

in fact James uses the same verb, *planaō*, in 1:16 to describe being deceived.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:16–17)

Such deception can be thrust upon people who unwittingly follow those who twist the Scriptures for their own designs and to gather a following for their own gain.

How is it, then, that one is able to turn back someone who has been deceived and wandered from the truth? It can only be by prayer and by clear and direct application of the Scriptures. In praying for the one who has strayed from the truth, their heart may be opened to listen and consider the truth when it is given to them. Further, through prayer the one who seeks to turn the wanderer back may be given wisdom in the proper approach and use of the Scriptures. And we may have full confidence that the word of God is alive and active, and that by the work of the Spirit, will bring repentance and a turning back to God in truth for the child of God who has been led astray.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

----- *Excursus – Sola Scriptura* -----

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century established a basic platform of core and essential doctrines of the faith, known as the “Five Solas,” originally stated in Latin. The Latin word “sola” means “only” or “solely,” indicating the unique and necessary aspect of each doctrinal statement. The “Five Solas” are:

1. *Sola Scriptura* – “Scripture Alone” – The Scriptures (the 66 books of the Bible) and the Scriptures alone are the final authority in all aspects of faith and practice (*halachah*). This means that the Scriptures are the true and final “measure” against which all teachings and doctrines are to be assessed. Only if they align with the Scriptures are they to be received.
2. *Sola Christus* – “Christ Alone” – This affirms the absolute and eternal uniqueness of Yeshua as the only Savior of sinners (Jn 14:6), the only

Mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5), and the only human revelation of God, that is, the only person Who is God in the flesh. (Jn 1:1, 14)

3. *Sola Gratia* – “Grace Alone” – This means that we are saved from our sins and damnation by the unmerited grace of God alone without any of our works. God’s saving grace is unmerited, undeserved favor which He bestows upon us entirely of His own character and sovereign intention. (Eph 2:8–10)
4. *Sola Fide* – “Faith Alone” – This means that we are saved from the righteous judgment of God upon sinners, not by our own efforts or religious practices, but by coming to God with “empty hands” (admitting we could do nothing to merit His mercy) and receiving from Him the promise of salvation which then evidences itself in a changed life, becoming more and more conformed to the very likeness of Yeshua. (Rom 5:1; Tit 3:5)
5. *Soli Deo Gloria* – “The Glory of God Alone” – This means that God alone is the one Who is to receive all the glory, for it is entirely by His power, grace, and mercy that we are enabled to be forgiven of our sin and to have enduring and eternal fellowship with Him. For it is by His Messiah, Yeshua, that the debt of our sin has been paid, and it is by His Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) that we are enabled to grow in righteousness and to be set apart (sanctified) unto Him. (Is 43:6-7; Rom 11:36; 1Cor 1:31)

As I have noted, the current text of James that we are studying, emphasizes the fundamental truth of *sola scriptura*, for he teaches us that one who turns back a believer who as “strayed from the truth” does a very important thing. And what is it to “stray from the truth”? James makes this clear when he writes in 1:18 that God “brought us forth by the word of truth,” meaning the Scriptures. And Yeshua emphasizes this same truth in His prayer before going to the cross:

Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. (Jn 17:17)

The compilation of the five *solas* by the Reformers was directed to the Roman Catholic Church and to the Pope who, according to Roman Catholic theology, had the same divine authority as did the Bible. They ascribed divine authority to their own writings, teachings upon which their own unique doctrines were founded, such as eternal salvation being only possible through the Church, and that one merits one’s salvation through participation in the Church and the “sacraments” the Church offers.

Another example is the Mormon Church (established in 1830) which

has the Book of Mormon as well as the office of “Prophet” who continued the authority of its founder, Joseph Smith. For the Mormon Church, the word of the Prophet is to be received as having divine authority equal to or even greater than the Bible.

It is interesting that in our own times, and in what is generally referred to as the “Messianic Movement,” there are those who likewise are teaching that “the Rabbinic Writings” have binding authority.<sup>1</sup> By Rabbinic Writings, they refer to the Mishnah, Talmuds, Targumim, Shulkan Aruk, etc. Mark Kinzer writes:

Is the written Torah sufficient for instructing the Jewish people in how to live as individuals, families, and local communities? While it is certainly foundational and indispensable, it is not sufficient. The Torah requires a living tradition of interpretation and application if it is to be practiced in daily life.<sup>2</sup>

This ought to be alarming to all who are seeking to live out a Torah, Yeshua-honoring life of faith! For if we allow extra-biblical writings to be given equal authority with the inspired Scriptures, we open ourselves up to all manner of errant teachings. What is more, to describe the Rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmuds, Midrashim, Targumim, etc.) as a unified body of literature is clearly uninformed. Even the Bavli and Yerushalmi Talmuds have divergent rulings, and the remainder of the extant Rabbinic materials are surely not a monolithic voice of unity!

So we must, once again, affirm that the Bible and the Bible alone is the final authority in all aspects of faith and practice (*halachah*), even as James emphasizes in our current text.

Likewise, when Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy, he reminded him about the sufficiency of Scripture, the very Scriptures that had led him to faith in Yeshua:

... that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Messiah Yeshua. (2Tim 3:15)

For Paul, salvation consists in far more than having one’s sins for-

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- 1 For a critique of the idea that the Rabbinic Writings have binding authority, see my article, “The Battle for the Bible: Are the Inspired Scriptures Enough?” available at <https://torahresource.com/battle-for-the-bible-are-the-inspired-scriptures-enough/>
  - 2 Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (Brazos, 2005), pp. 236ff.

given. Salvation also includes sanctification, becoming conformed to the person of Yeshua—walking as He walked. And Paul states that the “sacred writings,” are able to give wisdom that leads to this salvation. He then goes on to write:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2Tim 3:16–17)

When Paul speaks of the Scriptures, he’s talking about the written Torah, not the Oral. And he makes it clear that the Written Scriptures are “profitable” for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. The Greek word translated “profitable” is *ὠφέλιμος*, (*ōphelimos*) which means “good,” “beneficial,” “useful.”

Then note what Paul writes in regard to the use of the Scriptures: “that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” In English, the word “adequate” seems minimalist, that it is enough to get by. But that is not what the Greek word means that lies behind this translation. The word is *ἄρτιος* (*artios*) and means “to be well fitted for some function, complete, capable, proficient, i.e., able to meet all demands.”<sup>1</sup> The NIV has a better translation: “thoroughly equipped for every good work.” For Paul, the Scriptures are absolutely sufficient to train the follower of Yeshua in living out every *mitzvah* (good work).

Surely the rabbinic literature, as well as the Pseudepigraphal and Apocryphal writings, are valuable for historical data and backgrounds to early Judaism and Christianities, and they often contain valuable insights into the Scriptures themselves. But they are, like other commentaries, the thoughts and writings of men and women. They are not the inspired Scriptures, and they do not carry divine authority as do the Scriptures. Marking this distinction, between what is divinely authoritative and what is not, is paramount to maintaining a biblically based, Yeshua centered, Torah observant life of faith.

So when you start hearing teachers giving credence to the rabbinic writings or even to early Christian documents (e.g., Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Apostolic Constitutions) as though they are authoritative or give us the definitive interpretation of the Scriptures, beware! If you are told that your obedience to God’s commandments is not complete unless your *halachah* conforms to this rabbinic dictum

1 BDAG, “ἄρτιος,” p. 136.

or that rabbinic tradition, watch out! You are being led down a slippery slope that ends in submission to the traditions of men as having equal authority with the Scriptures. Rather, like the Bereans of old, who “received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so,”<sup>1</sup> we must put everything we hear against the infallible word of God. What conforms to the Scriptures, accept; what does not, reject. Let the word of God be your sole authority for knowing what pleases God. A person determines if a stick is crooked by putting it next to a straight stick. Let the Bible be your straight stick.

Yeshua Himself warned His disciples and us about how the traditions of the elders could set aside the very commandment of God.

And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? (Matt 15:3)

In doing so, He was not negating all of the traditions of the elders, for it is clear that He followed many of these traditions and taught His disciples to do so as well. But what He did teach was that the traditions of the elders must be subservient to the word of God—the traditions do not have divine authority in and of themselves. Therefore, the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone are to be the final authority in all matters of faith and *halachah*.

Martin Bucer’s words contain a sobering contemplation for us:

A man is rarely to be found, who pays an excessive attention to human inventions in religion, who does not put more trust in them than in the grace of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Let it not be so of us! Let us cling to God by faith in His Messiah, Yeshua, and prize the inspired Scriptures as worthy above all other literature to lead us in the paths of righteousness for His Name sake.

----- *End of Excursus* -----

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1 Acts 17:11.

2 Quoted from J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Baker, 1977), 1.173.

**20 – let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

In the Greek manuscripts, the opening phrase, “let him know,” has a variant reading. Some manuscripts have *γινώσκετε* (*ginōskete*), the common indicative verb, which would be rendered “you know that he who turns...” But the weight of manuscript evidence has *γινώσκετω* (*ginōsketō*), an imperative, thus “he should know.” The problem with the reading “you know” is how it is to be applied. Is it addressed to the one who has turned a sinner from error, or to the sinner himself? The imperative, on the other hand, clearly addresses the one who has helped the wayward believer come to repentance and return to living obediently.

It is interesting that James ends his epistle with this admonition, encouraging each of us to extend a careful, wise, and loving hand to a brother or sister in the Lord who has followed the wrong path in his or her life. In fact, this forms a nice “bookend” to the epistle, for James began with a similar emphasis.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (James 1:2-3)

A brother or sister in the Lord who “strays from the truth” creates not only a trial in their own life but this can also be trying times for those who must seek to “turn the sinner from the error of his way.” Yet even these difficult situations are ultimately to be received as that which strengthens our faith as we are called upon to trust the Lord all the more and to be strengthened in the truth and its application in each other’s lives.

*...he who turns a sinner from the error of his way* – One wonders if James has Lev 19:17 in mind when he was guided by the Ruach to write this.

You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. (Lev 19:17)

Here, to “not hate your fellow countryman in your heart” could well be applied to one’s fellow believer, for all believers are adopted children in the family of God. Thus, to “reprove your neighbor” means not only to show him when he has done that which is contrary to God’s Torah,

i.e., His divine instructions, but also to “reprove him” (יָכַח, *yakach*, “to rebuke, reprove, to mediate”), that is, to “turn him from the error of his way” by speaking the truth in love, even as Paul admonishes us.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Messiah... (Eph 4:14-15)

To “speak the truth in love” does not mean to diminish the truth, even if to speak it may be received as judgmental. The discipline of the Lord may be painful but is given in love to restore His child to know and live out that which is true and right.

To “turn a sinner from the error of his way” is thus to bring that person back to the truth and to embrace the truth in his or her life and actions. The English word “turn” translates the Greek ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrephō*) which means “to turn back” or “to turn around,” that is, to reverse the errant path upon which the person is walking and to direct that person to the “path of righteousness.”

He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. (Ps 23:3)

And it is clear that one of the primary methods the Lord uses to restore His child who has “strayed from the truth” is the loving and persistent friendship of believers within the body of Messiah. Thus, James gives the strong encouragement to us all, that when we are used of the Lord to help bring a fellow believer back to living what is right and true, we are to know that we have been used of the Lord in a very important and strategic way.

... *will save his soul from death* – Once again, it appears that James is reiterating what we find in the wisdom of the Tanach:

In the way of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. (Prov 12:28)

The obvious truth is that a “path of life” that is not one of righteousness is, in fact, a pathway that leads to death. This is clearly referring to spiritual death, for if one who has professed to be a believer turns to live a life that is contrary to the truth of God, and never repents and turns back to the truth, then such a life of disobedience evidences a lack of

truly being born again unto a new life in Messiah and marks the person as an unbeliever. Clearly the Lord is the ultimate judge of the heart, but a person who professes to be a believer but whose life evidences no true fruit of righteousness causes their profession to be gravely suspect.

Some question why James would ascribe the “saving” to the one who has “turned the sinner from the error of his way.” The obvious answer is that those who help turn a fellow believer from the path upon which he has strayed, have been used of the Lord to bring about repentance and a return to a life of obedience. That God uses various means, including people, to accomplish His will, is clear. Note Paul’s instructions to Timothy:

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (1Tim 4:16)

Paul is not ascribing saving power to Timothy himself, but to the power of teaching that is based upon the Scriptures and is thereby used of God to bring about His saving grace and mercy in the lives of those who are His.

*...and will cover a multitude of sins.* – Sin inevitably brings consequences because living in sin is contrary to God’s will and design, and life characterized by sin inevitably yields sorrow and trouble. The longer a person remains on a path that leads away from God and His righteous instructions for life, the more pain and strife will be experienced, even if this is not immediately evident to others.

The metaphor of “covering” sin is well attested in the Scriptures and it means to put sin out of sight. To have sins “covered” when considered in the realm of forgiving one another, means that the sin is not longer a dividing factor, but that true forgiveness has been given and restoration is therefore desired. When considered in terms of what God “sees,” for sins to be “covered” means that they are no longer “seen” by Him as requiring payment. The sins have been paid for and no longer require His righteous judgment.

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit! (Ps 32:1–2)

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions. (Prov 10:12)

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. (1Pet 4:8)

Thus, James ends his epistle by giving a series of exhortations on how the believing community should function together in order to help one another grow in faith and in living righteously for the glory of our risen and reigning Savior, Yeshua. Not only does James emphasize the need for his readers to do what he has written, but he also instructs them to be deeply concerned to see others within the believing community do them as well.

Though the epistle ends abruptly without any salutation, it appears that particularly this final chapter compiles a number of primary exhortations that James, being born along by the Holy Spirit, desires to emphasize for his readers and for us.

He exhorts us to be faithful in that which God has given us to do, to persevere even under difficult times, to be careful about what we promise and to keep the oaths that we make, and finally, to serve each other in the community of faith and to do so in truth, guarding each other in order to strengthen our mutual faith in Yeshua.