

Marks of a Faith that Works

The Marks of Maturity

Introduction to James

We're beginning a new series today in the book of James. And we're calling it "The Marks of a Faith that Works." James has a lot to say about faith, and he also has a lot to say about works. And throughout this book he describes for us a *faith that works*. But a faith that works is not an end in itself. The focus is on Christian maturity. James states it this way in the introduction to his letter:

Perseverance (i.e. in difficulty) must finish its work so that you may be *mature* and complete, not lacking in anything. James 1:4

James uses that word "mature" (in his language *teleios*) five times in the five chapters of his book.¹ James has a lot to say about what it means to be a mature Christian. We could say that James is a manual on how to be mature.

But just what is maturity? How do you know when you've arrived? What does Christian maturity look like?

Some associate maturity with *age*. But age is pretty fluid and relative. When you get too old for pimples you go right into wrinkles. I probably still had pimples on my face when I was turned down at a church I was hoping to pastor right after seminary. I was only 29 at the time and I didn't have any gray hair! I was told I was too young...and I probably was. On the other hand, I've seen some 60 or 70 year old kids. Age doesn't necessarily determine maturity.

Some define maturity in terms of *personality*... thinking that a type A, extrovert, accomplishment oriented leader is the more mature person and the more reserved, quite, follower is less mature. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Or sometimes maturity is defined in terms of *knowledge*. The more degree you have behind your name the further up you are on the proverbial ladder of maturity. When I finished my first year of Bible College, I found myself lecturing my Dad who had been in the ministry at that time for more than 35 years on how to preach. Now that's the epitome of arrogance, not maturity! Then I went on to seminary and then got a doctorate only to discover that I really know very little at all. You

can have so many degrees that they call you Dr. Fahrenheit, but that doesn't make you mature.

So what are the marks of maturity in the Christian life? If it's not one's age, personality, or knowledge that ultimately determines maturity, then what is it?

First...

1. A mature Christian is a humble Christian.

Notice how James begins his letter in 1:1 –

James, a *servant* of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...ⁱⁱ

Just who is James, the author of this book? The answer to that question is initially complicated by the fact that there are no less than six different people called James in the New Testament.ⁱⁱⁱ But the most likely candidate is James, the half-brother of Jesus.

What do we know about this James? It's clear from the gospel records that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was not a believer before the resurrection. In fact, he was nothing less than a staunch unbeliever (John 7:5). But an amazing thing happened to James. Just as for Paul, the resurrected Christ appeared to him personally (1 Corinthians 15:7) and this changed his life forever. So much so that he became a key leader in the emerging Jerusalem church (Galatians 1:19; 2:9; Acts 12:17) which he guided for nearly 15 years. He eventually came to be regarded as one of the apostles (Galatians 1:18ff) and died a martyr's death.^{iv}

Isn't it interesting that James doesn't introduce himself as "the leader of the Jerusalem church," or even as the "brother of Jesus himself." But the only credential he lists on this cover letter is "a *servant* of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."^v

What this tells me is that the authority with which James speaks is the authority of humility and loyalty to Jesus Christ, not an authority of position or placement within the church. James is speaking to these believers – and to you and me – not because of a grasping after personal power or authority, but because of his loyalty to *the Servant par excellence* Jesus Christ.

The thing about a great person is that he doesn't think he is great. The great man never thinks he is great and the small man never thinks he is small. If you think your too big for a small job, then your probably too small for a big job.

Here, James describes himself as a *servant*. In his language, he is a *doulos*, literally a bond-slave. A bond-slave is one who, having been freed from his slavery, chose to remain with his master. In the Old Testament, a bond-slave would be brought to a door and his ear pierced with an awl indicating that he was now and permanently in the possession of his master. This piercing was the *stigmata*, or stigma that indicated he was a bond-slave. Paul writes to the Galatians saying that he bears on his body the "marks" of Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:17). Does this characterize your life? Do you have on your life the *stigmata* of Jesus Christ? Is your life characterized by the humility of a servant of Jesus Christ?

2. A mature Christian is prayerful and patient in difficulty.

Second, a mature Christian is patient and prayerful in difficulty. This is also seen in verse 1. Notice that James is writing to the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations."

There are two basic interpretations of what James means here. Either it refers to Jewish Christians now scattered from the believing church in Jerusalem or the expression is "spiritualized" to refer to the multiracial church in general. And there are good arguments for both. I tend to believe that James, however, is writing largely to believers with a Jewish background and who may have been dispersed from Jerusalem following the persecution that broke out at the time of Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 8). In other words, these believers were experiencing the difficult onslaught of persecution. But even if this is the case, what James says is applicable to all believers everywhere. In a certain sense, we all experience the difficulties of living in the *dispersion* while awaiting our heavenly home.

And James advice to us is this: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2). And he ends his letter by saying, "Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray" (James 5:13). And between these two he reminds us to be patient in suffering as we wait for the Lord's coming (5:7-12).

Life is full of trouble and difficulty. Without being overly pessimistic, there is something wrong with everything. And that's because we live in a sick and fallen world (Romans 8). The message of James is that, as a Christian, you are not

exempt from such difficulty. In fact, as a follower of Jesus Christ, you can expect difficulty.

The question is: How do you respond to difficulty? Are you positive under pressure? D.L. Moody once said, “Character is what you are in the dark.” In the darkness of difficulty, are you prayerful and patient, waiting for God to work out his good purposes in your life?

3. A mature Christian obeys God’s Word.

The third mark of a mature Christian is this: He obeys God’s Word. Take a look at these straightforward verses:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
James 1:22

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?
Can such faith save him? James 2:14

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith
without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. James 2:18

And to really throw a theological “monkey wrench” into the works, notice what he says in verse 24:

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone!
James 2:24

What in the world does James mean by that? At first glance, that seems to contradict our understanding of other New Testament passages. But is it not true, as John Calvin once said, that we are saved by faith *alone*, but faith that saves is *not alone*? Faith that truly saves results in life change!

As you can see, this letter of James is very pragmatic. He deals with the daily, pedestrian stuff of life. And in it all he give us a clarion call to obedience.

In the minds of many, belief and practice just don’t seem to go together. Somehow, our culture seems extremely susceptible to this disconnect between faith (what we say we believe) and practice (how we actually live).

Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* claims that we struggle with a low information-action ratio.^{vi} What is that? He claims that the information overload created by television (and I would add the internet) is such that we grow accustomed to receiving information without acting upon it. Think about it. To what degree did you act upon the vast amount of information received this past week through the news media or via the internet? And so unconsciously, we do the same thing on Sunday morning! We come, we sit, we hear a message from God's Word, we say politely, "That was interesting, or insightful...or maybe sometimes we say, 'Was that ever boring!'" and then we leave and do little about it. Why? Because of our low information-action ratio.

4. A mature Christian cares for the needy.

But there is a third characteristic of the mature Christian. The mature Christian, James says, cares for the needy.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress... James 1:27

If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? James 2:2-6

As is typical for James, he often picks up on themes of the Gospels or even of the Old Testament. And when we speak of compassionate care for the needy, there is no exception. One of the reoccurring themes of the Old Testament is that God is the champion of justice and the defender of the poor (Amos 4:1; 5:11-12:24; Psalm 69:33). And in the ancient world, more than 90 percent of the population was considered "poor."^{vii}

Contrary to popular opinion, what was true in the ancient world is also true today. If the entire population of the planet is represented by one hundred people, 57 live in Asia, 21 in Europe, 14 in North and South America, and 8 in Africa. The numbers of Asians and Africans are increasing every year while the number of Europeans and North Americans is decreasing. 50% of the wealth of the world is in the hands of 6 people...all of whom are Americans. 70 people are unable to read or write. 50 suffer from malnutrition due to insufficient food supply. 35 don't have

access to safe drinking water. 80 live in sub-standard housing. Only 1 has a university or college education. Most of the population of the world lives in substantially different circumstances than those we in America take for granted.^{viii}

James has very little that is positive to say about the rich. In fact, here are his cutting words in chapter 5:

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. James 5:1-2

But it is not so much wealth that is condemned by James, as the spiritually corrosive effect that wealth can have in the life of the believer. Wealth tends to spiral us into a state of lethargy and complacency in regards to the poor and needy. We become so emotionally and geographically removed from physical need that we grow insensitive and dull to our “neighbor” whether across the street or on the other side of the world. To this, James reminds us that any wealth we have is as transitory as the flower’s bloom (1:11).

5. A mature Christian masters his mouth.

Fourth, a mature Christian manages his mouth.

We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. James 3:2

I went in for a physical check-up a few months ago, and one of the first things the doctor did was to have me stick out my tongue. He uses the tongue to check your health. And God does the same. That’s why James has so much to say about the use of our tongue. Self-control begins with tongue control.

In World War II there was a saying: “Loose lips, sink ships.” Loose tongues destroy lives and churches. Gossip is like that. It’s mouth-to-mouth recitation. Gossip is hearing something you like about someone you don’t...and it destroys.

James has some very strong words for the person who doesn’t control the tongue: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (James 1:26). You can come to CB every week, teach a class, serve as an usher, attend a Life Group, but if you don’t reign in the tongue, your religion worthless.

6. A mature Christian is a peacemaker, not a troublemaker.

Finally, a mature Christian is a peacemaker, not a troublemaker. James talks about this in chapter 3:18 –

Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

But then he immediately launches in to an all-out attack on troublemakers. Notice what he says in James 4:1 –

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? James 4:1

Consistently in the New Testament, disunity in the church is a sure sign of immaturity. Remember what Paul tells the Corinthians? There is jealousy and quarreling and divisions in your church. "You are all just a bunch of babies," he tells them (1 Corinthians 3:1-23).

Wherever there is ongoing conflict and disunity, there is immaturity. And James tells us just what's at the heart of this. The first cause of conflict is found in James 4:1—These conflicts "come from your desires that battle within you."

Why are there conflicts in our marriages? In our churches? In our work relationships? In our families? It exists first and foremost because of *selfishness*. On the other hand, maturity (and resulting unity) grows when your concern for others outweighs your concern for yourself.

I don't know about you, but I want to be a peacemaker, not a troublemaker.

So, what are the tests of true faith? What are the marks of maturity?

- Are you growing in humility?
- Are you patient and prayerful in difficulty?
- Are you obedient to God's Word?
- Do you care for the needy?
- Do you manage your mouth and what you say?
- And are you a peacekeeper rather than a troublemaker?

Evaluate your own life in view of these "tests." How do you anticipate God speaking to you through this book of James?

Notes

ⁱ James 1:4, 17, 25.

ⁱⁱ Most letters at this period of time followed a typical pattern. First there is the name of the sender along with some type of identification. This is followed by the name of the recipient, in this case the “twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” And finally, a blessing or expression of good will. Among the Hebrews this was often the greeting *shalom* (“peace”), but among the Greeks the Greek word *charein* “greetings” (from which we get the word “grace”) was often used.

ⁱⁱⁱ (1) James, the brother of Jude (Jude 1); (2) James, the father of Judas (not Judas Iscariot; cf. Luke 6:16; Acts 1:12); (3) James the younger (Mark 15:40); (4) James the son of Zebedee and brother of John (Mark 3:16; Acts 12:2); (5) James the son of Alphaeus (also called James the Less; cf. Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Acts 1:13); and (6) James the half-brother of Jesus (1 Cor. 9:5, 14; 15:7; Gal. 1:15-2:12; Acts 15:13-21).

^{iv} Other facts are: (1) Following the resurrection, he was with the apostles and others in the upper room (Acts 1:13, 14); (2) He was a member of the “brethren of the Lord” (Mark 3:31ff.; Matthew 12:46ff.; Luke 8:19ff.; Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 15:7); (3) He may have been leading a house church in Jerusalem that met apart from those in Peter’s company (Acts 12:17); and (4) He presided over the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and summed up the essence of the meeting (see Galatians 2:12). As for James’ martyrdom in A.D. 62, Josephus gives us an account in his *Antiquities*. He tells how Festus, the procurator in Judaea, died while in office and was eventually succeeded by Albinus. But in the interim period, Ananus I “convened a session of the judicial Sanhedrin and brought before this court James, the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, and some other men. Accusing them of breaking the law, he handed them over to be stoned to death.” Josephus, *Ant.* 20.200 f. Tradition tells us, supported by Eusebius, one of the great church fathers and a respected historian, that James was finally martyred for his faith by being pushed off the pinnacle of the temple. The pinnacle was the point in the wall around the temple that jutted out over the Kidron Valley. There is a drop of about a hundred feet from the height of that wall straight down into the Valley. This was the very place where the devil took Jesus and tempted him to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Eusebius tells us that in about the year 66 A.D., James the Just, the brother of our Lord, was pushed off this pinnacle by the Jews who had become angered with him for his Christian testimony. Eusebius says that the fall did not kill him, and that he managed to stumble to his knees to pray for his murderers. So they finished the job by stoning him to death, and he joined the band of martyrs.

^v James had the choice of several other words in his native language, all of which can be translated “servant.” One of these is found in Romans 14:4 – “Who are you to judge the *servant* of another?”, speaking of a household servant. Another term is found in Romans 13:4 where Paul says that the government is a “*minister*” (lit. “*servant*”) of God to you for good. Here we have the word from which we get our word “deacon.” However, the word James uses is the word used in Philemon 16 referring to Onesimus, the “*slave*” of Philemon. The other terms are more noble, but the word “slave” speaks of one who is bound to his master, whose whole life is swallowed up in serving his master, one who has no rights of his own. For the Greeks, this term “slave” was abhorrent and revolting. The Roman people understood well about slavery, because when an army was conquered, the victors brought enemy soldiers in as slaves and marched them before the people in triumphal procession. Animals had more rights in the Roman Empire than slaves did, so for James to call himself a bond slave is to identify with the lowest of the low on the totem pole of the social pecking order of Rome.

^{vi} Terry C. Muck, in General Editor’s Preface to *James in The NIV Application Commentary*, 9.

^{vii} Nystrom, *James in The NIV Application Commentary*, 25.

^{viii} Roméo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil* (New York: Random House, 2003), 520-521.