

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF THE GENERAL EPISTLE OF JAMES

By
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Introduction

The book of James is probably the least understood and most maligned of the New Testament books, at least when considered in view of theological debate. James stated truth in practical terms of application for everyday life. His bluntness either makes him an immediate friend or an enemy of the reader. His linking of works with faith has confused or offended many who consider themselves as champions of grace *only* salvation. The extremists among dispensationalists adamantly oppose the book of James, John 15, The Model Prayer and The Sermon on the Mount as pertaining to Christians. They do this on the basis that these (according to their estimate) teach grace plus works salvation, thus reflecting their severe antinomian views. They even deny the necessity of repentance for confession of faith in Christ, considering repentance a work, claiming that a one-time profession of faith assures a person of a home in heaven, even if that person lives a worldly life, or later denies the Christian faith and dies in his sin.

The idea that a person can somehow profess faith in Christ without asking that his sins be forgiven by having the blood of Jesus applied to them and turning from sin to God is absurd and is tantamount to another gospel and near to being accursed (See Gal. 1:8-10. This reference, of course, *is* an indictment of a legal or works of law gospel, but *the converse of a cheap grace gospel is equally condemnable.*). Grace is free, but it assuredly is not cheap. (See I Pet.1:13-19.).

Indeed, repentance is a work, *but a work of grace and not a work of law*. I will explain this truth as this paper progresses. Suffice it now to say that it is the Spirit of God that leads a person to repentance because of the conviction of sin by the law and this leads to confession of faith (John 6:44). The purpose of the law in the process is to convince a person of his sin and need for salvation (Rom.3:20, 7:7). The power to save resides in God's grace and mercy manifested in the cross and resurrection of Christ (Titus 3:4-7). There should not be any confusion between law and grace, but apparently there is. The source of this confusion is that certain theologians, Lewis Sperry Chafer being chief among them during the twentieth century, wrongly have placed law and grace into an antithetical position. With them, law and grace are completely opposed and incompatible. The fact that Chafer codified his antinomian views in his early 20th century writings earned him the title of "father of modern dispensationalism".

I find it strange that the Author and Finisher of our salvation, the One who gave the law and manifested grace through His great sacrifice, also said "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Some say that Jesus did not mean the Ten Commandments, but only the various other commandments He gave. I have no doubt that He meant all of His commandments in view of Matt.22:35-40, especially v.40 ("On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.") This declaration by our Lord deserves the close scrutiny of every Christian, for its meaning is very profound, indeed. Jesus was saying that all of God's former communications to man are summarized in "You shall love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself." Both James and Paul certainly understood this. See James 2:8 & Gal.5:14. Of course, one cannot possibly love his neighbor without obeying the Great Commandment to love God supremely.). Jesus also said that man lives "by every word that comes from the mouth of God."(Matt.4:4). It is indeed unfortunate that a faction of the theological community has made God's perfect law and His

marvelous grace into adversaries. The Scriptures do not support such a thesis, for clearly God meant the Law to be a guide to righteous living, and He meant it to be obeyed (See Deut.30:15-20.) so that He could bless His people Israel “that you may live.”

One other aspect associated with the Law of God deserves mention at this point. The Levitical system of sacrificial atonement, although given with the law, was not of the Decalogue, per se. Rather, it served two distinct purposes: 1. It provided temporary covering of the sin of one who ignorantly transgressed the law until the sacrifice of the Christ was made to forgive (or take away) that sin (Gal.4:4-5, Heb.9:15), and 2. It illustrated and elucidated the ministry of Christ’s sacrifice for sin and His ministry as our Great High Priest (Heb.8:1-2, 9:11-14). Thus, the Levitical system was actually a mechanism of God’s grace within the law. Otherwise, there would not have been any OT saints after Moses. The propitiation of the Father by the sacrifice of Christ was necessary for the OT saints to inherit the Kingdom of God (Heb.9:15).

Finally, another powerful element is involved in Law vs. Grace. Because Christianity and Judaism are related as they are, when the church was first started, there was a very strong tendency for the Jewish converts to want to cling to their legalistic religion. Thus, Paul and others constantly found a necessity to defend grace, which put law into a negative context at every turn in the road, so to speak. See Acts 15 and Galatians as examples of this conflict. Nevertheless, “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.”(Rom.7:12). God gave His law for a perfect guide to righteousness, to be used as a moral compass. It was never intended as a *direct* means for salvation, but it *was* given to be obeyed. Disobedience brings sin, and sin is made sinful through the law. Sinners, both OT and NT, have always been saved by faith in God’s grace (See Heb.11 and many other references to faith in both Testaments.). Paul certainly was not antinomian,

saying that we of faith do not make the law void, but rather establish the law (Rom.3:30-31), having it written in our hearts.

I believe that the crux of the James controversy lies in a misunderstanding on the part of some of both law and grace. In this paper, I intend to clarify what James meant by works. Also, I hope to both broaden and deepen the reader's concept of faith. Let me state at the outset that James presents straight forward guidance to Christian life practices and clear warnings against false professions of faith by those who walk according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit.

To Whom was the Letter Written?

One might say, according to James 1:1, it was addressed to the 12 tribes of Israel who were scattered throughout the world, and that would be correct. To which dispersion, however, does James refer? : With little room for doubt, the evidence points to the Church of the mid first century. Some scholars think the book of James was among the first, if not the first, written communication to the church (about 50 AD or earlier). Those who would have James' letter to be to the orthodox Jews have no evidence, either external or internal, for such a claim. All creditable evidence points to the church. James' use of "my brethren", "my beloved brethren", "brother or sister" is indicative of a Christian vocabulary in use at the time. The subject matter of James' short sermons appears to show that he wrote not only to believers but to unbelievers (including false professors), as well, which would be typical of any concerned pastor during any part of Church history.

The Credentials of James

James referred to himself as a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the same mindset that Paul, Peter, and Jude displayed. He apparently had become a pastor and leader of

the Jerusalem congregation. His stand on law and grace is clearly revealed by the proceedings of the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15. The purpose of the meeting was to settle a dispute over legalism at the church at Antioch of Syria. Some from Judea were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation. After considerable testimony and discussion, James (apparently acting as moderator with some authority) offered an acceptable compromise that would not burden the Gentile believers and would respect the better traditions of the Jews (See Acts 15:13-21). His wisdom in this matter is noteworthy and his stand on salvation by grace without legalism is clearly seen in Acts 15:21. The letter (Acts 15:23-29) which the Council sent back to Antioch stated the particulars of the decree and was ordered to be circulated to all Christian congregations by all missionaries. Therefore, it is erroneous to say that James taught a works salvation.

The Meaning of Works in James

James refers to works either directly or by inference many times in his short epistle. What does he mean by works? First, let's examine what he did not mean. Let us consider Paul's letters.

During a cursory reading of Paul's letters, one might erroneously conclude that Paul was anti-law, because he often wrote of the law in terms of the works of the law, seldom mentioning the law of faith (Rom.3:27-31). We must remember, however, that Paul was often fighting against the legalistic influence of the Judaizers (either Gentile Christians who agreed to live according to Jewish law, especially circumcision, or Jews who professed faith in Christ but urged Gentile Christians to live as Jews). Thus, Paul used the phrases "deeds of the law" or "works of the law" to describe such a legalistic mindset as this, where

persons arrogantly presumed to be justified by their own self-righteous works. See Rom.3:20, 9:30-33, and Gal.2:16.

Paul wrote to Timothy (1Tim.1:5-9ff) regarding the misuse and proper use of the law. Note especially v.5 on the purpose of the law for those of faith. The punitive aspect of the law is for the unrighteous person. Also, Paul's love for God's law is obvious from Rom.7:12, 3:31, 8:4, 13:8-10 and Gal.5:13-14.

When James referred to works, he meant good works, not the unwise deeds of the law which can never justify a person in God's sight The difference between good works and works of the law (as Paul used this term) is very simple and very great:

Good Works: Works done by faith, initiated by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Grace, done selflessly for God's glory and to benefit others are *works of grace (good works)*. God is involved throughout. These works done by faith, seeking no meritorious justification, God accounts as righteous acts of the saint. The doer (saved person) knows his righteousness is the righteousness of Christ given to him because the perfect sacrifice of Jesus has reconciled him to the Father and he is justified on the basis of his faith in Christ Jesus.

Works of the law: Works that are selfishly initiated and performed for self glory and self justification are *works of law*, performed in the flesh. God has no part in them. The doer of these works seeks merit based on self-righteousness, but receives no merit and no justification from God. This person is not walking in the Spirit nor living by faith.

The perfect Scriptural example of the vast difference between works of grace and works of law is found in Luke 18:9-14 in the story that Jesus told about the two men who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed with himself, attempting to tell God

what a law abiding man he was, enumerating his works and judging the tax collector in the process. The tax collector was broken hearted and humiliated because of his sin and cried out to God for mercy. Jesus said the tax collector went to his house justified. *The Pharisee's "prayer" was a work of law, while the tax collector's prayer was repentance [a work of grace].* The implication of Jesus' comments was that the Pharisee remained lost, but the tax-collector received salvation, being justified by his faith.

Discussion of Key Passages in James

Within the first two chapters of James' letter there are several passages that are key to understanding it. The first is **James 1:2-4**. Finding joy in trials is definitely an attitude of grace and would have been an alien idea to the orthodox Jew. According to traditional Jewish thought, trials and troubles were brought on by a person's sin. See the book of Job, for example. His friends exhausted Job with that argument. Yet, contrary to that idea, God, in His administration of grace, uses trials to refine and purify His children. Consider John 9:1-3 and 2Cor.11:23-12:10. Thus, James could admonish Christians to find joy in all sorts of trials. Our example is Jesus, Who endured trials and sufferings more than any other because of the joy that was set before Him (Heb.12:2). As the Israelites discovered, there was no joy in their religion because they sought righteousness apart from faith though works of law (Rom.9:30-33).

James 1:12: Enduring trials for the sake of one's Christian faith brings Divine approval and the reward of a crown of life (eternal life) which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Remember that those who love the Lord also keep His commandments (John 14:21). This verse is filled with grace.

James 1:18: *Here is a verse of great import, for it contains several core truths of Christianity.* “Of His own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.”

We see first God’s sovereign will regarding salvation (“Of His own will...”). Next, “He brought us forth...” speaks of the believer’s spiritual birth to become a new creation in Christ (This is regeneration.). A similar passage is found in 1 Pet.1:3-4. The term “a kind of firstfruits” will bare more detailed examination, but first let us look at “...by the word of truth...”

The word of truth refers to the gospel of Christ and all that the term implies, which is more than the simple facts that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised again on the third day, though these form the kernel of the gospel. Jesus had much to say about what it means to follow Him and books have been written on that subject, which is considerably beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it here to say that God uses His written word as well as His Spirit of Grace to bring us forth to life in the Spirit. See Rom.10:6-17 and John 6:44-45.

“A Kind of Firstfruits”

To understand what James is saying in 1:18 regarding firstfruits, we need to go back to Lev.23:4-21. I will begin with vv.4-8.

In Lev.23:4-8 we see in verse 4 that the Lord says “***These are the feasts of the Lord, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times.***” Then follows the requirement for the Lord’s Passover to be kept (details of this feast are given in Exod.12, as are those for the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began with Passover and extended for the seven days immediately after Passover (Lev.23:5-8)). Passover has two meanings, one

pertaining to the Israelites whom Moses led out of Egypt and one for Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles (1Cor.5:7-8, Lk.22:14-20). Christ Jesus was our Passover Lamb.

There is a very good reason why Paul referred to Jesus as the Firstfruits from the grave in 1Cor.15:20 and the preeminent One in Col.1:18b. Looking into Lev.23:10-13, we see a prophetic picture. The requirement was for a sheaf of the first grain harvest to be brought to the priest who waved it before the Lord on behalf of the worshiper on the day *after* the Sabbath, in other words on the first day of the week (*Sunday---the Lord's Day for Christians*) The offering which accompanied the sheaf wave offering was one male lamb of the first year, without blemish, as a burnt offering to the Lord, with its grain offering of flour mixed with oil and its drink offering of wine. This burnt offering (as all others) represented Christ's sacrifice, but was offered on the first day of the week rather than the last, the regular Sabbath. ***The sheaf depicted the resurrected Christ*** ("Christ, the Firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep..."1Cor.15:20). Of course, this was not revealed to the Israelites.

The next feast was the Feast of Weeks which culminated with the Day of Pentecost, exactly 50 days after Firstfruits, again on the day after the seventh Sabbath (See Lev.23:15-21). This time the wave offering was to be two loaves of bread, ***baked with leaven***. This use of leaven was unique to this fellowship (or peace) offering. Two male lambs were offered as the Peace offering and were waved with the two leavened loaves before the Lord.

Normally, *no* leaven could be used in offerings to the Lord, since leaven in Scripture *always* represents the fleshly, fallen estate of man, ***but this offering was unique in that by requiring the leaven it signified God's acceptance of man due to his reconciliation to the Father through the sacrifice of the Son, Christ Jesus (Eph.1:3-6)***. Again, this meaning and significance

was not revealed to the Israelites, so far as we know, and it is not universally understood by Christians even today.

The Christian significance of the Day of Pentecost is, of course, the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the Church on that day (exactly 50 days after Jesus was raised from the dead), without any doubt making the OT and NT celebrations inseparable in essence and part of the mystery of Grace revealed to the Church but not to the Israelites (Eph.3:1-6). The Holy Spirit coming to indwell believers on the Day of Pentecost fulfills the real meaning of that feast regarding God's fellowship with man in that God openly showed His intent and purpose where the Church was gathered in Jerusalem and immediately began directing the Church's activities, fulfilling Jesus' promise seen in Acts 1:8.

I believe there were two loaves and two lambs for a reason, and it is alluded to in Eph.3:6 (the fact that the Church is made up of two people groups--both Jewish and Gentile believers.).

With this understanding from Lev.23 and the NT references cited, we can now look again at James' statement in James 1:18 pertaining to firstfruits. Certainly, the early Jewish converts to Christ were the Jewish firstfruits to whom James alluded and are represented by one of the leavened loaves and for whom one of the lambs was sacrificed for a peace offering (Lev.23:12, 19) It follows that the early Gentile believers were represented by the second leavened loaf and the second lamb. Of course, this revealed mystery concerns the Church in all periods of church history, as well.

Since these interpretive ideas concerning the two loaves and two peace offering lambs are not explicit in Scripture, I accept full responsibility for advancing them. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt whatever that James 1:18 pertains to salvation and life in Christ.

James 1:21: “...receive with meekness the implanted word”
God is interested in owning the heart of a person and, therefore, will implant His word into the submitted and surrendered heart.
The first part of this verse conveys the idea of repentance
“Therefore lay aside all filthiness and abundance of wickedness”
(See also Ezek.18:31a for the same thought [‘cast away from you’], certainly indicating the need to turn from sin to God and to receive life from Him “...which is able to save your souls.”

The implanted word leads to true belief, so this is the process of the birth of saving faith (the beginning of regeneration by the Holy Spirit). James’ words sound more like the OT messages of grace, like Ezek.36:25-27 or Deut.30:6 or Jer.31:33. The message is the same, whether OT or NT language, it means salvation and a changed heart and mind. God changes a person’s heart and mind to enable that person to believe and to obey. Grace is a gift from God. God prepares a heart to receive His call (John 6:44-45).

James 1:22: “...be doers of the word and not hearers only.”
True conversion produces the fruit of the Spirit (godly attitudes and attributes and works of grace). Thus, James declares that faith without works is dead (James 2:17, 26). Those who wrongly eliminate repentance from confession of faith in Christ and who separate justification from sanctification are making a spiritually fatal error. Here is the reason why: Regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, sanctification, and glorification are all works of grace by the Spirit of Grace. For an example, read the story of the salvation of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10. This man was drawn to Jesus by the Father (See vv. 1-5, a Divine appointment related to the regeneration of his heart/mind to prepare him for repentance and faith); he confessed Jesus as Lord (v.6), repented of his sin (v.8), was justified by his faith in Jesus and proved his faith by his works of faith in restoring anything he had acquired by unlawful means as well as giving half of all he had to the poor

(v.8). Jesus declared Himself Savior and Zacchaeus saved (vv.9-10). A short course on these essential Christian doctrines is seen in Rom.8:29-30, where Paul's doctrinal statement is seen to be in perfect agreement with what happened in the life of Zacchaeus when he met the Lord and, I am convinced, during his walk with God after that pivotal encounter with Him.

James 1:25: The Perfect Law of Liberty:

How does one define the “perfect law of liberty”? In one sense, we could say that it is all of God's word. There are many things in His Book that seem to have little to do with liberty, however. Let us first define “liberty”. Clearly, in the context of what James wrote, we can say that this liberty will enable a follower of Christ to be a doer of the word (good works) and not a forgetful hearer only. One who looks into and continues in this Law of Liberty will be blessed in what he does. In James 2:12 we are told to speak and do as those who will be judged by the Law of Liberty. Paul sheds some light for our understanding in Galatians 5:13-14 (“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”). James calls this the “royal law” (2:8). Ah! We who are in Christ *are free to live by the Rule of Love* (NHA's term) and we will be judged by the Law of Liberty, that is, we will not be condemned by the Ten Commandments, but *will establish them by walking in the Spirit* (Rom.3:31& 8:4). Oh, James understood faith (grace) very well! He was not writing about works of law, but about works of grace (faith). The proof of this is found in James 2:20-24 where he uses the wonderful example of Abraham's faith and his work of obedience that authenticated his faith. **The Lord's words agree perfectly with James' analysis (See Gen.22:15-18 “...because you have done this thing, and have not withheld...your son from Me...in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be**

blessed *because you have obeyed My voice.*” Thus, Abraham’s faith (Gen.15:6) was made perfect and God was pleased to confirm His covenant promises which began with Gen.12:1-3.).

This Law of Liberty, then, is one and the same as the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ that makes me free from the law of sin and death as seen in Rom.8:2. *Living by the Law of Liberty is living under Grace (Rom.6:14).*

James on Humility, Wisdom, and Grace

James had some things to say about humility, pointing out that ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’ quoting from Proverbs 3:34. Why? It is because pride is centered in self (James 4:13-16), whereas humility is indicative of submission to God (See 4:7—“Therefore, submit to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you.”). Such submission will defeat pride and leads to dependence on God, not self-sufficiency and independence. The latter indicate a person who is living according to the flesh. Such a person is not subject to God’s Law, nor can he be (Rom.8:7). Carnal-mindedness leads to death, but living in the Spirit leads to life and peace (Rom.8:6, 13). Arrogant boasting is evil (James 4:16). Humility and dependence on God lead to patience and patience leads to endurance and Christian maturity (James 1:4, 12, 5:7, 8).

Wisdom from God: God will give wisdom to the sincere seeker of wisdom (James 1:5). True wisdom is meek (3:13). God’s wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, without partiality, without hypocrisy, and produces good fruit -fruit of the Spirit (James 3:17).

Vignettes of Pastor James' Sunday Sermons

1. "Wisdom Is Known by Her Children" (1:5-8, 3:13-18)
2. "The Risks of Riches" (1:9-11, 5:1-6)
3. "The Folly of Favoritism" (2:1-11)
4. "Teachers and Tongues" (3:1-12)
5. "The Perils of Pride" (4:1-6, 13-17)
6. "Submit to Survive" (4:7-10)
7. "Patience Perseveres" (5:7-12, 1:12)
8. "The Power of Prayer" (5:13-18)
9. "The Truth about Goodness, Evil, and Sin (1:12-20)
10. "Works of Grace Turn the Wheel of Faith (2:14-26)

Concluding Discussion

It is fairly apparent that the epistle of James is a collage of his Sunday sermons, or parts thereof and other thoughts he wished to convey, and is not a deliberately organized letter in the strict sense of the word. Nevertheless, it constitutes Spirit-inspired messages from God to His Church for our practical guidance. More importantly, it is doctrinally in perfect agreement with what our Lord Jesus taught and, therefore, should be given our utmost and undivided attention.

James believed that *the daily practices of the children of God must support our doctrinal declarations, that true faith must be proven by works of grace. Our Lord taught the same truths.* Certainly, right doctrine is essential, for it forms the framework of our faith, but if faith is unsupported by our good works, that 'faith' is dead. Hence, *true faith is a dynamic force, alive and functioning in obedience to God, producing the fruit of the Spirit.* Therefore, James could legitimately declare that faith without works is dead. If we allow our doctrine to become isolated and insulated from the works of grace, then, as born again children

of God, we are in sin and are in need of repentance, cleansing, and forgiveness. Under such conditions we are walking in the flesh and are unfruitful. If this unfruitful condition is a person's chronic condition and there is no conviction for repentance and renewal, then God's word indicates that such a person is still unregenerate and in need of God's salvation.

God commanded holiness in His children ("Be holy for I am holy.") This means that a follower of Christ must live a consecrated, separated life of obedience to God, whereby he loves God with all his being and his neighbor as himself. God's good seed produces fruit when it falls into good soil. *Not all believers produce the same amount, but all do produce (Matt.13:8).*

James is a book of grace, advocating the works of grace. His understanding of faith and works coincides with the teachings of the Lord Jesus. Some argue that the early teachings of Jesus are for 'kingdom citizens' and have nothing to do with grace, that He was making a Messianic offer to Israel and, therefore, His teaching applied to a future dispensation of law. I would readily agree that He did present Himself to the Jews as Messiah [and was rejected], but I strongly disagree with dispensational doctrine concerning the law of God. **The law and grace are not opposed to each other** in every way as the extreme dispensationalists hold (*See Gal.3:21.*).

In the first place, God's offer of grace to the Israelites was totally legitimate. *God always desired for mercy to triumph over judgment (James 2:13).* The law is an adjunct to God's grace, given to demonstrate sin and to describe moral rightness. God never asks the impossible of mere humans when He commanded obedience to His commandments; that was doable by faith. See Deut.30:11-20? The key is found in the word LOVE, and it is the same today when a person is saved by God's love and mercy. We, too, are commanded to keep God's commandments that we may live (John 14:21, Rom.7:6, 8:4, 2Cor.5:21). *As Christians, the law*

does not condemn us, because we have the imputed righteousness of Christ. Nevertheless, we can and must fulfill the law by love. The Israelites, not understanding grace, and demanding law, needed some means of temporary atonement until Christ made grace manifest by His own sacrificial death. God, in His mercy supplied the Levitical system for that temporary atonement, proving His great love for them until the fullness of time when He sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law (See Gal.4:4-5 and Heb.9:15.).

God has never had but one plan of salvation for fallen man. It has always been though grace by faith. ***Salvation for all people in every age is only by grace, and the book of James is about grace and the works of grace, not about works of the law.***

James, one of the half-brothers of Jesus, was certainly influenced by the directness of Jesus' instruction. Moreover, the Lord Jesus spoke with authority, and James wrote the same way. Jesus was misunderstood and misinterpreted and so was James. Those who would divide and set into opposition God's law and God's grace should be reminded that the Author of Grace is also the Author of Law, and He is not at all divided in His purpose in both Law and Grace. That purpose is to conform His children to the image of Christ Himself. God has no problem with those who are under Grace who walk by faith and strive also to obey His perfect Law; in fact He commands them to do exactly that. The problem lies with those who believe that Grace excuses them from obeying and fulfilling the Law by love. Yet both the Father and the Son have commanded those of faith to love God and keep His commandments. Those who disparage the book of James also say that the Sermon on the Mount is not for Christians, but these do not understand either Law or Grace—but James did, and so should we.

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