
James

Lesson 1

“James, Introduction, and Chapter 1”

Objective: To introduce the Book of James with its historical setting and provide an exegetical overview of chapter 1 along with some hermeneutical insights.

Materials:

- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text

Procedures

1. Provide a fresh translation of the text from Greek.
2. Introduce the issues surrounding the church's acceptance of this work and authorship.
3. Provide an exegesis of chapter 1.
4. In the context of the exegesis provide some hermeneutical ideas for our modern world.

The book of James is one of those books that has often been sidelined, ignored and even maligned. Martin Luther called the Book of James an “Epistle of Straw”¹ indicating his disdain for this book, but others have found in this letter a richness, a depth, and a beauty, that inspires and challenges them.² James in this encyclical letter addresses all of his compatriots and fellow believers in the Jewish diaspora as head of the Jerusalem church.³ This book was not easily accepted into the canon of the New Testament. There were, and there continue to be questions regarding its authorship. The traditional view among those in the Protestant tradition is that the author was James the younger


¹ “In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an **epistle of straw**, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it. But more of this in the other prefaces.”

² “For him [James] the thought of God’s unchangeableness [1:17] is one of pure and unmixed comfort, peace, joy, happiness. And this is indeed eternally true. But let us not forget that the Apostle’s joy has its explanation in the fact that the Apostle is the Apostle, that he has already long since wholly yielded himself in unconditional obedience to God’s unchangeableness. He does not stand at the beginning, but rather at the end of the way, the narrow but good way which he had chosen in renunciation of everything, pursuing it invariably and without a backward look, hasting towards eternity with stronger and ever stronger strides.” Søren Kierkegaard, trans. Walter Lowrie, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves! and Three Discourses 1851* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 230.

³ Richard Bauckham, *James*, in the New Testament Readings series (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 13.

brother of Jesus. The history of this question is far from simple, and issues of theology regarding the virginity of Mary impact the views held by the various groups causing those on the other side of the divide to be deeply entrenched in their approach to this work. We will seek to survey these various views regarding James and his relationship to Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the other apostles. Some may see this as unnecessary, and unfruitful, but I disagree. Understanding others, who are genuinely trying to be faithful to the call of God is never wasted effort and it appears that the various views regarding James come from a genuine desire to understand who James really is, and how we should regard his message.

It might be of some value to note that there seems to be a tremendous symmetry between the message, thought processes and emphases between the message of the Book of James and that which we have recorded in the Gospels regarding Jesus. It is also important to note that the response of interpreters to the message of the Book of James and that of Jesus also shows parallels: interpreters respond by radical critiques of the message, or by domesticating it and thus softening its impact. James tends to



focus on Torah obedience, practical theology, and ethics. This is perhaps part of the reason that James has so little appeal to theologians and yet his material is commonly the subject of sermons and other discourses that focus upon the practical applications of Scripture. Some also see James as contradicting the teachings of Paul and even other parts of the Bible and this causes some to discount the message of this book. It is perhaps James's radical pronouncements with regard to the marginalized, the poor and the wealthy that contribute most to this marginalization.⁴ The words of James deeply challenge, offend, and convict people in ways that cause them discomfort, and even distress, and so it is easier to avoid that discomfort and distress by marginalization of this work. It must however be noted that the message of James aligns concisely with the message of Jesus.

It should be noted that in reality most interpreters agree that there little or no contradiction between the teachings of Paul and those of James with regard to faith in works. It is their approach that makes them appear to be different. A substantive battleground for the Book of James has been, and in some circles

⁴ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, in the Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries series (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 22-23.

continues to be in the area of determining who is this James who wrote this letter? James was a quiet common name and this, along with theological issues, have been instrumental in creating some level of confusion with regard to the identity of James and his relationship to Jesus, in particular. Theories regarding the Epistle's authorship vary and the internal and the external evidence has a level of ambiguity that has permitted a variety of views to persist. The author begins by calling himself, "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," in a manner that is at the same time self-effacing and exuding tremendous authority. This designation then gives him the qualifications necessary to follow with numerous commands to those whom he addresses in the letter that follows.⁵

In English we call this work after the name of its author, which in Greek *Iacobus* (Ἰάκωβος). Had it not been for the Latin alternate rendering (*Jacomus*) of this name it might have come down to us in English as Jacob. A number of modern European languages now have two male names that are derived from a

⁵ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, p. 28.

common linguistic root (Jacob and James).⁶ It should be noted that most interpreters would argue that the author of this letter implicitly claims to be James the brother of Jesus. This then leaves three basic options for how James the brother of Jesus authored this letter. 1. James could have written this letter before, or without having encountered the writings of Paul with regard to justification by faith. 2. Some argue that James is actually writing in response to Paul's message that had been heard or was beginning to be heard. 3. Others would argue that James did not actually write this letter at all. They object to the possibility of James the brother of Jesus having written this letter based upon the high quality of the Greek in the Epistle. Some would counter that a scribe was involved in the composition of this letter in the way that Paul also used a scribe in the composition of his letters. This would then explain the quality of the Greek.⁷ There is no real way of determining which of these views is correct and in reality they do not heavily impact our interpretation of the message of James.

⁶ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), p. 47.

⁷ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 29-30.

The issue of the identity of James is considered critical in determining the canonicity and authenticity of its message. Interpreters have understood the meaning of the term *adelphos* (“brother” **ἀδελφός**) in different ways. There are three primary views in this regard that are named after the most common advocates of the various positions in the fourth century when this issue was hotly debated, they are: 1. The Helvidian. 2. The Hieronymian. 3. The Epiphonian theories. The term *adelphos* (**ἀδελφός**) normally is used to designate a biological brother and so the simplest and most likely explanation is that Jesus and James are related by blood. It is commonly the case that the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels (Matthew 12:46; 13:55-56; 28:10; Mark 3:31-32; 6:3; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; 20:17) were seen as the younger children of Joseph and Mary. This position is called the Helvidian theory after an obscure figure made famous by Jerome’s criticisms of his position.⁸

Helvidius points to the example of biblical verses such as Matthew 1:25 which says that Joseph did not “know” (**γινώσκω**) her until the birth of Jesus. To Helvidius this verse then implies

⁸ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 29-30.

that after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, had sexual relations. He also cites Luke 2:7 where Jesus is referred to as the “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος) of Mary which he argues implies that she had other children. In this view James is then the younger brother of Jesus and the son of Mary and Joseph. In the Epiphanian theory, which came to be the dominant view in the Eastern tradition, it is argued that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were children of Joseph from a previous marriage. This theory is named after Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis around A.D. 366. He takes his cue for this position from earlier texts such as the *Protevangelium of James* that was written in the middle of the second century where it states that Joseph is a widower who had at least two other sons from a previous marriage. This older son is even said to have led the donkey that carried Mary to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus. The final theory is the Hieronymian theory which is named after its steadfast proponent Jerome. He puts forward the view that the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus are in reality his cousins. He held so firmly to the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary that he preferred this view over any that might threaten this view. He postulates that since Paul calls


James one of the Apostles he must be one of the twelve apostles of Jesus (Galatians 1:18-19).⁹

It seems most probable that James was the actual younger brother of Jesus and also that after the death of Jesus he becomes the primary leader of the mother church at Jerusalem and that he is referred to as an apostle. This James is known outside of the New Testament, the earliest of these accounts is that given by Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* where he records that James is brought before the Sanhedrin by the newly appointed High Priest Ananus who had him stoned to death along with others. (*Antiquities of the Jews* XX:200-201). Eusebius gives a somewhat different account that he says he received from Clement of Alexandria in which James is thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and then beaten to death with a fuller's club. Eusebius also gives an account attributed to Hegesippus which combines throwing James from the pinnacle of temple, stoning him and the striking of him with the fuller's club. This account also says that at the time that James died Vespasian began his siege of Jerusalem.¹⁰

⁹ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 30-34.

¹⁰ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 34-40.

Perhaps it is not so much the issue of who the author of the Book of James was nor other historical details that have led so many to not only question this letter's authenticity and its validity, but also its message, because of the subversive nature of the message. James, in a way that is very much reminiscent of Jesus challenges the order of the world and calls for those who would be his followers to become champions of the poor, the weak and the powerless. This message has perhaps even been seen by some as Marxist-Leninist infiltration into the doctrine of the church. Of course such an accusation is absurd: the book of James was written long before such doctrines were known and bringing anachronistic arguments to the issue only clouds, distorts, and enflames the issue. James almost totally repeats the message of the Sermon on the Mount in his epistle. The message of the Book of James convicts us, challenges us, and calls us to live life in the light of a reality that is not comfortable, not reconcilable with a life of ease and comfort. This work challenges us to continually see the injustice in our world, to fight that injustice, and to truly



recognize that this world, in its unredeemed, and unsanctified, state is not our home.¹¹

The Book of James calls on its readers to live a life of wisdom, not the wisdom of our modern world or that of human concoction, but to recognize and follow the wisdom of God. It challenges us to recognize and to truly acknowledge that we, as human beings, are not the center of the universe. It calls upon us to recognize that that place is occupied by the God who created all that exists, but more than recognition James calls for acknowledgment through actions. This is not a book concerned with having the correct answers to some celestial quiz it is a book concerned that the correct understanding of the world demands correct action on the part of the creature. We are challenged to address inequality, oppression, poverty, injustice in the radical and subversive way that Jesus did during his life and to be willing to give our life to challenge the false nature of the world in which we live.

The message of James also reiterates the message that was delivered when someone stood up in public on the very first day

¹¹ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, Revised ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 1-6.

that the full message of the Gospel was delivered to the world and that is that the message of the good news of God is not for the few, it is for everyone. Some call this day the birthday of the church. It was the day that the spirit of God swept over the chaos of the deep disorder that had been created by the sinfulness and rebellion of man, and as the time of creation the hovering spirit of God began a new and powerful creative activity that would result in something new and good. The leader of those who explained to those present the meaning of what God was beginning in this moment had only a few weeks earlier been a sniveling, lying coward who had denied even knowing Jesus. Now he would be the spokesperson for God in this pivotal moment when the plan of God would finally be revealed and the new creation would begin. This message would spread; it was never intended to be a message for the intellectual elite, the powerful, or even for those who were religious. This was a message for everyone.¹²

N. T. Wright starts his commentary on James with a great illustration regarding waves, he says:

¹² N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. ix-xi.

I used to think the waves had come from far away. Standing by the sea and watching the grey-green monsters roll in, it was easy to imagine that this wave, and then this one, and then the one after that, had made the journey from a distant land. Here they were, like the Magi, arriving at last to deposit their gifts.

But of course it isn't like that.

Waves are what happens when wind and tide take hold of the waters that are there all the time and make them dance to their tune. Just yesterday I stood in the bright sunshine and watched them sparkling and splashing around a little harbour, making the boats dip and bob. A fine sight; the waves seem to have character and energy of their own. But they don't.

They are the random products of other forces.

The challenge of faith is the challenge not to be a wave. There are many winds and tides in human life, and it's easy to imagine ourselves important because we seem, from time to time at least, to dance and sparkle this way and that. The question is whether the character that develops within us is the real thing, or whether, as James says in verse 6, we are simply double-minded and unstable, blown and tossed about by this wind or that.¹³

Jacob (James), slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the diaspora, greetings.

James writes with the authority of a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. This at first look appears as such a humble

¹³ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 3-4.

and lowly title, but what title could carry more authority than the one James lays out here? He writes to the twelve tribes of the dispersion. Two views are taken of the meaning of James here: 1. That he is indeed writing to those who are the physical descendants of those who are dispersed around the world from the borders of Palestine. 2. That James has in mind here the faithful remnant of God's people, the true Israel of eschatological salvation (cf. Jeremiah 31:8; Ezekiel 37:19, 25). This is the sense that was appropriated by Christians who laid claim to this status as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).¹⁴ The question then is to whom is James writing? It is most likely that he is writing to the true Israel that has accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but also those that are descended physically from the twelve tribes of Israel. James was, after all the head of the Jewish church at Jerusalem and it appears that here he is writing to that segment of the church.¹⁵


1:2 Regard it as a source of great joy when you fall into various trials, 1:3 because you realize that the testing of your

¹⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *James*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 48 (Nashville TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1988), pp. 4-11.

¹⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 28-30.

faith produces patient endurance. 1:4 and let the patient endurance result in a mature workmanship in order that you might be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

James moves past the initial greeting to identify more clearly the audience to whom his letter is addressed. It is addressed to those that are undergoing trials. James will identify this group and what they are experiencing more as the letter develops but here he calls for a response that is very different from what be expected. He calls upon his audience to consider it a joy to come under testing. He calls for them to do this because in these trials a byproduct will come, that byproduct will be endurance. James recognizes a benefit in these trials actually “testing” the faith of these Christians living under trying circumstances in the places beyond Palestine. As we begin reading the letter of James it does not begin with a sense of building up the audience or with deep theology, it begins in a fashion that is very much reminiscent of Jewish wisdom literature. It begins with very practical admonitions as to how to be wise before God. To do that, more than intellectual knowledge is required; action is needed as well, and this is where James



begins. He expects and anticipates knowledge in his audience, and that knowledge demands action that aligns with that knowledge. This then is wisdom.

James does not call for some kind of quiet resignation to trials but for an active resistance in the cause of God. The focus of James here is upon developing an attitude of militant patience that does not wear down the Christian's resistance to trials but continually strengthens and empowers that person. The fuel for greater resistance and perseverance are the trials.¹⁶ James masterfully and powerfully gives his audience the key not simply to endure but to be transformed by the trials in such a way that those trials empower and encourage. Truly this is a mature view that propels the one with such a view into a new arena of existence and gives such a person a power that turns the world on its head. Normally it is the case that experiencing oppression, marginalization, and persecution is a debilitating or draining experience. It tend to dehumanize and destroy the human spirit. In this instance James writes to those experiencing such things,

¹⁶ Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2004), pp. 337-338.

words of hope, but more than hope, power. James calls his audience to transformation into what God has called his human image to be from the beginning even using hardship and pain as a tool to make this happen. In this process they become more human rather than less human.¹⁷

^{1:5} If any of you is lacking wisdom, let him ask God, the one giving to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ^{1:6} But ask in faith not doubting for the one doubting is like a wave of the sea driven and blown by the wind; ^{1:7} for that person should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord, ^{1:8} since he is double-souled, and unstable in all his ways.

This section begins with an understanding of wisdom that is in so many ways unique to the Jewish community among the cultures of the Ancient Near East. For the Jews wisdom was something that could be defined as the ability to live life in such a way as to follow God and be what God had created humanity to be. James is using the term wisdom here in this Jewish fashion. He is certainly not telling his audience that if they pray to God he will make them smarter, with a higher IQ. The plea here, from

¹⁷ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, pp. 60-61.

James, is to pursue that which leads to a godly life, one devoted to pursuing that which will transform a person into the human that God always intended a person to be, a person that truly lives as the image-bearer of God in the world. James calls upon his audience to make this request in humility, recognizing the Lord as the source of such wisdom and who seeks to give this to those who humbly seek it, in faith. Faith is critical here, this is not a hail Mary pass hoping it might help; James here calls for a confident faith that challenges his readers to trust God, especially in the times of trauma.

In such circumstances God gives “generously” and “without reproach”, this is the desire of God and he waits as a good and generous father for such a moment in the life of his children and he does not say, “What took you so long you thick-headed dunce?” God has longed for this request from his children and he longs to reward this open, honest, humble, faith-filled request. James does warn his readers not to doubt but he goes beyond this using a term that literally means “double souled” (δίψυχος). James here provides the earliest usage of this term, (that has currently been found in Greek literature) though it does become common

in Christian literature from this point onward. Today we might translate this as “half-hearted”, which expresses the divineness that James is saying is counterproductive in this endeavor.¹⁸

James called for a singleminded determination that is not affected negatively by external forces. The imagery here is of one who is not to be driven or affected by winds as is a wave of the sea. This person is to be dominated by a desire to follow God in a single-minded determination that causes him to withstand these forces. If this is not done then nothing should be expected from the Lord, because they are “unstable.” Again, there is a connection being made with the Hebrew concept of wisdom that powerfully anchored a person in the word and will of God so that they are not tossed about by the latest whim of society, or culture, in a way that disregards the Lord. If a person does follow the whim of his own mind, or of society, they are on their own and should expect nothing from God.

1:9 But let the humble brother boast in his high position, 1:10 and the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the grass he will pass away. 1:11 For the sun rises with burning heat and dries

¹⁸ A. K. M. Adam, *James A Handbook on the Greek Text*, in the Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament series (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), p. 10.

up the grass and its flower falls off and the beauty of its face is destroyed just as the rich in his journey withers away.

James here begins this section telling the “lowly,” the man of “humble,” position to boast in his “high position.” Once again we find James challenging the perspective of the world. In terms of what the world admires and boasts in, riches, fame and power are elevated. People pursue these things with their time, and more importantly, with the hearts. James is challenging this set of priorities and instead challenging his audience to recognize that these things are signs of a mis-spent life. I have heard it said that when someone is very proficient at playing pool this is a sign of a mis-spent youth. James is here saying that the accumulation of wealth is a sign of a mis-spent life with priorities in the wrong place. Have you ever met someone who considered themselves to be rich? I have not. I have, however, met many people that I considered rich, and I am almost certain that I have met many that have considered me to be rich. James is not really trying to define where that line is he is trying to get his audience to focus on the priorities of the Lord rather than on the priorities that the world sets to measure success.

James here very much writes in a fashion that is reminiscent of Hebrew wisdom literature, with one of those themes, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes, being the fleeting (vaporous) nature of our life on earth as human beings. Surely the words of James here will have reminded his audience of this body of literature and they would have recognized that the call of James here is a call that echoes the call of those who wrote the wisdom literature of Israel in the past. He is calling upon them to focus their attention upon the priorities of God and not the accumulation of wealth as a source of security and comfort. He is actually saying that the pursuit of wealth is fleeting and does not provide security at all. It is temporary and insecure.

^{1:12} Blessed is the man who endures temptation, because becoming approved he will receive the crown of life which is promised to those loving him (the Lord). ^{1:13} Let no one being tempted say that, "From God I am being tempted;" For God is not tempted by evil and he tempts no one. ^{1:14} But each one is tempted by his own desires being drawn away and enticed; ^{1:15} then the desire, seizing the opportunity, gives birth to sin, and the

sin finishes giving birth to death. ^{1:16} Do not be deceived, brothers of my beloved ones.

James begins this section with a word that, for most Christians, reminds them of the Beatitudes of Jesus. Perhaps this should not be surprising to us as they were brothers after all. He then states that the one who endures temptation will receive the “crown of life” as a reward to those, perhaps here we would expect him to highlight obedience, but instead we are confronted with the motivation for such actions in the form of the love for the Lord. Action that is self-seeking is not in view here. The resisting of temptation that James indicates will receive this reward is not motivated by fear, or selfish motives, but out of love. There is a tendency to even think of temptation as some form of test sent from God, and James wants his audience to clearly understand the source of temptation. First of all, that source is not from God who cannot be tempted by evil nor does he use evil to tempt anyone. The source of these temptations is from within the person themselves: This is from where temptations spring, not from outside. This desire then grows as a child grows in the womb and if fed, nourished, and looked after, it will come forth

full born as sin. It will begin a family tree, of that which is at its source a creation of our own heart; and it ultimately brings forth death to the one who conceives it. James calls upon his audience not to be deceived into allowing this to happen.

^{1:17} All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights from whom there is not variation or shadow of change. ^{1:18} Wishing to give birth to us through the word of truth so that we are the ones who become first fruits of his creation.

In these verses James grounds what he has said previously in what is true about God himself: God is the generous source of all that is truly good and of every perfect gift that comes from above. James carefully defines the source and in some sense the nature of the gifts he speaking of here. Everything that truly is a source of light in the world is from God. This is an echo of Isaiah 40 where we are told that God became our father by the word of truth. God has begun here his fresh, new, family tree, that is brought into existence through the word of truth, the gospel of Jesus. James continues to challenge his audience to look at the world differently; to be transformed by the gospel message into

something new and different in the world. Standing firm against temptation is the beginning point of what God is doing with his people in the world.¹⁹

1:19 You must understand, brothers of my beloved ones; every man should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 1:20 because human anger does not accomplish the righteousness of God. 1:21 Therefore laying aside all moral uncleanness and all evil excesses in gentleness, welcome the implanted word, the one being able to save your soul.

In this section James introduces others of his key themes: first, calling upon those of his audience to be listeners. He calls upon them to be quick to listen and he links this here to the issue of anger. How easy it is for us as humans to hear something that quickly causes our anger to flair, but James calls for another way. He calls upon those hearing his words to listen carefully and to lay aside human anger, because it does not accomplish the will of God. How easy it is for us as human beings to become angry and to consider our anger, in some way, to be righteous; well here James calls us out on that and says such anger does not

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 9.

accomplish the righteousness of God. It is most often self-centered and self-righteous, making it more about us than really about God. In traditional wisdom fashion James seeks to reorient our worldview in such a way that the reality of God sits at the center of our reality, rather than self.

James links all of this to theme of moral uncleanness and ties gentleness to it speaking of the word that is implanted in the person. There is a link between this implanted word, moral cleanness and gentleness. The implanted word will produce these other aspects if it is growing and taking root as it should and the final outcome will be the salvation of the soul. James makes it clear that he sees a correlation and one cannot truly be present without the other. The living, actively growing word of God will bring change, if there is no change there is a problem.

^{1:22} But become one that does the word and not only a hearer deceiving yourself. ^{1:23} Because the one hearing the word is not the doer, this one is like a man beginning to look at his face in the mirror; ^{1:24} to consider himself and departing and immediately he forgets what sort of person he was. ^{1:25} But the one looking into the perfect law of liberty and the one remaining

(steadfast), does not become one hearing in forgetfulness but he becomes a doer of deeds, therefore you are blessed in being the one doing.

The words of James here are both distressing, while at the same time, in some sort of strange way, comforting. The church today faces the fact that many of the people that attend are “hearers” only and not doers. They are nominal Christians at best. In the time of James the same problem existed and because it did he addresses this matter. These were people that were happy to listen to the word, but who left and were not really changed by what they heard. James here uses the illustration of someone looking into a mirror and then forgetting what they looked like. They took a quick glance and found what they saw interesting but they forget and carry on with their life in the same way they had before they heard the message. The remedy that James proposes for this problem is to remind his audience of the word of God; they are not just to hear it be to actually let it take hold in their lives and allow their lives to be transformed by the word.²⁰

²⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 11-12.

^{1:26} If anyone considers themselves to be religious but does not bridle his tongue, he is deceiving his heart, the religion of this one is worthless. ^{1:27} Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the father is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress, to keep oneself spotless from the world.


James then goes on to lay out what such a changed life would look like. James is extraordinarily practical, and the words that he leaves here at the end of chapter one are infinitely practical, but more than that they reflect the very nature of God himself. First of all James calls on his readers to control their tongue. He uses the metaphor of a bridle here. He says that if a person is not willing to control his tongue then his religion is worthless. In verse 27 he goes on to define more closely what he means when he uses the term “religion” (θρησκεία). This is a word that is often used of devout, or pious religious practice and James here defines such practice that is “pure” and “undefiled” as caring for orphans (ὀρφανός) and widows (χήρα) in their distress. This religion that James calls for is to look after the weakest and most vulnerable in their time of distress. They are to do this while at the same time keeping themselves unstained

by the world. The world system is tainted, and the challenge for Christians is to live in the world without allowing the impurity of this world and its system to stain them and change them. They are to change the world, not be changed by the world. The call here is straightforward and simply said, but so hard to actually perform.

Synopsis

Despite the fact that the the Book of James has been maligned, ignored by many there is a tremendous richness and wealth of inspiration there. There have also been many that have disputed that James, the younger brother of Jesus was the author of this work, but this is most likely who wrote this letter. There are tremendous parallels between this letter and the teachings of Jesus. James is also very practical while as the same time presenting things in a challenging fashion much like his older sibling did. He focuses on Torah obedience, practical theology and ethics and does not deliver a theological treatise like Paul. Some have seen the teachings of James to disagree with those of Paul, but that is more reflective of their understanding than any real disagreement.

James (Jacob) writes to the twelve tribes of the dispersion calling himself a slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, a title of humility for the slave and respect and honor for the master. The Greek of this letter is of an extraordinarily high standard and this has caused some to question whether this could have been written by a Palestinian Jew like James? Such an objection is unfounded



and there are multiple ways that James could have composed this letter; such as using a scribe, or perhaps he was just well-versed in the Greek style. James was martyred for his faith and at least some say that once James was gone from the Temple God allowed the Romans to attack under Vespasian.

This letter challenges us in very practical ways in a style that is very much reminiscent of Jewish wisdom literature and in the style of Jesus himself. The message of this book convicts, challenges and inspires, calling for a proactive powerful faith of action. We are challenged to see the injustice in our world and to be counter-force to fight against all injustice, especially on behalf of the weak and the powerless. The central motivation for this lifestyle is the recognition of the wisdom of God and the fact that acknowledging this is demonstrated through action. The action of the followers of Christ are a part of God's new creative activity sweeping over creation in a fashion reminiscent of the spirit hovering over the deep in Genesis 1:2. We are to be joint participants of the tsunami of change generated through the power of God and not to be affected by the winds of worldliness

that challenge us to be like a wave tossed about by any and every wind.

James recognizes that such a stance will put those taking it at odds with the world and he seeks to fortify his audience to endure the hardship that will ensue. He does this in a very creative fashion that challenges them to see trials as a source of producing endurance and maturity. He goes on to challenge them to seek wisdom from its ultimate source and indicates that if they will ask God will give it to them. He invokes them to be people of faith with a single-minded resolve that is securely anchored in their trust of God. He also calls upon his audience to recognize that worldly position is not the same in the eyes of God as it is in the eyes of men. Wealth should be seen as a sign of humiliation and danger and humble circumstances as “high position.” As is clearly taught in Ecclesiastes man is but a vapor in the span of his life before God and soon withers. The calling of man is to resist temptation and seek the approval of God rather than the approval of the world or self. One leads to life while the other gives birth to death.

Everything that is good comes from God. If we are to truly follow God we should be slow to anger, quick to hear laying aside all evil and embracing gentleness, welcoming the word of God that has been implanted in us and is capable of saving our soul.

Hearing the word, while failing to do it is deception. As followers of Christ we are called to not only hear but to do what the word of God says. James in a very practical manner challenges the recipients of his letter to bridle the tongue and to look after widows and orphans in their distress, keeping oneself from being tainted by the world. This is pure religion.

Questions

1. Why does it matter if James is the younger brother or not in the interpretation of the Epistle of James?
2. Why do you think some people do not like the Book of James?
3. Why do you think James, the brother of Jesus might be called called an apostle?
4. Why do you think James wrote to the Jews of the dispersion?
5. What is wisdom?
6. How do you see James applying wisdom in his epistle?
7. How does James challenge his readers to see trials?
8. What response does he expect to be the result of trials?
9. What should the result of trials be for Christians?
10. Where does wisdom originate?
11. How are wisdom and faith connected?
12. How do faith and doubting relate to one another?
13. How does James respond to wealth?

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14. What is the nature of man in comparison with the nature of God?
 15. What response does James call for in the face of temptation?
 16. What is temptation?
 17. What gives birth to death?
 18. What does it mean to be the first fruits of creation?
 19. What is the place of human anger in the service of God?
 20. Why do you think James focuses on doing?
 21. What is religion?
 22. What does it mean for James to call on his readers to look after widows and orphans in distress?
 23. How do we get spotted by the world?

James

Lesson 2

“James Chapter 2”

Objective: To provide an exegetical analysis for this section and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in the application of this text.

Materials:

- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text

Procedures

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- 1.** To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.
 - 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
 - 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
 - 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

There have been times that I have been embarrassed at church and particularly by things that were said or happened at church. One of those embarrassing things relates to a practice that I have often seen in Europe. In touring churches you will sometimes find pews with doors on them and walls around the pews and name plates on the door. I have learned that such facilities represent the fact that families of means would buy pews for their family to sit in at church. I had always thought that this was an anachronistic practice that came from medieval times, sort of like stocks, iron maidens, and other torture devices, but I was very much mistaken. Recently I became aware that something very similar has happened and continues to happen at our own church and more horrifying to me still is that some people take pride in such a practice. I would have thought with even a basic modicum of cultural sensitivity such practices would be a thing of rarity or the past, but how naive I have been.

Recently I was made aware of a couple that visited our church and only a few minutes after the morning worship service began they were seen exiting the auditorium rather hurriedly and someone stopped them and asked them very politely why they

were leaving? They said they were leaving because they had been asked on two separate occasions, that morning, to move because they were sitting in someone's seats. In some ways this scenario seems more barbaric and uncaring even than the stalls in the ancient churches of Europe that have walls, gates, and nameplates, because, in our church, there is no way to know if you are sitting in someone's seat, there are no labels, walls, or nameplates present. All of this makes me wonder if people have ever read the Epistle of James, especially chapter 2. My heart is broken for this family that were visiting to see if this might be the place where they could come and worship God and find a family of believers that would encourage, empower, and enrich their relationship with God and his people. What must they think? What must God think?

^{2:1} My brothers, do not in partiality have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. ^{2:2}For if a man enters the synagogue with a gold ring on his finger wearing wearing glamorous clothing, and a poor man in filthy clothing enters, ^{2:3} Do not look favorably upon the one wearing glamorous clothing, saying you be seated well, and to the poor saying you stand there or sit on

my footstool, ^{2:4} If you make a distinction in yourself have you not become judges reasoning with evil motives?

It seems to me that James must have experienced some of these things in his time. He calls upon his readers to recognize the insidious and “evil” nature of preferential treatment. Some might object that the situation that James addresses is different than the one I recounted above. Is it really? The best seat in the house for anyone is the one they like the best. I wonder if Governor Perry had walked in and sat down, or Cliff Kingsbury had walked in and sat down in your favorite seat, would you ask them to move, or would you relish the moment? “Partiality” is evil, at least according to James, and he is going to unpack what is meant by this later on in his letter, but deep down we all know it is evil. Whenever we treat someone in a fashion that causes separation, pain, or causes them to leave, because of our own selfishness have we honored a savior that left heaven to pursue those living in the filth and squalor of their sin? This is surely a part of what James meant at the end of chapter one about not being stained by the world, not allowing the world to put its dirty smudge on us. The world is always assessing people, sizing them

up, measuring them, establishing pecking order: God, who sees and loves all alike wants the church to reflect that generous love in how it behaves. God wants the church to be a beacon of his attitude, and not the attitude of selfish human nature. In some parts of the early church they had a rule that if a regular member of the church came in an usher would seat them; but if a stranger came in, and particularly a poor stranger, the bishop of the church would leave his chair and go to the door to welcome the newcomer.¹ Perhaps this is a rule that it would be good for us to ponder today?

James begins his line of reasoning by warning his audience of trying to combine faith and prejudice; starting with the command not to show prejudice. There is no place in true faith in Jesus Christ for making social distinctions.² These social distinctions are made based upon the jewelry and clothing worn by those coming into the assembly (συναγωγή). The assumption is here, and not just here, but elsewhere, that you can tell who is a

¹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 13-14.

² Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), p. 106.

poor person by what they wear. Based upon these judgments seats were assigned with the rich being given the good seats while the poor are humiliated, or at least ranked in a submissive position (Psalm 99:5; 110:1; 132:7; Isaiah 66:1; Lamentations 2:1).³ This act of judgement takes the place that is only God's position, of being the only true judge, and doing what Jesus told people not to do (John 7:24), at least not to do it improperly merely based upon appearances.

^{2:5} Listen my beloved brothers; has God not chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom he promised to those loving him? ^{2:6} But you dishonor the poor. Is it not the rich oppressing you and they dragging you into court? ^{2:7} Do they not blaspheme the good name of the one calling to you?

James goes beyond simply insisting upon equality of treatment and hints at something that he will develop later: This is the fact that the rich are likely to be those that are the oppressors of the poor, and even persecutors of the church. It is the same with every justice system that does not take great care, the rich control the justice system. The rich can hire the best

³ Ralph P. Martin, *James*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 48 (Nashville TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1988), p. 62.

lawyers and they might even be able to bribe people to get what they want. They lobby, give campaign donations, and get their way while the poor are powerless to do anything.⁴ In light of this God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. It falls to them, that God gives the inheritance of the kingdom. James appears to be aware that some in his audience are guilty of dishonoring the poor, the heirs of the kingdom. He then seeks to redress the balance and remind them of the exploitation of the rich. It is they who drag people to court, not the poor who are powerless and unable to do so. They even appear to be against the church, blaspheming the name of Christ. Why then give deference to the enemies of God's church and the heirs of his kingdom? He challenges them to see the world through the eyes of God and not through the eyes of the world.

^{2:8} If, however, you fulfill the royal law according to what is written, love your neighbor as yourself, you do well. ^{2:9} But if you show partiality, you are convicted of sin by the law as a transgressor. ^{2:10} For whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles on one part, becomes guilty of all. ^{2:11} For the one saying, "you

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 14-15.

must not commit adultery,” he also said, “you must not murder;” but if you do not commit adultery but you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James continues to indicate to his audience the right path, citing the need to obey the royal law of loving your neighbor. He commends this as something that is good and that doing this, is something that should be done. Doing, some, good is not enough, if in one instance you keep part of what is right and in another instance you go against God by showing favoritism. How hard it is for human beings not to show favoritism, especially when it comes to something that is beneficial to oneself. James here equates favoritism with being a lawbreaker and he goes on to indicate that if you break one law you are guilty of breaking it all. Here James indicates that he is totally at home in the world of Judaism. The goal of the Jewish law, for those who followed it, was to carry out all of it, and not just part of it. The breaking of one command places a person in the position of being a transgressor of the Law. This precept is clearly demonstrated in the world of Judaism: “Cursed is every man, who does not abide in all the words of this law to do them, and all the people say,

“may it be so.” (The Septuagint Deuteronomy 27:26). The community of Qumran had a similar conviction: “And anyone of the men of the Community, the covenant of the Community, who insolently shuns anything at all commanded, cannot approach the pure food of the men of holiness” (1QS 8:16-17).⁵

The teaching of Jesus respects this same emphasis on the importance of upholding the whole Law: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:17-20 NRSV. The issue here is not the observance of the letter of every minuscule aspect of the Law in some form of legalistic, formulaic manner. What is in view

⁵ Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, in the Sacra Pagina series, vol. 14 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), pp. 135-136.

here is the overarching view of the purpose of the Law. The Law represents God's will for humanity. That one must "keep" the whole Law means that one must orient their life toward carrying out God's will in totality in their life. This is the vision, the goal of the person oriented toward keeping the Law. They strive to be, and to do what God has called them to be and to do. Every command then becomes an expression of, not only obedience to God, but devotion and trust in God.⁶

2:12 Thus speak and act as one who is be judged by the law of liberty. 2:13 For merciless judgement will come to the one not being merciful; mercy triumphs over judgement.

James then calls upon his readers to speak and act in a certain way: in a way that recognizes that they are judged by "the law of liberty." It is perhaps here that we have the clearest indication that James has two different laws in mind. James returns here to the "law of liberty" that was first introduced in 1:25 as a positive contrast to the Law of verse 10-11.⁷ Confusion can easily come here, if we do not see James speaking and

⁶ Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, p. 136.

⁷ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 119.

contrasting the Torah with the “Law of Liberty.” James sees clearly, even at this early stage of the church, that there are some who want to pick and choose what they will obey and what they will disregard as if somehow the new covenant represents some type of holy smorgasbord where any part will bring nourishment to the soul, sustaining it, and that it is all up to individual preference what parts to take and what parts to leave. Instead James sees the law as like a sheet of glass, that if it is broken, is completely broken, and not just a little broken. It is this same way with other things such as a flat tire, that when flat is not just a little flat. It appears that some in James’s audience were trying to drive on a flat tire, the flat tire of social prestige rather than upon the fully inflated tire of loving one’s neighbor. They were trying to stop the cold wind coming in the their house with a broken sheet of glass that was shattered and had fallen into pieces.⁸

James here confronts a paradox in verse 13. The mercy of God is sovereign. It will overcome, but the moment a person says, “Oh well, that is all right, God will forgive me, so it does not

⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 15.

matter what I do,” and in particular when what I do is to discriminate against the poor; then it is at that point when because the mercy I am relying upon is God’s, he must act in judgement. God will not forever tolerate a world in which mercy is not the ultimate rule of life. “Mercy” is not the same thing at all as shoulder-shrugging tolerance where anything goes. Anything does most certainly not go. Certainly arrogance, corruption, blasphemy, favoritism and lawbreaking of any kind does not go. If God were to be merciful to such things then he would be deeply unmerciful to the poor, the helpless, the widow and the orphan. Everything about the gospel message insists that this is not the case at all.⁹

At the beginning, it is the case that churches were made up mostly of those who were poor. Some have even referred to this early church community as the brotherhood of the poor. In the time that the Epistle of James is written the church is still made up mostly of the poor. In this letter, it appears that the rich are either not members of the Christian community at all, or that James does not think they are genuinely a part. Of the three

⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 16.

contexts in which they are explicitly named, in two they are named as oppressors (2:6; 5:1-6), and in the third they are condemned to failure in all their pursuits (1:11). James makes it clear that this judgment comes because they oppress others. It seems that in this early church, which began as a poor church, the Christian community began to open up widely to those who were rich, a development that James did not look upon with favor. James insists that the vocation of the church, its mission, is to the poor, who are rich in faith, and thus heirs to the kingdom of God (2:5).¹⁰

The teachings of James here very much echoes those of Jesus in his Beatitudes. Emphasis there is placed on the poor, the weak, the humble and those with broken spirits, but also on those that know how to show forgiveness and mercy as described in the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:12¹¹, 14-15¹²). For James it is clear that God applies the measure that we use for others to us, and if

¹⁰ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, Revised edition (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), pp. 24-26.

¹¹ **And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** NRSV.

¹² **For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.** NRSV.

we are not forgiving and merciful with others then God will not be forgiving and merciful to us. This includes, how we use the wealth and blessings that we have. This is a message that is also powerfully demonstrated in the Parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35). Especially take note of verses 34 and 35.¹³ The whole gospel insists that mercy must be a shining beacon in the lives of God's people and if it is not then those people are not God's obedient people.¹⁴

^{2:14} What is the advantage, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Is that faith able to save him? ^{2:15} If a brother or a sister is naked and lacking daily food, ^{2:16} and one out of you says, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," and does not give the necessary food for the stomach what benefit is it? ^{2:17} so also faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.

James then moves to drive his point home in such a way that shows the link between faith and action. James makes it clear that faith cannot be simply an intellectual exercise or mere

¹³ **And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."** NRSV.


¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 16.

intellectual assent, it must be more than this, it must produce real, palpable, action. In our western world, and our era, it is so often the case that we have spiritualized the gospel message and elevated the spiritual aspect of the gospel to such a height that our faith is so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use. Such a faith is foreign to James and more than foreign it is useless, pointless, and the figment of a delusional mind. Faith that is really faith will be plainly seen in the actions that are more than words.

^{2:18} But someone will say, “You have faith, I also have works; show me your faith apart from works, and I will show you my works of faith. ^{2:19} Because you believe God is one, you believe well, also the demons believe and they shudder. ^{2:20} Do you wish to know, empty man, that faith without works is useless? ^{2:21} Was not our father Abraham by works justified by offering his son Isaac upon the altar? ^{2:22} You see that his faith worked together with his works and out of the works his faith was perfected, ^{2:23} And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Now Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God.” ^{2:24} You see that out of works a man is

justified and not out of faith alone. ^{2:25} Likewise, was it not the case that Rahab the prostitute out of works was justified, when receiving the messengers she sent them out by another way? ^{2:26} For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

James had already begun addressing this issue in chapter one when he spoke of people who hear the word but do not do it. Perhaps it is the case that he has heard people talking about their faith, not meaning a rich, lively trust in God, but rather an empty, vaporous, etherial affirmation that is nothing but an empty husk, a bare acknowledgment, a body without a spirit, dead, rotting and stinking. That is what James thinks of faith without genuine works, because he knows that genuine faith cannot help but produce action, change, transformation. There is no way for genuine faith to leave its recipient unchanged, they will become a part of the mission of God in powerful, deep, impactful ways that express the royal law, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Simply saying, "God is one," is not enough. It may be truth, but truth must be accepted and become action. The demons know, and believe, that God is one, but the only action that this produces in



them is a shuddering fear, not transformation, not repentance, not mercy and therefore, not salvation. It merely scares them out of their wits. Real faith reveals itself as Jesus-shaped action.¹⁵

Translating faith into Jesus-shaped action is downright dangerous. When faith is dangerous and costly, that is when it is real, and that is when it really matters. That is the faith that saves, creates, transforms and focuses the creative power of God to begin in that place, and at that time, the work of the new creation. This is near to the heart of the message of James: the challenge to make absolutely certain that the faith of the believer is the real thing, that it actually does what God says genuine faith must always do.¹⁶ Genuine faith must always recreate, just as the power of God that we see, in Genesis one, created the universe in which we live and all that inhabit it real faith accesses the creative power of God that recreates that universe and transforms it into what the heart of God desires it, ultimately to be.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 19.

Synopsis

James begins this chapter addressing the issue of favoritism, particularly favoritism based upon perceptions of earthly wealth and clearly defines this as evil and the stealing the place of God. He calls upon those in the church not only to recognize this as evil but challenges the precepts upon which it takes place. He challenges those of the church to recognize that this is not the way that God sees the people of the world and that very much the opposite God favors the poor, giving them rich faith and the inheritance of the kingdom. James also reminds them that it is the rich who drag the poor into court, who are responsible for persecuting the church, and even blaspheming the name of Christ.

James then goes onto to challenge his audience with reasoning that is very Jewish in nature, the letter is after all addressed to a Jewish audience. He challenges them to recognize that partial compliance to the law makes them in reality transgressors of the law and therefore guilty before the law. Partial compliance to the law of freedom does the same. Though he is not calling for absolute perfection James is calling on his

audience to have a single-minded devotion to the causes that strives for perfection in all instances and in every aspect of life. All of this discussion is to be based in the mercy of God and the recognition that that mercy is to be a central feature of the life of the Christian. The church is called upon to be a beacon of mercy in a world of condemnation and judgment.

James is always very practical and here he challenges his audience to recognize that genuine faith can be seen by the action that it will produce. Faith will produce works and truth a faith that does not produce works is useless, pointless and without any sense of genuineness before God. He challenges them to demonstrate their faith through their actions and to recognize this is the nature of saving faith. He gives the example of Abraham and Rahab to demonstrate his point. For James it is clearly the case that faith and works are inseparable parts of a whole and one cannot be real without the other. Just as works without genuine faith is useless so is faith without works.

Questions

1. What is favoritism?
2. How do you recognize favoritism?
3. How can favoritism be eradicated?
4. How does God deal with the favoritism of humanity?
5. What are we to make of the statement of James in verse 5 regarding God's attitude toward the poor?
6. What is the "royal law?"
7. What was the role of the Law supposed to be among the nation of Israel?
8. How does mercy relate to law?
9. How does mercy relate to us today in our relationship with God?
10. What is the relationship between faith and works?
11. How does your faith change the way you live and the way that you see the world?
12. How can the church help us to be people of true faith today?

James

Lesson 3

“James Chapter 3”

Objective: To provide an exegetical analysis for this section and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in the application of this text.

Materials:

- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text


Procedures

- I. To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.

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- 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
 - 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
 - 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

^{3:1} Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, knowing that you will receive greater judgment. ^{3:2} For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in words, that man is perfect being able to hold in check also the whole body. ^{3:3} And if into the mouths of horses we put bits to persuade them to obey us, and the whole body of them we are able to direct. ^{3:4} And behold ships, though being large and the strong wind causes them to be driven along, they are guided by a small rudder wherever the impulse of the pilot wishes, ^{3:5} in this way the tongue is small and boasts greatly. Behold how a small fire sets ablaze a great forest. ^{3:6} And the tongue is a fire; a (the) world of evil is the tongue set in the midst of the members of the body, a (the) stain to the whole body and setting alight the course of existence, and it is set alight by hell.

N.T. Wright who became the Bishop of Durham in the Anglican church, and is a highly respected teacher, and author, talks about his early life and why he chose the path he did in life. He looked back on his life and remembered the impact, at key moments in his life, of teachers. He talked about the fact that he had some good teachers and some bad teachers, but there were



two or three that made a major impact. They took the trouble to get to know him, and find out who he really was and gave him friendly words of encouragement and advice. He said having someone that he trusted say one or two sentences opened doors to a whole new world for him.¹ James understood this. He understood how critical this role, the role of the teacher, was in the life of the church, in the spiritual development and well-being of individuals as well as in the development of the group. A word of encouragement given in the right place, and at the right time, is of critical importance. Wrong teaching destroys the individual and ultimately could lead people in the wrong direction. Because of this, people who teach will be judged more strictly than those who do not teach.

Apparently it was the case that the community addressed by James held their teachers in high esteem. In a culture that gave high value to personal honor, such a role would have given a powerful incentive to people to pursue being a teacher. James clearly counts himself among those who teach. He lets them know

¹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 20-21.

that this role comes with a greater level of scrutiny from God.

Those that teach must not only talk the talk, they must walk the walk. They must display God-given wisdom through their humble service (James 3:13, 17; cf. Matthew 23:11-12²). Later, James will urge the mutual confession of sin (5:16³). James applies this to himself as he includes himself among those who make many mistakes (3:2a).⁴ Religious teachers in the world of James were those who passed on sacred tradition. The key task for such teachers was to learn things accurately and transmit them with exacting precision. Only after written and oral texts were correctly memorized were the disciples of a rabbi ready to discuss them. This process of learning was done with great care lest the students misrepresent these texts unwittingly. The word that James uses here for they “will receive” (λημψόμεθα) implies that this judgement will ultimately be received at the final time of judgement, but there is certainly a sense that a teacher is put on

² **The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.** NRSV.

³ **Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.** NRSV

⁴ Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2004), pp. 371-372.

trial by those listening every time they teach. The word used for “judgement (κρίμα) refers to a judicial verdict and carries with it the possibility, and here the likelihood of censure.⁵


It is most likely the case that James intends here for the focus to be on sins of speech, since this is the topic introduced at verse 2. Teaching in the world of James was mostly oral in nature. It then seems plausible to argue that James is arguing for accountability for verbal blunders and harmful words expressed while teaching others (cf. Jesus - Mark 12:38-40⁶; Luke 20:47⁷).⁸ For some it seems shocking that James would speak of perfection here, but it must be remembered that he owes his concept of perfection to the Torah, which was seen as the perfect Law of the Lord. The whole point of purity laws was to establish access to

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), pp. 151-152.

⁶ **As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”** NRSV

⁷ **They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”** NRSV

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 152.



God and to define what was needed in order to remain in right relationship with God and with one another. Following the Torah enables one to lead such a life, that could be described as “perfect” or “righteous.” The concept of this type of perfection is central to the Epistle of James. He derives his ideas here from the Hebrew writings and ritual practices of Israel and it is only against such a background that they can be properly understood. Perfection for James, entails a total allegiance to God and is properly expressed in the desire to live in right relationship with God and with His people.⁹ Many times people have tried to live in right relationship with God (in a monastic community or all alone), while disregarding relationship with people. Such a conception would be totally unacceptable to James and be incomplete, and far from his conception of perfection.

James then proceeds to give illustrations of how something very small can control something that is much larger. He begins first with the example of a horse being controlled by a small bit in its mouth that allows the rider to control the horse and make it go wherever he chooses. The rudder of a ship too is small by

⁹ Patrick J. Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, Interfaces series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) pp. 172-190.

comparison to the immensity of the ship that it steers. If a teacher lets the wrong word slip out at the wrong moment a gracious relationship can be spoiled forever. It may be that a promise made is broken, or a bad impression is given that can never be repaired. It is no wonder that David pleaded with God to “set a guard” over his mouth (Psalm 141:3¹⁰). James here continues to reiterate what he has said previously in that any pretense of being devout that does not result in control over a person’s speech is nothing more than a sham. For James this is a central, vital part, of what it means to be human. Even more serious than this is the statement that James makes when he declares that the tongue is a fire ready to set things ablaze. We often see this working its way out in the lives of politicians where one wrong word or phrase brings a career crashing to the ground. Unwise words reported on the internet can even result in riots around the world resulting in death and destruction.¹¹

This brings us to the real underlying point being made here by James. Why is it that the tongue is like this? Jesus had already

¹⁰ **Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord;
keep watch over the door of my lips.** NRSV

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 21-22.

made the point that what comes out of the mouth is a sign of what is really in the heart of a person (Matthew 12:34-37¹²; Luke 6:43-45¹³). James echoes the words of Jesus when he speaks of the fig tree bearing olives, or the vine bearing figs. Nature teaches us that things are not like that. If a tree bears olives then it is an olive tree. The kind of tree is known, for certainty, by its fruit.¹⁴ Just seeing the leaves can sometimes be confusing, but once the fruit appears the confusion is eradicated and the reality of the nature of that tree is displayed for all the world to see. The words spoken by a person display the heart of that person and therefore are the fruit of a person. For a teacher, this is extremely critical. There are many who listen to their words and they must exercise great caution not only in their speech, but more importantly with

12 “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” NRSV

13 “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” NRSV

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 21-22.

their heart. The heart must be pure so that the words that come from there will also be pure.

^{3:7} For every kind of animal, bird, reptile and marine creature can be subdued and all types have been subdued by man. ^{3:8} But no one is able to tame the tongue of man, an unstable evil, it is full of deadly poison. ^{3:9} With it we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse men that have been made in the image of God, ^{3:10} out of the mouth comes a blessing and a curse. These things should not be like this, my brothers. ^{3:11} A spring does not pour forth out of its opening sweet and bitter water does it? ^{3:12} Is a fig tree able to produce olives, my brothers, or a grapevine figs? Neither can salty water produce fresh water.

James continues with his illustrations of the nature and the difficulty of controlling the tongue. He alludes to the mandate given to mankind in Genesis to “subdue” the world.¹⁵ While it is the case that man can exert control over the animal world he still has not been able to master controlling his own tongue. The verb used for the taming of the animals indicates that this is a possibility; James is not trying to argue that every animal has been

¹⁵ Genesis 1:28-31.

tamed, but simply that it is possible. This then is contrasted with the fact that mankind has domesticated the natural world through their building of cities, roads, farms and the like. This state of affairs is then contrasted with humanity's inability to control that small organ of speech, the tongue. The implication given by James in verse 8 is that mankind must look beyond themselves for help in taming the tongue. The implication is that only God can provide what is necessary in order to make this happen. The tongue is an "unstable" evil that at any moment, without warning may lash out; it is a disorderly and unpredictable organ. The image of it as a death-bearing poison is dramatic and may in some sense allude to the nature of the serpent that poisoned paradise with his words of poison that brought death. Psalm 140:3 declares the nature of the tongue to be like a venomous snake.¹⁶

The tongue of man reveals the depths of his duplicity as James points out starting in verse 9. With the same tongue mankind will bless God and then turn right around and curse other human beings who are in fact made in the image of that same God. James challenges his readers to ask how can this be so?

¹⁶ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 159-160.

How can a person who has truly been cleansed by the power of the Holy Spirit be this duplicitous creature? A person who does such things, speaks such things, is not receiving his inspiration from the Holy Spirit but from hell (verse 6). The readers are challenged to understand this fact. The challenge here is for consistency. James wants people to follow Jesus through and through; to be a blessing only, rather than to be someone who brings both blessing and cursing into the world. The calling for the people of God is to be of the same nature as the Lord Jesus Christ, they are to bring blessing. They are to be a blessing-only people. This is a high standard, but surely no less should be expected by a people are truly transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The danger is always present that people will take the parts of the gospel that they like and leave the other parts, leaving the real challenges, the truly transformative elements, behind. This cannot be done. The spring must be cleansed so that the only source of water comes from heaven, from God, and all the water is fresh and sweet. For this to happen we need help. It is help that the gospel offers to us all.¹⁷

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 21-22.


^{3:13} Who is wise and understanding among you? Out of his good behavior he must demonstrate his works in gentleness that brings wisdom. ^{3:14} But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not boast and tell lies against the truth. ^{3:15} This is not wisdom coming down from above but earthly, natural, demonic (wisdom). ^{3:16} For where there is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every worthless deed. ^{3:17} But the wisdom from above on the one hand first is pure, then peaceful, tolerant, obedient, full of mercy and good fruit, nonjudgmental, without hypocrisy. ^{3:18} And the fruit of righteousness in peace is sown to those making peace.

A wrong diagnosis by a doctor can lead to the death of a patient. There are countless stories of where the wrong diagnosis has led to the death of a patient. Sometimes a person will appear healthy and then suddenly it happens, death comes quickly, and with finality. Such people appear to be healthy while all the while something unpleasant, something deadly, is eating away at them on the inside. This is what James is taking about here. It is not a physical illness, but an illness nonetheless, more insidious, more powerful, and more devastating than any physical illness. This

illness has eternal consequences. It may be difficult to determine which causes which, but what James is talking about is “bitter jealousy” (ζῆλον πικρὸν) and “selfish ambition” (ἐριθείαν), a spirit which is always nagging and critical, which cannot let a nice word be said without adding a nasty, sarcastic one. When someone with that kind of spirit claims to be healthy, spiritually healthy, the symptoms betray the disease that is in fact eating away at their soul. They may claim to be a practicing Christian, but in fact they are infected with a demonic illness that if not eradicated will lead to their destruction and perhaps to that of others. They are telling lies against the truth, maybe not just in their some of their words, but in the duplicity of the totality of their words.¹⁸

James challenges his audience to demonstrate their good life by living a life filled with wisdom, wisdom demonstrated in works done with gentleness, a gentleness that brings wisdom (verse 13). “Bitterness”, “disorder,” “wickedness,” and “selfish ambition” are indeed symptoms of the infection of that which is unspiritual and demonic. “Wisdom from above” (verse 17) brings something totally different. Such wisdom is first of all pure and from this

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 22-23.



purity will flow all the other attributes indicated by James. Its purity will bring forth good fruit from the tree which God has planted in a person's soul through the gospel; and the true nature of the person will be seen as a result of this pure wisdom that comes down from God. That fruit will be apparent for all to truly see in the nature of the person who will be peaceful, tolerant, obedient to the will of God, full of mercy. This is such an important aspect of the person who is truly being transformed by the gospel. So many times the focus of a person will be on their relationship with God and this is critical, but not all that is needed. A part of the power of the gospel is in its ability to make that relationship possible but more than that it makes possible relationship with people, those who bear God's image because of his creative act. A critical element in this arena is mercy. For us to have relationship with other people, for those relationships to truly be healthy and strong, and reflect the nature of God, they must be bathed, infused, and transformed by mercy.

Sarcasm, bitterness, and a contentious spirit have no place among those that are being transformed by the gospel. They reflect hypocrisy and endanger those possessing them as well as

those around them. The people of God are to be people that are people of peace. Jesus said, “blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. James reminds his readers of this in what he writes here. This wisdom comes from above and in it those that bear the name of Christ should dwell.

Synopsis

James here begins by addressing the fact that not many should become teachers because of the greater scrutiny placed upon them by God because of their words. He here speaks in a ligament with the way Jesus did when he recognizes that there is a connection between the words spoken by a person and their heart. If a person can be perfect in their words, that person can indeed be a perfect person. The perfection spoken of here by James must be seen in light of the Jewish background of this work and of James himself where perfection equals righteousness. James gives several examples of the power of small things to control large things indicating that the whole tongue is a small thing is has control over things much bigger. The tongue has great power and James here indicates that it releases a fire that is set alight by hell itself.

At verse 7 James talks about the fact that mankind has power over a great many things, with the implication that this power was given to humanity, by God, at creation. Despite this great power it is beyond human ability to control the tongue, which is full of deadly poison like a serpents venom. People use

the same tongue to both bless and to curse. This should not be so and James indicates that one opening cannot, in truth, issue forth both sweet water and bitter water. A tree will be known by its fruits and a man will be known through his words, all of his words.

Starting at verse 13, James begins to explain the way of the true wisdom that comes down from God. Gentleness is a sign of this wisdom. Jealousy and selfish ambition are signs of the earthly and the demonic. Disorder and worthless deeds will be the symptoms of this demonic wisdom while the wisdom from above can be seen through purity, peacefulness, tolerance, obedience, mercy, good fruit, a nonjudgmental attitude, the lack of hypocrisy and peace.

Questions

1. Why do you think people want to be teachers?
2. Why do you think James warns his readers about the greater judgement that teachers will face?
3. How do you think people are controlled by words?
4. Why can people not control their tongues?
5. Why do you think James describes the tongue as a fire set alight by hell?
6. What are some ways that you have seen words to be a powerful force in the life of people?
7. Why do you think that James describes the tongue as full of deadly poison?
8. How can people insure that their words are not hypocritical?
9. Why should people not curse other people?
10. How do you know if a person is wise?
11. What are the signs of the lack of wisdom?
12. What do you think James means by calling wisdom from above pure?
13. How does peace relate to wisdom?

14. Who do you know who is wise in the way that James describes wisdom from above?

15. What is the source of disorder in chaos in the world?

James

Lesson 4

“James Chapter 4”

Objective: To provide an exegetical analysis for this chapter and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in the application of this text in the life of the Christian living in the 21st century.

Materials:

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- Commentaries

 - Books

 - Bible Dictionaries

 - Encyclopedias


 - Journal Articles

 - Greek Text

Procedures

- 1.** To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.
- 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
- 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
- 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

There have been questions regarding how this chapter connects to what James has already written in his letter, what purpose does it have in the overall message that he wants to send out. To briefly explore that question, 4:1-12 further unfolds the second main section of the letter body, which is an expansion of the discussion regarding the theme of wisdom and speech. The discussion in 4:1-10 flows so naturally from 3:13-18 that some commentators keep these two subsections together as a single unit. James, having just warned his readers regarding the evils that result from jealousy and rivalry (3:14, 16) now points out what some have allowed those motives to produce - coveting and quarreling - which resembles devotion to this fallen world rather than devotion to God (4:1-6). Verses 7-10 offer the antidote to the evils that have befallen them: resist the devil (it is important to recall the link between the world and the devil 3:15), and submit to God (in line with those who exhibit wisdom from above, cf. 3:13, 17-18). In verses 11-12 the readers are reminded that James has not forgotten the key illustration of the kind of wisdom one manifests, which is displayed prominently for all to see in one's speech. Speaking against one another is the primary



example of how people act on their own selfish ambition. Just as such actions impugn those created in the image of God, such actions implicitly attack God himself (3:9). These actions also oppose God's Law that prohibits slander and false judgement, and amounts to a critiquing of God, who gave the Law in the first instance.¹ It is common today for everyone to critique everyone from world leaders, to movies, to preachers, to fellow members of the church. James says this is the way of the world and not the way of the people of God and for those judging in the church this amounts to putting God himself on trial.

James makes connections in this section with material from still earlier in his Epistle: The lusts of 4:1-3 recall the evil desires of 1:14-15. The "warring" in one's members in 4:1, utilizes the identical term that is used in 3:5-6, of the tongue that proved so dangerous and damaging. The combination of murder and adultery in 4:2 and 4 repeats the pairing in 2:11 of the two commandments from the 10 commandments that prohibit those actions. Becoming the friend of God reminds the readers of a

¹ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), p. 182.

similar commendation given to Abraham (2:23). The humble person who receives grace is reminiscent of the “humiliated” of 1:10, who will be exalted, a thought which is repeated with parity in 4:10. Cleansing hands and cleansing hearts (4:8), makes the application of the language of ritual purity applicable to moral issues just as 1:27 did when it challenged the readers to keep themselves unstained by the world. The command for the wicked to humiliate themselves in repentance (4:9) employs the same concept as in 1:10 when it predicts that the rich person’s pride will be his humiliation.²

The rebuke given by James concerning improper judgement (4:11-12) employs the same Greek word group (κριτής) that he uses to censure vacillation in 1:6 (διακρίνω), and discrimination in 2:4 (διακρίνω), and in 3:17 he calls for them to be “impartial.” The declaration that there is only one lawgiver and judge (4:12a) applies the confession of Judaism relating to monotheism, to the giving of the law and to the one who gave it: this is spelled out even more explicitly in 2:19. Many see James turning to a new topic in 4:13-17, but in reality even these verses

² Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 182-183.

continue the theme of proper and improper speech by stressing what people say about their planning for the future.³ James has carefully crafted his letter and he builds on those themes introduced earlier in his writing here in this chapter.

^{4:1} From where do the conflicts and disputes among you come from? Is it not from this, namely, from your desires which are at war within you? ^{4:2} You lust for things and you do not have, you murder, and you are filled with jealousy, and you are not able to obtain what you lust for, you fight and you make war, you do not have because you do not ask, ^{4:3} you ask and you do not receive because you ask wickedly, in order that you may spend what you lust for on your own pleasures.

Earlier James talks about being “double minded” (δίψυχος) or quite literally “double souled” (1:8), here in this section he will pick up once again on this theme. There has been a lot of discussion over the meaning of this term (δίψυχος), with some linking the origin of its meaning with the heart (καρδία). In this section James will pick up not only this term (4:8), but the consequences of a life lived in such a state of duplicity. It is likely,

³ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 183.


according to Seitz, that the real antecedent of the notion expressed by the antecedent δίψυχος is to be found in the rabbinic conception of a double heart, or literally two hearts. Such a state, in Jewish, rabbinic, thought, leads to sin causing a person to forsake the true way. Δίψυχος then is the inner disunity of the heart that is referred to by the rabbis using the term “two hearts,” which renders a person vulnerable to the assaults of the tempter and to the influence of “evil desires” that come from an inner vulnerability created by this duplicitous internal wavering.⁴

James in this section will elaborate on the consequences for such a condition not only on the part of the individual, but he will indicate the affect that such a condition has on the wider church too. He begins at verse 1 asking his readers to indicate the source of the conflicts and the quarrels that exist among them. He then goes on to tell them the source of these problems is not from outside, but from within them, from their own passions. James recognizes that these things come from within the person and they are the outflow of a heart that is not wholly, and fully

⁴ Oscar J. F. Seitz, “Antecedents and Signification of the Term ΔΙΨΥΧΟΣ,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 66 (1947), pp. 211-219.

committed to the cause of Christ. It is as if such a person has two hearts, one that is devoted to Christ and his Gospel, while the other is devoted to the world and what it sees as important. There is a war going on inside the person and this internal war spills out into the church and creates conflict and quarreling in the church itself. The affect is devastating and debilitating to the church and hinders it from fulfilling the mission of God.

The inevitable outcome of these passions, these desires is “murder” and “envy.” Here James is not necessarily referring to their actually being murder in the churches to whom he writes, but he is using a rhetorical device to issue a warning to them that will be startling enough to wake them up from their stupor before their battling actually leads to such consequences. The murder spoken of here may even more serious than physical murder because it has eternal consequences. The things that James speaks of here may lead to people being pushed away from the church because of the hypocritical nature of those in the church. This then is not just murder of the body, but of the soul itself (Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). In the context of Scripture, one such example of the connection between envy, jealousy and murder



can be found in the narrative of Cain and Able (Genesis 4). Desire and envy are characteristic features of the world, these have been brought into the community of the church and they have infected the religious piety of the community of believers. Even their prayer life has been contaminated by envy and desire so that their motivation for prayer is wicked; they desire things in order to spend what they receive on themselves. They use prayer to God in order to attain what they envy in others.⁵ This is the way of the world and not the way of the church.

James appears to be addressing, very precisely, what has become the central motivation among many Christians even today, which is known as the “Health and Wealth Gospel.” This doctrine teaches that God wants to bless his people and that if his people will name and claim the blessings that they desire God will grant them. The desire for having the things prayed for is in order to be personally blessed by them, the kingdom of God and the will of God is not a priority in such a system, or indeed in such a setting God becomes an idol of a person’s own perception. They would say that of course God wants good things for his

⁵ Patrick J. Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, Interfaces series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) p. 212.

children ,he wants to bless them and for them to be healthy and wealthy. Of course there is an element of truth in these words, but the focus of God is not centered upon the material world but upon the spiritual eternal values of his kingdom. Certainly it is the case that God loved his son Jesus, but he did not show his love for him with material, worldly wealth, or with rescue from physical pain, torment, and death. The will of God was that he should suffer and die for the kingdom mission of God. If a person has wealth and health these things should be used for kingdom purposes and not simply for a personal hedonistic agenda. James calls to his readers for a singleminded devotion to the cause of the Gospel.


^{4:4} Adulteresses, do you not know that the love of the world is enmity with God? Whoever desires to be a friend of the world, makes an enemy of God. ^{4:5} Or do you think that in vain the scripture says, the spirit which dwells in you he longs for jealously? ^{4:6} But he gives greater grace, therefore it says, God opposes the arrogant, but to the humble he gives grace.⁶ ^{4:7} Therefore, be subject to God, and resist the devil and he will flee

⁶ Proverbs 3:34 - Although he is scornful to arrogant scoffers, yet he shows favor to the humble. NET.

from you, ^{4:8} come near to God and he will come near to you.

Cleanse your hands and purify your heart, you that are double souled. ^{4:9} Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be transformed into mourning and your joy into dejection. ^{4:10} Be humble before the Lord and he will exalt you.


James now turns to an illustration from marriage with regard to exclusivity of the relationship that is called for by the Gospel toward God. A variety of societies have experimented with polygamy, and even polyamory, but there is something embedded deep in the human soul that seeks to bond with one person above all others. Of course the temptation to stray is powerful, but even in multiple relationships there usually is a tendency, not to multiple simultaneous relationships (or if it does the people most often find themselves torn apart inside), but to a new exclusive bond. The Bible will often use the exclusive partnership of marriage as an image of the exclusive claims of God on the human life. It is in this way that James uses the term “adulterers,” (verse 4) not to accuse his readers of marital infidelity, but to warn them that being friends with the world means being enemies with God. This is an extremely and



powerful concept, and it is meant to shock and startle the readers of this epistle.⁷ Note that James indicates that the people doing this make a choice, they decide to be the world's friend and in doing so they become an enemy of God. The choice is clear be a friend of God like Abraham, or a friend of the world and be an enemy of God. There is no fence straddling allowed.

Some might ask the question as to what James means by the using the term the "world" here, and how does this all relate to what he has been saying about fighting, making war and asking for things in the wrong way? By the the term "world" James appears to mean, "the way the world behaves," the pattern of life, the underlying narrative, the things people want, expect, long for, and dream about. The things that drive people to do what they do with their lives. If a person goes with the flow, the drift of the world without reflecting on what they are doing, just following habits of mind and body from all around them the chances are such a person will then become friends with the world. Such a person will be seen as normal by those around them. It takes

⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 26-27.




courage to stand out from the crowd and to be different. It also requires determination, and intentionality.⁸ Following Christ does not just happen, it takes effort, it is swimming upstream against the flow.

Why is friendship with the world at the heart of the quarreling, the conflict, the hostility? It is this way because in “the world” the ultimate answer to winning an argument is a fist, a boot, a gun, a bomb, violence, force, or power. People may smile and appear to be civil, and even friendly, society may appear open and generous, but just go against society and you will feel the displeasure of that society.⁹ This is the way of the world, but the problem for James is that at least some are bringing that same scenario into the church. Someone speaks up, expresses an opinion that the group does not like and there is an eruption of aggression. It may be passive, but it is aggression nonetheless, sometimes directed at the individual, or even at their family through a whole host of time tested and tried worldly, intimidation techniques. To act in such ways is to act as an enemy

⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 27.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 27.



of God. Such people may win the battle, but ultimately they have set themselves up to make war against God and they will lose that war.

To look at this from the other side we might ask the question of what it would be like to be a friend of God? For a start it would mean taming the desires that agitate a person inside. Taming the desire to get what a person cannot, or perhaps should not, even have. Desires that push us to fight, struggle, manipulate, kill, or make war. Taming those desires that lead us to pray for, to long for, things that are simply for our own comfort and pleasure rather than for the glory of God. These are people that claim to be the people of God and yet their spirit of self-centeredness indicates that they do not have an exclusive friendship with God. In particular James highlights the issue of humility. This is something that the world lacks, but there is arrogance in abundance; arrogance that says my desires come first, that say my cause is worth fighting, and even killing for. The cure for this is of course to submit to God (verse 7) rather than to ask God to submit to **me**.¹⁰

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 27-28.

James indicates that God multiplies his grace to those who need it, but not arbitrarily, or capriciously, but to those who are willing and able to humble themselves and accept the grace that God offers (verse 6). He challenges his readers to, in humility, “submit to God”. He also challenges them to “resist” the devil and tells them that if they would resist the devil then he would flee from them. There is no promise that when the Devil flees, life will now be easy and good, we are just told that he will flee. They are then told to draw near to God and that if they do this then the promise is that God will draw near to them (4:8). James returns once again to the issue of purity calling upon his readers to cleanse their hands to remove the filth of their selfishness and to make their hearts pure and single in nature, no longer being double-minded. This issue of duplicity is crucial as a theme throughout the Epistle as James calls for them to have a singleness of mind that is focus intently upon God and upon what is important for the glory of God and not upon self.

In verse 9 James calls for his readers to “grieve” to “lament” to “feel miserable.” Some might question whether God even wants a person to be happy, but it must be remembered that joy

is not the same as self-satisfied happiness. Being of two minds and giving a quick nod, or a Sunday morning, to God and then linking arms with the world once more on Monday morning simply will not do. It may take a lot of time, and a lot of effort on our part, to look God in the face and admit just how far we have been wrong, but that is the path we are called to walk and it is that path that leads to true joy. The call of James here is to a life of humility and focus on those things which are focused upon God and not upon self. We are then given an astonishing promise, which is that if we will draw near to God **he will draw near to us**. God is ready and waiting with open arms to receive us. God is like the father in the Prodigal Son story watching for our return to him, and if we will come to him in true humility he will run to greet us. If only a few people are willing to take these promises of God seriously what a huge difference it would make in our churches and in our world. The power and glory of God is transformative and it will make such a huge difference wherever it resides.¹¹ If we are willing to humble ourselves before God he will exalt us and this is exaltation indeed. Not the honor and

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 28-29.

exaltation of the world, but true godly honor and exaltation that brings us near unto God.

^{4:11} Do not speak evil of one another, brothers. The one speaking evil of his brother or judging his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law; and if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but its judge. ^{4:12} There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and able to destroy; who are you if you are the one judging your neighbor?

James challenges his readers at the point that is perhaps one of the most destructive, sinister and prevalent contaminating forces among not only the church, but among people in general. This is the kind of slanderous talk that eats its way like a cancer through the heart of Christian fellowship and requires urgent and determined treatment or it will prove fatal. Anyone who speaks like this against their brothers is implying that the law which applies to the Christian with regard to loving your neighbor as yourself does not apply to them. They are, in effect, saying they are above this law. They can look down upon these petty standards from their great height and in doing this they are judging the law instead of doing what it says. To take such a

stand is not only foolish and arrogant it is also a usurpation of the role of God himself (verse 12). There is only one who is lawgiver; and only one who is judge, and that is not us. God, as judge, has the power to either rescue or to destroy. This last line is saying that the only one who has the power, authority, and right, to pass this kind of judgement on another, is God. Any human doing this is usurping the place of God. The warning here is not to put ourselves in the place of God.¹² This sin makes a person beyond redemption because of their arrogance. Only once their arrogance is broken may they have hope.

^{4:13} Come now, the one saying, today, or tomorrow, I will travel to such and such place and I will stay there a year and we will do business and make a profit; ^{4:14} You do not know of tomorrow or what sort of life is yours; for you are a vapor that appears for a short span, then vanishes. ^{4:15} Instead, you ought to say, “if the Lord wishes and we live, then we will do this or that.” ^{4:16} But now, as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such arrogance is immoral. ^{4:17} Therefore the one knowing the good he should do and he does not do it, that is sin.

¹² N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 30-31.

These verses are the second half of the warning that James began in verse 11 and warn against the temptation to put oneself in the place of God. Here James warns his readers of even thinking they might be in control of their own lives. In reality such thinking is an illusion. He returns here to the theme that is so often reiterated in the wisdom literature regarding mankind as, nothing but a vapor, a puff of smoke, before God. This vapor or puff of smoke is here but a short time and then it disappears and leaves no impact other than perhaps a faint memory that it once existed at all. James calls upon his readers recognize their place before God and to acknowledge this in the making of their plans; and even in talking about such plans. Not to do so, represents an arrogance that is described as “boasting” and “evil”. The word that is used here for “evil” indicates that James has in mind someone who is “immoral” or “morally corrupt.”

James also indicates that if a person knows what is right and does not do it, such a person is guilty of sin. This closing verse, has sometimes produced, in those that are sensitive in nature, a continual anguish of heart-searching and questioning of their every action. Perhaps the best thing that can be said to such

a person is that if they are still concerned about this, then the chances are they are doing fine. It is the case that all Christians should search their hearts in order to understand their motives and their heart. Is our focus totally upon God? Is our devotion single in nature? Are we humble in all things? God calls us to these things as we recognize who he is and who we are before him.

Synopsis

James in this chapter continues themes he has previously introduced in his Epistle and here he deals with the source of the conflicts and desires. They begin in the heart of the individual and they then spill out into the wider world of the congregation and then even bring shame and disrepute on the name of God. The source of these conflicts is reflected in the lusts and desires that people have which are not focused upon God, but upon a desire to have the things of the world and to be like the other people of the world. Such lusts lead to murder, fighting and making war. James says that they do not ask and therefore they do not have what they need and when they do ask they do not receive because what they ask for is for themselves and their own selfish pleasures.

He goes on to accuse his readers of adultery, because of their love of the world. They have two lovers and God will not tolerate such a situation and to be friend of the world is to be an enemy of God. Despite this harsh tone James gives hope to his readers telling them that in such situations there is greater grace available, but not to the arrogant. This grace is available to those

who are humble and seek God. James also challenges his readers to resist the Devil and he tells them that if they will do this the Devil will flee from them. Some have taken this to mean that now they will have a trouble free life, but this is not the promise that is made here at all. James does go on to tell them not only to resist the Devil, but also to draw near to God and then he does make a promise to them and that is that God will “draw near” to them. He challenges them once again to cleanse and purify not only their hands but also their hearts. He challenges them to lament and weep and to humble themselves before God seeking only exhalation from God and not from the world.

James then moves once again to the issue of speech and in particular speech where brothers are speaking evil of one another and judging their brothers. He says that to this amounts to more than just judging the person it amounts to judging the Law itself and more than that to even judging the giver of that Law, God himself. Such speech and judgment is not for mankind to exercise, it is the purview of God alone.

He then moves onto address the arrogance of making plans in such a way that a person actually thinks that have control over

their own destiny, without God. In this section James returns to a common theme in the wisdom literature of ancient Israel recognizing the fleeting nature of life and how insignificant it is in the face of who God is. He challenges his readers to temper their speech and their attitude in a way that reflects their reliance and their faith in God. This challenges is once again to remove the arrogance that separates a person from God and his grace. James ends with an admonition that challenges his readers to recognize that sin is not only what you do it is also often about missed opportunities. Not doing what a person knows is the right thing to do is sin too. The challenge of James in this chapter is a challenge for the people of the church to live a life devoted with single-mindedness to God alone, void of selfishness and worldly desires. Such a life will bring near the presence of God.

Questions

1. Why do you think James is concerned about conflicts in the church?
2. How does knowing the source of these conflicts help his readers?
3. How is desire related to murder?
4. What is the relationship between asking and having in James chapter 4?
5. How can we avoid spending our money on our own passions?
6. Why do you think friendship with the worlds correlates to hostility to God?
7. What do you think are the consequences of being an enemy of God?
8. Why do you think God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble?
9. What is grace?
10. What does it mean if a person does not resist the Devil?
11. What are the consequences of being double-minded?

12. Why do you think James calls upon his readers to mourn and weep?

13. How can a person become humble?

14. How did God exalt Jesus?

15. How should the words of James challenge us in our making of plans?

16. How can planning become arrogant?

17. What are some opportunities to do good that you almost missed?

18. Why do people miss opportunities to do good?

James

Lesson 5

“James Chapter 5”

Objective: To provide an exegetical analysis for this chapter and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in understanding our role as Christians living in the 21st century and so create a summation for this book.

Materials:


- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text

Procedures

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- 1.** To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.
 - 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
 - 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
 - 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

^{5:1} Come now the rich ones, weep, crying aloud because of the miseries that are coming upon you. ^{5:2} Your wealth has rotted and your clothing has become moth-eaten. ^{5:3} Your gold and silver have rusted and their corrosion will be a witness to us and it will consume your flesh as fire. You have stored up treasure in the last days. ^{5:4} Behold the wages of the workers reaping your field the ones being defrauded by you he cries out, and the shouts of the ones reaping have entered the ears of the Lord of hosts. ^{5:5} You have lived self-indulgently and luxuriously upon the earth, you have fed your heart in the days of slaughter, ^{5:6} you have condemned, murdered the righteous, they did not oppose you.

The words of James come full force in this last chapter upon the necks of the rich. It is likely that what James has to say here is not so much a plea to the rich for repentance as it is a pronouncement of judgment on the rich that will bring encouragement to the poor who are enduring hardship because of the rich. The introductory formula “come now” (*ἄγε νῦν*) links the grim preview of the judgment day here in chapter 5 with the critique of the presumptuous, profit-driven merchants of 4:13-17. The prophecy of James is first a call of encouragement to the poor



and only secondarily a warning to the oppressors to repent. The poor have no reason to envy the rich who are on the road to destruction.¹

Some have seen the rich being referred to here as a reference to the Sadducees and the chief priests and the Jerusalem elite² and though there is a certain amount of appeal to this proposal it seems far from certain. It certainly is possible that the people of the diaspora would have had a bad experience upon one of their pilgrimages to Jerusalem, but the harvesting of the fields does not seem to fit with such imagery. The overall reference to the rich and how they acquired their wealth would seem to be far more general than a reference to just those particular rich in Jerusalem. It is perhaps the case that those of us who live in the west would prefer this to be a reference to this particular people and to vilify them, but perhaps the call should not be deflected so quickly. The indictment of James is meant to provide comfort and

¹ Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2004), pp. 401-402.

² N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, in the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 33-34.

encouragement to the poor and for many of the poor who live in our era those of the west are certainly seen as “the rich.”

The words of James are made to make your head snap around to look sharply at what he is talking about. He is challenging his audience to be kingdom people, with kingdom values, and kingdom goals. He is calling upon them to recognize the coming of Christ in the way that they live life, the things they emphasize, and the things that they hold valuable. This passage of Scripture is reminiscent of the words of Jesus telling people that where their treasure is there also is their heart (Matthew 6:21, Luke 12:33-34). It is only a matter of time before the wealth of the rich rots; before their clothes become moth-eaten and their gold and silver rust. Some have objected that gold does not rust. Perhaps it does not rust if it is pure but it is highly probable that the refinement of such metals was not to the same standard as we would see today. Only today I saw an article where a picture was shown of gold rescued from a sunken ship and the gold looked as if it had rusted.

James uses a word for “rust” in verse 3 that can also be translated as corrosion or poison. This negative word leaves no

doubt about the true nature of hoarding wealth, it poisons and corrupts the heart of the one who sets their heart upon such things. This rust, will then stand as a witness against the rich. They have this wealth and like a miser they hoard and squirrel it away for a day that does not come and the wealth does no one at all any good. More than this it rots like good food gone bad and becomes poisonous in nature. The rich have stored up treasure for their retirement and in doing so they have ignored the true source of all that is truly good. They have not been rich toward God and in their ignorance and arrogance that which they have set their confidence in has become a consumer of their flesh. They have expended their effort and their physical energy upon something that provides no payment for the future.³

The indictment continues though to go even further; they have done this in the last days at the very eve of one era and at the point when the new era is about to begin they have been old-fashioned, out of step with the times and with a clear indication that the last days are here they have continued to live life as people have always lived life and in this they have failed. They are


³ Patrick J. Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, Interfaces series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) pp. 227-228.

not people of faith, they are not people who live in the light of the coming of Christ. The challenge set forth at verse 4 is to pay what you should to those doing the work. I wonder what this says about all of our buying of cheap goods from workers in India and in China who labor for less than they deserve and maybe even less than they can survive on? In many ways we live in a supermarket world that is sanitized and compartmentalized. We think meat comes from the grocery store and we fail to see the slaughter and the bloodshed that actually is the source of the meat. Is our source of luxury and wealth built on giving unfair wages to workers in other countries? This is why many choose to buy fair-trade goods that pay a fair wage to those producing the goods rather than buying what is cheapest and persecuting the poor.

James wants his readers, whether they are the rich, or the poor, to know that the cries of those who have been cheated, abused and mistreated have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. This is the Lord Sabaoth, the one who commands the armies of heaven to act. The implication here is that they will face the judgment of God and there will be action. The rich have lived indulgently and in luxury on the earth acting as if nothing is going

to change and as if they are not going to have to give an account. They have fattened their hearts and like an animal prepared for slaughter they have ignored that possibility. While on the one hand for the rich this is a horrendous indictment, for the poor, this is a challenge not to envy the rich and to seek their way as it actually leads to destruction and death. These rich are those who have condemned and murdered the righteous person even though such a person was not even against them.

^{5:7} Therefore be patient, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. Behold the one farming expects the precious fruit of the ground being patient upon it until it receives the early and the late rains. ^{5:8} You yourselves also be patient, strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord is near. ^{5:9} Do not complain, brothers, against one another so that you are not judged; behold the judge stands at the door. ^{5:10} An example you received, brothers, of the suffering and the patience of the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ^{5:11} Behold we call blessed those who endured; you heard of the patience of Job and you saw the end purpose of the Lord, that the Lord is sympathetic and merciful.



In situations of oppression, like the ones that James appears to anticipate for his readers, hope is essential if despair and cynicism are not to set in. Without hope life becomes nearly impossible. Often hope without the feeling of progress toward the goal can produce an unhealthy environment as impatience leads to rash actions that actually end up destroying the progress toward a goal. In light of this, James calls for patience on the part of his readers.⁴ He gives an example for his readers to help them to understand their role and position before God. Any good farmer knows that they can do everything just right in preparing the soil and planting the seed, but then he must wait. He must wait for the seed to germinate and make its way through the soil. In dry land farming there is also the waiting for the rains to come and when they come the moisture is there, but without them the seed just remains dormant in the soil.

In verse 8, James uses the word from which we derive our word for “steroids” (στηρίζω) to call upon his readers to “strengthen” their hearts. In the prophetic literature, the “setting of the face” is terminology used to denote steadfastness of

⁴ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), p. 42.

purpose (Amos 9:4; Jeremiah 3:12; 21:10; 24:6; Ezekiel 6:2; 13:17; 14:8) a meaning that is carried over in Luke 9:51. James, however evokes an image idiom from the Old Greek translation of the Old Testament of “strengthening of the heart.” It can mean “to gain physical strength” as for a journey (Judges 19:5; Psalm 103:15), or courage that comes from trust in the Lord (Psalm 111:8), or “firmness of intention” (Sirach 6:37; 22:16; 1 Thessalonians 3:13). It is without a doubt one of the last two meanings that James intends here. He does not want his readers to remain merely passive he calls them to be focused and intentional.⁵

Traditionally the word “patience” has been understood as denoting a passive and submissive attitude. The idea of this being that nothing can be done about the situation that a person finds themselves enduring. James is not referring to this type of patience at all. He is calling for his readers to have a militant patience, one that watches intently for a propitious moment. It is used of those that are engaged in the battle of life, such as when swimmers in the sea swim for the safety of the shore. It is also in

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, in the The Anchor Yale Bible series, vol. 37A (New haven CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 315.

military situations in waiting with endurance through hardship for victory. Here in James, patience means to be “constant,” “to resist,” “to be unbreakable,” to be “immovable.” There is an active meaning to the term as James uses it here. This is heroic suffering. This is a word that is used of the Maccabees and their resistance against the forces of Antiochus. It is used to speak of the courage and the patience of the mother of the heroes and their children (4 Maccabees 1:7-11). In the Book of Revelation the word is used with this same meaning. There John speaks of the bloody persecution of the Christians and the patience and endurance of the victims. In verse 11 James speaks of the patience of Job. There is no sense in which the patience of Job is passive. He fights and struggles, calling for the presence of God until he attends. Job resisted, almost to the point of death, and in the end God vindicated him. This is the type of patience that James calls for his readers to have.⁶

James realized the difficulty that his audience faced and in the face of those difficulties he calls for valiant perseverance. He does not stop here in his instructions though: he challenges his

⁶ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, pp. 43-44.

readers realizing that as they tired under the load of their persecution there would be the tendency for to begin to grumble against one another as children do when they are on a long trip and begin to get tired and grumpy. They are not to tire and begin to blame one another for the things they are beginning to endure. When things are going well it is easy to forget about things that perhaps did not go perfectly, but it is human nature that when things begin to go bad people begin to look for someone to blame; we can all easily become critics. James reminds them that the Judge is at the door, near, and they should be fully cognizant of this fact. He then goes on to remind them that their situation is not unique, they are reminded of the prophets who in the past spoke in God's name and for those that endured there is praise for their endurance. The call is for them to be as heroic as were these heroes of the faith in their day. The final thought of this section is to remind his readers of the fact that the Lord is compassionate and merciful. This thought is intended to bring hope in the face of the persecution that they are facing, or would face.

^{5:12} And above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven, or by the earth, nor any other oath; but let your yes be yes and your no be no, in order that judgment does not fall upon you.

In verse 12 James turns to the issue of swearing oaths, challenging his readers to be trustworthy and to avoid such practices as unnecessary because of their verbal fidelity. The Essenes were noted for not swearing oaths and this was seen as a mark of purity.⁷ This appears to be the nearest thing to a direct quote from Jesus himself that is found in the Book of James (Matthew 5:34-37). Leviticus 19 also looms in the background of what is being advocated here. The problem that likely lies behind the prohibitions of Jesus and likely may also be behind the words of James here is the callousness of the Pharisees in taking oaths. They ranked oaths and some carried more weight while some could sound good to the unformed but actually allowed the person to break that oath without fear of retribution. The same things has happened in America today. At one time a handshake

⁷ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2.135 - "Any word of theirs has more force than an oath; swearing they avoid, regarding it as worse than perjury, for they say that one who is not believed without an appeal to God stands condemned already." H. St. J. Thackeray, trans., *Josephus, The Jewish War Books I-II* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 375.


was all that was necessary and now witnesses, notaries, and signatures are necessary. Today, even contracts are broken.⁸

Legalities and financial penalties are often required to get people to keep their word.

^{5:13} Is anyone among you suffering, let him pray; if someone is cheerful, let him sing praises; ^{5:14} If anyone is sick among you, let him call the elders of the church and let them pray upon him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ^{5:15} Indeed the prayer of faith saves the sick one and the Lord raises him; if he has committed a sin, it will be forgiven him. ^{5:16} Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another in order that you might be healed. The prayers of a just man are able to accomplish much. ^{5:17} Elijah was a man with the same nature as us, and he prayed a prayer for it not to rain and it did not rain upon the land for three years and six months. ^{5:18} And again he prayed, and the sky gave rain and the the land produced its fruit.

The main idea of this next verse is that Christians should deal with suffering, sickness, and sin, by intercession with prayer

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008), p. 236.



and intervene for one another. It is sometimes the case that sin will be one of the direct causes of suffering or sickness and sometimes it will not. When it is the direct cause confession becomes crucial and in every instance prayer proves to be powerful.⁹ Prayer, as called for here by James, is anything but passive, it is a powerful revolutionary force calling for the power of the God of creation to step in and continue his restorative work of the new creation at the focal points called to His attention by Christians. Christians are called upon to be different than the world. If they are cheerful (feeling good) they should sing (ψαλλέτω). The verb used here originally meant to pluck the

⁹ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 239.

strings of a harp (Herodotus, *Persian War* 1:155¹⁰; Lucian, *The Parasite* 17¹¹) and later under the influence of the Old Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures it takes on the sense of singing in accompaniment of such harp-playing (cf. 1 Samuel 16:16-23 ⲓⲁⲓ ⲡⲣⲁⲗⲗⲱ). In the New Testament there are three occurrences of the verb (ⲡⲣⲁⲗⲗⲱ): Romans 15:9 cites the Old Greek translation of Psalm 17:50; 1 Corinthians 14:15 refers to singing “in the spirit and also with the mind”; and Ephesians 5:19 “as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among

¹⁰ “When Cyrus, on his way to Agbatana, received these tidings, he returned to Croesus and said, “Where will all this end, Croesus, thinkest thou? It seemeth that these Lydians will not cease to cause trouble both to themselves and others. I doubt me if it were not best to sell them all for slaves. Methinks what I have now done is as if a man were to ‘kill the father and then spare the child.’ Thou, who wert something more than a father to thy people, I have seized and carried off, and to that people I have entrusted their city. Can I then feel surprise at their rebellion?” Thus did Cyrus open to Croesus his thoughts; whereat the latter, full of alarm lest Cyrus should lay Sardis in ruins, replied as follows: “Oh! my king, thy words are reasonable; but do not, I beseech thee, give full vent to thy anger, nor doom to destruction an ancient city, guiltless alike of the past and of the present trouble. I caused the one, and in my own person now pay the forfeit. Pactyas has caused the other, he to whom thou gavest Sardis in charge; let him bear the punishment. Grant, then, forgiveness to the Lydians, and to make sure of their never rebelling against thee, or alarming thee more, send and forbid them to keep any weapons of war, command them to wear tunics under their cloaks, and to put buskins upon their legs, and make them bring up their sons to cithern-playing, harping, and shop-keeping. So wilt thou soon see them become women instead of men, and there will be no more fear of their revolting from thee.”

¹¹ “Other arts, again, are useless to their professor unless he has his plant; you cannot play the flute if you have not one to play; lyrical music requires a lyre, horsemanship a horse. But of ours one of the excellences and conveniences is that no instrument is required for its exercise.”

yourselves, singing and **making melody** to the Lord in your hearts,”¹²

If anyone is “sick” he should call the elders. The indication here is that this person is prone, very ill, and unable to pray for themselves. Such a person is to call the “elders”, those that represent the church for anointing. This is not the anointing before death; this is an anointing calling for physical healing of this person. It is interesting that the call is not here for the priest or for a solitary person but to those who represent the entire local community of believers. The specific command here is to anoint this person with oil. Some have seen the oil as symbolic in the sense that the anointing of kings in the Old Testament symbolized God’s presence with them. Others see the oil as a medicinal substance, but this view is less likely. The healing that might take place here is solely by the will and power of God. Verse 15 indicates that the prayer of faith will “save” the sick. Some have seen this as a reference to physical healing but the emphasis on “forgiveness” may mean that more than that is in mind here.¹³

¹² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, pp. 329-330.

¹³ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 242-244.

Verse 15 - The promise here of the healing of the sick provides a much needed corrective for the timidity with which we so often pray. We so often pray without the boldness to truly ask God to heal someone and instead we pray a timid pray that lacks the faith that James call for from his readers here. God listens to those who pray in faith, though we need to understand that God chooses how, and when, he heals (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). In this verse James uses the word “save” (σώζω), and while the word may here refer to physical healing it must be noted that every other time that James uses this word it refers to spiritual salvation. We should also be reminded that God is more interested in the spiritual welfare of a person than he is their physical well-being. It is important for us to find a balance in our prayers between never expecting God to heal and requiring him to heal on demand. We should pray with a confident expectation that God will hear and answer our prayers. We also need to remember why we are praying. If it is for our own purposes rather than the purposes of God then in reality we should not even pray such prayers. Our prayers should be devoted to the kingdom of God.¹⁴

¹⁴ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 243-244.

In verse 16 the issue of the confession of sins is taken up by James. He makes it clear that the forgiveness of sins comes in the context of confession. The flow of the argument here makes us wonder if there is not meant to be an understanding that there is a connection between the sin and the illness. This seems to be the case. There is the sense that there is accountability here to the group. Life, for the Christian, is not intended to be lived outside the group and there is the sense that the members of the congregation need each other. They are a community. God intended for prayer to bring the body of Christ together so that when one of the members of the community falls ill, physically, or spiritually, others in that community will intervene redemptively. Confession is not merely a mental activity reserved for our times alone with God, it is a communal activity. God clearly intended confession to be as much a part of community life as prayer.¹⁵

The final clause of verse 17 has often been taken to be a statement regarding effectiveness versus ineffectiveness in prayer, but this is not most likely what is intended here. James is seeking to remind his readers that they ought to pray. The meaning then is

¹⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 245.

that the prayer of a righteous person can accomplish a great deal, if, or once, it is actually prayed.¹⁶ To finish this book with a call to prayer may be quite unexpected, but in reality it is very appropriate. Prayer must surround, infuse, and infiltrate everything else that we do. The Psalms are a testament to the wide diversity of things that should be a part of our prayer life and are there for us to use today as a guide. It is the case that many in Christianity today deny their lives, ministry, and relationships, the power that would come through prayer. Prayer provides an opportunity for heaven and earth to intersect and overlap and surely the more often, and the more intensely that happens the better. This is after all what prayer and the Christian sacraments are all about. Prayer is not a cry into the darkness of the unknown but a call to a God that we know, trust, and we know loves us.¹⁷

James then gives to us a great and powerful example of prayer in the life of Elijah whose prayers affected even the weather itself. Perhaps a timely and important reminder for the people of God living in West Texas today. As is always the case

¹⁶ A. K. M. Adam, *James a Handbook on the Greek Text*, in the Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament series (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), p. 103.


¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 41-42.

with James he brings things down to a very practical level that challenges us and gives us hope.

^{5:19} My brothers if anyone among you might be led astray from the truth and anyone turns him back, ^{5:20} let it be known that turning the sinner back from the way of his error saves his soul from death and covers over a great number of sins.

James chooses to touch on one last, very awkward subject before he closes his letter. He deals here with the subject of someone inside the community of faith wandering away from the faith. The word used here for “led astray” (πλανᾶω) comes from the Greek word where we get our English word “planet.” The planets were seen as wandering in an unfixed way across the sky as “wanderers.” In this passage James does not assume that the people have wandered away, but he does allow for the possibility, or even probability that such will happen.¹⁸ James also holds out the possibility, if not the expectation, that such a person will be pursued and even brought back by another. He wants to encourage such actions and to tell his readers that this is a powerful and worthwhile effort. It even saves the sinner’s soul

¹⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 247-248.



from death. To see someone wandering off from the faith and to do nothing about it is a heinous dereliction of duty. It may be hard, or even impossible to turn them back but the reward if they do is that their soul is saved. When a person is turned back a bit of heaven arrives on earth, a bit of the future that God has in store for his creation arrives. Surely this is what we as participants in the mission of God are called to as his children. To learn with James what he learned from his older brother is to understand and obey the royal law of love and in so doing to get to know Jesus himself. In doing the things that James calls us to, we are called upon to demonstrate our faith and draw ever nearer to God. We are called to be true disciples of Christ.¹⁹

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 43-44.

Synopsis

The words of James come like a nuclear bomb in this last chapter as he unloads upon the “rich.” His words though addressed toward the rich in reality seem to be more focused at encouraging the poor. Though some have tried to identify the rich under scrutiny here with some particular group James does not give enough specifics here for scholars to be certain that he even means to be that specific. In condemning the rich in this fashion James challenges the poor not to be jealous of what they do not have in physical wealth, but to focus upon something of far more value in their standing before God.

James challenges his readers to be patient and to not grumble against one another recognizing that the coming of the Lord is near. They are called upon to do this without complaining all the while recognizing where they stand in the history of God’s dealing with his creation. They stand at the threshold of an even greater change than what they have already seen and it is here that the patience is essential. The patience called for here though is not for some passive, reticent form of patience but for an aggressive, progressive, endurance that challenges the old order

by living as if such a person is already living in the new era under the full dominion of the rule of God. Job is given as an example of the militant patience that James calls for from his audience.

James, as a part of living in the light of being the people of God are called upon to be truthful and forthright in their speech so as not to face condemnation for their shrewdness.

James clearly recognizes that there either already is, or that there will be suffering among his readers and so he calls upon them to pray and he also recognizes that some will be cheerful and he calls upon them to sing songs of praise. For those who are sick he tells them to call upon the elders as the representatives of the church to be called in order to ask them to pray and anoint the sick in order that the power of God may be brought to bear on what causes them to be ill. In doing this they will be raised up and they may be healed. There seems here to be a connection made between sin and illness that calls for confession on the part of the members of the congregation and for prayer to be offered on behalf of those confessing so that they might be healed by the prayers offered on behalf of one another.

Finally James challenges his readers to pursue those among their number who go astray to bring them back and therefore to save their soul and to cover over a multitude of sins.

Questions

1. Why do you think James shows so much concern in this chapter for the rich?
2. Why is reliance upon wealth such a problem for James?
3. How do you think the poor would view the rich after reading what James has to say about them?
4. What is the threat here given by James regarding the rich?
5. What is patience?
6. Are there different kinds of patience?
7. Why is patience needed by the followers of Christ?
8. Why do you think James connects patience and grumbling?
9. What does the judge of verse 9 have to do with patience?
10. How are patience and endurance related?
11. Why do you think James brings up swearing here?
12. Why would condemnation come upon a person swearing?
13. What do the words of James teach us about our everyday speech here?
14. What is the first thing you do when you have pain?

15. What do you do when you are happy?

16. Why do you think James promises that the prayers of the Elders, given in faith are effective?

17. How are illness and sin connected?

18. How can you tell if someone is wandering from the faith?

19. What should we do if we see someone wandering away from their faith?