

A Study of the Epistle of James

This book in the New Testament has been quite a neglected letter until recent years and there are reasons for this neglect. Luther's attitude is one important factor. He thought poorly of this letter calling it "the epistle of straw that lacked the wheat of the Gospel".

Two statements about James made by Luther:

"The true touchstone of testing any book is to discover whether it emphasizes the prominence of Christ or not ... What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, not even if taught by Peter or Paul. On the other hand what does preach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, or Herod does it. On that test James fails". Luther goes on. "The epistle of James however only drives you to the law and its works. He mixes one thing to another to such an extent that I suspect some good and pious men assembled a few things said by disciples of the apostles, and put them down in black and white; or perhaps the epistle was written by someone else who made notes of a sermon of his. He calls the law a law of freedom (James 1:25; 2:12), although Paul calls it a law of slavery, wrath, death, and sin". (Galatians 3:23f; Romans 4:15; 7:10f)

and

"In sum: he wishes to guard against those who depended on faith without going on to works, but he had neither the spirit, nor the thought, nor the eloquence equal to the task. He does violence to scripture, and so contradicts Paul and all scripture. He tries to accomplish by emphasizing law what the apostles bring about by attracting man to love. I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible; but I would not prevent

anyone else placing him or raising him where he likes, for the epistle contains many excellent passages. One man does not count as a man even in the eyes of the world; how then shall this single writer and isolated writer count against Paul and the rest of the Bible?"

Ever since, Protestants have been troubled with James, agreeing with Luther that he contradicted Paul's doctrine of Justification by Faith. Recently, a number of commentaries have put this work in a much more positive light and called Luther's view into question. Some writers have recognized James' familiarity with the tradition of Jesus and they have praised this writer for applying the teaching of Christ to everyday life. As this letter is read, the modern reader is forced to come to terms with Luther's attitude toward this epistle.

Who Wrote the Letter?

The authorship of the letter is not known with certainty but there are three candidates in the running. The first is The James, the son of Zebedee. This James was part of Jesus' inner circle so he had an intimate knowledge of the Lord's teaching that would enable him to write such a practical letter to the early church. However, he is probably not the writer because Herod Agrippa had him executed before the accepted date for the writing (41B.C.E. to 44 B.C.E.) of this letter. (Acts 12:1-2)

A second but equally unlikely possibility is James, the son of Alphaeus. (Matthew 10:3) Very little is known of this person although some scholars do not rule him out entirely as the actual writer. However, his authorship is unlikely because a writer so

unknown would probably have written a more detailed introduction to make himself more known and to add to his credibility as the writer of this important text.

The third and final candidate is James the brother of Jesus. During Jesus' life time, James did not believe in Jesus as the one anticipated by the Law and the Prophets but he came to faith after the resurrection (Acts 1:14) Later, he presided over the church council in Acts 15 and it is clear that James eventually rose to a position of importance and influence in the Jerusalem church. This authority matches the authoritative tone in the letter and his position would account for the absence of detail at the opening; he would be recognized by the mere mention of his name making elaborate details unnecessary.

Several rather subtle arguments have been made to discount James, the brother of Jesus, as the writer and these are outlined in Peter David's commentary on the epistle. One reason is the quality of the Greek contained in the letter which is amongst the best in the Newer Testament. Some scholars have argued that it is difficult to imagine James writing such a high quality Greek. However, I will assume in this study that Jesus' brother wrote the letter although his identity is less important than the message.

The Form and Structure of the Letter

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Date of the Writing

It has been hypothesized that the content of the letter was circulated in the 40s for a decade before arriving in its final form a decade later.

The Historical and Social Context of the letter.

It is thought that the Jerusalem church existed for about fifteen years after the resurrection. It was a series of house churches that comprised about 60 members at the most. However, these

communities were probably quite small in number; 20 to 40 members.

When they met their form of worship was probably a modified form of synagogue worship that included a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Because they were Jews, Jewish festivals were probably recognized as the Acts shows.

Each house church was led by an elder or elders with James presiding over them all. Each community also had deacons whose job it was to collect donations and distribute them to the poorer members of the church. (Acts 6)

The church was poor for several reasons.

1. There were many members from outside Jerusalem who were unable to earn a living there. Some of these were converts who had chosen to remain in Jerusalem.
2. There were many visitors desirous of hearing the church's message. They had to be supported so long as they stayed in Jerusalem.
3. The preaching of the apostles attracted many who were outcasts because of the message of forgiveness that was preached. They were also attracted by the message of hope and justice.
4. Traditionally, many older people came to Jerusalem to die but heard the message of the resurrection and were converted. These people would need continuous support from the church as well.

5. Jerusalem was an economically depressed area and in the 40s there was a serious famine that affected everyone.
6. “Christians” were a despised sect so they experienced much discrimination in hiring practices.

The society that this church existed in was highly stratified and it consisted of five distinct groups. The lowest group were the slaves (few in number) followed by the landless people who worked at “odd” jobs when they found them. Next were tenant farmers who had once owned land but had been force to sell to the more wealthy land owners. Merchants and traders were the next group. Some were upwardly mobile and rich while others struggled to earn a living that required them to travel widely. At the top of the heap were the large land owners, including the priestly class who owned large farms worked by the tenant farmers.

Each of these social and economic classes was represented in the church and this social reality created certain problems. The reader of James can make the inference that most of the membership consisted of oppressed people who were inclined to imitate the “world” by trying to gain power and influence within the church. This struggle for power naturally created factions because poorer members tried to gain favour with wealthy members and to hold back on their economic support for more needy members. It is this state of worldliness the modern reader must keep in mind in order to discover the richness of the text and its relevancy for us now.

The Theological Concerns of the Letter

One should not read this letter with an overly individualistic concern. James is interested in the inner life of believers but his

primary interest is the spiritual well being of the community as a whole, a fact Western readers need to recognize. He wants to ensure that the spiritual life of his community is not brought to a halt by a dead orthodoxy that is loveless, irrelevant and too willing to embrace the culture of the day.

The Greeting

1:1 The opening words of greeting contain a conspicuous lack of detail unlike many other letters in the New Testament. The writer must have been well known to his audience; additional details are unnecessary simply because his audience already has a detailed knowledge of who he is as well as his credibility as a writer. Unlike Paul, (particularly when he is providing a corrective) James sees no need to provide reasons why they should take his message seriously; he assumes that they will because of the relationship he already has with them. He addresses them as “brothers” in verse 2.

1:1 continued: James had a prominent position in the Jerusalem church (See Acts 15) and he is the half brother of Jesus but he has no desire to pull rank. The most important thing he can say about himself is that he is “servant”. The appeal he is about to make is not based on any earthly authority or position and it does not flow from a sense of superiority of any kind. The message he is about to give them applies to him as well. “He is a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread”.

This title makes it clear that he is not speaking as one who is superior to this community; he is one of them so his own spiritual maturation is inexorably linked to theirs.

1:1 continued: Note the high Christology contained in his greeting. James says that he is a servant of God and Christ; he makes no distinction between the two. They are one and the same. This fact contradicts the notion that orthodox Christology was a much latter development in Christian thought.

1:1 continued: His letter is addressed to the “twelve tribes of Israel”. Clearly he thinks of this community as part of God’s chosen people. They are not members of a new religious group who have cast aside their membership in the covenantal community established by God through Abraham. Furthermore, this is a community that is distinct from the world and they are strangers in a foreign land.

NOTE: Modernity speaks of Judaism and Christianity as two distinct religions as if the early Jewish followers of Jesus had abandoned the former for the latter. Today contemporary Christians speak of the Old and New Testaments as if the New Testament is a replacement for the previous one. Similarly, we think of Paul’s Damascus road experience as a “conversion” from one religion to another without ever asking, “What was he converted from?” There are at least two root causes for the view that Christianity replaced Judaism.

1. The earliest believers were exclusively Jewish but in time the early church came to realize that the Gospel they preached was intended for Gentiles as well. They saw themselves as fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant whereby Israel was to be a “light to the Gentiles”. (See Isaiah 42:6) This slow and remarkable process is described in Acts beginning at chapter 10 with Peter’s involvement in the conversion of Cornelius.

Today we have a difficult time comprehending the religious and social barrier that existed between these two groups. (See Ephesians 2:11-13 for Paul's discussion of this.) This enormous problem had to be resolved before the church could expand into the Gentile world and the relationship of Gentiles to the Jewish Torah had to be resolved. The question was whether or not Gentiles needed to be circumcised and obey the Law including the dietary restrictions that Jews followed. The agreement the church reached in Acts 15 was that Gentiles were not obligated to be circumcised as a commitment to the obligations of Torah as a sign of faith in Christ with the exception that they were not to eat food that had been offered to idols. In addition, they were asked not to eat the meat of strangled animals and they were to abstain from eating animals that had not been drained of their blood according to Jewish Law. (Acts 15:19-21)

In some respects, Paul's view was a practical rather than theological because he insisted that there was no reality to the God represented by the idol. He wrote in Corinthians 8; "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one". (4b) Eventually, church leaders reneged on this agreement (Paul challenged Peter publicly over this. Galatians 2:14-21) but in time the agreement was reinstated largely because of his influence. Paul argued in Galatians that Gentiles did not require circumcision as a sign of their faith in Christ as Messiah.

With this new and important understanding, Gentiles were seen to be included in the promise given to Abraham without the obligation of the entire Law. Following this consensus, Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, was able to fulfill his missionary calling to them with

the support of the first Jewish believers and he did his work well. In time the church became more Gentile than Jewish to Paul's great disappointment. (See Romans 9-11) The acceptance of Jesus as Messiah in the Gentile world and its overwhelming rejection amongst the Jews has tended to support the notion that a new religion had replaced an older one. Today Christianity and Judaism are understood as different religions with Christianity seen as a faith that has emerged out of Judaism while being a distinct departure from it. In reality, it is a departure only from that distortion championed by the Pharisees, not historic Judaism.

2. There is a second reason for the replacement theory. Paul's letters contain statements about the Law that seem contradictory. At times he speaks favourably about the Law and disapprovingly at other times. Traditionally, the anti-torah and anti-Israel passages have been read as applying to the Jew as well as to the Gentile. In addition, the anti-Torah passages have been favoured over those passages that read more favourably of the Law without an attempt to reconcile them in some way. This error of interpretation has supported the view that the religion of Israel has been replaced by "Christianity".

These conflicts in Paul can be resolved by realizing that Paul wrote to two different audiences, one Gentile and the other Jewish.

His primary concern was to insure that Gentiles were not obligated to follow the all details of the Law as a condition for their acceptance into the "church" as true followers of the Jewish Messiah but never does he argue that his fellow Jews must abandon their Law keeping. If Paul had believed that circumcision was

inappropriate for Jewish believers he would never have circumcised Timothy before taking him on his missionary journey even though the decision to circumcise him was partly political. (His mother was Jewish but his father was Greek. Acts 16:1-5) However, he is insistent that both communities are reconciled to God in the same way; by faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

As a former Pharisee, Paul argued that the idea that anyone is reconciled to God by the works of the Law was a distortion of Judaism perpetuated by the Pharisees. His understanding was that justification by works was never at the heart of Israel's faith. Paul knew that God's willingness to welcome repentant sinners is everywhere in the Torah and this is exactly what Jesus taught in Luke 15:11-31.

For him, true Jews are those that have the faith of Abraham whose covenant with God was made on the basis of trust, (faith) not the Law. Paul states that Abraham could not have been reconciled to God through the Law because it came four hundred years later. (Galatians 3:17)

The passages in his letters that speak against the Law have Gentiles as audience and they make it clear that there is no need for Gentile circumcision even though the obligation to obey Torah remains for Jews. Even though he argued that sinners cannot be justified through the Law, he still believed that the Law remained operative for Jewish believers.

Paul had no concept of "Christianity" as a new religion. There was only the fact that God had revealed Himself through the Law, the Prophets and the entire history of Israel. (A common theme in the

sermons in Acts.) Each of these contained the anticipation that in time God would act decisively to rescue his creation and overcome the effects of Israel's and all of mankind's disobedience. (A theme in the Messianic Psalms as well.) The Gospel he preached sought to include all people in the covenantal relationship that had begun with Abraham. He wrote: "If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches". (Romans 11:17)

Modern "Christians" ought to see themselves as those who have become part of Israel's story by faith in the Jewish Messiah. We are not possessed of a faith that is distinct from Israel's. Rather, by faith (trust) in Jesus' teaching, death and resurrection, we have been "grafted" into the faith of Israel and included in the promise first given to Abraham. In a sense, we are sectarian Jews just like the first Jewish followers of Jesus.

1:1 continued: "Scattered among the nations" is a technical term that would have rich meaning for Jewish followers of Jesus. It refers to the historical fact of Israel's dispersion from Palestine around 586 B.C.E. when the Jewish nation scattered with many never returning. (Diaspora) They are a scattered people, belonging to no nation and in a sense they are foreigners/exiles in an alien land. (See 1 Peter 1:1, 17; 2:11) James wants them to live as a counter culture that provides a witness to the dominate culture of his day.

Trials and Temptations: James 1:2-18

1:2 The members of this church are his “brothers”. James will offer a critique in his letter but he is not lacking in warmth towards them. By calling them brothers James is also anticipating a theme he will pick up in Chapter 3:1-2; he is one of them and he shares their weaknesses. He cannot be accused of seeing the “sliver” in their eyes and missing the “plank” in his own.

1:2 continued: The trials James has in mind consist of the difficult times in life that inevitably come to every believer when faith is tested. These trials may involve tragedy, hardship, difficult choices, persecution, disappointment, or illness. They are not sent by God; they are a part of the everyday warp and woof of life and they are unavoidable. He tells them to “consider it pure joy”. He cannot mean that we are to enjoy suffering itself since enjoyment of this kind would be a sign of serious mental illness or perhaps a self understanding that interprets suffering as deserved. Nowhere in his letter does James suggest that he is talking about suffering as deserved. Since the early church looked forward to the imminent return of Christ, James is probably reminding them that any present suffering pales in significance to the reward they will enjoy when Christ’s rule will set all things right. Instead of focusing on present suffering, real though it is, they are to live in eager expectation of a time when all suffering will be set aside by the peace and justice of God established by Christ’s return.

1:3 Next, he tells them that trials produce virtue. When faith is tested and not abandoned, perseverance is developed. Only trials

can produce this virtue. One aspect of perseverance is that faith and confidence in God becomes a stronger inner reality for the one who is being tested and this produces a more confident and faithful community. James is encouraging them to keep their minds on this end result now. They are being made stronger by trials just as steel is tempered by fire.

1:4 Clearly, James sees the development of perseverance as a long process at the heart of mature faith because it “must finish its work”. No one is “an over night success”. He says that a person with perseverance is “lacking in nothing”. This phrase cannot be a reference to sinless perfection. James is simply saying that this virtue allows the believer to reflect the very nature of Christ to the community and to the larger society as well because it is the aspect of Christ that led him to suffer on the cross for the sake of sinful humanity.

1:5 At first reading, this verse appears to change the topic abruptly but a careful reading indicates otherwise. What he has just said to his readers about perseverance would likely cause some to realize that they fall far short of possessing this quality of faith and life. However, there is no reason to despair; God is willing to give generously without the slightest taint of “You don’t deserve it!” He will not find fault as He gives the gift of wisdom through the Holy Spirit.

1:6 This verse may present some difficulties for the modern reader because James seems to say that God answers prayer only when asked by those who have faith and no doubt whatsoever. If this reading is correct then a conundrum results. How could doubt ever be replaced by faith?

1:6 continued: On an emotional level, every believer experiences doubt and uncertainty and no amount of will power is enough to rid the emotions of uncertainty. However, James is not speaking on an emotional level here. The example of Habakkuk provides a wonderful insight into what James is saying.

1:6 continued: The prophet complains bitterly to God wondering why He does nothing to help his people but as he speaks to God his attention is redirected from his trials to the faithfulness of God. His reflection enables the prophet to renew his confidence in the God who is always faithful to His Covenant and he learns to trust God because He is God. Now the prophet can “hold on” in difficult times despite the doubt that may still linger in his emotions. Similarly, James is asking his church to pray with a single minded confidence and commitment to the trustworthiness of God during times of testing because God will always see them through.

1:6 continued: James completes his thought using the illustration of the sea in order to say that those who doubt are blown about by the wind and are at its mercy. In affect, they are like ships that are all sail and no ballast. This metaphor is powerful in that it pictures a person who has lost complete control of his/her direction because of the inner conflict between faith and doubt with each pulling in a different direction. This person, controlled by their subjective feelings of uncertainty, can only look inward for the resources needed in difficult circumstances and these will prove inadequate. Two verses later James will call this person “double-minded”.

1:7-8 Now the writer draws a dramatic and unequivocal conclusion; the person he has just described will not receive an

answer from God. It is critical for the reader to keep the context of this verse in mind. James is speaking of prayer for the sake of wisdom. Those who are denied wisdom lack the desire for it and that is why it is withheld. Double mindedness and instability point to a lack of desire for what God really has in store for those who trust Him.

1:9 The Jerusalem community was very diverse but the majority of the members belonged to the lower strata of society. The social and economic divisions would have produced some problems for the spiritual growth of this church. Perhaps the “poor” had feelings of inferiority that caused them to envy those with greater economic resources and higher status. The rich, on the other hand, may have brought into the church inappropriate social values and feelings of superiority that made harmonious relationships difficult or even impossible. This is the problem that James addresses in verses 9-11. This problem was very evident in the Corinthian church as well.

1:9 continued: This paragraph seems to change the topic abruptly but what James is saying is logically connected to what he has already said about faith and wisdom. One important expression of wisdom is to see oneself from God’s point of view and not the world’s and this issue applies to both the “poor” and the “rich” as well. The “poor” are those with little social status (“humble circumstances”) and James instructs them to take pride in their “high position”. This must be a reference to their status in Christ whereby they have been “bought with a price” and reconciled to God by means of Christ’s atoning death. For James, there can be no “higher position” than this so he encourages them to live this reality.

1:10 Next James turns his attention to the one whose worldly position is the exact opposite. Later in the epistle there are two longer passages that indicate who the rich are and what they are like. (2:6; 5:1-6) In chapter 2 the rich are the exploiters of the poor and they are their oppressors in every way and in chapter 5 the rich are those who face a devastating judgment because they are evil and corrupt. Their material gain has been ill gotten so the judgment to come will render them totally bankrupt and miserable. People who fit this description are clearly not part of the kingdom of God.

1-10 continued: The rich, says the writer, should now take pride in their lowly position; having become members of a despised community, they have been freed from their formerly exploitative and corrupt past. It may also be that James is reminding them that they have discovered the joy of being generous to the less fortunate in the Jerusalem church as an expression of God's generosity to them.

1-10 continued: James may have in mind another theological truth. By becoming lowly "the rich" have come to realize that their reconciliation to God, by faith in Christ, has occurred without merit on their part. Therefore they are free to celebrate the free gift that God has given to them. They "take pride" not in themselves but in the work that God has done on their behalf. It is in this sense that they have taken a low position.

1:11 James uses an image from Isaiah 40: 6-8. He brings his argument to a close by pointing out to them the fact that worldly status and wealth, though not intrinsically evil, eventually pass away even if the rich men continue to work. In other words, the rich

cannot sustain their wealth and earthly advantage forever; its loss is inevitable!

1:12 It is difficult for the modern reader to image the suffering that first century Christians experienced as a result of their belief in the risen Christ as Lord and Saviour. Modern Christians (the third world is probably an exception) suffer for their faith relatively little when compared to that experienced by the early church. James addresses this reality more fully to encourage this church to remain steadfast. He points out that their suffering should be seen as a refining instrument in God's hand and as preparation for an unspeakable reward awaiting them in the future.

1:12 continued: In the next brief paragraph that echoes the beatitudes, James picks up the theme of perseverance that he first mentioned in verse 4. This will be a troubling verse for some readers because it seems to suggest a "works righteousness" paradigm.

1-12 continued: The blessed man is one who, because of his perseverance, has found favour with God. There is only one way to find what faith is "made of"; by testing. Although tests are not sent by God, they serve the purpose of discovering the depth of a person's faith on an experimental basis and since faith is the steadfast desire to trust God no matter what, it is a necessary condition for the receiving of God's ultimate reward. Faith that has been refined by testing is the capacity necessary to receive "the crown of life".

1: 13 James returns to the theme of temptation in verse 13. Like every church since the first century, yielding to temptation can be a

destructive force that diminishes the life of the church as well as the individual. James begins by declaring that no one can blame God for the temptation because evil is a complete contradiction of God's nature. He can neither be tempted or nor does He tempt any person to do evil. The cause of a person's moral failure rests with themselves, not God.

1:14 Tempting remains the experience for the believer because evil desires remain. These desires are capable of "enticing" every believer. In short, we are never immune because the essence of temptation is internal and not external; we have only ourselves to blame. Temptations call upon an internal response and that is the test. Either we say yes to the fallen nature that remains or we say yes to God.

1:14 continued: In the next verse James outlines the terrible consequence of giving in to the temptation that comes inevitably to every believer.

1:15 He uses a metaphor from child birth to reveal the downward spiral that can so easily result. When sin is not resisted it takes hold of the sinner and the sin becomes "full grown". The sinner becomes oriented away from God because sin has taken over as the dominate force in his/her life. The disastrous consequence is that sin produces more sin then it expresses itself with ever increasing frequency. Sin that once offended the conscience, no longer does and death is the result!

1:16 In this verse James speaks more positively by reminding them of the true nature and purpose of God. He begins by writing, "Don't be deceived" my dear brothers". (It is a question as to whether this

statement refers to what has already been said or what follows.) Since he calls them brothers it is plain that they are still “Christians” but the possibility of them wandering away is real.

1:17 They must reject the notion that temptation comes from God and they must never blame Him for their own moral and spiritual failure. Most importantly, they are told to hold onto the truth that God desires only good for them. The formation of Christ likeness and “wisdom” in them has been and will always be God’s desire for them because He is the “Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting shadows”. “God is the antidote and not the poison”. (Peter H. Davids)

1:18 James again uses the metaphor of birth to explain God’s will and purpose for them. “God chose to give us birth through the word of truth”. When James speaks of “birth” he can only mean that they have begun a new life, by faith in Christ, that leads to a new orientation towards God that will fashion in them the qualities of Christ. Ultimate perfection is what God has in mind for them. (see Matthew 5:48)

1-18 continued: James uses an expression that Paul used as well. They are “the first fruits of all creation”. (1 Corinthians 15:23) The life that God is developing in them is an indication of what His intends for all of His creation. Beginning with them, God is overturning the ravages of a fallen creation.

Listening and Doing: James 1:19-27

1: 19 The reader can infer from this verse that harmonious relationships in Jerusalem church were threatened by

“uncontrolled speech”. Apparently some members had an inflated opinion about the value of their own ideas that rendered them poor listeners. It was not just the quality of their speech that was the problem. The quantity of it prevented them from really hearing and understanding the other person. Listening is critical because it promotes caring relationships.

1:19 continued: James associates uncontrolled speech with anger but it is not clear whether he is thinking of the anger of the speaker or the hearer but it is likely both. When believers are more concerned with listening than speaking their words are more measured and responsive to the other person so each is less likely to become angry. In the next verse the writer makes it clear what is really at stake.

1:20 Anger has a devastating effect on the life of the church. It almost always leads to uncontrolled/ destructive behaviour and speech that does not produce desirable consequences. The kind of anger that James is referring to can never bring about the kind of life that God desires for individuals or communities.

1:21 The true believer ought to have a desire to be pure so James instructs them to “get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent”. The image here is suggestive of tearing off a garment and it carries the connotation of extreme urgency. (“to get rid of” in Greek is the equivalent of tearing off) Given the theology of the New Testament as a whole it is doubtful that James believes his listeners can do what he asks as a unilateral act of their will since he says that sin is all “pervasive”. In other words, there is no aspect of human nature that is not seriously tainted by sin which means that no part of our humanity can save the other. Surely,

James is calling on his readers to name sin for what it is, to abandon the desire to excuse or justify it, and to recognize that sin retards our spiritual progress in every way. His words may have reminded them of Jesus teaching in the Gospels: “No man can serve two masters....”. (Matthew 6:24)

1:21 continued: James also tells them to “humbly accept the word implanted in you which can save you”. A humble heart is one which willingly submits to the lordship of Jesus as the only solution to the problem of sin. Only his word can give them victory over sin because it enlightens the heart and produces a renewed nature that desires righteousness. Clearly, James does not believe that there is any hope in attempting to conform to external principles; the word of Christ, must be allowed to penetrate and take root in the deepest level of their being in order to win a victory over their sinful nature. There is no works righteousness here!

1:22 James has just been speaking about how the word implanted in the heart, produces new life so he continues with this theme in order to point out that authentic faith goes beyond intellectual understanding. Those who hear the word with understanding deceive themselves if their understanding does not lead to obedience of it. Faith that is not followed by active response is no faith at all. It is “deception”. True faith requires them “to do what it says”. James’ instruction here is quite consistent with the teaching of Jesus. Recall the parable of the unforgiving servant who, having had an enormous debt lifted from his shoulders, refuses to extend this generosity to several others even though their debt is trifling when compared to the one that has been taken from him. As a result the king revokes his previous act of forgiveness and throws him in jail. (Matthew 18:22-35) The point of the parable is clear; Faith

in what God has done requires the outward expression of obedience or it is no faith at all. There needs to be a symmetrical relationship (albeit an imperfect one) between God's response to us and our response to others. The Jerusalem church must aspire to put into practice what James has said as a visible expression of the word they have received otherwise their hearing is superficial and insincere. (Hearing in scripture always implies obedience.)

1:22 continued: James is not teaching a works righteousness here. He never says that their behaviour is a precondition for their membership in the Kingdom that God has established in Christ; it is an expression of their membership.

1:23-24 The paragraph ends with a simple everyday illustration of what he has said. It is a natural thing to look into the mirror at the beginning of the day so that you can present an attractive image. The point is to do something about that which is unattractive and undesirable. However, if after looking into the mirror a person immediately forgets their own image and does nothing about what they saw, either they didn't care about what they saw in the first place or their appearance had no relevance for the rest of the day. In either case, the image seen has no real implication for them; it is an act that corresponds to hearing the word but not doing it. What was first seen in the mirror should be acted on and then carried forward for the rest of the day just as hearing the word should be followed by doing what it says. Hearing the word is like looking into the mirror because it will inevitably reveal flaws that must be corrected; otherwise the hearing counts for nothing.

1:25 The previous illustration is carried forward by James because he speaks of "looking intently into the perfect law that gives

freedom...”. He calls it a perfect law because it has been revealed by God and there is nothing superior to it. This law is the normless norm. Lastly, it has a divine purpose in that those who obey it will find freedom from the tyranny of their passions and, (like anger and quick speaking) just as a train is free to roll to its intended destination by staying on its assigned track, so they will realize God’s real intention for them.

1:25 continued: In this verse James is not preaching a legalism because he does not have in mind conformity to an external code. (This was the kind of saying that Luther deplored.) Remember that in verse 21 he spoke of the word implanted in them. He must mean that this word, with its behavioural implications, can be obeyed only as God first gives the believer what he requires: a changed heart. This law can be obeyed only as God does His work in a person’s internal life. We are not changed because we obey; we obey because we are changed.

1:26-27 James now summarizes everything that he has said in the previous section of his letter. Again he reminds them that personal piety and religious ritual (the term for religion refers to religious performance or ritual of some kind) that does not lead to love for others is “worthless”. Real faith leads a person to constantly consider the impact of their words on others and real faith reaches out to those who are powerless and in need of practical support when they do not have the means to support themselves. Lastly, real faith does not allow itself to be conformed to human culture because it rejects personal ambition that desires the accumulation of wealth and the acquisition of worldly position above all else instead of the welfare of others.

Respect for Persons/ Favouritism Forbidden: James 2:1-

13

2:1 In the first verse of this chapter James returns to a theme of social distinctions first introduced in 1:9-11 because these differences posed a constant threat to relationships in this church. Again he reminds them that what binds them together is their common faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour; there is no reason for favouritism because it imputes to social distinctions an importance they do not deserve. (See Galatians 3:28) In the next verse, James illustrates his point by stating a very realistic hypothetical.

2:2-4 The situation he describes speaks for itself. Treating the wealthy more favourably than the poor is too judge “with evil thoughts”. This kind of preference is “evil” because it brings into the church worldly values and norms that contradict the Lordship of Christ. Christ’s death on the cross both judges and saves all men/women without regard to social distinctions. All are equally guilty and all are pronounced innocent (justified) by the same means; the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is nothing meritorious about social class. The church is obedient only when it rejects certain societal norms in favour of the equality established by the cross and resurrection.

2:2-4 continued: The Greek word used here that is translated “meeting” does not refer to a service of worship. The context is

most likely a gathering that has the purpose of making a judgment or settling a dispute between two individuals whose social status differs widely. Therefore, in this context, James is telling the community that the judgment they make must be impartial in everyway. The person of high position is not to receive special consideration.

🕒 **NOTE:** The apostle Paul also had a concern about the resolution of disputes between believers but his focus is different. For his discussion see 1Corinthians 6:1-8.

2:5-7 James now adds support to what he has already said by contrasting their treatment of the poor with God's. The first point he makes is that poverty and the lack of worldly status is not a consideration of God because he has given to poor the greatest wealth of all, a "rich faith" that leads them into an inheritance of "the kingdom". Whereas God elevates the poor by his generous giving, they insult them by favouring the rich on the basis of their worldly position. The apostle goes on to add more fuel to his argument. The favouritism offered to the rich by poorer members is irrational because it is the rich who have exploited them in the past (often by loaning money at exorbitant rates of interest) and by "dragging" them into court where justice is denied them. (See Habakkuk 1:4) Their favouritism is not only theologically wrong; it is naive even by worldly standards.

NOTE: See Ephesians for Paul's teaching concerning Jesus as the "broken wall". (Ephesians 2:14)

2:5-7 continued: Next, James tells them plainly that their attitude toward the rich slanders the name of Jesus because it contradicts the very purpose for which Christ died. (See Galatians 3:28)

2:8-11 James' final argument is the most devastating of all because loving one's neighbour was considered a summary of the entire law and this law they have broken already. Preference for the rich constitutes rebellion against the entire law; this is what James' means when he says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at one point is guilty of breaking all of it" so no person can defend themselves by saying that they have kept most of the law. In verse 11 the point is illustrated further. A person is a lawbreaker no matter which commandment they break.

2:12-13 In the last paragraph of this section James summarizes what he has been saying with a reference to "speaking and acting" which covers "all the bases". They are not forbidden every kind of judgment. (If they were, James could not write his letter because he is constantly making judgments of them as he writes.) Rather, they are to judge with an "eye" to the judgment they will eventually face. The law that will form the basis of their judgment is a "law that gives freedom". James means that the purpose of this law is to complete the work that God has already begun in them rather than to condemn. Furthermore, this is the pattern each must follow in their dealings with others. Judgments are made for the purpose of enlightenment, not condemnation.

2:12-13 continued: James teaching is absolutely consistent with Jesus own teaching on judgment. Those who remain eager to condemn will find no mercy offered to them. Mercy, in this context, is not a precondition for the offer of Divine mercy. (a form of works

righteousness) Rather, the anticipation of God's mercy is the ground of the mercy they must extend to others.

2:12-13 continued: "Mercy triumphs over judgment" because mercy saves while judgment condemns. Mercy is superior!

Faith and Deeds: James 2:14-26

NOTE: This passage has caused some difficulty because it seems to contradict Paul's great doctrine of "justification by faith" (Romans 3:28) that is considered bedrock for Protestant theology.

2:14-17 Up until this point in his letter, James has been discussing the importance of certain Christian virtues: perseverance in time of trial, willingness to listen, disciplined use of the tongue, control of anger, and impartiality in judgment. He has already spoken about the importance of "doing" the word as well as "hearing" it in 1:22-25 so what he says now is a further development. Apparently, he has no difficulty with the orthodoxy of this church's theology as was the case for Paul in several of his letters. What he is concerned about is their behaviour and attitude because the life of the community is profoundly affected by both of these. Basically, James' is warning them about the dangers of a dead orthodoxy that doesn't issue in a visible expression of love for other people. A faith that consists of an intellectual consent to the facts of the Gospel without a "heart" commitment falls short of being a faith that saves.

2: 14-17 continued: The Gospels contain the same concern. (1.) In Luke 3:7-11, the Baptist is speaking to the crowd and he tells

them that they cannot claim the righteousness of Abraham as their own. They must, he says, “Produce fruit that is in keeping with repentance”. (2.) In a similar passage, in Matthew 7:15-23 Jesus is warning his followers about false prophets. He summarizes his teaching by saying, “Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”. (3.) In Romans 6 Paul offers a rejoinder to the accusation that the Gospel he preaches encourages sinning because it demands nothing by way of obedience. (anomism) He begins the passage with the words of his objector: “What shall we say then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” (i.e. Shall we provide God with an opportunity to show His grace by sinning because every sin gives Him an opportunity to forgive?) The apostle answers by saying, “By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it longer?” (Romans 6:2) He goes on to say that obedience must lead to righteousness. (2b) All three of these passages express the same Gospel truth; the consequence of true faith is Godly behaviour. James is saying the same thing!

2:14-17 continued: The point that James is making is not that both faith and deeds are necessary for reconciliation to God. On the contrary, he is explaining that faith, unaccompanied by deeds, is non-existent in the first place so it cannot save. He pushes his point home by providing his readers with an everyday example that must have actually occurred regularly in this community given the social disparity that existed. If the desperate needs of a person for food and clothing are met only by the words, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed”, then the poor person’s condition remains unaltered and the words are useless, powerless, and insincere. By contrast, faith is real and truly held when it has a visible and

practical expression. Faith, unaccompanied by deeds, is merely an allusion; it is not faith.

2:18-19 James quotes his objector: “You have faith; I have deeds” as if to say, “Faith can exist without deeds.” He answers by showing that this notion is absurd. He recalls for them the fact that when the demons encountered Jesus in the Gospels they demonstrated more understanding than anyone and in this sense they are entirely orthodox in their understanding. But they “shudder”. Their “faith” does not lead to obedience and they remain in rebellion to God. The conclusion James’ is asking his readers to draw is that those who possess a faith that does not result in obedient love are aligned with the demons.

2:18-19 continued: James would agree with Paul that their reconciliation to God begins without merit of any kind but once they have accepted the gift that God offers, they must express their gratitude by responding to human need with practical love.

2:20-24 Now James offers another argument to support the truth of what he is saying. Jews considered Abraham the father of their nation so James could not have chosen a more powerful illustration than this. He begins saying that Abraham was a man whose faith and actions worked together as one. Abraham’s faith was real because it allowed him to do (action) the unthinkable; offer (action) his son for sacrifice. His faith was made “complete” in the sense that it came to maturity because of his determination to obey God even though God’s command seemed to contradict His covenant. Verse 23 suggests that Abraham lived by faith in a covenantal relationship with God and he was so convinced (faith) of God’s faithfulness to him that he was able to follow (action) His command.

2:24 This verse demands a careful reading because it seems to contradict Paul (Romans 3:28) because both writers use the same illustration but with important differences. What does James mean by the phrase, “by what he does”? Clearly the context of the letter provides the answer; he means acts of love and charity. On the other hand, Paul has in mind obedience to the law defined by circumcision, dietary regulations, and the observance of various rituals. Secondly, James and Paul are not using the word “justified” in the same way. When Paul uses this word in Romans he is referring to the forgiveness that repentant sinners receive at the final judgment because of Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross whereby the sinners’ guilt and Christ’s innocence are exchanged. Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the sinner. This is not how James is using the word. He means that as Abraham offered his son on the alter because he “believed God”, (23) his faith was authenticated/demonstrated by his actions. It is in this sense that faith and deeds were working together. Lastly, the phrase “by faith alone” has a different meaning for both apostles. James means intellectual ascent to orthodox belief whereas Paul means personal commitment to Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

2:24 continued: Both apostles agree that reconciliation to God begins as a free gift and that the reception of this gift is authenticated by obedience to its ethical and behavioural implications.

2:25 James gives his readers one last illustration. He directs them to recall an incident from Joshua 2:1-24 that they must have known well. Rahab the prostitute is the main character. Moses has died and the Lord tells Joshua that He is now going to lead Israel across

the Jordan river into the promised land. The theme of obedience is an integral part of the entire story because God promises Joshua that if the law is obeyed the people will prosper.

Joshua sends two spies to look over the land, especially Jericho. Naturally, they go to a place where they will hear a lot, a bawdy house. Soon the king of Jericho gets wind of the spies so he sends a message to Rahab demanding that she turn them over. She hides them and concocts an elaborate story to protect the spies. The heart of this story is found in Rahab's explanation of her heroic actions. (from Israel's point of view) She is aware of what Israel's God has done in the past (Joshua 2: 10-11) and she believes in Him and her belief leads her to action.

At the end of the story she asks that her family be spared after giving the spies their instructions about how to escape.

This is the story that James uses to make his case. The initial faith she had in God would not have saved her or her family but when she acted on it the spies declared her righteous. Her faith involved committed action as well as intellectual belief; this is what James wants his readers to realize.

2:26 The topic is brought to a conclusion with a statement that parallels what was already said in verse 17. The only appropriate action to take with a dead body is to bury it. Leaving it around is a liability. Likewise, faith without deeds calls for only one action, burial.

Taming the Tongue: James 3:1-12

Early in the letter James wrote about the importance of listening over speaking and the fact that speech can have a destructive impact on the life of the community. (1:19-21) He returns to this theme because much inappropriate speech must have been occurring in the Jerusalem church. This kind of speech he regards as “moral filth and evil” that is a serious contradiction of the word that has been “implanted” in them. Any reader will notice the passion of the words and the rigor of his thinking.

3:1 The opening sentence indicates that too many of them have presumed to be teachers without fully realizing the implications of such an assumption. He warns them that teachers will be judged by a higher standard. Teaching may carry with it a certain social status that makes it desirable but teachers must accept the heavy responsibility that accompanies teaching because a teacher has the power to do great damage as well as good. Anyone who has been a teacher knows that the student is often in a very vulnerable position because they are often willing to take what the teacher says at face value. Therefore, teachers must teach with great restraint and humility because of the harm that can be done to those receiving their instruction. Words as well as deeds, count. Control of the tongue is a critical aspect of teaching!

NOTE: For Jesus warning to teachers see Matthew 23:1-39

3:2 James adds a second reason why they should be reluctant to assume the role of a teacher. He asks them to recognize the fact that every teacher is prone to stumble. (sin) Those who teach must be humble enough to embrace their own sinful nature as a basic reality in their work as teachers. Finally, James says plainly that anyone able to control their tongue is gaining a victory over every

aspect of their sinful nature. "...he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check". Controlled speech is a fundamental characteristic of "perfection" (spiritual maturity) especially for teachers.

3:3-4 Two more illustrations follow: Just as a small bit can steer a powerful horse in any desired direction and an enormous ship can be controlled by a tiny rudder so the control of the tongue can guide and mature (perfect) the whole person. James realizes that the tongue speaks words and words contain thoughts that initiate action. Jesus taught the same truth when he said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean" (Matthew 15:10-11) How wonderfully consist scripture is!

3:5-6 Just in case they have missed the truth of what he is arguing the apostle continues with an illustration from nature. A fire begins with a spark and before long it has destroyed the entire forest. Similarly, the tongue is a small thing but once unleashed it quickly overwhelms and destroys the entire person (body) because the damage it causes originates in no other place than "the fires of hell".

3:7-8 James is not yet finished with the tongue. In case this church has not yet grasped the enormous evil that can come from the tongue, he gives another illustration. The tongue is so full of "evil" and "deadly poison" it cannot be easily tamed. Even though men are able to control the most powerful animals, they have enormous difficulty controlling the tongue. Therefore, what he is asking of them requires a radical submission to the word that God has implanted in them.

3:9-12 Finally, James shows that the tongue is contradictory, uncontrollable, unstable, and double sided in its very nature. It is capable of praising God at one moment and cursing men at another but this distinction is a false one. When we curse those who are “made in God’s likeness” we are in fact cursing God. The careful reader will notice that he uses the pronoun “we” in this section because he is including himself in his critique of them.

3:9-12 continued: James brings this section to a conclusion with a contrast between the tongue and nature. He sees a simple integrity in nature that is not found in speech. Salt and fresh water are never found together in the same body of water. Fig trees produce only figs and grapevines only produce grapes. On the other hand, the tongue is so evil and double minded that it can both curse and praise because it does not have the integrity of the natural order. James is asking his readers to embrace the truth that the destructive potential of speech is a window into their fallen nature.

3:9-12 continued: The arguments that James has used in this chapter must have demanded a response from his readers in the Jerusalem church. Some may have denied their guilt and attempted a rigorous defense but others would have repented because they were convinced by the power of James’ words of correction and warning.

Two Kinds of Wisdom: James 3:13-18

3:13 This portion of his letter begins with a question. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Wisdom is a virtue that he has

already mentioned in 1:5 but now he gives it a more extended treatment. The question allows him to make the key point of the entire letter; Human wisdom and understanding are virtues only in the context of a “good life” otherwise they are used only to gain personal advantage of some sort. Deeds, he says, must be done in “humility”. The person that James is describing is one who acts rightly without the intention of gaining a reputation and praise from men.

3:13 continued: Here James shown his familiarity with the tradition of Jesus. “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret. Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:1-4)

3:13 continued: Humility is an expression of true wisdom and James has already pointed out that wisdom is not a natural human possession; it comes only from God.

3:14 In 14a the apostle describes the very antithesis of a Godly person. Bitter envy causes a person to jealously seek what other people have in both position, power, influence, and wealth. Envy sours human relationships because the envious person gives no credit to others and they imagine that they really deserve what the other people have. Because envy and selfish ambition are

preoccupied with the self, they are powerful co-workers that produce conflict instead of loving relationships.

3:14 continued and 15: He tells the church that they ought to admit the truth instead of rationalizing, excusing, or denying the truth of what he is writing because earthly wisdom is of the devil.

3:16 Envy and selfish ambition are not mere annoyances in the life of the Christian community; where these vices exist disorder and evil are present and people are driven apart.

3:17-18 “Heavenly wisdom” comes from God and it is the complete antithesis of the wisdom that comes from the devil. This wisdom has purity as its main ingredient. The person who is pure has no hidden agenda or ulterior motives, they desire justice for everyone, and they value harmonious relationships above all else. Wise people behave in ways that promote and encourage a sense of community by being considerate, teachable, (submissive) and charitable. (full of mercy and good fruit) A person in possession of heavenly wisdom works continually to promote right relationships and justice in the community and they are also willing to offer mercy to the person who is in trouble even when it is of their own doing. The “wise” person knows that God’s wisdom is the soil in which righteousness grows.

The wise also know that the culture and institutions of this world must be rejected as the ultimate source of Godly wisdom because they are organized without God. This fact does not contradict the truth that God uses secular institutions as a means to accomplish His will and purpose in creation. (see Romans 15 for Paul’s discussion of the state as a divine institution)

Submitting to God: James 4:1-12

4:1 The question that James asks reveals the serious problem in this community. They are quarreling and the cause lies within them so there is no one to blame but themselves. The question is a rhetorical one because he already knows the answer.

4:2 The reason for their quarreling is that they want something but they don't get it. It is not clear whether or not James thinks that their desires are innately wrong. The problem is that they are scheming and planning to take what someone else has with means that are the moral equivalent of murder. ("Murder" is used metaphorically) The source of their desires ought to be God but they are relying on their own wits instead.

4:3 James begins the sentence by saying, "When you ask....". Obviously they pray but their motives are entirely wrong; they want pleasure. Prayer ought to begin with a submission to the One who knows what we need rather than what we want, otherwise it is a type of magic. Although the desire for pleasure is not by definition a sin, in this case it indicates that they are praying with hearts that are not in tune with God. Their motives are all wrong.

4:4 The tone of James' language here is strong and there is no doubt about his concern for them. He sees the imminent dangers present in this community so there is little point in being "politically correct"; he simply "calls a spade a spade". The modern reader may find the term "adulterous" extreme but consider what he means

by it. As believers in Christ they have entered into a relationship with him that is akin to marriage, an exclusive relationship that cannot be shared. (Marriage is a common metaphor for Israel's relationship to God in the Older Testament. Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:14, 20) However, they still seek a certain intimacy with the "world" that offends their exclusive relationship with God in Christ so their desire "to have it both ways" is "adulterous". 4:4a summarizes his thought. James sees the world (human culture, mores, and institutions organized without God) as hostile to God. If a person seeks what the world offers they have, by definition, become an enemy of God for "no man can serve two masters". (Matthew 6:24) One wonders whether the modern Christian has a similar understanding of the Gospel as such a radical counter culture.

4:5 William Barclay's translation of this verse is helpful: "...God jealously yearns for the spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? Like a lover who desires nothing less than married intimacy, God longs for that same intimacy with a jealous love.

NOTE: No one knows the source of this reference in verse 5. It is not found anywhere in the O.T. or the N.T.

4:6 Without the statement of this verse James' readers would be left in a desperate position. The quotation from Proverbs 3:34 offers hope **because** God is a forgiving God. James is telling them that if they will "own" what he has said about them and repent, God will forgive them. The grace He provides will enable them live up to the calling He has given.

4:7 James has just told them that God is a forgiving and gracious God. God's nature makes repentance possible and their sin makes

it necessary. Repentance involves a repudiation of past sin as well as an active resistance of sin in the present and future. The devil is powerful but his power is diminished by their resistance of him. Jesus resisted the devil during his temptation and "... the devil left him" (Matthew 4:11)

4:8 Resisting the devil is not all that they should do. They must also submit to God by repenting and obeying his word. This is possible only because He is waiting expectantly to come near to them. The image James presents is one that may have reminded his readers of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Luke painted a moving picture of the father rushing to meet his lost son: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) The son returned because he knew that his father would be waiting and would treat him as if he had never been away.

4:8 continued: In Exodus 30:17-21 Moses received a command from God. He was to make a bronze basin with a stand and fill it with water so that Aaron and his sons could wash their hands before approaching the altar. The fact that God lovingly awaits us does not mean that we should trivialize the seriousness of the sin that is an affront to His holiness. Washing is a symbolic gesture through which the worshiper recognizes their true condition before God as one who is not fit to worship. (See Psalm 51:1-12)

4:8 continued: What they require, James says, is not only an outward washing but an inward one as well. As Jews, they certainly knew that ritual washing meant nothing if it was not accompanied by a rigorous examination of their inner selves. The "world" still has a significant hold on their thinking and behaviour (double

mindedness) so their spiritual maturity depends on their honest self examination and willingness to be “single minded” so that God can complete His work in them.

4:9 Jesus told his disciples that a person must not only admit that they are spiritually bankrupt; (Matthew 5:3) they must also have a sense of sorrow because of it. (Matthew 5:4) Grieving, mourning, and wailing is an outward sign of true repentance that has come to terms with the seriousness of sin and the holiness of God.

4:10 James ends this section of the letter by ensuring them that their repentance will be accepted by God. He will “lift” them up and celebrate their return just as the father ordered a feast to celebrate the return of his lost son. God will restore them as if they had never been away.

Slandering One Another: James 4:11-12

4:11 The directness and intensity of the previous passage must have left this church reeling but James is not finished with them yet. He returns to issue of their interpersonal relationships and his topic is “slander”, a word with two different but meanings. It can mean to speak negatively of another person or to offer unloving criticisms or negative judgments that may be true or false. James views “slander” as a transgression against the law because the law’s primary purpose is to produce a love for God and one’s neighbour. Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment by an expert in the law. His answer left no doubt: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is the like it: Love your neighbour as your self. All the Prophets hang on these

two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18) When they slander, the law is spoken against and judged. He means that the person who slanders has made a judgment that the law has no authoritative claim upon him.

4:12 The last sentence speaks for itself. Only God has the prerogative of judgment. Judgment is an infringement on the rights of God.

Boasting About Tomorrow: James 4:13-17

In this passage James gives attention to those members whose ability to be successful in business has lulled them into a false sense of security in worldly accomplishments.

4:13 James changes his topic with the words, “now listen”, suggesting that what he is about to say is critically important. They are planning a trip, deciding on their destination and devising a plan that will make money. There is nothing in the text to suggest that there is anything unethical in their plans. They seem very reasonable and in keeping with what any responsible business person would do. What then is the problem that James sees?

4:14 First he points out that they have no control over the future and that their life is “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” In other words, their confidence in the future reveals

two things: their naiveté about the fragility of life and the fact that their thinking is worldly.

4:15 With this sentence James accuses them of planning as if God does not exist because they are purely secular in their approach to life and their boasting shows where their confidence really lies: in themselves.

4:16 Lastly, James holds them responsible for their worldliness because they know better! The plans they are making are sinful.

4:17 James defines what sin is in this verse. When they know that a certain act is sin and they do it, they have sinned. Furthermore, seeking wealth for the purpose of their own pleasure without regard for those who are poor is sinful even if the means they use is acceptable.

Warning to Rich Oppressors: James 5:1-6

Who are the rich that the apostle addresses in this paragraph? They are a class of rich people who are outside this church unlike those he addressed in 4:13-17. Obviously, these people will not hear what James is saying which raises another question: Why does he address them now? It must be the case that some members of the Jerusalem church admire the rich and wish to imitate them in some way. (Is this like our worship of celebrity?)

In this paragraph James makes two key points about riches; all earthly riches are ultimately worthless and those who pursue it are of detestable character. In short, the rich are enemies of the Gospel.

5:1 The language James uses the strongest language to describe their future and he holds out little hope that they will ever repent because they are committed to the riches they seek. The rich want only what the world has to offer.

5:1 continued: He says that their future holds nothing but the misery of a judgment that will destroy everything they value and vindicate those they have oppressed. (a recognizable theme in scripture) Instead of rejoicing in their earthly possessions they ought to be “weeping” and “wailing”. (i.e. shrieking) At present the rich are not suffering but their future misery is “a done deal”. “ ... because of the misery that is coming to you”. (5:1b)

5:2-3 James has been speaking of a future judgment and he is so confident in what he has says that he regards their wealth as already rotten. Moths have already eaten their cloth and their money has already rusted. (He is speaking metaphorically) James does not say that the acquisition of wealth wrong; it is the fact that they have shown a complete lack of generosity by hoarding it for their own pleasure while completely disregarding the poor.

5:4 The rich are a corrupt and dishonest people because they have denied simple justice to their employees by with holding their wages. They are unmoved by the plight of the poor unlike God who has heard the cries of their victims. “The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord”.

5:5 What James writes here is full of irony. He says that they (the rich) have fattened themselves “in the day of slaughter”. It was customary to fatten the lamb before a feast so the implication is that they are the ones to be slaughtered. (i.e. condemned)

5:6 There is no limit to what the rich will do to acquire and hold on to their wealth. The murdering of innocent people is no problem for them even though their victims are poor, innocent and offer no resistance at all.

Patience in Suffering: James 5:7-12

5:7 These early Christians faced many difficulties from within the church and from the wider culture as well and the response they must make is “patience”. Given his basic thesis that faith must include deeds, it would be a mistake to think that James is telling them to remain passive to the threats that surround them. Active resistance is required as well. However, the ground of their “patience” (steadfastness) is their trust that God in Christ will put things right when he returns. The second coming is the basis of Christian hope.

5:7-8 James now illustrates what he has just said with an agricultural illustration that would be very familiar to them. The point he makes is that there is only so much they can do. After planting the crop the farmer has no choice but to wait for nature to take its course and produce the harvest that will inevitably come. Like the harvest, the Lord’s coming is a certainty but it will occur according to God’s own timing; they must wait patiently for it.

5:9 In the mean time, they can resist evil by committing themselves to one another and by refusing to complain about other members of the community. Notice the reasons that James gives. If they judge others harshly that judgment will be the standard by which they are judged. In this statement James has echoed Jesus' teaching; "Do not judge or you will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged". (Matthew 7:1-2) Those who judge others harshly have not comprehended their own imperfection and they do not fully realize the extent of the mercy they have received from God.

5:10-11 continued: James is not saying that God's mercy is merited by the mercy we extend to others. Rather, they are to be merciful as an expression of the mercy they have already received from God. The writer alludes to Matthew 24:30-35 when he says, "The judge is standing at the door". This sentence is a reference to Christ's return and it reminds them that they will eventually be held accountable for the way they treat others.

5:10-11 James uses Job as an example of how they are to respond to suffering. Job's patience was certainly not passive. He resented what was happening to him, he rejected the easy orthodox answers given to him by his friends, and he struggled daily with his own doubts about the goodness of God without losing his faith. Job held on to God even when his life experience contradicted his covenantal relationship with God. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him". (Job 13:15) "I know that my redeemer liveth". (Job 19:25)

5:10-11 continued: James is asking them to do something very difficult. He knows that there are times in life when the evidence of God's faithfulness is obscured so he recalls for them the occasion

of Job's vindication as an indication of God's faithfulness. "After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before". (Job 42:10) James makes it clear to them that the basis of their patience is the character of God. "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy". (5:11)

5:12 There is an abrupt change of topic in the letter and it reads as if James is thinking, "And just one more thing before I finish!" Briefly, he moves to the topic of oaths. The modern reader may find a lack of coherence in the way he jumps so quickly to a new topic so we need to remember that James was not writing for posterity. His thoughts are guided by the needs of this first century church.

5:12 continued: James is not saying that it is unethical to take an oath or to swear. He simply feels that "swearing" is unnecessary. When a follower of Christ speaks his words should be taken at face value because his words do not require authentication by any external authority. Failure to be honest in speech deserves condemnation.

Conclusion: The Prayer of Faith: James 5:13-20

5:13 James brings his letter to a conclusion by telling the church that the most important response to trouble is prayer. Trouble can threaten trust in God so prayer is the vehicle to strengthen faith and align the will to God.

5:13 continued: The church can sing as a way of recognizing God as the source of happiness.

5:14-16 This text will cause some difficulties for the modern western church because miraculous healing are often understood as belonging to the apostolic age. Interestingly, James tells them to call the elders, not those who have the gift of healing. Their prayers, spoken with faith, will bring about healing but there is a more important issue for James. The physical healing will be accompanied by repentance and forgiveness. The church must also gather together for confession and healing because God will answer the prayers of those who pray with His will in mind of which repentance is the sign. The righteous person is not a perfect person; they are those whose ongoing confession of sin brings them in harmony with God.

NOTE: The locus of faith in most Gospel miracles and many miracles in Acts is in the person who prays (normally Jesus); only rarely is the person who is healed said to have faith. Rejection of Christ prevents healing, but the amount of faith in the patient is biblically unimportant. (James; Peter H. Davids; page 134)

5:17-18 The illustration that James gives is from 1 Kings 17:18:46. Elijah is a good choice because he is not portrayed as a perfect man; he has faults like them. The obvious point is that God will answer their prayers in the same way.

5:19-20 When a person “wanders from the truth” the believing community has a God given responsibility to act. Someone must bring them back because the stakes are high. That person will be saved from judgment. The extent of their sin is never a barrier to their recovery because God can forgive (cover over) “a multitude of sins”. This phrase is intended to emphasize the grace of God not the wickedness of the sinner. The substitutionary death of the

incarnate son on the cross, whereby He takes responsibility for their sins, (and ours) means that there is no limit to God's grace. Grace stands waiting to welcome repentant sinners home.

5:19-29 continued: James knows that "Love covers a multitude of sins" and (1 Peter 4:8) with this final paragraph James has ended his letter by reassuring them that none of their errors or imperfections is beyond the grace of God. He has presented the case that love and concern for others is the necessary sign that they have truly comprehended God's love for them. Otherwise, they are "listeners" but not "doers".

Completed by Peter Ferguson

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