

The New Testament letter of James is challenging. It's challenging because it pulls no punches as it describes the way Christians ought to be. It's challenging because James insists that good works have a place in the life of a Christian. James goes so far as to say that faith without works is dead. Who was James to talk that way? Well, he was Jesus' half-brother, a natural child of Joseph and Mary. He rose to prominence in the Jerusalem Christian Church. James had been a skeptic of his brother's claims, and that's probably saying it nicely. Yet seeing his dead brother come back to life convinced him that Jesus was in fact the Son of God, the promised Messiah. James built the rest of his life around this fact. So this challenging letter has authority, even today.

It's no coincidence, then, that when you read this letter as a whole, it sounds an awful lot like Jesus. Like Jesus, he tells stories and paints word pictures to get his point across, and like Jesus, his point hard-hitting: you need to repent. You need to go in a different direction. If you don't turn away from sin you will destroy yourself. Yet with God there is mercy; there is forgiveness of sins; there is a new beginning. James' message is unsettling because Jesus' message is unsettling. What He wants is a new you. James is trying to tell you that. Do you want to hear it?

The author Mark Twain once wrote: “Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture that they cannot understand. The Scripture which troubles me most is the Scripture that I do understand.” James is troubling, yet he isn't saying anything different than the rest of the Bible. He knows that we are saved not by our performance, but by Jesus' performance. James knows that we are saved from destruction by faith in Jesus alone. You could not possibly earn the status of being a child of God, but it has been given to you. It has been declared of you. It has been implanted in you. God's choice. It belongs to you by faith alone. All James is saying is that faith is never alone. Active service always follows along behind.

Do you see what James is fighting against? It's this idea that all “faith” consists of is saying the right words, or in my head, agreeing to a couple fine points of doctrine, and once I've done that, since I'm not saved by doing good works, I don't have to do any. James comes along and says, “that's not real faith.” If you have no desire to serve your brother; if you're not really concerned about taking care of the people in your life, James says check your pulse. Your faith may be dead.

So what's the solution? What are we supposed to do? Try harder to be a better Christian? Dig down deep inside to strive for more integrity? No, that won't work. We'll just disappoint ourselves, feel guilty about it, and beat ourselves up, or stop trying. No, the solution is to become a sponge. Yes, you heard me right. We need to become sponges.

Just imagine for a moment that you are holding a dry sponge in your hand. I mean, bone dry. Now imagine that you are squeezing that dry sponge as hard as you can. How much water are you going to get out of it? You're right. None. That dry sponge can't give what it doesn't have.

At different times in our lives, we let our faith become a dry sponge. We let all kinds of other things take precedence over getting that sponge wet with the Word of God. We let all kinds of other things take priority over sticking that sponge into God's bucket. And then we actually wonder why God feels so far away. We actually can't figure out why we feel so lifeless, even though we're so busy. If you've let your sponge go dry, there's just one solution, and it isn't difficult. Get your sponge back into God's life-giving water. Fill your sponge on the Word of God.

When you fill your sponge, what do you get? When you soak up the Word of God, you get the blessing of sins forgiven. You get the relief of not having to try to earn enough points for Him to notice you—He loves you already! And even more than that, you get His status applied to you. Everything he did counts for you. Everything He is is true of you—you are treasured by the Father, you are perfect in His eyes—you are eternal. This is what you get in your sponge when you fill up on God's Word.

Do you see what that means? In life you are going to get squeezed. It's guaranteed. But if your sponge is full of the precious gospel of Jesus, look at what's going to pour out. If your sponge is dry, it's going to hurt a lot. If your sponge has soaked in the promises of your Baptism and the identity of Jesus, pressure and stress, as unpleasant as they are, will cause the grace of God to overflow from you, you'll get squeezed and it'll flow out, and there's the works that James was talking about. That's why, as strange as it always seems, Christian people rise to the occasion—they lead the charge to help others in need. Some great trouble or tragedy occurs and it squeezes the sponges of Christian people. Those Christians take action. Not to save themselves. Not to earn points. It's who they are. It's who we are. It's who we can be when we keep soaking up God's Word.

Educator William Cunningham tells the following story. It's not about sponges, but it's close. A man was out walking in the desert at night when a voice said to him, "Pick up some pebbles, put them in your pocket, and tomorrow you will be both sorry and glad." The man obeyed. He stopped down, picked up a handful of pebbles, and put them in his pocket. The next morning he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of diamonds and rubies and emeralds. And he was both glad and sorry. Glad that he had taken some; sorry that he hadn't taken more.

God has priceless riches for you in His Word. He pledged those riches to you in your baptism. He serves those riches to you in Holy Communion. Don't end up sorry you hadn't taken more. Soak up God's gifts and let them flow out of you.