

First Church of Jerusalem

The courtyard seemed to overflow with people. Spilling into the entrance halls they stood excitedly sharing with one another. Up at the front end of the palatial home were a small platform and a chair. Welcome to Jerusalem A.D. 38. Jesus had ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives just across the Kidron Valley only five years earlier. Here in the massive home of Nicodemus, the church met for quiet and private worship and instruction.

Off to the right of the chair used in teaching was a man kneeling. That was old camel-kneed James, the oldest living half-brother of Jesus. "Camel knees" was a nickname for his habit of always getting on his knees when he spoke to Jesus. James had such a reverence for his now exalted family member. He had scorned Jesus for most of his early days, but he worshiped Him now.

With a hush the crowded saints began to look intently to the front. James was rising, and soon his message would ring through the ornate halls, around the quiet pools of water, and past the fountains to reach the ears of every one assembled. James had risen to the rank of the apostles. He had come to faith at the crucifixion of Christ and had a personal visit from the exalted Lord. He had submitted himself to the apostles teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. He never wavered under the persecutions. He was constantly at each time of worship, always on his knees whether it was on the rocks, stones, or tiled floors. His reverence for the exalted Son of God was all-encompassing.

As the apostles moved out to Judea and Samaria, he stayed in Jerusalem. As they gave the gospel to the Gentiles, he was faithfully a part of the local church. Gradually he was recognized by the saints and apostles as the natural choice to lead the Jerusalem assembly. He had known Christ Jesus the longest, and now he knew Him as intimately as any. He faithfully served the church at Jerusalem, and what a church it was!

Across the front row worshipers assembled with their faces aglow and their hearts intent upon the words of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that overflowed from their Spirit-filled lives. There was Bartimaeus, eyes aglow sitting next to Zacchaeus. They always came up from Jericho and shared with all that would listen how Jesus had changed them. Off to their right were Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. They were singing about Christ's triumph over the grave with eyes pressed shut and tears streaming down their faces.

Some out-of-town guests were on the left. From Nain the widow and her son whom Jesus raised to life often visited the fellowship. The former demoniac of Gadara now with his sweet wife and family were singing with upturned faces about the One Who loved them and loosed them from the chains of sin.

Rich and poor, famous and unknown, locals and out-of-town guests, all were seemingly one at this vibrant fellowship. Yet all was not perfect. Tensions were present, and James was about to present the letter he had written to the members of the first church driven out by Saul's ravaging of Jerusalem's saints. Many had scattered around the land; others had gone to far reaches of the Empire. All were facing the challenges of integrating the life changing gospel with every day life in often hostile cultures. James

was moved by the Holy Spirit to write a letter. This was the first inspired letter from God to His people for over four hundred years. What an incredible moment to again hear God's directions for His people. This was the beginning of the twenty-seven New Testament books, and the crowd was full of anticipation.

What did James write as the opening chapter to God's New Covenant people? Simply this: a clear and simple way of life that reflects a maturing walk of faith. As Christ was received by faith, so the way of life flowing from His presence would be reflected in the walk of faith. James gives twelve clear indicators of how this walk of faith should be. These are the marks of Christian maturity.

James: Twelve Tests of Spiritual Maturity

A maturing walk of faith endures troubles (James 1:2–12). Maturing saints see trials from God's perspective. They see them as purifying faith-builders. This gives life a whole new orientation when we recognize that God brings things into our lives and opportunities for us to respond to in order to mature us.

Maturing saints also have a whole new standard for assessing personal worth. They no longer measure their worth and success by the amount of things they have. God clarifies the new valuation has nothing to do with money or comforts of life.

A maturing walk of faith knows how to deal with temptation (James 1:13–18). Maturing saints understand that temptations come from their own lusts. One who is maturing in their faith will turn from desires that would drag them away from God. They will develop a new revulsion of the flesh that rebels against God.

Likewise, maturing saints grow in appreciation for the faithfulness of God. God is so faithful. He began the work in us. He is the One Who started salvation, and He is going to finish it. He is also the One Who delivers us from temptation.

A maturing walk of faith obeys the Word (James 1:19–27). Maturing saints pursue the disciplined life. Discipline isn't just for professional athletes and for masters in their fields. Christians are to be pursuing a disciplined life. Bring yourself under the dominion of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Choose to say no to yourself in the little areas of life (food, sleep, etc.) in order to remind your body who is in control.

Maturing saints have a teachable spirit. This is the acid test of whether or not someone is spiritual—how they respond to correction. The godly person is someone who is teachable; they are constantly evaluating their lives to see if they are a doer of the Word.

Maturing saints know the elements of true worship. If you are really a maturing saint, you will have a harnessed tongue that guards your words. If you are really worshipping God, you will have humble service. Humble service is serving in the obscure, unknown ways. Above all, if you are really a maturing saint, you will keep yourself from being stained by the world. All of the harnessed talking and humble service will mean nothing in God's eyes if we are stained by this world. He desires for His saints to be characterized by holy living.

A maturing walk of faith allows no prejudice (James 2:1–13). Maturing saints know the dangers of externalism. God doesn't look on a person's outward appearance

but on his heart. Watch out for showing favoritism because someone looks good or smells good!

A maturing walk of faith displays itself in godly works (James 2:14–26). Godly works are the vital signs of living faith. Maturing saints will live lives characterized by actions that are the proof of their faith. They will have a practice of godly works, not just a profession.

A maturing walk of faith bridles the tongue (James 3:1–12). Maturing saints recognize the power of the tongue, and know how to muzzle their mouths (and muzzle their ears to what they shouldn't hear!). The tongue is so important James spends twelve verses dealing with it.

A maturing walk of faith demonstrates heavenly wisdom (James 3:13–18). Maturing saints who are walking with Jesus Christ have wisdom beyond this world. Immature saints have signs of the devilish influence of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Bitter jealousy is wanting what someone else has and not wanting them to have it. Jealousy and selfish ambition are not from God, but are earthly, natural and demonic.

Instead, maturing saints display elements of wise living. They are pure, peaceable, gentle, full of good fruit, and without hypocrisy. Every where they go they sow seeds of righteousness. Their lives are characterized by heavenly wisdom.

A maturing walk of faith separates unto God (James 4:1–12). Maturing saints recognize that they have a choice to either pursue worldliness or godliness. They avoid “reptilian desires.” A reptile will grow bigger every year of its life if fed and left unhindered. So too will our desires grow if we feed them and protect them from the Spirit of God mortifying and killing them. Left unhindered, they will grow bigger than you ever dreamed.

Maturing saints avoid the consequences of a pleasure dominated life. If you are only living for pleasure, and pleasure dominates your decisions, then you are feeding the lusts of your flesh. Our world is constantly bombarding us with the desire for a pleasure dominated life. In order to prepare himself for going to China, Hudson Taylor used to sleep on the floor with one sheet over him so that he would not always have a soft, pleasure seeking life.

Maturing saints know how to avoid infidelity to God. God equates friendship with this world with spiritual adultery. Friendship with the world is anything that distracts us from worship, ministry, and devotion! Whatever is pulling us away from devotion to God causes us to be God's enemy. To be a friend of God is to seek His pleasures, His friendship, and His humility. These areas of our lives will be in line with God.

A maturing walk of faith trusts the future to God (James 4:13–17). Maturing saints never mistakenly put their confidence in empty wealth. This goes against the American culture which tells us to take control of our future. Don't stake your life on paper; stake your life on the Rock that will never let you down.

A maturing walk of faith avoids the dangers of wealth (James 5:1–6). Maturing saints know that hoarded riches corrode spiritual living. When Jesus told His disciple to

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal” (Matthew 6:19), He used a word that means to “lay things on top of one another.” In other words, you don’t need to have stacks of stuff. The goal in life is not to stack stuff. If you keep it you loose it. If you give it away, you keep it forever.

A maturing walk of faith waits patiently for Christ’s return (James 5:7–12).
Maturing saints grow in triumphant patience. They are the singing church as they wait expectantly for Christ’s return.

A maturing walk of faith prays all the way through life (James 5:13–20).
Maturing saints are the praying church. They know the power of effective kneeling before the throne of God.

These are the twelve keys that James gives us for spiritual maturity. Is your life characterized by them? In the coming weeks we will look more closely at each of these areas in order to learn how to personally develop and grow in them.