

birth” in them and thus a change in their “doing.” This reminds one of Yeshua’s words in Matt 7:22.

Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’ (Matt 7:22-23)

Here we see a picture of the final judgment day, when those who have deluded themselves into thinking that their saying “yes” to a religious appeal has earned them final salvation. They have been deceived by the words of men and have not submitted to the word of God. Instead of the word of God being “implanted” by the work of the Ruach, it has been brushed aside in favor of a man-made substitute.

**23-24 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man *who* looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.**

James now continues to describe what is the inevitable outcome of the “implanted word” as it “lives” within the child of God. He thus begins our verse with the connective “For” (ὅτι, *hoti*), which is used here to substantiate what he has taught us in the preceding verses.

When a person professes to have received the divine gift of salvation by faith in Yeshua, the proof that such a confession is true is the manner in which that person’s life and actions increasingly conform to the righteousness of God as revealed in the Scriptures. A man or woman who says they are a believer in Yeshua must “prove” their confession by “being doers of the word,” (v. 22). For James has already told us that the means by which a person is saved is the very “implanted word which is able to save your souls” (v. 21), that is, the word of God as brought to life within the repentant believer by the Ruach HaKodesh. This being the case, one who is truly “born from above” will evidence the reality of being “made new” by how they live.

As is the pattern of good teachers, James now gives us an illustration, in the pattern of a parable, to drive this fundamental point home.

To do so, he uses the metaphor of a mirror. In the ancient times, mirrors were made of polished metal, the finest of silver, and others of bronze, copper or tin,<sup>1</sup> and often laid upon a table so that the one using the mirror bent over to see the reflection of his face. That he looks at “his natural face” (τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γενέσεως), literally “the face of his birth,” means that he sees a true and accurate picture of his face.

We should remember that a person’s “face” offers a positive identification of the person and James may be using this to illustrate that when a person looks in a mirror, he or she sees oneself as one truly is. Thus in the ancient world “face” was used to denote the whole person since one’s face offered the true identity of a person and thus distinguished one person from another. Obviously a person cannot see their face without the use of a mirror, and thus even in ancient times, the mirror was thought of as giving a true and accurate picture of oneself.<sup>2</sup>

*...for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.* – Here we see that James is using “face” to represent the whole person, for after looking at his face in the mirror, he immediately forgets the truth about himself. The point of James’ illustration is that when a person looks at his face in the mirror, the image which he sees does not remain in his sight when he looks away or walks away from the mirror. In this sense, he has “forgotten” what he looks like because the exact image no longer is available for him to see until he returns again to view himself in the mirror. As Hendriksen notes:

We see ourselves daily in the reflection in a mirror: before we leave the house in the morning, during the course of the day, and several times in the evening. Mirrors are part of life. But the repeated returns to the mirror establish the point that our memories are like sieves.<sup>3</sup>

The positive aspect of a mirror is that it gives a real and accurate picture of one’s face. But the negative aspect which James wishes to emphasize here, it that the “accurate picture” of what is seen in the mirror cannot be permanently fixed in one’s memory.

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- 1 James Hastings, ed., *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 3.396; Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP, 1998), p. 560.
  - 2 See Luke Timothy Johnson, *James in The Anchor Bible NT* (Yale Univ. Press, 2008), p. 208.
  - 3 Hendriksen, *James*, p. 60.

This illustrates a key point regarding anyone who only hears the word of God but does not receive it and thus the transforming word of God is not internalized. The word of truth is not “implanted” through the exercise of faith, as the next verse makes clear.

**25 – But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.**

When James writes of “one who looks intently,” he uses the Greek verb παρακύπτω (*parakuptō*) which pictures a person “bending over to see or look,” and thus describes not a passing notice or glance but an intentional investigation to know for certain that which is seen. This corresponds to the way mirrors were most often used in the ancient times, by placing the mirror on a table and bending over to see one’s face. Here, however, the “mirror” is the very word of God which, when illumined by the Ruach HaKodesh, allows the true believer to see the truth about themselves and more and more to align oneself to God’s own righteous ways.

James begins this verse with the particle δέ (*de*) which in this case is clearly adversative, thus making a marked differentiation between the person who hears the word but does not receive it, and the one who “looks intently,” meaning comes to know the truth and receives it by faith.

And what is the object so intently seen and investigated? It is the “perfect law, the law of liberty” (νόμον τέλειον τὸν τῆς ἐλευθερίας). This construction in the Greek indicates that the “law” (νόμον, *nomon*) is both “perfect” (τέλειον, *teleion*) and brings about “liberty” (ἐλευθερίας, *eleutherias*). The fact that there is one article (the word “the” governing both “perfect law” and “of liberty” indicates grammatically that the “law” is both “perfect” and “liberating,” i.e., brings freedom.

Clearly James’ description of the “law” as both perfect and liberating makes it clear that he is talking about the Torah, the very Law of God given to Moses and proclaimed to Israel. Further, it seems very likely that James has Ps 19 in his mind as he, being carried along by the Ruach HaKodesh, wrote these words. For in Ps 19:7[8] we read:

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;  
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.  
(Ps 19:7 [Hebrew v. 8])

Granted, the Lxx of this verse in Ps 19 does not use the same word for “perfect” (*teleios*) as we find in our James text. But the fact that the Greek word νόμος (*nomos*) is regularly used to translate the Hebrew תּוֹרָה (*torah*) in the Lxx (89% of the times) would give strong support to the fact that James refers to the Torah of Moses (the first five books of the Tanach) when he speaks of “the perfect law.” Note also that Ps 19:7[8] has ὁ νόμος τοῦ κυρίου ἄμωμος (*ho nomos tou kuriou amōmos*) in the Lxx, once again translating תּוֹרָה with the Greek *nomos*.

What is meant by the Psalmist that “the Torah of Adonai is perfect?” The Hebrew word translated as “perfect” is תְּמִימָה (*tamimah*), which carries the meanings “complete, without fault, free of blemish, impeccable, honest, devout.”<sup>1</sup> This means that the Torah of Adonai is without any fault or imperfections. Thus, it portrays precisely God’s will and the very revelation of His own righteousness, for we must remember that the biblical Hebrew word תּוֹרָה, *torah* has as its root meaning that of “teaching” or “describing that which is right.” Even as God is Himself perfect, eternally righteous and infinitely good, so the truth that He reveals is equally righteous and infinitely good. Further, that the Hebrew word *tamim/tamimah* indicates that which is “complete,” this also emphasizes the fact that in God’s teaching (Torah), He has given us all that we need to know Him in truth, to worship Him as He desires, and to align our lives to His righteous standards. We need not look for something additional to God’s inspired word, His Torah, in order to become what He desires us to be. And that He has endowed all who are His with His own Spirit, by His power we will inevitably progress in becoming trophies of His grace, becoming more and more conformed to the very image of Yeshua, for God has ordained that Yeshua should be the “first born among many brethren.”

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; (Rom 8:29)

The “perfect Law” is thus that which brings forth the will of God, for it describes the bondage of unbelievers and condemns those who are perishing, but for those who are regenerated by the Spirit, it leads to a life of conformity to the very righteous ways of God. As Calvin notes:

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1 HALOT, “תְּמִימָה,” p. 1748.

As long as the law is preached by the external voice of man, and not inscribed by the finger and Spirit of God on the heart, it is but a dead letter, and as it were a lifeless thing. It is, then, no wonder that the law is deemed imperfect, and that it is the law of bondage; for as Paul teaches in Galatians 4:24, separated from Christ, it generates to condemn and as he also shows to us in Romans 8:13, it can do nothing but fill us with diffidence and fear. But the Spirit of regeneration, who inscribes it on our inward parts, brings also the grace of adoption. It is, then, the same as though James had said, "The teaching of the law, let it no longer lead you to bondage, but, on the contrary, bring you to liberty; let it no longer be only a schoolmaster, but bring you to perfection: it ought to be received by you with sincere affection, so that you may lead a godly and a holy life."<sup>1</sup>

...*the law of liberty* – Liberty is not the freedom to do whatever one desires, but rather, "the enablement to do what God desires." But if we may take the illustration or parable James employs, if we are truly made new by the work of the Spirit Who indwells us, and if in fact we have become a new creation in Yeshua through faith in Him, then we must consider the Scriptures to be an "effectual mirror," that is, having the ability to change us as we constantly look into its eternal truths. We are not like the person who sees his face in the mirror and then, having gone on his way, forgets what he has seen. Rather, through the indwelling and abiding Ruach, as we feast upon the word of God, we discover that it dwells within us, and by it we are more and more conformed to the very thoughts and perspectives of God Himself Who inspired the living word of the Scriptures and by Whose grace these eternal truths become our focus and our desire.

This, then, is true liberty as the flesh, the sinful nature, is more and more put to death and we are enabled to obey God and to walk in a way that pleases Him. Surely the Spirit continues to war against the flesh, and the flesh against the Spirit, but the victory in this struggle is evident as we put to death the deeds of the flesh and are enabled, by God's grace, to become increasingly conformed to His ways of righteousness.

Note carefully that the "law" to which James refers is the very word of God, all of it, including and even based upon the Torah which Moses brought down from Sinai and the subsequent revelations given

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1 Calvin, *James*, pp. 299–300.

to Moses by God Himself. Far from replacing the Torah with the later Apostolic Scriptures as some teach, James is clearly establishing for us the utter necessity of the Torah and that it is the very foundation upon which the believer's life of liberty is founded.

*...and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer* – The first and primary characteristic that James identifies as the mark of a true believer in Yeshua is that they “abide by it,” that is, they persevere in seeking to know the word of God and to live in accordance with its eternal truths regardless of the what it may cost to do so. Once again, the illustration of the previous verses is brought in to emphasize what this looks like. The person who looks in the mirror and then leaves, immediately forgets the image he saw of his own face. In contrast, the believer “abides” in looking into the word of God and refuses to be sidetracked from this life-giving exercise.

This is a strong exhortation for each and everyone who confesses to be a follower of Yeshua, to have been redeemed by His death, resurrection, and His life of intercession for all who are His. For if we say that we have been adopted into His family (Eph 1:15) through true saving faith in Him, then we ought also to be known as “people of the word,” those who read it, study it, hide it in our hearts, and have as our primary goal in life to live in accordance with its eternal principles to the glory and honor of our Savior.

And what is the primary characteristic that differentiates a true believer in Yeshua from the one who only claims to be His? It is contained in James' words, “an effectual doer” (*ποιητής ἔργου, poiētēs ergou*), literally “a doer of works.” This means a person is known by what they regularly do. This is how false prophets are to be recognized.

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. (Matt 7:15–16a)

If we are truly “in the Messiah,” if we have died with Him and risen to new life in Him, then the manner in which we live: our thoughts, our words, our actions, our desires, and how we treat others, will be the final proof of the faith we profess to have. “Hearing” the word of truth is not enough. It must be internalized, submitted to, and lived out. But before we can live out God's truth we must first know it. Only those who are enabled by the indwelling Spirit will persevere and grow in being trophies of God's grace in this fallen world. Thus obeying God's instructions and living in accordance with His righteousness are the

ultimate marks of all who have been made new by His grace.

Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Cor. 5:17)

... *this man will be blessed in what he does.* – The blessing of the Lord comes upon those who obey Him. This statement of James reminds us of Ps 1.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the torah of the LORD, and in His torah he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers. (Ps 1:1–3)

There are, however, two aspects to this final phrase of our verse, based upon the promise “will be blessed” (*μακάριος...ἔσται*).<sup>1</sup> It means that the person who looks intently into God’s word and perseveres in it by living a life of obedience to the righteous precepts of God, will be blessed in what he does because living in obedience to God brings His blessing, even as Ps 1 teaches. But the blessing is not only in this temporal world but also has an eternal dimension. For the one who perseveres in obedience to God’s word proves himself to be a true child of God and thus receives the ultimate blessing of salvation and of eternal life in the very presence of Messiah Yeshua. This connects back to v. 12 of our chapter:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (James 1:12)

The application of these verses is clear: if we name the Name of Yeshua as our Savior and Lord, and profess to be redeemed by His marvelous grace, then knowing and living in accordance with His word will more and more characterize our lives. Not merely hearing, but doing what He commands and desires is the true mark of saving faith.

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1 Using the word order of the Greek, this phrase would be “this one blessed in what he does will be” (*οὗτος μακάριος ἐν τῇ ποιήσει αὐτοῦ ἔσται.*)