

## Epistle of Ya'akov (James) ~ 1:17-27

### Testing of Our Trust <sup>1</sup> (Faith) ~ Part 3

***17 Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father who made the heavenly lights; with Him, there is neither variation nor darkness caused by turning.***

***Heavenly lights ... variation ... darkness caused by turning*** - astronomical language: either eclipse or phases of the moon. **Ya'akov's** cosmology was more Copernican than Ptolemaic; the Roman Catholic Church's condemnation of Galileo (recently corrected) was inconsistent with this verse. The meaning, of course, is that **God** does not change. <sup>2</sup>

***18 Having made His decision, He gave birth to us through a Word that can be relied upon, in order that we should be a kind of firstfruits of all that He created.***

***Having made his decision*** of His own free will, by grace and not because He owed it to us, ***God gave birth to us through a Word that can be relied upon*** (see Rom. 10:17). The **Word of Truth** is **Yeshua** the **Messiah**; this is taught most clearly by the **Gospel of Yochanan** (see Yochanan 1:1, 14; 3:5–8; 15:26; 16:7–15; also 1 Yochanan 5:4–8). We are ***a kind of firstfruits of all that God created***, as can be inferred from Rom. 8:19–23, 29; 1 Cor. 15:20, 23.

**Ya'akov** now turns to appropriate ways to *deal* with **testing** (1:2–18). The Zealot-like model, which was gaining popularity in **Jewish** Palestine and ultimately led to **Yerushaliyim's** destruction, was inappropriate. **Ya'akov** condemns not only violent acts but also the violent rhetoric that incites them. <sup>3</sup>

***19 Therefore, my dear brothers, let every person be quick to listen but slow to speak, slow to get angry;***

This is one of my favorite verses. I have to be mindful of it every day so I don't get myself in trouble, which I occasionally do.

***Let every person be quick to listen but slow to speak*** (compare 3:3–12), ***slow to get angry*** (compare Ecclesiastes 7:9). <sup>4</sup> Can modern psychology match this advice for improving interpersonal relations? When someone does or says something that would typically provoke quick angry speech, invite him to explain more clearly what he has done or said; listen carefully to him, trying to understand him and his situation; and respond in love, aware that, like you, he was ***made in the image of God*** (3:9, Genesis 1:27).

***20 for a person's anger does not accomplish God's righteousness!***

The history of **Judeo-Christian** relations is riddled with the sad consequences of **Believers'** failure to heed this verse. If **Jews** have tenaciously refused to trust in **Yeshua**, it is partly because frustrated **Believers** have attempted to **accomplish God's righteousness** through their **anger**. It cannot be done. **Jews** receive **God's** righteousness through **Believers'** mercy, not their anger, through their humility, not their arrogance.

The overall theme of the remainder of Chapter 1 is having received the new birth through a **Word of God** (v. 18), we should **receive it** (v. 21) and **do it** (v. 22). True religion involves not **only hearing** but **doing** (vv.

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<sup>1</sup> Recall that the Complete Jewish Bible translates the Hebrew word for **faith** as **trust**.

<sup>2</sup> Stern, D. H. (1996). Jewish New Testament Commentary .

<sup>3</sup> Keener, C. S. (1993). The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament (Jas 1:19–27).

<sup>4</sup> I really like how frequently **Brit Hadashah** authors refer back to the **Tanakh**.

22–27). The entire letter emphasizes **deed** over **creed**, **action** over the **profession**, and the usual **Jewish** approach to religion, morals, and life.

***<sup>21</sup> So rid yourselves of all vulgarity and obvious evil and receive meekly the Word implanted in you that can save your lives. <sup>22</sup> Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says but do it! <sup>23</sup> For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, <sup>24</sup> who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. <sup>25</sup> But if a person looks closely into the perfect Torah, which gives freedom, and continues, becoming not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work it requires, then he will be blessed in what he does.***

***Someone who looks at his face in a mirror, who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like*** - instead of grooming him or herself to face the day - is failing to use the mirror correctly, that is, actively instead of passively. ***The perfect Torah*** is the **Believer's** perfect, complete mirror; it perfectly, ultimately reflects their ungroomed (i.e., sinful) condition - as **Sha'ul** puts it, ***"what Torah really does is show people how sinful they are"*** (Ro 3:20). The **Believer** uses the perfect mirror's assessment of his spiritual condition to correct and groom their behavior. As with the bathroom mirror, they continue to use it this way throughout their lives.

***26 Anyone who thinks he is religiously observant but does not control his tongue is deceiving himself, and his observance counts for nothing.***

***Anyone who thinks he is religiously observant.*** Greek *thrêskos* in this verse and *thrêskeia* ("religious observance") in the next connote zeal in performing religious acts, whether in connection with true religion or false. In **Jewish** terms, one could say, equivalently, *"Anyone who thinks he is "dati" ("religious") or "frum" (Yiddish, "pious") or "shomer-mitzvot" ("one who observes the commandments" of the Torah) but does not control his tongue is deceiving himself."<sup>5</sup>*

***27 The religious observance that God the Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being contaminated by the world.***  
~ Ya'akov 1:17-27 (CJB).

This verse, apparently based on Isaiah 1:15–16 (quoted in Ya'akov 4:8), sums up the burden of all the Prophets, who zealously insisted that true religion must consist not in mere external observances but good deeds flowing from a sound spiritual condition. In reducing the **Torah** to two commandments - the one urging a practical expression of self-giving love toward those who can offer little or nothing in return, the other concerning the inward spiritual and outward ethical purity prerequisite to right action - **Ya'akov** entered a time-honored **Jewish** tradition of epitomizing the **Torah**, as is seen from the well-known **Talmud** passage, Makkot 23b–24a, quoted in Ga 5:14N. This verse, like the book of Galatians, is a warning to **Believers** who become enamored of specific observances at the expense of ***the weightier matters of the Torah—justice, mercy, trust"*** (Mt 23:23).

We will learn a little more about **Ya'akov** as we dig into what he says about the **Sin of Partiality**.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.