James 1:17).”