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## The Epistle of James

**2** Editorial: Thomas R. Schreiner  
Practical Christianity

**4** Robert H. Stein  
"Saved by Faith [Alone]" in Paul  
Versus "Not Saved by Faith Alone" in James

**20** Timothy George  
"A Right Strawy Epistle": Reformation Perspectives on James

**32** Mark A. Seifrid  
The Waiting Church and Its Duty: James 5:13-18

**40** Ron Julian  
A Perfect Work: Trials and Sanctification in the Book of James

**52** Dan G. McCartney  
The Wisdom of James the Just

**66** Daniel L. Akin  
Sermon: The Power of the Tongue  
James 3:1-12

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# Practical Christianity<sup>1</sup>

*Editorial: Thomas R. Schreiner*

**Thomas R. Schreiner** is a professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has also taught New Testament at Azusa Pacific University and Bethel Theological Seminary. Recently, he completed a commentary on Romans in the Baker Exegetical Commentary Series. Currently, he is working on a theology of the apostle Paul and is co-authoring a work on perseverance and assurance (both due from InterVarsity Press). He is also serving as the preaching pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

For some of us it is easy to talk about the Christian faith. We are interested in exegesis, theology, church history, evangelism, missions, Christian education, church music, and what is happening in the Church throughout the world. Perhaps we have studied some of these subjects deeply, so that we are a fount of information to those who have not had that privilege. Perhaps some of us know the joy of preaching and teaching God's word, and have experienced the joy of being entrusted with holy things. Those of us who preach, teach, and write about the things of God could easily begin to imagine that our knowledge of God is deeper than it really is. Simply because we speak about these things often, we may deceive ourselves into thinking that our godliness matches everything we proclaim.

James brings us back to earth. He reminds us that not many of us should become teachers, since there is a stricter judgment for teachers (Jas 3:1). Our Christian maturity is not measured only by what we teach, preach, and write, but also by what we say in our homes, to our friends, and to those with whom we work (Jas 3:1-12). James reminds us that our everyday speech is a barometer of the heart, indicating whether we are truly praising God, or whether we are people who are easily irritated and provoked. We may be tempted to think that we are truly wise and discerning. True wisdom, James instructs us, is not determined by our intellectual ability (Jas 3:13-18). The wisdom of God is demonstrated by our godly behavior. If we are motivated by selfish ambition, and consumed by envy and jeal-

ousy, then we are not wise. If, on the other hand, we are full of humility, gentleness, love, mercy, and patience, then wisdom genuinely resides in our hearts.

Our religion—yes, even our preaching and teaching—can become a cloak for advancing our own reputations, so that our faith becomes a platform for idolatry. One test for all of us is how we treat the lowly people of the world (Jas 2:1-13). When the rich or prestigious come to our churches, do we treat them royally and attend to their every need? But when the “no names” attend, do we by comparison ignore them, knowing that they cannot assist our church as much? We may even justify such behavior by saying that some contacts are more “strategic” than others, revealing that we have swallowed the value system of the world.

James is a spiritual tonic for us, since we can easily confuse “hearing the word” with “doing the word” (Jas 1:22-27). We might think that we are progressing well in the Christian life if we read our Bibles and pray daily, and regularly attend services where God's word is proclaimed. James warns us against a disconnect between our hearing and doing, and reminds us that without the latter our “religion” is useless.

I am hopeful that this issue of the journal will prove helpful to our readers. Robert Stein tackles the difficult issue of “justification by works” in James (2:14-26), explaining how, when rightly understood, there is no contradiction between Paul and James. Timothy George's companion piece provides a history of interpretation of James 2, emphasizing Reformation per-

spectives. Mark Seifrid examines the text on anointing the sick with oil (5:13-18). How should we understand this difficult passage, and what does it say to us today? Seifrid's study provides insightful answers to these questions. Ron Julian gives us an inroad into the primary purpose of James—living lives that are pleasing to God. Dan McCartney opens a window into the relationship between James and other wisdom writings. Finally, Daniel Akin concludes this issue with a sermon on the tongue (Jas 3:1-12). Here is where the message of James speaks to every heart. I pray that the Lord will speak to every person who reads this outstanding sermon.

#### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

<sup>1</sup>In Volume 4.2 in John Piper's article, *To Live upon God that is Invisible: Suffering and Service in the Life of John Bunyan*, the statement on p. 7, "After Cromwell's death, his brother Richard was unable to hold the government together," should read, "his son" rather than "his brother."

# “Saved by Faith [Alone]” in Paul Versus “Not Saved by Faith Alone” in James

Robert H. Stein

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## Introduction

In contrast to Romans 3:28 where Paul states, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law,” James writes in 2:24, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, the relationship between faith, works, and justification in the teachings of Paul and James have been much debated.

On the one hand, there are those scholars who argue that the teaching and theology of Paul and James are contradictory and incapable of harmonization. No doubt the most famous of these is Martin Luther, who referred to James as a “right strawy epistle”<sup>2</sup> and in his Preface to the book states that James

... is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works [2:24]. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac [2:21]; though in Romans 4 [2:22] St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone, before he had offered his son....<sup>3</sup>

More recent scholars give a similar assessment. “What we encounter [between Paul and James] is not simply a tension but an antithesis... There are no grounds for blurring the fact that James 2:14ff. visibly appears to have been written intentionally in opposition to Paul’s statement.”<sup>4</sup> J. T. Sanders argues that James “misunderstands Paul,” “opposes

the writings of Paul,” and “rejects Pauline tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Ropes writes that “James shows no comprehension of what Paul actually meant by his formula [saved by faith and not by works] . . . and he heartily dislikes it.” Furthermore he “would have deplored as utterly superficial and inadequate James’s mode of stating the conditions of justification.”<sup>6</sup> Compare also Bultmann who states, “. . . Paul’s concept of faith is . . . utterly misunderstood. For Paul would certainly have agreed with the proposition that a faith without works is dead (2:17, 26) but never in the world with the thesis that faith works along with works (2:22).”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, there are those who seek to argue that James and Paul are in agreement and that no conflict exists. Marxsen argues that what James

... attacks is the idea that the Pauline formula should be accepted as valid with *this* interpretation of faith [a faith without works]... The author . . . brings out what Paul means by faith by means of an addition. In other words, what Paul signifies by ‘faith’ can now be expressed only by ‘faith and works.’... His aim is to bring back a Paulinism that has been misinterpreted and distorted to the truly Pauline position.<sup>8</sup>

Mitton also argues that “James is entirely at one with Paul.”<sup>9</sup>

Still others argue that James and Paul do not contradict each other but are dealing with different issues and fighting dif-

ferent foes. Thus there is “no disagreement between James and Paul, only a slight variation of emphasis.”<sup>10</sup> “The polemic of James . . . was not directed at the thesis of Paul, but at a slogan derived from it.”<sup>11</sup>

The false views which Paul and James are opposing, in Rom. 4 and here respectively [James 2:14-26], are different. Paul is combating the idea that men can put God under an obligation to themselves. . . . James is opposing the idea that a real faith can exist without producing works of obedience. The difference of aim accounts to a large extent for the differences of language. There is no need to infer any significant disagreement between their fundamental positions.<sup>12</sup>

Formally, Ro 3:22 (justification by faith without the deeds of the law) and Ja 2:24 (justification by works and not by faith only) are sharply opposed theses. In reality the differences are modified if we take account of the different applications of the terms.<sup>13</sup>

The present article will explore the argument of James in 2:14-26 with the purpose of seeing if he and Paul are indeed in disagreement. We shall do so by examining: (1) The terminology of Paul and James; (2) the context of James 2:14-26; (3) key issues found in James 2:14-26; and (4) James 2:14-26 and the rest of the New Testament.

### **The Terminology of Paul and James**

Individual words in any language usually bear a range of possible meanings. If a person looks up any particular word in a dictionary, he or she will find a number of possible meanings associated with the word because the semantic range of words vary. Some possess many different, possible meanings. Others possess only a few. It is difficult, however, to think of any word in the English language that has

only one specific meaning. Within the norms of language words almost always possess a range of meanings.

Within the writings of Paul and James this is also true. In James, for example, the word “trial (*peirasmos*)” is used positively in 1:2 and 12. In 1:13-14 its verbal form “tempted (*peirazō*),” however, is used negatively. It should not therefore surprise us that the same word may be used by James and Paul in different ways and possess different meanings. There are two terms used in James 2:14-26 that possess meanings quite different from the normal way that Paul uses these terms. These terms are: “faith” and “believe (*pistis*–*pisteuō*)”<sup>14</sup> and “works (*erga*).”

### **“Faith” and “Believe”**

In James the noun “faith” is found sixteen times. Five are found outside 2:14-26 (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5; 5:15) and the rest are contained in our passage (2:14 [2], 17, 18 [3], 20, 22 [2], 24, and 26). The verbal form “believe” is found only three times and all occur in our passage (2:19 [2] and 23). The five occurrences of “faith” outside our passage indicate that a different faith is being described there than the “faith” James begins to discuss in 2:14-26. In 1:3 the “faith” described is one that successfully encounters trials and as a result produces endurance. In 1:6 it is a “faith” that endures in prayer and as a result receives wisdom from God. In 2:1 it is “faith” in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.<sup>15</sup> In 2:5 the poor of this world who are heirs of the kingdom are described as rich in “faith.” In all these instances “faith” is portrayed positively. It is never viewed as merely an intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions.

In 2:14-26 “faith” is viewed quite differently, and it appears that the faith

being discussed is that of a real or hypothetical opponent whom James has engaged in a diatribe. This opponent's understanding of faith is quite different from that of James himself. This can be seen by observing how this faith is described:

- 2:14a—It is a faith that possesses no works;
- 2:14b—It is a faith that cannot save;<sup>16</sup>
- 2:17—It is a faith without works that is dead;
- 2:18a—It is a faith that is distinct and separate from works;
- 2:18b—It is a faith without works;
- 2:18c—It is contrasted with a faith shown by works;
- 2:20—It is a faith without works that is useless;
- 2:22a—It is contrasted with a faith that works along with works;
- 2:22b—It is contrasted with a faith perfected as a result of works;
- 2:24—It is a faith that is alone; and
- 2:26—It is a faith without works that is dead.

The verbal cognate "believe" also helps us to understand the kind of faith possessed by James's opponent:

- 2:19a—It is assent to the biblical proposition that God is one;
- 2:19b—It is a kind of faith that even demons possess; and
- 2:23—It is contrasted with the kind of faith Abraham possessed.

From the above it is obvious that a distinction must be made between "faith" as it is understood by James and "faith" as it is understood by his real or imaginary opponent. It is doubtful that James would acknowledge that his opponent's kind of faith is true or real faith. He hints at this in 2:14a when he describes his opponent's faith as follows, "What use is it, my brethren, if someone *says* he has faith but he has not works." As numerous commentators point out, James does not say, "What use is it, my brethren, if

someone *has* faith but has not works."<sup>17</sup> James appears to have intentionally worded his introductory statement in a way that indicates that his opponent does not have true Christian faith. This interpretation finds support in 2:14b where James states, "Can *that* faith save him?"<sup>18</sup> The use of the article *hē* indicates that James is asking whether *the* specific kind of faith he has just described can save the man. Still further support for this view comes from 2:18. Here the imaginary opponent<sup>19</sup> describes his faith as being one totally independent of works. "But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works.'"

In Paul "faith" almost always refers to a whole-hearted trust in God that salvation can be received as a gracious gift apart from any meritorious works because of the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Faith for Paul involves "man's total response to and involvement with Jesus Christ."<sup>20</sup> Accompanied with the gift of the Spirit it involves a new creation (2 Cor 5:17) in which the believer has been raised to newness of life and has become a slave to righteousness (Rom 6:18). It involves an obedience of faith (Rom 1:5). Thus Paul would never say that "demons believe," as James does in 2:19, because of the different meaning he gives to the terms "faith" and "believe." The faith of James's opponent involves merely intellectual assent to propositions such as "God is one." It is a belief *that* certain propositions are true. Paul's use of the words "faith" and "believe" involve faith *in* God and his Son. It is not merely propositional, although that element is present. It is also relational! Faith for Paul involves a relationship of grace and love toward God that results in a transformed life; for James's opponent faith involves nothing

more than assent to doctrinal truths. Yet even the demons possess a correct understanding of such doctrinal propositions and assent to their truth. In fact their theological understanding of doctrinal propositions is undoubtedly more correct than ours due to their supernatural nature, but such knowledge does not result in their salvation!

### *“Works”*

The term “works” also possesses a range of possible meanings, and it is used quite differently in James and Paul. In James it is used fifteen times and always positively. This is true both for the twelve times it is used within our passage and the three instances it is used elsewhere (1:4—associated with endurance, 1:25—contrasts with the mere hearing of the law of liberty; 3:13—are the results of good behavior). In our passage it is used in:

2:14—From 2:15-16 it is clear that it refers to such things as clothing the “naked” and feeding the hungry, i.e., works of loving kindness;

2:17—The works mentioned here refer to the actions described in 2:15-16;

2:18—In these three instances works refer to the works mentioned in 2:17;

2:20—Here works refer to the faithful obedience of Abraham;

2:21—Here works refer to Abraham’s obedience in offering up Isaac as a sacrifice;

2:22—In these two instances works refers to Abraham’s offering of Isaac in 2:21;

2:24—Here works refer to the kind of actions mentioned in 2:15-16, 21;

2:25—Works here refer to Rahab’s protecting God’s messengers; and

2:26—Here it refers to the works of loving kindness, obedience, and faith mentioned in 2:15-17, 21, 25.

It should be noted that in 2:14-26, and in the rest of James, “works” are always seen positively and, when described,

involve acts of loving mercy, kindness, and obedience to God. They are performed from a faith that “works through love.” They have nothing to do with ritualistic or ceremonial actions.

In Paul, however, “works” possess a very different meaning. In Romans and Galatians they are frequently described by the expression “works of law” (Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16 [3]; 3:2, 5, 10). Works are antithetical to grace (Rom 11:6). They are an attempt to boast before God, place God under obligation (Rom 4:2), and as a result earn justification (Rom 4:4). Consequently, “works” are a way of seeking righteousness that is inimical to faith (Rom 9:30-33), and it is impossible to achieve justification through this method (Rom 3:20). The specific “works” that Paul has in mind are: circumcision (Rom 4:1-12; Gal 5:3, 6; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19; cf. Acts 15:1, 5); ritualistically keeping certain days (Gal 4:10); abstaining from certain food and drink (Col 2:16); etc. It should be noted that clothing the naked and feeding the hungry do not appear in Paul’s polemic against works. Paul is not arguing against faith needing to be accompanied by loving acts of kindness and mercy. These are not the works that he is opposing. He is not opposed to good deeds done in obedience to God. These kinds of works are spoken of quite positively in Paul.<sup>21</sup> He is opposed, rather, to performing certain ritual acts found in the Old Testament for the purpose of acquiring a standing before God. Such “works” deny the adequacy of “by grace through faith” and ultimately trust in the “works” one does to achieve justification.

It is clear that, although Paul and James are using the same terms for “works,” they attribute different meanings to them, just as in the case of “faith.” These meanings

lie well within the semantic range of these terms, but they are not identical. In fact they are antithetical. As a result Paul's words in Romans 3:28 ("For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law") can be interpreted, "For we maintain that a person is justified by a whole-hearted trust in God's grace and mercy and not by seeking to merit favor with God through such acts as circumcision and the keeping of the ritual law." On the other hand, James's words in 2:24 ("You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone") can be interpreted, "You see that a person is justified by a faith that works through love and not by a sterile assent to religious propositions unaccompanied by works."

### **The Context of James 2:14-26**

The value of the context of James 2:14-26 for understanding this passage is debated. Some suggest that the discussion of "faith" in 2:14-26 picks up the theme begun in 2:1-13. "In this section St. James proceeds to enlarge on the meaning and nature of that faith in Jesus Christ which was spoken of in ver. 1 as inconsistent with *prosōpolēmpsia* [personal favoritism]." <sup>22</sup> There are several parallels between these two sections: "faith" (2:1 and 14ff.); clothing (2:2 and 15); person in need (2:2 and 15-16); the expression "you do well" (2:8 and 19); "called" (2:7 and 23); "if a man . . ." (2:2 and 14). Ties between the present passage and chapter one include: "faith" (1:3, 6 and 2:14ff.); "works" (1:4, 25 and 2:14ff.); the contrast between "hearing and doing" and "faith and works" (1:22-25 and 2:14-26); concern for the needy (1:27 and 2:15-16). <sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, Dibelius has argued that "A connection between this treatise [2:14-26] and the preceding one cannot be

established."<sup>24</sup> That there are allusions in 2:14-26 to what has preceded is obvious. Yet there does not appear to be any intimate or necessary tie between our passage and what has preceded. Thus James 2:14-26 can be understood, for the most part, without the help of its context. As so often in works of wisdom, the logical ties between sections are loose and play no major role in understanding the meaning of individual sections. Our present passage can be understood without major dependence upon the material that has preceded or that follows. The general argument against merely hearing and not doing in 1:22-25 and some of the vocabulary ties with 2:1-13 help throw some light on the issue James deals with in 2:14-26, but they do not play a determining role on how to interpret our passage. Thus, due to the constraints of space, we shall proceed to the discussion of the key exegetical issues involved in 2:14-26.

### **Key Issues Found in James 2:14-26**

The structure of this passage involves three sections. The first consists of 2:14-17, which begins with a question about faith not having works (2:14b) and concludes with a summary (2:17) about faith not having works that forms a kind of *inclusio*. The second section consists of 2:18-19 where James interacts with the comments of a real or imaginary opponent. The third section (2:20-26) is also introduced by a question. It likewise involves a rhetorical question based on the fact that faith apart from works is useless. The section concludes again with a kind of *inclusio* that faith apart from works is dead (cf. 2:20 and 26).

### **Section One—2:14-17**

The first section begins with the ques-

tion, “What use is it...,” that introduces the following diatribe. This expression is frequently associated with a diatribe (cf. 1 Cor 15:32; Sirach 20:30; 41:14). The question assumes “before God in the last judgment” and is soteriological in nature (1:12, 21; 4:12; 5:20). The conditional sentence (“If a [person] has . . .”) need not imply that this is a hypothetical question. It is more likely that we have here an actual situation that James encountered on more than one occasion. This is suggested by the present tense of the verb “say” (*legō*). We have already noted the fact that James does not state that the person *has* faith but only *says* that he has faith, and that *this* [literally—the faith just referred to] faith cannot save. He is not saying that faith, in the sense that both he and Paul understand it, cannot save, but that the faith referred to in 2:14a and described in 2:15-16 cannot save.

In 2:15 and 16 James provides an example of what he means by the works that must accompany faith. This “is such a crass example of faith without works that the nature of any such situation becomes clear to all.”<sup>25</sup> Whether the illustration is a real one that reflects the situation of James or merely hypothetical is unclear, but this does not affect the argument. “Without clothing” need not mean that the people described are naked and totally without clothing. It probably means that they are inadequately dressed and may refer to their lacking the outer garment worn over a tunic (Matt 5:40; Luke 6:29; John 13:4; cf. James 2:6). “Daily food” refers to the food needed for that day. It is not the same word used in the Lord’s Prayer. The needs that James highlights indicate that by “works” he is not referring here to ritual laws or what Paul calls “works of law.” They refer rather to

the most basic form of love and compassion, mercy and kindness.

The kind of faith James claims is unable to save is one that can see a fellow Christian, i.e., a brother or sister, in such terrible circumstances and instead of providing what is needed utters pious platitudes—“Go in peace, be warmed and filled.” The first of these platitudes is a semitic idiom (Judg 18:6; 1 Sam 1:17; 20:42; 29:7; 2 Sam 15:9; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50; Acts 16:36) that means something like, “May the Lord bless you as you go.” The latter two banalities are in either the middle or passive voice. There is little difference, however, as to how they are to be understood in this sentence. They are trite and loveless wish prayers such as, “May God provide your needs.”

“What use is that?” repeats exactly the “What use is it?” of the opening verse of our passage. The expected answer is of course, “None whatsoever!” Here Paul would be in complete agreement. The faith described in these verses cannot save, because it is not a faith that “works through love (Gal 5:6).” The example James provides in these verses brings to mind Jesus’ parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In this parable the separation of the sheep to eternal life and the goats to eternal punishment is based on their behavior toward “the least of these my brethren (Matt 25:40).” The sheep fed believers (the brethren) who were hungry, gave them something to drink when thirsty, welcomed them as strangers, clothed them when naked, and visited them when sick and in prison. It should be noted that two of these actions (“feeding the hungry” and “clothing the naked”) are found in the illustration of James. Whether James was aware of and even patterned his example after Jesus’ parable is impossible to say.

The thought, however, is the same. The behavior reflected toward the least of the brethren, i.e., the believing community, is a behavior that is ultimately directed toward God and the Savior of these brethren (cf. Matt 10:40-42; 1 John 3:17-18). Such behavior is a much more accurate reflection of their attitude (or “faith”) toward God than any mere confession such as found in 2:19.

“Even so” introduces James concluding summary of this section (2:14-17). This same expression is used in similar fashion in 1:11; 2:26; 3:5 to draw a conclusion from a preceding analogy or example. “Faith, if it has not works, is dead, being by itself.” It is difficult in an English translation to indicate the article that stands before “faith.” It is clear in the Greek text, however, that James is referring specifically to the faith noted in 2:14 and illustrated in 2:15-16. “If it has no works” parallels the exact same expression in 2:14. This so-called “faith” is described as “dead.” In 2:20 such a faith is referred to as “useless.” The reason is that it is “by itself.” Similar expressions for “by itself” are “without works” (2:18, 20, 26) and “alone” (2:24). The response shown in the example is so heartless and lacking of mercy that even the qualified approval given in 2:19 to a demonic-like assent to a theological proposition is not given here! This faith is “dead.” This indicates that “Works are not an ‘added extra’ any more than breath is an ‘added extra’ to a living body.”<sup>26</sup> The faith that James is describing may fit the possible semantic range of the word “faith” in James’s day, but it does not fit what “faith” means in the context of the Christian faith!

### **Section Two—2:18-20**

There are a number of exegetical diffi-

culties associated with these verses. In a now famous quotation, Dibelius refers to 2:18 as “one of the most difficult New Testament passages...”<sup>27</sup> Some of the difficulties involve: “Who is the person raising the question and how should we understand the question? Is the questioner an ally of James repeating his views or an opponent?” The second main question involves where James’s reply to the question begins. Does it begin in 2:18b, 2:19, or 2:20? There are three main alternatives regarding the identity of the questioner:

- (1) He is a supporter of James who attacks the idea that one can have faith apart from works. Thus the “you” refers to his and James’s opponents, and the “I” to his and James’s views. This ally argues against the suggestion that faith and works can be separated. They are not two, acceptable alternatives. This allows the “you” and “I” to correspond more consistently to the opponent’s view (“you”) and James’s and his supporter’s view (“I”) throughout the passage. Thus we should understand 2:18 and 19 as essentially James’s and his ally’s response to their opponents.
- (2) It is a straw man James uses to argue (either in favor of James or in opposition to him) that faith can (or cannot) be separated from works.
- (3) It is an opponent of James who argues that faith and works are separate virtues or gifts. Some have faith whereas others have works. They can exist separately. Just as some are ordained for works (note the deacons of Acts 6), others are ordained for prayer and ministry of the word, i.e., faith (note the apostles of Acts 6). The opponent, like Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:4ff., believes that “faith” and “works [healing]” are separate gifts.

Various arguments are given in support of each of these positions. We shall, however, due to considerations of space, argue only for the last of the alternatives.

The opening expression “But someone may well say” opens a diatribe that usually involves an opponent whose view is being stated (1 Cor 15:35; cf. also Rom 9:19; 11:19; Luke 4:23). This suggests that in 2:18 the question comes from an adversary. Also the normal way of interpreting the “But (*alla*)” of 2:18 is as an adversative. It is far more common to interpret the Greek word *alla* as “But” than “Indeed” as the first view requires.<sup>28</sup> The first view also requires us to think that James is now introducing a third person into the argument, whereas it seems more likely that he is dealing with the same opponent who is now responding to what James has said in 2:14-17.

It is better therefore to interpret 2:18 as introducing the argument of an opponent. Where, however, does the opponent’s argument end? It seems best to see it as ending in 2:18a and to have James’s counter argument begin with “Show me...” in 2:18b.<sup>29</sup> These verses then should be understood as follows. An opponent challenges what James has said in 2:14-17 by saying, “You have faith and I have works.” The problem with this statement is that the opponent attributes to James “faith” and to himself “works,” and this view is the opposite of what James has been arguing in 2:14-17. One would expect from the mouth of James’s antagonist, “You have works and I have faith.” Here, however, the “you” and “I” should be understood more like “one” and “another” or as *allos . . . allos* in Greek. It must be acknowledged that the latter understanding is a weakness in the interpretation advocated.<sup>30</sup>

The objection being raised in 2:18 is the view that faith and works can be separated and isolated from each other. A person supposedly can possess one or the

other. Thus one may have faith and another works. Consequently, the man who possesses works should not condemn the man who has faith (and *vice versa*). To this James responds in 2:18b that such a division is impossible. One cannot have faith without works. “Show me your faith without the works” means “Demonstrate to me how you can have faith without works! I (or “a person”) can demonstrate to you my faith only by my (“his” or “her”) works!” In the whole discussion it is not the content of faith that is the issue, but its lack of works. This James makes clear in his next illustration.

“You believe that God is one.”<sup>31</sup> This can be understood either as a rhetorical question or as a statement. The faith being challenged by James centers on the *Shema*, which plays an important role in the history of God’s people.<sup>32</sup> The faith being described is essentially creedalism, i.e., an intellectual assent to some proposition about the nature of God. Faith here is simply the approval of a theological statement. It does not involve belief *in* or personal trust *in* God but belief *that* or a belief *about* God. The response “You do well” indicates that the confession is both correct and good. Its inadequacy becomes immediately apparent, however, by the next statement.

“The demons also believe, and shudder.” Here James describes clearly the kind of faith he claims cannot save. The fact that such a faith cannot save is self-evident. The demons, allies of Satan doomed to hell, can also claim the kind of faith that James’s opponents possess. They even possess a better “creedalism,” because of their supernatural knowledge!<sup>33</sup> Their knowledge is also more existential than that of James’s opponents, for the demons “shudder”<sup>34</sup> as a result

their knowledge. For James such a faith is dead. Correct confession apart from works of love rises no higher than the faith of demons. True faith must be accompanied by works of love.

### **Section Three—2:20-26**

The third section of our passage, like the first, begins with a question (cf. 2:14 and 20). It will also, like the first, end with a summary statement (cf. 2:17 and 26). Furthermore, just as the first section begins with a question (“ . . . if someone has faith without works can this save him?”) and concludes with a parallel statement (“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead”), so the third section also begins with a question (“ . . . that faith without works is useless?) and concludes with a parallel statement (“ . . . so also [literally – even so] faith without works is dead).<sup>35</sup> In the first section we find statements such as “faith without works cannot save” (2:14) or “faith, if it has no works, is dead” (2:17). In the concluding section such statements occur three times: “faith without works is useless” (2:20); “justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24); and “faith without works is dead” (2:26).<sup>36</sup>

The third section begins with the question, “But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?” Such a direct, harsh address is characteristic of the diatribe style (cf. 1 Cor 15:36; Rom 2:1). The term “useless” is composed of the negative prefix “a” attached to the root “*ergon*” which means “work.” The result is the adjective *argos, ē, on* that appears in text as *argē*. Thus we have a pun—Faith without works” is “workless” or “useless.”

In 2:21-24 James appeals to the example of Abraham, who is referred to as “our

father.” James is probably appealing to a common hero that he shares with his readers. The question as to whether Abraham was justified by “works when he offered his son Isaac” expects a positive answer from his readers. This is evident from the use of *ouk*. There is a clear difference between James’s and Paul’s use of Abraham as an example, even though both appeal to the same text, Genesis 15:6.<sup>37</sup> James, when he refers to Abraham’s faith, refers to his offering up of Isaac. Paul refers to Abraham’s faith as occurring before his circumcision and his offering of Isaac (Rom 4:10-14) as he trusted in the promises God made to him (Rom 4:18). Like Paul, James refers in these verses to Abraham’s “justification.” Again, however, as in the case of the terms “faith” and “works,”<sup>38</sup> we should not assume that James and Paul mean the same thing in their understanding of the term “to justify” in Genesis 15:6.<sup>39</sup>

The terms “justification” and the English synonym “righteousness” refer to the same Greek term. These terms and the verb “to justify” all stem from the same Greek root. For Paul, this refers to the gift of righteousness based on the work of Christ that is appropriated by faith alone. It is primarily a forensic or legal term referring to one’s status or standing before God. It is not primarily a word describing human virtue. Some “righteous” people were in fact far from virtuous (cf. Gen 38:26; Luke 18:14). For Paul, justification comes instantaneously upon initial faith. It is not a virtue that develops after initial faith. It is a judicial pronouncement of innocence, not a moral quality of personal piety.

For James the adjective “righteous” and the noun “righteousness” refer primarily to a moral quality. In 1:20 it refers to the

moral quality of life that God demands. In 3:18 it is used in the expression “fruit of righteousness.” The exact meaning in James of this common expression is unclear.<sup>40</sup> What is certain, however, is that the meaning is ethical in nature and not forensic.<sup>41</sup> When compared to Pauline usage (cf. Rom 1:17; 3:10; Gal 3:11), it is clear that the adjective “righteous” in 5:6 and 16 bears an ethical and moral meaning rather than a forensic one.

In 2:21, 24, and 25 the verb “justify” and in 2:23 the noun “righteousness,” however, must be interpreted in light of “Can that faith save him?” of 2:14. Thus “being justified” and “being reckoned righteous”<sup>42</sup> are the equivalent of “being saved.” They do not refer to the moral virtue of Abraham and Rahab but the salvation and righteous standing God has attributed to them in light of their working faith. The forensic nature of these expressions is seen in the passive nature of the verb in 2:21, 24, and 25 (they are “divine” passives) and the term “reckoned” in the quotation found in 2:23.

We have already shown that James is arguing against a view of faith that involves merely mental assent. Such a faith will not save (2:14). In fact, it is not faith in the Christian sense at all. True, saving faith is accompanied by works, which are the fruit of faith. When James refers to “works,” he is clearly not referring to “works of law.” He is also not referring to deeds of mercy and love isolated from faith. The works that he refers to are always associated with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (2:1). Thus “by works” in 2:21-22 should be understood as “by a faith that works through love and obedience (cf. Gal 5:6)!” There is no thought here of “works of law.” We can therefore translate 2:21 by the following paraphrase,

“Was not Abraham our father justified by a faith that manifests itself in works of love, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”

Because of the use of the singular “you” in v. 22, James is probably addressing his opponent of 2:19-20. “You see” in v. 22 can be understood in the sense of “You are able to see with your eyes through the example of Abraham....” This would mean that the verb “justified” should be interpreted as demonstrative in nature, i.e., Abraham’s justification was demonstrated or shown by his visible works, i.e., the works “you see.” The offering of Isaac serves as an example of 2:18 in that Abraham shows his faith, which brought him justification, by this work. More likely, however, “You see” should be interpreted as in 2:24, “You can see logically as a result that. . . .” This meaning fits the context of James 2:14-26 better in that the basic issue involves, “What kind of faith secures righteousness?”<sup>43</sup> The difference between Paul and James in their use of the term “to justify” involves the temporal dimension envisioned. Paul refers to the initial, proleptic pronouncement of God’s judicial verdict upon faith. James is referring to the verdict in the final day when a person stands before God. In that day Abraham’s faith would be demonstrated by his life of obedience and love. James has more in mind what Paul says in Romans where he states concerning the righteous judgment of God that he

... will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew

first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek . . . for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified (Rom 2:6-10, 13).<sup>44</sup>

Verse 22 can also be understood either as “You are able to see . . .” or “You can see therefore. . .” The latter is more likely. Although only a single “work” is mentioned in 2:21, the plural “works” is used in order to maintain the symmetry of 2:14, 17, 18, and 20. The tense of “was working with” (an iterative imperfect—the only imperfect found in the entire letter) implies, however, that this was but one of many works by which Abraham demonstrated his faith.

A chiasmic parallelism is contained in this verse—“Faith (A) was working with his works (B) and as a result of the works (b), faith (a) was perfected.”<sup>45</sup> Mussner rightly points out that this is not an equal parallelism. He states, “James does not say that—and this is especially important to observe—works worked together with faith but the reverse. Faith worked together with his works. That means that what is primary in importance for James is faith.”<sup>46</sup> James clearly sees faith as primary. Works do not produce faith. James never entertains the idea that works can exist independently of faith. Earlier in 1:22 James gives the command to be doers of the word (cf. “works”) and not hearers only (cf. “faith”).<sup>47</sup> No thought is given to the possibility that one can be a “doer” but not a “hearer.” Apparently both James and his opponent(s) would agree that doing and works are dependent on hearing and faith! Faith (and hearing) is prior to and produces works (and doing)! Works bring faith to perfection. Yet faith and works should not be thought of as separate entities. “The relation between

Abraham’s faith and his works is not properly one of consequence, demonstration or confirmation, all of which terms assume a measure of distinction between the two: for James they go together in a necessary unity. . . .”<sup>48</sup>

The example of Abraham begun in v. 21 comes to conclusion in v. 23 with “and the Scripture was fulfilled” and the quotation of Genesis 15:6. This quotation is also quoted by Paul in Romans 4:3 (cf. also v. 9); and Galatians 3:6. The term “fulfilled” is not used in the frequent prophecy-fulfillment schema in which it is so often found in the New Testament. It is used, rather, in the sense that Abraham’s faith referred to in the OT quotation is demonstrated or proven by his acts of faithful obedience and especially in his offering of Isaac on the altar. Such faithful obedience shows that Abraham truly “believed” God, and this was reckoned (a divine passive for “God reckoned it”) to him for righteousness.<sup>49</sup> The reference to Abraham being called a “friend of God” is not found in the Old Testament. Several suggestions have been made,<sup>50</sup> but it is probably best to see James as building on such passages as 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8 (cf. Isa 51:2) that refer to Abraham as “my beloved.”

Of all the statements found in 2:14-26 none raise more theological problems than v. 24. It is ironic that the specific affirmation “justification by faith *alone*” does not come from any statement found in the letters of Paul but rather from James. And James is arguing that justification is not by faith alone! “You see,” which is addressed to James’s Christian readers (note “you” is plural and the readers are the “brethren”—1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; etc.), introduces the conclusion, “A man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

There is no getting around the fact that, if James means by the words “works” and “faith” the same thing that Paul means in Romans 3:28, we have a clear and undeniable contradiction! Yet, we have argued that “faith” and “works” possess a semantic range of possible meanings and that Paul and James choose from these possibilities different “meanings” for these terms. If we translate this verse according to James’s usage of these terms, we have the following: “In conclusion you see that a man is justified by a living faith that works through love and not by a dead faith that involves merely an assent to certain doctrines.” It is doubtful that Paul would disagree with this, although it is equally doubtful that he would have phrased this thought the way James did.<sup>51</sup>

James provides a second illustration in v. 25 to support the illustration given in 2:23-24. This involves Rahab. It is unclear as to why James uses the illustration of Rahab in conjunction with Abraham. Some have suggested that they were both examples of ideal proselytes. In 1 Clement 10-12 they are placed together, along with Lot, as examples of hospitality and faith. Regardless, Rahab’s action in protecting the “messengers” serve as another example of how a faith which produces works leads to justification. Although her faith is not specifically referred to, works must be seen as stemming from her faith. The example of Abraham sets the pattern by which we should interpret the second, similar example (“In the same way”). The entire context, which deals with faith with/without works, likewise requires us to see Rahab’s works as being associated with her faith.

A concluding summary (“For just as”) brings not only the third section, but also the entire passage to its conclusion. The

analogy is difficult in that it compares faith that is dead without works, to a body that is dead without the spirit. Thus we have a comparison of faith with the body and works with the spirit! This is strange.<sup>52</sup> We should not, however, press the details of the analogy, but seek to understand its main point. Apart from the spirit the body is dead! In a similar way faith apart from works is dead! One cannot separate them. The body is dead if it has no spirit (2:26); faith is dead (2:17; cannot save—2:14; useless—2:20) if it has no works! For James faith and works are not separate entities that can exist independently. Even as a coin cannot have only one side, so Christian faith cannot possess only one side. It requires both faith, in the sense of mental assent, and works.

### **James 2:14-26 and the Rest of the New Testament**

Up to this point we have sought to understand James’s argument in 2:14-26. In opposition to a real or hypothetical opponent he has sought to demonstrate that a person is saved by a faith that is life-changing and accompanied by acts of lovingkindness. Mere intellectual assent to theological propositions, even if correct, is insufficient, because it rises no higher than demonic faith. “According to [James and Paul], a man is saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is not alone—it is followed by good works which prove the vitality of that faith.”<sup>53</sup> In this section we shall seek to establish that James’s teaching on this subject is in accord with the teachings of the rest of the New Testament. In fact, the danger encountered by James in the first century elicited a theological response that may be extremely relevant today. For a Christianity that has been satiated with a nominal Lutheran

“saved by grace alone” and a flippant Baptist “once saved always saved,”<sup>54</sup> the message of James is both timely and necessary.

First of all we can begin by comparing the message of James with that of John the Baptist. John proclaimed, “Repent . . . bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:2, 7). The message of Jesus also demanded repentance and faith (Mark 1:15) accompanied by “good works” (Matt 5:16). Jesus also warned that mere profession of him was insufficient, for “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven . . .” (Matt 7:21). In 1 John 3:17-18 we read, “But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue [in James—faith and hearing], but in deed and truth [in James—works and doing].” “The fact that Christianity must be ethically demonstrated is an essential part of the Christian faith through the New Testament”<sup>55</sup> is obvious.

What about Paul, however? We should not assume that the places where Paul is engaged with his opponents and argues for faith “alone” apart from works of law are the totality of his message. There are numerous places where Paul gives teachings that seem to be in complete accord with that of James. We have already quoted Galatians 5:6—“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but *faith working through love*” (author’s italics). Elsewhere Paul refers to: “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 6:16; 15:18; etc.); “every good deed” (2 Cor 9:8); “faith and love” (1 Thess 1:3; 3:6; 1 Tim 2:15; 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim 1:13; 2:22; 3:10;

Tit, 2:2; Phlm 5); “word or deed” (Col 3:17); “work of faith” (1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:11); etc. The relationship of the “indicative and imperative” in Paul should be noted. Paul believed that faith in Christ involved having died with him and that this led to a new life in which faith worked through love (Rom 6:1-23). Thus the indicative (faith) and the imperative (works) are not separate teachings but are intimately associated.<sup>56</sup> In a similar manner, Paul also knew that the faith was not the greatest of Christian virtues. Love was more important still (1 Cor 13:2, 12).

## Conclusion

Much of the discussion centering on James 2:14-26 concentrates on a central theme of the Reformation—“justification by faith.” The need for the debate on that issue, and its stalwart defense by the Reformers forever puts us in their debt. As in many theological debates, however, the focus and debate on the central issue often results in a neglect of related but, for the moment, peripheral issues. These peripheral issues are not unimportant, but, being on the edge of the debate, they are often relegated to a lesser role and importance. Unfortunately, this has occurred with respect to the issue of justification by faith.

Justification is but one of several metaphors and images used to describe what occurs in the experience of becoming a Christian. It may be the most, or at least one of the most, important of these metaphors. Yet, like any other metaphor, it is unable to express all that occurs when a person becomes a Christian. There are numerous other metaphors that indicate that much more occurs at conversion than a person receiving a new, legal standing before God or being “reckoned” righ-

teousness. Other relational metaphors are also used to describe this relationship: reconciliation; peace; in Christ; forgiveness; adoption; saints; etc. Other metaphors are used to describe the “metaphysical” change that has taken place in this experience: died to sin; raised in newness of life; passed from death to life; born again; new creation; baptized by the Spirit; etc.

The discussion concerning “good works” is all too often set purely in the framework of justification by faith. What is the relationship between the new standing of righteousness that a person possesses and Christian living? Is “justification” simply a legal fiction? The debate all too often loses sight of the fact that justification is not synonymous with Christian conversion. If, when a person is justified, he is also born again and made a new creation through the gift of the Spirit, the issue of whether faith must be accompanied by works is a moot one. Good works are not an option for the believer, but a necessary fruit. A “good tree bears good fruit” (Matt 7:17). A true faith, unlike mere intellectual assent, must bear good fruit. Such good fruit or works can never be the cause of salvation. Here the Reformation cry of “justification by faith alone” must be affirmed at all costs. But James’s warning that the faith that saves cannot be alone but will be accompanied by works must also be affirmed. This seems to be especially true at the present time.<sup>57</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the updated edition of the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>2</sup> The full quotation is that whereas John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter “. . . show you Christ and teach you

all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know. . . . St. James’s epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” See *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 117. For the German text see WADB 6, 10 (Weimar Edition of Luther’s works, Die Deutsche Bible, vol. 6, p. 10).

<sup>3</sup> *Luther’s Works: Word and Sacrament* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 35:396.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Souček, “Zu den Problemen des Jacobusbriefes,” *Evangelische Theologie* 18 (1958) 467.

<sup>5</sup> Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 121-122.

<sup>6</sup> James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916) 35-36.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955) 2:163. Cf. also Dan Otto Via, Jr., “The Right Strawy Epistle Reconsidered: A Study in Biblical Ethics and Hermeneutic,” *The Journal of Religion* 49 (1969) 257, “. . . one cannot say that while Paul and James differ in the realm of definitions, there is really no conflict between them. It cannot be shown that they disagree merely on the meaning of words but agree in basic concepts. They also disagree in their basic understanding of man, disagree on what constitutes man’s wholeness or well-being.”

<sup>8</sup> W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) 230-231.

<sup>9</sup> C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 8.

- <sup>10</sup>G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 190.
- <sup>11</sup>Leonard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2:209.
- <sup>12</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Message of James," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18 (1965) 341.
- <sup>13</sup>Joachim Jeremias, "Paul and James," *Expository Times* 66 (1954) 371. Compare William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) 72-74. Much earlier Augustine argued that "the statements of the two apostles Paul and James are not contrary to one another when the one says that a man is justified by faith without works, and the other says that faith without works is vain. For the former is speaking of the works which precede faith, whereas the latter, of those which follow on faith, just as even Paul indicates in many places." See Saint Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions* (The Fathers of the Church; Washington: Catholic University of American Press, 1982) 196.
- <sup>14</sup>It is unfortunate that in English two different words are used to describe the noun and verb that in Greek possess the same root.
- <sup>15</sup>There is a great deal of confusion as to exactly how this expression should be interpreted.
- <sup>16</sup>The question is introduced by the Greek particle *mē*, which expects a negative answer.
- <sup>17</sup>Cranfield, p. 338, rightly points out, "This fact should be allowed to control our interpretation of the whole paragraph."
- <sup>18</sup>Cf. again Cranfield, p. 338, "By 'that faith' . . . the writer means that thing which the man in question wrongly calls 'faith'; he does not imply that he himself regards it as faith."
- <sup>19</sup>The interpretation of this very difficult verse is discussed below.
- <sup>20</sup>Thorwald Lorenzen, "Faith without Works Does Not Count before God! James 2:14-26" *Expository Times* 89 (1977) 233.
- <sup>21</sup>Cf. Rom 2:7; 2 Cor 9:8; Eph 2:10; 1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:11; etc.
- <sup>22</sup>Joseph B. Major, *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954) 95; cf. also Ralph P. Martin, *James* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word Books, 1988) 77-79; Christoph Burchard, "Zu Jacobus 2:14-26," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 71 (1980) 28-30; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1995) 235-236.
- <sup>23</sup>See Timo Laato, "Justification according to James: A Comparison with Paul," *Trinity Journal* 18 (1997) 47-61, who argues for the importance of 1:16-25 for understanding our passage.
- <sup>24</sup>Martin Dibelius, *James* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 149.
- <sup>25</sup>Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 121.
- <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>27</sup>Dibelius, 154.
- <sup>28</sup>Dibelius, p. 150, states that ". . . no reader could have supposed that someone other than an opponent of Jas is introduced by the formula 'but someone will say.'"
- <sup>29</sup>So RSV, NRSV, NIV, NEB, NAB, but contra NASB .
- <sup>30</sup>For a similar view and a more detailed discussion, see Scot McKnight, "James 2:18a: The Unidentifiable Interlocutor," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990) 355-364. For an opposing view see Laato, 78-81.
- <sup>31</sup>There is a textual problem here in that some manuscripts omit the article and have a different word order, but no significant issue of interpretation is at stake.
- <sup>32</sup>Cf. Deut 6:4; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.91; 4.201; 5.112; Rom 3:30; 1 Cor 8:4-6; Gal 3:20; Eph 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5; etc.
- <sup>33</sup>Note Mark's statement concerning the accurate perception of the demons with respect to Jesus' identity. Cf. Mark 1:24, 34c (this Markan editorial comment is especially important); 3:11; 5:7.
- <sup>34</sup>See Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Harper's New Testament Commentaries; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 126-128, who sees this term as coming out of the practice of exorcism.
- <sup>35</sup>W. Nicol, "Faith and Works in the Letter of James," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975) 7-9.
- <sup>36</sup>For the attempt (unconvincing to this writer) to interpret 2:20-24 as a chiasmus, see John G. Lodge, "James and Paul at Cross-Purposes? James 2,22," *Biblica* 62 (1981) 200-207.
- <sup>37</sup>Dibelius's statement, p. 164, serves as a helpful warning—"Whoever comes to Jas after a look at Paul (Rom 4) must completely forget Paul's interpretation of Gen 15:6

(faith reckoned as righteousness)."

<sup>38</sup>See above pp. 4-8.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. how Luke uses the term "good" in 18:19 and 23:50. In 18:19 Jesus is quoted as saying "No one is good except God alone." Yet in 23:50 Joseph of Arimathea is described as "a good and righteous man."

<sup>40</sup>See Phil 1:11; Heb 12:11; Amos 6:12; Prov 11:20 (LXX); cf. also 2 Cor 9:10; Isa 32:16-18.

<sup>41</sup>John Reumann, "Righteousness" in *the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 150.

<sup>42</sup>It is unfortunate that in English we use two different words ("justify" and "righteousness") to describe this verb and noun that possess the same root.

<sup>43</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *James* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 109.

<sup>44</sup>See Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Justification by Grace—To the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul," *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986) 72-93.

<sup>45</sup>The NASB and REB preserve this chiasmic structure in its translation of 2:22. It is lost, however, in the NIV, RSV, NRSV, and NAB.

<sup>46</sup>Franz Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 1964) 142.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Rom 2:13. The close association of hearing and faith is reminiscent of Paul's words in Gal 3:2 ("hearing with faith") and Rom 10:14, 17 ("faith comes from hearing").

<sup>48</sup>Laws, 134. Cf. Cranfield, p. 341, who states, "The verse [2:22] is then tantamount to an emphasizing of the inseparability of faith and works."

<sup>49</sup>For a parallel argument with respect to Abraham's righteousness, cf. 1 Macc 2:52.

<sup>50</sup>See, for example, Lodge, 208-13, and Johnson, 243-44.

<sup>51</sup>Cranfield, p. 341, comments, "The clue to the understanding of verse 24 . . . is the recognition that here, as in verse 14, the author is making a concession to his opponents' use of terms. He does not himself believe that a faith which does not produce works is really faith at all, but for the moment he accepts his opponents' way of speaking, and so is forced to deny that a man is justified by faith alone. 'By faith alone' is right, if what is called 'faith' is really faith; but, if something which can exist without producing works is meant, then the formula *sola fide* will not do."

<sup>52</sup>Cf. Luther's comment, "He [James] presents a comparison: 'As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead' [Jas. 2:26]. O Mary, mother of God! What a terrible comparison that is! James compares faith with the body when he should rather have compared faith with the soul!" This is found in *Luther's Works*, 54:425 (WA, TR, p. 157).

<sup>53</sup>Bruce Manning Metzger, *The New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965) 254.

<sup>54</sup>The present author has no problem with these expressions if they are properly understood. However, the abuse and misunderstanding encountered today may be very much like that which James encountered and sought to combat in his day.

<sup>55</sup>Barclay, 73.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Rom 6:6, 11, 14 and 12-13; 6:17-18 and 19; 8:9-11 and 12-13; 1 Cor 5:7b and 7a; Gal 5:25a and 25b; Col 3:1a and 1b; 3:3 and 2, 5; 3:9b-10 and 9a.

<sup>57</sup>It is evident that James is well aware of the fact that salvation is "by grace." His references to human sinfulness (3:2), the fact that all stand guilty before God (2:10), and the need for mercy (2:13) reveal this.

# “A Right Strawy Epistle”: Reformation Perspectives on James<sup>1</sup>

Timothy George

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The history of theology is the story of how the church has interpreted the Bible. While many other factors must also be taken into account, the church has always tried to define its faith in terms of its grasp of the Word of God in Holy Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

This principle has important implications for the way we study the Bible today. It requires that we take seriously the exegetical tradition of the church as an indispensable aid for a contemporary interpretation of the Bible. It is not enough to come to the study of the text with the New Testament in one hand (even if we read it in the original Greek!) and the latest commentary in the other. We must also examine carefully how God has spoken in his Word to other Christians of different ages, in various cultures and life settings. How they have understood—and misunderstood—the Scriptures will significantly supplement our own investigation of the text.

The Scriptures have spoken in new and fresh and powerful ways throughout the history of the church. To take but one example, Paul’s reinterpretation of Habakkuk’s dictum, “The just shall live by faith,” rediscovered by Martin Luther through whom it was reclaimed by John Wesley, reemerged as pivotal text in Karl Barth’s *Commentary on Romans*. As faithful members of the “communion of saints,” that is, the church extended throughout time as well as space, we cannot close our ears to the living witness of the Scriptures through the ages.

## The Status of James Prior to the Reformation

At the time of the Reformation the Epistle of James emerged as a source of great controversy among the reformers themselves. In this study we shall see how James was treated, respectively, by Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and the Anabaptists. We may begin our investigation, however, by referring to a sermon on James 2:12 preached by the famous Anglican divine John Donne on February 20, 1628. In the introduction to the sermon he described James as

one of those seven Epistles, which Athanasius and Origen call’d *Catholic*; that is, universal; perchance because they are not directed to any one Church, as some others are, but to all the Christian world: And S. Hierom call’d them *Canonical*; perchance because all Rules, all Canons of holy Conversation are compriz’d in these Epistles: And Epiphanius, and Oecumenius call’d them *Circular*; perchance, because as in a Circle you cannot discern which was the first point, nor in which, the compass begun the Circle; so neither can we discern in these Epistles, whom the Holy Ghost begins withall, whom he means principally, King or Subject, Priest or People, Single or Married, Husband or Wife, Father or Children, Masters or Servants; but Universally, promiscuously, indifferently, they give ALL rules, for ALL actions, to ALL persons, at ALL times, and in ALL places.<sup>3</sup>

Donne’s description is a good summary of what could be called a “retrospective consensus” on the Epistle of James.

As “catholic, canonical, and circular,” its place among the New Testament writings seemed secure. Upon closer examination, however, the status of James in the early church appears less certain. It is not quoted by any Church Father of the second century, nor does it appear in the Muratorian canon, the famous list of Scriptures accepted by the Roman Church around 200.<sup>4</sup> The earliest undisputed reference to James among the Church Fathers appears only in the writings of Origen who accepted its authority but recognized that not everyone else did, a view shared by his disciple, Eusebius of Caesarea.<sup>5</sup> In the West Jerome gave credence to James by including it in his Vulgate version of the New Testament, although he too registered doubt concerning the apostolicity of its author.<sup>6</sup> Augustine, who wrote a commentary on James which is no longer extant, had no doubt that the author of the epistle was James, the brother of Jesus. This view, widely accepted during the Middle Ages, helped to secure for James a recognized status within the Christian canon.<sup>7</sup>

The Epistle of James attracted relatively little attention during the millennium between Augustine and Luther. The most frequently quoted text from the epistle was James 5:14, which became the classic proof text for the sacrament of extreme unction. When the British monk and church historian Bede wrote his commentary on James in the eighth century, he interpreted the oil of anointing as “oil which had been consecrated by a bishop”.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas repeatedly appealed to James 5 as the scriptural basis for the sacrament of extreme unction: “Extreme unction is a spiritual remedy, since it avails for the remission of sins, according to James 5:15. Therefore it is a sacrament.”<sup>9</sup> This view was recog-

nized as the official position of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. The same council had earlier included the Epistle of James in its “Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures” and had declared anathema anyone who did not accept “in their entirety and with all their parts” the aforesaid sacred books.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Epistle of James and Luther**

Undoubtedly the most important event in the development of biblical studies during the Reformation was the publication of Desiderius Erasmus’s New Testament in 1516. It was the first complete edition of the New Testament ever to be published with a Greek text and a translation based upon it. Along with the Greek and Latin texts, printed side by side, Erasmus included his *Annotationes*, or critical remarks. Concerning James, Erasmus repeated the patristic reservation about authorship, drawing especially on Jerome. He then added his own doubts based on his analysis of the language and style of the epistle: “It just doesn’t measure up to that apostolic majesty and gravity. Nor should we expect so many hebraisms from the Apostle James who was the bishop of Jerusalem.”<sup>11</sup> Despite his criticism of James based on humanistic philology, Erasmus did accept the epistle as a proper part of the canon. In 1520 he published a paraphrase of James. During the reign of Edward VI, Erasmus’s New Testament *Paraphrases* were translated into English and, by royal decree, placed in every parish church in England.

As we shall see, Luther’s critique of James was far more radical than that of Erasmus. In his first published criticism of the epistle (1519), however, Luther merely echoed Erasmus’s remark: “The

style of this epistle is far inferior to the apostolic majesty, nor is it in any way comparable to Paul."<sup>12</sup> Although his main argument against James was more theological than philological, Luther used Erasmus's critical scholarship as a launching pad for his own more trenchant attack. In this sense, too, "Erasmus laid the egg which Luther hatched!"

Between 1515 and 1522 Luther's attitude toward James underwent a complete transformation. In the summer of the former year Luther began his lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Romans at the University of Wittenberg. In his "scholion" on Romans 3:20 he spoke of James and Paul in the same breath and saw no contradiction in their respective views on justification: "When St. James and the apostle say that a man is justified by works, they are contending against the erroneous notion of those who thought that faith suffices without works."<sup>13</sup> Does the phrase "justified by works" indicate that something other than faith in Christ is required for justification? Again, Luther quoted James (2:10), "Whosoever... fails in one point has become guilty of all of it," to prove the indivisibility of that "living faith which produces its own works."<sup>14</sup>

In his *Lectures on Romans* Luther could stress the compatibility of James and Paul because he had not yet developed his mature doctrine of justification by faith alone. Though he may well have experienced his "evangelical breakthrough" by 1515 (as most Luther scholars contend), he had not yet learned to formulate his insight into the gracious nature of God in terms of the sheer imputation of Christ's righteousness. For example, in the same *Lectures on Romans*, he interpreted the famous "*iustitia dei*" of Romans 1:17 as a progressive justification, a "growing more

and more" toward the achievement of a right standing before God. The Christian life was thus always a "seeking and striving to be made righteous, even to the hour of death."<sup>15</sup> By 1518, however, Luther had begun to speak of justification largely in forensic language: we are declared righteous by faith alone. In this view there was no direct correlation between the state of justification and one's outward works, as Luther made clear in his sermon on the Pharisee and the publican (1521): "And the publican fulfills all the commandments of God on the spot... by grace alone. So he went down to his house declared righteous. Who could have seen that, under this dirty fellow?"<sup>16</sup> This view of justification required the strongest opposition between faith and works. As Luther put it, "If faith is not without all, even the smallest, works, it does not justify."<sup>17</sup>

The formulation of Luther's mature doctrine of justification coincided precisely with his shift of opinion on James. A pivotal moment in this process was the Leipzig Debate of 1519 during which his opponent, John Eck, cited James 2:17 against Luther's position. Luther replied with the Erasmian critique of James's authorship, to which we have referred, and added that, in any event, one could not oppose one writing of the Bible against the whole Scripture.<sup>18</sup> Thus Luther was forced by Eck to distinguish various levels of authority within the Bible itself.

On Friday, April 26, 1521, Luther was spirited away from Worms by the soldiers of his prince Frederick the Wise following his heroic refusal to recant his teachings ("Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.") unless persuaded by clear arguments from Scripture. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," he

had said. Secluded in the Wartburg Castle, he worked furiously on his translation of the New Testament into German, first published in September 1522. In the preface to the so-called September Testament Luther set forth his famous verdict on the Epistle of James.

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's epistle is really a right strawy epistle, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.<sup>19</sup>

What did Luther mean when he called James "a right strawy epistle" (*eyn rechte stroern Epistel*)? The image of straw recalls the Pauline metaphor of "wood, hay and stubble" (1 Cor 3:12), "*Holz, Stroh oder Heu*" in Luther's rendering, the faulty materials which some use in trying to build on the foundation of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Some doubtful epistles such as Hebrews were a mixture of worthless and valuable materials, but James was really (*rechte*) an epistle of straw!

In his "Preface to the Epistle of James" Luther cited three reasons for this harsh negative judgment. First, James contradicts Paul and all the rest of the Scripture in ascribing justification to works. Luther saw this as evidence of the deutero-apostolic character of the document, rather than an indication of a real conflict between Paul and the historical James. Second, it does not really preach or inculcate Christ. There is no mention of the passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. Here Luther raised his standard for adjudicating the apostolicity of any New Tes-

tament writing:

This is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ (*ob sie Christum trieben oder nicht*).... Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.<sup>21</sup>

Third, granted the good intentions of the author, i.e., to guard against a false view of faith without works, he was unequal to the task. Thus Luther concluded that the author must have been "some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper."<sup>22</sup>

Despite all of these strictures, Luther did not, as is commonly repeated, excise James completely from the canon. He included James in all of the editions of his German New Testament, although he did detach it from the usual order and placed it, along with Hebrews, Jude, and the Apocalypse, at the end of the Bible. It is true that on one occasion Luther said, "Away with James. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove, as the priest in Kalenberg did"—a reference to a local pastor who used the wooden statues of the apostles for firewood.<sup>23</sup> But this is a typical Lutheresque statement made near the end of his life (1542) in the heat of polemical exchange with his Roman Catholic opponents, who found James a ready-made weapon to use against the Reformation. More telling is the fact that after 1522 Luther withdrew his characterization of James as a "right strawy epistle" from subsequent editions of his New Testament. And, on several occasions, he preached from James in accordance with the lectionary of the church year. In one

of these sermons he referred to the passage in question (James 1:16ff.) as “a good teaching and admonition.”

Even this was grudging praise, however, for in the next breath he was saying how much better it would be, between Easter and Pentecost, to preach through Paul’s great chapter on the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15).<sup>24</sup>

Luther’s criticism of James, then, while incorporating elements of humanistic philology, was essentially theological in character. For him Christ remained the Lord and the Center of the Bible. Those writing which most clearly “inculcated Christ” were the “true and certain chief books” while the others, such as James, had to be relegated to the periphery. Since the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the “article by which the church either stands or falls,” James’s neglect or distortion of this important truth was sufficient reason for assigning it to a level of secondary significance.

### **The Epistle of James and Zwingli**

Luther was the catalyst for the Reformation not only in Germany but throughout all of Europe. Huldrych Zwingli referred to him as an “Elijah” and urged his congregation to buy and read his books, which poured forth from the printing presses of Zurich and Basel. John Calvin went so far as to call Luther his “father” in the Lord, although he had never met him in person. The Reformation in Switzerland, however, had both a different origin and social setting than that of Germany. It was an urban movement sustained by city councils rather than territorial princes. In the essential Reformation concerns, *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*, Zwingli and Calvin agreed with Luther over against the Church of Rome

on the one hand and the radical reformers on the other. Nonetheless, the shape of their theologies and the varying emphases they placed upon these cardinal doctrines were quite different. We can gauge the distinct character of Reformed (as over against Lutheran) theology by examining the comments of Zwingli and Calvin on the Epistle of James.

On January 1, 1519, Zwingli entered the pulpit of the Grossmünster in Zurich and began preaching, verse by verse, through the Gospel of Matthew. This event signaled his desire to reform the church on the basis of a careful exposition of Holy Scripture. Matthew was followed by Acts, then the epistles to Timothy, then Galatians, and so forth, until Zwingli had worked through most of the books of both Old and New Testaments.<sup>25</sup> Zwingli preached without manuscript or notes, and, sadly, few records of his sermons have survived. Fortunately we do have certain notes from Zwingli’s sermons on James, which were taken down by his friend Leo Jud and published the year following the reformer’s death in 1531.

Unlike Erasmus and Luther, Zwingli seems not have doubted the apostolicity of James. He referred to the author as the “Apostle James,” “St. James,” or even “the pious, holy, or divine James.” For example, both Luther and Zwingli agreed that James 5:14 provided no warrant for the Roman sacrament of extreme unction, but the basis of their objections varied. Luther challenged the authorship of the epistle and added that, even if it had been written by an apostle, no apostle had the right on his own authority to institute a sacrament.<sup>26</sup> Zwingli accepted the apostolic status of James, but argued a different interpretation: “James here has taught nothing other than sincere sympathy for

and visitation of the sick.”<sup>27</sup> On another, very different, occasion Zwingli hurled this same text at Luther. Arguing against Luther’s doctrine of the corporeal presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Zwingli, not without a touch of irony, asked his opponent: When James enjoins the elders to pray for and anoint the sick, why does he not also say, “shall partake of the body of Christ with him,” especially when you hold that faith is established and sins forgiven through this eating?<sup>28</sup>

On the thorny issue of faith and works, Zwingli had no difficulty in harmonizing James and Paul. The two apostles merely directed their writings to different audiences:

Paul wrote against “works”-men (*operarios*) and superstitious, sanctimonious hypocrites. James, on the other hand, opposed ambitious boasters of vain faith, *pseudo-christianous*, who had received the gospel but were not living according to it.<sup>29</sup>

In an apparent slap at the Lutherans, Zwingli denounced those who “take away from faith the works of love, glorying only in the empty word, ‘faith.’”<sup>30</sup>

Therefore like Christ himself and Paul and James we warn them that they must show forth their faith by their acts, if they have faith.... Hence we preach the law as well as grace. For from the law the faithful and elect learn the will of God.<sup>31</sup>

Not only is James’s authority unquestioned, he is placed on an equal ranking with Paul and Christ! Unlike Luther, Zwingli did not feel the need to separate law and gospel into polar opposites. The law served a positive function in the Christian life insofar as it encouraged the active embodiment of faith. “Christ

will not let his people be idle,” Zwingli wrote. Moreover, “Those who have rightly understood the mystery of the gospel will exert themselves to live rightly.”<sup>32</sup> James was valued by Zwingli because, perhaps more than any other New Testament writing, its primary theme is the outworking of faith in action.

### The Epistle of James and Calvin

Zwingli’s effort to “rehabilitate” James as a proper book for Protestant Christians was advanced further by John Calvin, whose commentary on James, originally published in French in 1550, is perhaps the best sixteenth-century treatment of the epistle. Calvin was well aware of the disputes, ancient and contemporary, concerning the canonicity of James, yet he gladly included it among the authentic scriptures for, as he put it, “I can find no fair and adequate cause for rejecting it.” He regarded it as apostolic even though he doubted (here he differed from Zwingli) that it had really been written by the Apostle James. The precise identity of the writer was of immeasurably less importance than the divine origin of the book. And, if James seemed to preach less of the grace of Christ than we might prefer, “we must remember not to expect everyone to go over the same ground.” James, then, contains nothing unworthy of an apostle of Christ. It is a rich store of varied instruction on many aspects of the Christian life. It contains striking passages—this is Calvin’s rough outline of the book—“on endurance, on calling upon God, on the practice of religion, on restraining our speech, on peacemaking, on holding back greedy instincts, on disregard for this present life.”<sup>33</sup>

Calvin, no less than Luther, was convinced that a right standing before God

derived from sheer grace and not from human effort, as his (in)famous doctrine of double predestination clearly demonstrates. But he was also convinced, no less than Zwingli, that true faith would issue in righteous living just as a bud invariably yields a flower. Calvin tried to balance these two concerns in his exegesis of James 2:14-26, a pericope referred to by a modern scholar as “one of the most difficult passages” in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> We shall look at three aspects of Calvin’s rich and nuanced interpretation of this passage.

### ***The Discourse of Faith and Works Is Related to James’s Concern for the Poor***

In his exposition of the first verse of the epistle (1:1), Calvin noted that James was writing for those “who need, not doctrine, but effective lines of encouragement.” In particular, they needed to be encouraged “to behave warmly and generously toward their neighbors.”<sup>35</sup> When James admonished his readers “to visit” (*episkeptesthai*) the widows and orphans (1:27), he did not exhort them to pay polite pastoral calls, but rather “to stretch out a hand for the relief of those who are oppressed.”<sup>36</sup> A prime example of faith without works is the comfortable Christian who greets a hungry neighbor with a “God bless you,” but does nothing to alleviate the other’s distress (2:16).

Calvin was not a social egalitarian; he taught that one’s economic status should be accepted as the result of divine providential ordering. But far from using this principle “to comfort the comfortable,” he upbraided the wealthy for their complacency and greed. The rich stand in danger of divine judgment because they have pampered themselves while their poor neighbors suffer from want.

Not for nothing does the Lord by his prophets throw sharp words at those who sleep on ivory couches, who pour on precious unguents, who entrance their palates with sweetness to the notes of the zither, to all intents like fat cattle in rich pastures. All this is said to make us keep a perspective in all our creature comforts; self-indulgence wins no favor with God.<sup>37</sup>

Calvin’s sermons on James were delivered at a time when streams of refugees were pouring into Geneva because of the persecution of Protestants in France, Italy, and other lands. Most of these were destitute people who arrived with virtually nothing. One of Calvin’s major activities as a reformer was to organize a system of social welfare and relief to meet the basic needs of those who sought asylum in his city. Many of the patrician families of Geneva resented the influx of foreign refugees and needed to hear, Calvin felt, James’s sermon on the sin of discrimination (2:8-11).

If you are cloaking your actions with a pretended charity, it will soon be stripped off. God bids us love our neighbors, not certain selected persons. Now the word *neighbor* is understood across the human race.... God expressly commends to us both the alien and the enemy, and all who in any sense might seem contemptible to us.<sup>38</sup>

For Calvin to be a “doer of the word” implied a willingness to share one’s wealth with the poor since, after all, everything we own has come from the hands of God (1:17).

### ***James Does Not Oppose Works to True Faith But Rather to a False Conception of Faith***

Medieval Catholic exegetes of this passage often distinguished between two

levels of faith—*fides informis* (unformed faith) and *fides formata* (formed faith). The former was a kind of elemental faith which implied an assent to the basic truths of Christianity but which could exist apart from the infusion of sacramental grace. *Fides formata*, on the other hand, was that faith which, informed by the habit of supernatural love, was active in good works. Such works were in fact requisite for the earning of merits which contributed toward the justification of the sinner.<sup>39</sup> Calvin was aware of this interpretation and explicitly rejected it. The scholastic schematization of salvation turned faith and grace into essentially human qualities (though they were also said to be gifts of God) which issued in an anthropocentric doctrine of justification. For Calvin, as well as for Luther, grace was the unilateral favor of God toward helpless sinners, and faith the gift which enabled sinners to grasp the divine promise of acceptance.

But how to reconcile this Protestant, even Lutheran, understanding of justification with James? Calvin suggested that James's polemic was directed against a pretended, flaccid faith that was only a pretext for unbelief. Thus James introduced his hypothetical interlocutor with, "If someone *says* he has faith..." James does not attribute genuine faith to such a hypocrite, nor does he at any point offer a full evangelical definition of faith. "Just remember, he is not speaking out of his own understanding of the word when he calls it 'faith,' but is disputing with those who pretend insincerely to faith, but are entirely without it."<sup>40</sup> No wonder, then, that James denies any salvific effect to this kind of faith, which is hardly worthy of the name.

Calvin underscored the interpretation

by pointing out certain stylistic features of James's discourse. Erasmus had represented this passage as a dialogue between one side that supported faith without works, and another that supported works without faith, with James steering a middle course between them. Such a reading, Calvin held, was untenable for it missed the deep irony in James's speech. Calvin saw 2:18 (*alla ... tis* = "But someone will say" RSV) as introducing a rebuttal to the vain boast of those who imagine they have faith, but whose lives reveal their faithlessness. The irony is continued in the next line as well: "Show me your faith without works"—an obvious impossibility, since, as he has just shown, such a faith is not real but dead (2:17).

This line of argument is further reflected in James's comment about the devils who believe and tremble. In this statement, Calvin felt, the irony was mingled with a touch of sarcasm: "It is quite ludicrous for anyone to say that devils have faith." Since even the devils tremble at the thought of divine judgment, one who only professes a vain, empty faith is worse off than the hosts of hell! In sum, this remark is simply further proof that "our whole discussion is not on the subject of faith, but on a certain uninformed opinion of God, which no more brings God and man together than looking at the sun lifts us up into the sky."<sup>41</sup>

***For James "Justification by Works"  
Refers to the Demonstration of  
Faith in Deeds of Love***

Calvin contended that James's intention was not to show the source or manner of one's attainment of righteousness (this is evident to all, he said!), but simply to stress a single point: that true faith is confirmed by good works. This is also the

key to the reconciliation of James and Paul.

When the sophists set James against Paul, they are deceived by the double meaning of the term 'justification.' When Paul says that we are justified by faith, he means precisely that we have won a verdict of righteousness in the sight of God. James has quite another intention, that the man who professes himself to be faithful should demonstrate the truth of his fidelity by his works. James did not mean to teach us where the confidence of our salvation should rest—which is the very point on which Paul does insist. So let us avoid the false reasoning which has trapped the sophists, by taking note of the double meaning: to Paul, the word denotes our free imputation of righteousness before the judgment seat of God, to James, the demonstration of righteousness from its effects, in the sight of men; which we may deduce from the preceding words, *Show me thy faith, etc.*<sup>42</sup>

The examples of Abraham and Rahab are test cases of this interpretation. Abraham was reckoned righteous by God more than thirty years before he sacrificed his son Isaac (cf. Gen 15:6), but in that act of obedience Abraham "revealed the remarkable fruition of his loyalty" to God. The character of Rahab the harlot is cited to show that God expects all believers, both those of great renown and those of lowest degree, to demonstrate their faith in good works. Indeed, Calvin went so far as to say that "at no time was any person, of whatever condition or race or class, reckoned among the justified and believing if they did not show works."<sup>43</sup> In this sense Calvin was willing to allow that we are not justified by faith alone—that is, by a bare and empty awareness of God; we are justified by works—that is, our righteousness is known and approved by its fruits.

## The Epistle of James and the Anabaptists

The Epistle of James continued to stir controversy throughout the sixteenth century. It was quoted at the Council of Trent not only to buttress the sacrament of extreme unction but also to support the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification.<sup>44</sup> James was also a favorite writing of the radical reformers. They frequently quoted James 5:12 ("Do not swear") as a warrant for their eschewal of all oaths, and James 1:5 ("If anyone needs wisdom, let him ask of God") as a basis for the direct, unmediated revelations they claimed to have received.<sup>45</sup> This latter verse was also a favorite text of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith.

More commonly, the Anabaptists used the Epistle of James as a foil for what they perceived as the mainline Protestant doctrine of "cheap grace." Melchior Hofmann lambasted those who cried "Believe, believe; grace, grace," but whose faith was fruitless and dead (James 2:17).<sup>46</sup> Menno Simons explicitly refuted Luther's denigration of James as a "strawy epistle."

The Lutherans teach and believe that faith alone saves, without any assistance by works.... And therefore the important and earnest epistle of James is esteemed and treated as a "strawy epistle." What bold folly! If the doctrine is straw, then the chosen apostle, the faithful servant and witness of Christ who wrote and taught it, must also have been a strawy man; this is as clear as the noonday sun. For the doctrine shows the character of the man.<sup>47</sup>

Menno was disturbed by the anti-nomian tendencies which he felt were latent in Luther's doctrine.

They strike up a psalm, *Der Strick ist entzwei und wir sind frei*, etc.

(Snapped is the cord, now we are free, praise the Lord) while beer and wine verily run from their drunken mouths and noses. Anyone who can but recite this on his thumb, no matter how carnally he lives, is a good evangelical man and a precious brother.<sup>48</sup>

The Anabaptist concept of discipleship as a willful repudiation of the old life and a radical commitment to Jesus as Lord could not tolerate such a lackadaisical abuse of the grace of God.

### Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from this overview of Reformation perspectives on the Epistle of James?

Luther's one-sided emphasis on justification by faith, though necessary and correct in itself, led him to overly-disparage the equally evangelical (in the sense of "pertaining to the gospel") message of James. Using a Christocentric hermeneutic, Luther arrived at a "canon within the canon." He allowed Scripture to be its own critic and followed the principle of *Christum triebet* to the near exclusion of James. We cannot follow Luther in this respect, but neither should we be too harsh in our criticism of him either. While all Scripture is inspired by God, it is not all to be interpreted univocally. Few Christians today would advocate capital punishment for disobedient children or mandatory beards for all pastors (Deut 21:18ff.; Lev 21:5). In practice, if not in theory, everyone makes a discriminatory use of the canon. Witness "favorite verses" or "favorite books," the "Roman" road of salvation, or even the printing of the New Testament and (sometimes) Psalms to the exclusion of the rest of the Bible. Luther was right to evaluate and interpret the Scriptures in the light of Jesus Christ, since

Jesus himself did this "You have heard it said ... but I say unto you." Luther was wrong in that his grasp of the message of Jesus Christ was too restricted.

The more positive reception of James in the Reformed tradition and among the Anabaptists is a welcome corrective to Luther's harsh judgment. Yet here too we must be on guard. Just as an over-emphasis on *sola fide* can result in antinomianism, so the preaching of works, unleavened by love, can issue in legalism. Later Calvinists gave way to this temptation as they scrupulously sought evidence of their election in their good works.

We should also be wary of a too easy harmonization of James and Paul. Zwingli and Calvin give the impression that the two apostles saw eye to eye, almost as if they had just ironed out the differences between them over a long distance conference call! Each should be seen, however, as delivering his own unique, uncompromised word from the Lord to the community of believers of which he was a part, and through that community to the larger "communion of saints" through the ages. Still, when James and Paul are placed alongside the other witnesses of the biblical revelation, they both, separately and together, present an aspect of the gospel which the church today needs urgently to hear: namely, that while faith and works may be distinguished, they can never be separated. In our time no one has expressed this truth better than Karl Barth: In the act of faith "we have to do with the being and activity of the living God towards us, with Jesus Christ Himself, whom faith cannot encounter with a basic neutrality, but only in the decision of obedience."<sup>49</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article first appeared in *Review and Expositor* 83 (Summer 1986) 369-382. Used by permission. Note that some minor editorial changes were made, especially changes to conform the piece to this journal's format.

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, Gerhard Ebeling has argued that not only the history of theology, but the entire history of the Christian church should be read as the history of the interpretation of the Bible. See his perceptive essay, "Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift," *Wort Gottes und Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964) 9-27.

<sup>3</sup>"A Lent-Sermon Preached at Whitehall, February 20, 1628 [1628/9]" in *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 8, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956) 335.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), *passim*, cites many parallels between James and early Christian literature. Recent scholarship has not followed Mayor's lead in seeing these parallels as evidence of James's early acceptance in the church. Cf. Martin Dibelius, *James*, trans. Michael A. Williams (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) 51-61; Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1980) 6-26.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. The list of Origen's citations from James in Mayor, *James*, lxiii-lxiv. Origen described James as "the epistle which is current" (*en tē pheromenē lakōbou epistolē*). Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* III.25) classifies

James among the "disputed" writings (*antilegomenōn*) as opposed to the "agreed upon" books (*homologoumenois*) of the New Testament. Eusebius *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1952) 104.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 2: J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina* 22:642f. [hereafter, *MPL*].

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Paulus Bergauer, *Der Jakobusbrief bei Augustinus* (Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1962). Bergauer displays great erudition in discussing Augustine's high view of James in order to prove the (rather moot) point that Luther in his disparagement of James was not a good Augustinian! We only learn of Augustine's "expositio" of James from his book of retractions: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Retractationum*, ed. Pius Knoll (Leipzig: G. Freytag, 1902) 169-170. Lingering doubts about James's authenticity continued in the East, especially among the Syrian Christians. For example, Paul of Nisibis, a Nestorian theologian, placed James among the *antilegomena* as late 545. See James H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1916) 97-98.

<sup>8</sup>Venerabilis Beda, "Expositio super Divi Jacobi Epistolam," *MPL*, 93:39. Bede held that James was placed before the epistles of Peter and John in the canon because the church at Jerusalem, over which James presided, was the "fons et origio" of the preaching of the gospel.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Supplement, question 29, article I.

<sup>10</sup>The author of the epistle is called "James the Apostle and brother of the Lord." *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans H. J. Schroeder (London: Herder, 1941) 99-100, 17-18.

<sup>11</sup>*Annotationes in epistolam Jacobi* (Basel, 1516) 1026: "Nec enim referre videtur usquequaque majestatem illam et gravitatem apostolicam. Nec hebra-ismi tantum quantum ab apostolo Jacobo qui fuerit episcopus Hieroso-lymitanus expectaretur."

<sup>12</sup>"Resolutiones Lutherianae super propositionibus suis Lipsiae disputatis," quoted in Ropes, *James*, 25.

<sup>13</sup>*Luther's Works*, American ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972 [hereafter, *LW*]) 25:235.

<sup>14</sup>*LW*, 25:235-236.

<sup>15</sup>*LW*, 25:152, 251-252.

<sup>16</sup>*D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimer: Bohlaus, 1883 [hereafter, *WA*]) 17:404.

<sup>17</sup>*WA*, 7:231. For a fuller exposition of the development of Luther's doctrine of justification and its contrast with patristic and scholastic views, see Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986).

<sup>18</sup>*WA*, 2:425.

<sup>19</sup>*WA DB*, 6:537; *LW*, 35:362. Luther's sharp caricature of James may have been in part a reaction to the excessive praise heaped upon the epistle by his colleague and later opponent, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. In 1520 Karlstadt had published a treatise, *De Canonicis Scripturis Libellus*, in which he stoutly defended the canonicity of James. A recent interpreter has gone

so far as to say that “perhaps it is because of Karlstadt that the book of James was kept in the Protestant Canon.” Calvin A. Pater, *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 22.

<sup>20</sup>*Das Neue Testament Deutsch von D. Martin Luther* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983) 404.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 420. *LW*, 35:396.

<sup>22</sup>*LW*, 35:397. In *Table Talk*, Luther set forth the hypothesis of the Jewish authorship of James: “I maintain that some Jew wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any. Since he heard that Christians place great weight on faith in Christ, he thought, ‘Wait a moment! I’ll oppose them and urge works alone.’ This he did. He wrote not a word about the suffering and resurrection of Christ, although this is what all the apostles preached about.” *LW*, 54:424.

<sup>23</sup>*WA*, 39/II:199; *LW*, 34:317. Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 81.

<sup>24</sup>*WA*, 21:349.

<sup>25</sup>Zwingli never preached on the Apocalypse, whose canonicity he doubted. Cf. G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 61. Scholars have only recently begun to examine Zwingli’s contribution as an exegete. See the very helpful article by Fritz Schmidt-Clausing, “Die unterschiedliche Stellung Luthers und Zwinglis zum Jacobusbrief,” *Reformatio* 18 (1969) 568-585.

<sup>26</sup>*LW*, 36:118.

<sup>27</sup>*Huldrych Zwingli: Writings*, vol. 1,

ed. E. J. Furcha and H. W. Pipkin (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1984) 102. Calvin differed from Zwingli in that he believed the anointing in James referred to a genuine sacramental action. He saw it, however, as a temporary gift of healing valid only for apostolic times, “which God withdrew from the world fourteen hundred years ago.” *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 3:314-315.

<sup>28</sup>*Zwingli: Writings*, 2:264.

<sup>29</sup>“In Epistolam Beati Iacobi Brevis Expositio,” *Huldrici Zuinglii, Opera*, ed. M. Schuler and J. Schultheiss (Zürich, 1838) VI/2:249.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>31</sup>*Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (London: SCM, 1953) 273.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>33</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:259.

<sup>34</sup>Dibelius, *James*, 154.

<sup>35</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:261, 282.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 307. This is from Calvin’s comment on James 5:5.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 279. Calvin assigned the relief of the poor to the deacons. See Robert M. Kingdon, “The Deacons of the Reformed Church in Calvin’s Geneva,” in *Mélanges d’histoire du XVIe siècle offerts à Henri Meylan* (Geneva: Droz, 1970) 81-90.

<sup>39</sup>See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), *passim*, but esp. 468-469.

<sup>40</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:283. Cf. also Zwingli’s interpretation: “Iacobus ergo quum fidem iustificare negat, non de vera illa, viva, et efficaci

perque caritatem operante fide intelligit, cui in scripturis instificatio et salus tribuitur, sed eam (quam iactant quidam) quae non fides (tametsi eam ita appellent) est, sed potius opinio, taxat et reprobatur, quam et idcirco mortuam fidem appellat, quod caritate (quae vera vita est) careat.” *Zuinglii Opera*, VI/2:271.

<sup>41</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:284.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>44</sup>*Canons and Decrees of Trent*, 34, 42.

<sup>45</sup>On James 5:12, see Peter Rideman, *Confession of Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950) 117-180, 200, 204; on James 1:5, Melchior Hofmann, “The Ordinance of God,” in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. G. H. Williams and Angel Mergal (London: SCM Press, 1957) 203. James 5:12 is also cited in article seven of the Schleithem Confession: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1945) 243-253. To my knowledge, no Anabaptist of the sixteenth century produced a commentary on James. However, Francis Stancaro, a leader of the “evangelical rationalists” in Poland, published a commentary on James at Basel in the 1540s. See G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962) 721.

<sup>46</sup>Hofmann, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 201.

<sup>47</sup>*The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. John C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956) 333.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>49</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956) IV/1:765.

# The Waiting Church and Its Duty: James 5:13-18

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## Introduction

The great task of the Church, according to James, is to live in the hope of the coming of the Lord that has now drawn near (James 5:7-9). Even though the *parousia* is imminent, it is not subject to calculation. James regards the present hour as eschatological by virtue of the Gospel itself. Through this word, God has created believers as the “first fruits” of the final harvest (James 1:18). They represent the entrance of the endtime into the present time. Believers, therefore, must wait in an alien and hostile world for God’s righteousness to be established (James 5:9; 1:20). Their faith must undergo testing in order to come to perfection. The imminence of the Lord’s coming is not contradicted by delay, but accompanied by it. The early rains must be followed by the latter rains before the final harvest comes (James 5:7). Like a farmer waiting for “the precious produce of the field,” believers are to wait with patience. The prophets “who spoke in the name of the Lord” provide the pattern “of suffering and of perseverance” that we are to imitate. Those who persevere prove the goodness of God, that he is full of compassion and merciful (James 5:10-11).

Waiting for the endtime brings responsibilities toward one another in the meantime. One of the chief concerns of the letter is the conduct of believers in Christian community. James frames his admonitions mainly in negative terms, as warnings against the tendency to live by human wisdom. Faith in Jesus Christ is

incompatible with favoring the wealthy in the congregation. We must rather love our neighbor as ourselves, especially the neighbor in need (James 2:1-13). Not many are to become teachers within the congregation. Those who do so are to display their wisdom in kind and gentle behavior (James 3:1-2, 13-18). Conflicts within the congregation arise from the evil desires within its members, and are to be brought to an end by the repentance of each and every one involved (4:1-12). Believers must not “groan” to God against one another, calling down his judgment on their neighbor. The Judge himself is at the gates (James 5:9). Probably James’s stern prohibition against swearing an oath also has in view relations within the community of faith. Above all else, we are to be open and honest in our dealings with one another (James 5:12).

In the closing section of the letter, James provides positive instruction concerning the life of the waiting community of believers, giving us a glimpse of the way things ought to be among us (James 5:13-20). The initial exhortations are exceedingly brief: “Is someone among you suffering? Let that one pray. Is someone among you cheerful? Let that one sing praises.” That James characterizes well-being with a mere psychological term (*euthymei*), which signifies a good spirit or happy mood, corresponds to his larger message. Present prosperity and abundance are only temporary. Like the flower of grass, those who are rich shall wither and fall (James 1:9-11). All of us are like a

mist, which appears only briefly and then vanishes (James 4:14). Within this world we have only fleeting moments of joy, nothing that is substantial or enduring. Yet even these brief seasons of earthly happiness call for praise and thanksgiving to God, who is the source of all good (James 1:17). Both in sorrow and in joy, we are to direct our hearts to God. In such petition and praise all believers are united, however their immediate circumstances might differ.

The greatest part of the closing instructions deals with sickness and sin within the congregation. We often allow such matters to be pushed to the periphery of our life as a church. James places them at the center, undoubtedly because he sees in them the primary expression of the Gospel and its power. His instructions reflect both a sober realism about our condition in this world and a firm faith in the salvation granted us in Christ. Sadly, the practices that he enjoins have fallen into neglect and disuse in our churches.

### **Anointing the Sick**

In the case of the anointing of the sick, our cultural distance from the text and the difficulties of interpretation have contributed to our reticence to appropriate James's instructions. All too often, the passage has been misused to reject medical care or to claim that God will heal all our illnesses here and now. These abuses of the text should not hinder us from using it rightly. The practice that James enjoins has its primary background in the authority Jesus gave to his disciples to proclaim the kingdom, cast out demons, and heal in his name. Mark's Gospel reports that in carrying out their commission the twelve, "anointed many who were sick with oil and healed them" (Mark

6:13). Undoubtedly the disciples' procedure had its roots in the common practice in the ancient world of anointing with oil for medicinal purposes.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, their approach to healing differed from Jesus, who, according to the Gospels, never employed oil in his healings. He rather merely spoke a word, simply touched his subjects, or applied his spittle (or a clay made from his spittle). The difference in the manner of healing likely signals Jesus' unique authority. His word or touch is sufficient to heal. His use of substances that would otherwise bring religious pollution marks him as standing above religion.<sup>2</sup> The disciples, on the other hand, conform to the contemporary practice of anointing with oil for healing. Jesus' implicit acceptance of their action signifies that he does not intend for them to reject the human arts of healing. The same conclusion applies to the passage from James with which we are concerned. His instructions are not to be construed as a prohibition against seeking medical treatment.

That is not to say that the disciples performed a mere medical procedure or that James envisages the elders of the church practicing medicine alongside prayer. The disciples' anointing of the sick took place under Jesus' authority. Its healing virtue did not rest any longer in the application of oil, but in the word of the One who had sent them forth. Medicine is not rejected here, but it is transcended. In the disciples' mission, anointing with oil became a visible sign of the healing that Jesus himself brings in his announcement of the kingdom. The same conclusion obviously applies to the passage in James. The elders are to anoint the one who is sick "in the name of the Lord," that is, by the authority of Jesus Christ (James 5:14). The

practice of anointing appears as a continuation of the commission that Jesus formerly gave to his disciples. The healing promised in the name of the risen Lord stands in continuity with Jesus' own healings and manifests the kingdom of God that he proclaimed.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to notice a number of the details of the text in order to rightly understand the anointing of the sick as James envisions it. In the first place, James expects the ailing member of the congregation to initiate the visitation by the elders. He does not have in view a rite that effects healing of itself. The faith of the one who is sick (and that one's own desire for healing) plays a fundamental role in the anointing. James's language here implies a formal summoning of the elders of the church. This is no mere visit by an individual Christian, nor by a pastor alone. No special gift of healing to a particular believer comes into view here (cf. 1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30). The elders probably represent the congregation as a whole. The elders are to pray "upon" the one who is sick and "anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Again, the anointing is not viewed as working of itself, but rather is an expression of faith in God's healing power. The "prayer of faith," not the anointing in and of itself, brings healing (James 5:15). James has just instructed the one who is suffering to pray (James 5:13). That does not mean, however, that Christians do not need the prayers of others. Christians especially need others' prayers in times of illness and weakness. Here the church itself, through its elders, is called upon to intercede for one of its members. The unusual expression, "to pray upon" which James employs here probably signifies the authority of Jesus, in whose name the elders pray.<sup>4</sup> They of-

fer their petition as representatives of the Church that belongs to him and bears his commission. Just as Peter announced to Aeneas, "Jesus Christ heals you!" (Acts 9:34), so James understands such healings to come from Jesus himself.

It is clear James has a debilitating, life-threatening condition in view. The one who is afflicted is instructed to summon the elders, which suggests that the illness prevents him or her from coming to them. The promise that "the Lord will raise that one up" likewise presupposes that the ailing person is bedridden. Nevertheless, the name formerly given to the Roman Catholic rite, "extreme unction," misses the point of the text, and is better designated (as it now is), "the anointing of the sick." It is not at all clear that James imagines the one who receives the anointing to be at the hour of death. And the anointing is given as a promise of healing, not merely as a preparation for death.

Does James then imagine that every Christian who follows this practice will receive immediate healing, or that the absence of immediate recovery reveals a lack of faith? That would hardly fit the witness of Paul, who suffered with a "thorn in the flesh," which the Lord did not remove (2 Cor 12:7-10), who once feared that he might lose Epaphroditus to illness (Phil 2:25-27), and who on at least one occasion had to leave an ailing companion behind (2 Tim 4:20).<sup>5</sup> James, too, expects a testing of faith through trial, not an immediate deliverance from trouble. This is the theme that begins and ends his letter. Moreover, from the first century to the present believers have grown ill and passed away; otherwise the first witnesses to the Gospel would still be here with us!

How then are we to understand the promise James offers that "the prayer of

faith shall save the one who is sick and the Lord shall raise that one up"? The best interpretation by far is that which recognizes that James alludes to our final "salvation" and our "being raised" from the dead. With a gentle play upon words, James simultaneously leaves open the possibility of immediate healing while pointing to the hope of the resurrection. Faith in Jesus Christ and the prayer uttered in faith unfailingly save. Of this the one who is ill may be unconditionally assured. Healing may delay, but it shall certainly come. This hope of the resurrection in no way replaces a physical healing with a "spiritual" one. James directs our attention to the ultimate and abiding healing that we await, which is unambiguously physical, and in which all sickness and death shall forever be removed. Even the healings that Jesus performed in the course of his earthly ministry were temporary signs of the presence of the kingdom that is yet to come in its fullness. James understands that God still grants such healings when and where he wills to do so. The way in which he describes the anointing of the sick suggests that he regards any immediate healings that may occur as continuations of Jesus' ministry. As we have noted, they take place "in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14), and like Jesus' own healings anticipate the permanent healing that is yet to take place. Such healings display the authority given to Christ, and serve as tangible signs that God is merciful and that his purposes for his people are good. Yet, they are merely transient signs that point to the arrival of the kingdom. James has just directed his readers to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord. It should come as no surprise, then, that he subtly reminds them of it in this context. Until the Lord appears, one

of the trials that all believers must endure is that of sickness and death. The practice of anointing with oil that James enjoins provides a visible sign of the Lord's promise to save us. In each individual case, it rests with him whether he grants an immediate and temporary "salvation" as a sign of that which is yet to come, or whether he calls that person to wait for the ultimate and permanent healing of the resurrection. It would encourage the faith of many believers in times of trial and bring much glory to God if we took up the practice of anointing and prayer for the sick in our churches.

James closes this instruction with the promise that if the one who is ill "has committed sins, it shall be forgiven him" (James 5:15). His conception of salvation contains a dynamic element. Sins have a real effect. Evil desire, when it has come to completion, brings forth sin, and sin brings death (James 1:14-15). This is true not merely for the world, but also for the believers whom James addresses in these verses. James regards it as possible that the ailment that has struck the one in need is the result of particular transgressions. The Scriptures elsewhere clearly indicate that God may well send sickness or even death as a temporal punishment for certain sins.<sup>6</sup> He does this to discipline his children and keep them from further evil. Yet not all sickness is the result of specific sins. James merely raises the possibility that such is the case. Moreover, those who belong to Christ have a weapon to which they may resort: prayer by other Christians in the name of the Lord, in whom there is forgiveness of sins. Here sin and death are overcome.

It is worth remembering that in the biblical understanding, sickness and death are the result of our fallen state. Not

every affliction that comes to us is the result of particular transgressions, but all illness ultimately derives from our sinfulness. Indeed, the Scriptures sometimes use the image of incurable wounds or sickness to describe human sinfulness and rebellion.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the incarnation of the Son of God can be seen to have enormous significance. He took our condition upon himself in order to redeem us from it: “He himself took our illnesses and bore our diseases” (Isa 53:4; Matt 8:17). His cross accomplished our forgiveness, and for this reason worked our healing: “by his wounds you were healed” (1 Pet 2:24). The healings that Jesus performed were not mere “wonders” standing arbitrarily alongside his offer of forgiveness. They were visible expressions of the effect of that forgiveness, which secures participation in the coming kingdom of God: “In order that you might know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and walk” (Mark 2:10-11). To possess the forgiveness of sins is to possess eternal life, freedom from sin and death.

### **The Call to Prayer**

It is not at all surprising, then, that James draws a conclusion from the promise of healing that is applicable to the entire community of believers: “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you might be healed. The prayer of a righteous person effects much, since it actively works” (James 5:16). Here again, James engages in a play upon words. In the first instance, the “healing” that results from mutual confession most likely is the remission of sins itself. In accord with other biblical writers, James pictures sin as a “sickness”

from which only the Lord can deliver us. We are powerless to save ourselves. We must cling to the Lord and the prayer offered in his name.

Secondly, an echo of James’s preceding allusion to the resurrection from the dead as the ultimate healing is heard in this verse as well. The “healing” from sin, which is the object of our prayer for one another, will find its full expression when we are raised from the dead. Then, and only then, such petitions may cease. The loss of this practice within our churches is to be lamented even more than the loss of the anointing of the sick. We are so unaccustomed to it and unpracticed in it, that it has become very difficult for us to implement. James does not intend for us to become introspective. Confession of conscious sins is sufficient. Furthermore, James surely does not wish for us to violate the dignity, trust, or private concerns of other persons in the confession of our own sins. Undoubtedly other factors must be taken into consideration as well. Most importantly, the focus of our confession must remain upon our prayer for one another. That is James’s primary topic. He does not measure the effect of the confession by our soul-searching, but by the promise attached to prayer. Otherwise, mutual confession may devolve into a vain exercise in self-achieved catharsis. Despite all the difficulties attached to it, however, the practice is worth recovering. James calls us to something more biblical and profound than the “accountability groups” that have currently become so popular among evangelical Christians. Mere accountability to one another can effect outward change and conformity to group standards, but it has no power to transform the human heart. The Church has a far greater calling, and far greater

resources in the Gospel. Our prayer for one another in the name of Jesus Christ brings with it the forgiveness of sins and the healing of our persons, which God alone can work. We have been given the responsibility of participating in his work in one another's lives.<sup>8</sup>

As an example of the efficacy of the prayer of a righteous person, James points to the biblical story of Elijah. He is introduced as "a human being, like to us in passions" (*anthrōpos ēn homoiopathēs hēmin*). Probably James is countering the common image of Elijah as a spiritual hero, by pointing to his weaknesses that appear in the biblical narrative (see 1 Kings 19:4-18). Elijah was a righteous man, but he was at the same time a sinner like us. For this reason, we can take encouragement from his experience. It was Elijah's fervent prayer that was powerful, first bringing drought for three and a half years and then bringing the drought to an end (James 5:17-18).<sup>9</sup> As is frequently the case in this letter, the example that James chooses is a tangible representation of the truth he wishes to teach. Rain was withheld from Israel as a judgment upon it and Ahab its king, who had led it astray to the worship of Baal (1 Kings 18:18). The end of the drought followed Elijah's triumphant confrontation with the prophets of Baal and the conversion of the people (1 Kings 18:41-46). In calling attention to this part of the story, James may be quietly reminding his readers of the efficacy of their cries to "the Lord of hosts," who shall finally bring judgment upon those who oppress the poor (James 5:4-6). His elaboration of the effect of Elijah's second petition is likewise revealing: "He prayed again, and the heaven showered rain, and the earth sent forth its fruit" (James 5:18). James here recalls Isaiah

55:10-11, where God's word is said to effect his saving purposes just as certainly as the rain and snow cause the earth to yield its produce. James is perhaps reminding us that behind Elijah's prayer stands the word of God. The prophet merely entered into the effecting of God's purposes in his praying. Even more importantly, the allusion to Isaiah speaks of the accomplishment of God's saving purposes on earth. Just as Elijah's prayer brought about a time of repentance and blessing, so believers in Christ may take courage that God will hear their prayer for one another and bring to pass their petitions. Again, James's glance is cast forward to the coming of the Lord. The text of Isaiah that he echoes intimates a new creation, in which heaven and earth experience peace and blessing.

### Restoring Sinners

James's final exhortation deals with the duties of Christians toward those who fall away. The passage therefore forms something of a chiasm. The opening instruction concerning the anointing of the sick has its counterpart in the restoration of the apostate believer. We need not enter into questions concerning the perseverance of the saints here. It is sufficient to recognize that at least in outward and visible ways, those who name Christ as Savior sometimes do "wander astray from the truth" (James 5:19).<sup>10</sup> Although we shall not be able to persuade all of them, we shall be able by the grace of God to persuade some of them. We have a duty, like Jesus himself, to seek out the lost sheep, whoever they might be. Probably James continues to recall something of the Scriptural account of Elijah's ministry, since in his encounter with the prophets of Baal, Israel was turned back to the Lord

(1 Kings 18:37). Despite debate on the question, it is most likely that when James speaks of someone turning a sinner from “the error of *his* way” and thereby saving “his soul from death,” he has in view the salvation of the one who has fallen into error.<sup>11</sup> The one who does so “covers a multitude of sins.”

In this final appeal, James implicitly appeals to believers to be like God, who is unchangingly good to all persons (James 1:17). He is the one who has saved all of us from death and who has covered all our sins in Jesus Christ. When we consider all these exhortations together, it becomes quite clear what James expects of the Church as it waits for its Lord: We are to be “little Christs” to one another, meeting one another in the present misery of sickness and sin with the promise of the Gospel and the power of prayer in Jesus’ name.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the references in H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, Band 3 (Munich: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961) s.v. Mark 6:13 (1:11-12); James 5:14 (3:759).

<sup>2</sup> See David Smith, “Jesus and the Pharisees in Socio-anthropological Perspective” *Trinity Journal* 6 (1985) 151-156.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus’ healings stand alongside his proclamation as a witness to the kingdom. On this topic, see H. K. Nielsen, *Heiligung und Verkündigung: Das Verständnis der Heilung und Ihres Verhältnisses zur Verkündigung bei Jesus und in der ältesten Kirche*, Acta Theologica Danica 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> The only parallel to James’s usage which I have been able to locate in searches of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae and the

Scriptures is found in the Hebrew text of Job 42:8, where God informs Job’s would be comforters that he shall pray “upon” (i.e. “concerning”) them (*wə’iyyôb ‘abdî yitpallēl ‘ălêkem*) and God shall accept his prayer. In James 2:7 the rich are said to blaspheme “the noble name which is named upon you.” James here has in mind the name of Jesus Christ to whom believers belong. The biblical idiom expresses God’s ownership and blessing (e.g. 2 Sam 6:2, Isa 63:19, Jer 34:15, Dan 9:18, Amos 9:12). It may be that the expression here reflects the invocation of Jesus’ name upon the synagogue of believers.

<sup>5</sup> See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 244-245.

<sup>6</sup> See for example John 5:14; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Cor 11:30.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Jer 3:22; Hos 7:1; Ps 107:17-20; Mark 2:17. See Johannes Hempel, *Heilung als Symbol und Wirklichkeit im Biblischen Schrifttum*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> On this topic see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translation and introduction by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954).

<sup>9</sup> In attributing the period of rainlessness to Elijah’s prayer, James builds upon the biblical narrative, perhaps finding an indication of prayer in Elijah’s opening word to Ahab, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, . . .” See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 336.

<sup>10</sup> The dynamic element within James’s conception of salvation again comes to expression here. The believer who

restores the sinner saves a life from death (James 5:20). Only those who continue in faith shall receive salvation (James 1:12, 2:14-26, 5:11).

<sup>11</sup>The coordination of the pronouns and the general thrust of the passage argue for this reading.

# A Perfect Work: Trials and Sanctification in the Book of James

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## Introduction

Nobody enjoys the trials of life, yet the Bible consistently urges us to find them valuable. In the book of James we find the most straightforward and challenging of all such statements: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (1:2).<sup>1</sup> I cannot be the only one who, as a young believer, choked on this strange exhortation. Surely joy is our response to things we eagerly desire; how can “trials” be considered desirable? Is James merely using hyperbole? No, James means what he says. Trials are truly something to rejoice in, not because they are desirable in themselves, but because they lead to a most desirable outcome: They lead to our sanctification. How James connects trials and sanctification is the topic of this essay.

Before I begin my analysis of James, some explanations are in order. First of all, my use of the word “sanctification” needs to be clarified. I have no intention of exploring the Bible’s use of the word “sanctification” (*hagiasmos*). James is very much concerned with the believer’s growth into Christian maturity, and modern theological dialogue tends to borrow the word “sanctification” to refer to that process, a term that James himself does not use. I will argue, however, that James makes a strong contribution to our *concept* of change in the Christian life—to our concept of sanctification.

Second, while I will focus on the first

twelve verses of James, I will regularly highlight the connection between these verses and the coherent picture of sanctification that unfolds in the rest of the letter. Given the history of James studies, however, I need to say something about my use of the word “coherent” and the assumptions I am making. Normally, a careful interpreter approaches an epistle looking for two important and related things: (1) The situation(s) of the readers that the author addresses; and (2) The flow of thought that gives unity and coherence to the author’s individual statements. Some commentators, however, argue that we should downplay James’s letter-like opening and treat the book as an example of wisdom literature, something like a New Testament version of the book of Proverbs. If James is indeed a book like Proverbs, then it lacks the very things the interpreter is most eager to find: (1) a situation that the author addresses and (2) coherence.

Martin Dibelius takes this line of thinking to an extreme. In James 1:4-5, for example, James repeats the word *leipō*, “... that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom...” Normally, such a repetition would suggest a coherent connection in the author’s mind between the “perfection” in verse four and the “wisdom” in verse five. Dibelius argues, however, that since we know in advance that there is no coherence between the isolated ideas in

the book, James must have deliberately repeated the word to create an artificial connection between ideas that were in fact unrelated. James moves from a saying on trials to a saying on prayer with a “catchword link.”<sup>2</sup> In this line of thinking, the genre dictates that we should not only stop looking for coherence, but that we should also deliberately ignore whatever indicators of coherence we find. I think James Adamson is more persuasive than Dibelius: “We have too long been hampered by two misconceptions, first that James lacks unity and coherence, and second that James’s concept of Christianity is peculiar and unorthodox.”<sup>3</sup>

This paper assumes the unity of James. The following conclusions were reached after examining the whole book and will guide the approach undertaken in the rest of the essay:

(1) What James has written is not *personal*, but it is *purposeful*. James presumably writes to a number of churches with which he has limited personal contact, and the letter has none of those personal comments that mark Paul’s letters to the churches he founded. James wrote in order to address problems that he knew the churches were facing.

(2) The letter is not *tightly argued*, but it is *coherent*. James is clearly not starting with a premise and working his way step-by-step over five chapters to a conclusion. Furthermore, the connections that exist between his ideas are often left implicit. Yet it would be a mistake to neglect the real focus and coherence of the letter. James is clearly a man who has read the prophets and wisdom literature, and his work has a certain generality befitting a pastoral letter written to many churches. James has by no means thrown together a disconnected set of proverbs.

### The Testing of Your Faith

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when

you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (1:2-3).

#### *What is Faith?*

James does not share the current popular conception of “faith” as a vague belief that things will be all right. He does not even share the popular Christian conception that “faith” just means believing in Jesus. For James, faith includes a distinctive set of beliefs with specific content. To be sure, the message we are to believe begins with the truth that Jesus is the Christ, a truth that James neither explains nor defends, but merely assumes. James highlights the aspects of that message that directly address our predicament, our destiny, and the choices we face. He tells us that the human soul is in peril of death (5:20) and the adverse judgment of God (4:12), and it needs to be saved. Such salvation is available (2:21); God will justify (2:24) and be gracious to (4:6) the one who responds to Him (4:8). In contrast to the judgment awaiting the unredeemed, those who come under God’s grace stand to inherit the crown of life (1:12) and a place in God’s kingdom (2:5) at the return of the Lord (5:7-8). This inheritance is valuable beyond measure; therefore, even though believers may suffer much in this life, their future hope makes them rich (2:5) and exalted (1:9). These are the truths that a person with “faith” will believe.

This set of beliefs, this faith, confronts us with two striking implications:

(1) If the gospel is true, then the most important events of my life are still ahead of me (belonging to the end of the age), invisible to me now.

(2) Nevertheless, now is the time when I must decide whether I actually believe this message. The important decisions of today all hang on whether I believe what the gospel

says about my tomorrow.

### ***Faith under Trial***

By its very nature, therefore, faith will be tested by the circumstances of life. We will be forced to decide whether the gospel's intangible truths are substantial enough to affect how we live today. In discussing this testing, James uses two related terms: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, whenever you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

The Greek word *peirasmos* and its related forms sometimes refer to explicit attempts to entice and seduce someone to evil; in such contexts we usually translate it as "temptation."<sup>4</sup> James, however, seems to be using it with its broader sense of "a trial, something that tests what we are made of." In the context, *peirasmos* is used in parallel with *dokimion*, a word that emphasizes the idea of testing, and so "trials" seems the best translation. The issue, however, is not quite that simple. In the larger context (1:13), James uses the verb form *peirazō* in the narrower sense: God does not "tempt" anyone. One might reasonably argue that James is saying, "Rejoice in temptations, but do not blame them on God." It is unlikely, however, that James is denying that the *peirasmois* of verse three come from God.<sup>5</sup> He later uses Abraham's offering of Isaac as an example of faith at work, and surely James knows that God is described there as having "tested" Abraham (LXX Gen 22:1, *peirazō*). We would do better to see James qualifying the broad use of *peirasmos* in 1:3 by denying that it includes the narrower meaning in 1:13; that is, God *tries* our faith, but we should not interpret that as God's attempt to *tempt* us, i.e., to seduce us into evil.

Scholars often compare James 1:3 with

1 Peter 1:7 and discuss the derivation of *dokimion* in both.<sup>6</sup> It is sometimes argued that James emphasizes the process ("testing") and Peter the favorable outcome ("proof"). Several explanations are proposed for this difference, some involving the idea that James and Peter are in fact using two different words. A definitive answer may be impossible. The difference between James and Peter can be exaggerated, however. Peter may be emphasizing the favorable outcome, but the testing process is not far from view. James may be emphasizing the process, but a favorable outcome is clearly part of his picture as well; one does not rejoice in *failing* the test. A good translation in both James and Peter is "the proving of your faith." This captures both features of this word in James's usage: it is a *process* that results in *proof*. The idea of proof, genuineness, is at the heart of the *dokim-* word group. The *process* of *proving* the genuineness of our faith results in "perseverance"; indeed, as we will see, perseverance is the proof of genuineness.

James, then, has a concept that faith—the rich set of beliefs about the need for salvation and the inheritance of the redeemed—is proved in the midst of trials. What does that look like? We can begin to answer that question by considering the rest of James's letter. While I cannot write an entire commentary on James in the space of one article, three points will at least present the general direction of my thinking:

First, while James is not writing to a specific set of people, neither is he writing vague exhortations to generic Christians. A strong note of warning sounds through the letter, suggesting that James is at least generally aware of real spiritual problems in the churches to which he is

writing. He uses phrases such as: “do not be deceived” (1:16); “be doers and not just hearers who delude themselves” (1:22); “if anyone thinks himself to be religious... his religion is worthless” (1:26); “quarrels and conflicts among you” (4:1); “you adulteresses” (4:4); and “you double-minded” (4:8). James is not writing about trials in a vacuum; he is writing to churches where faith is under trial.

Second, wealth is a big issue in James because wealth is often an issue that forces believers to confront the claims of the gospel. For example, James rebukes those who would fawn over a rich man in the assembly and yet ignore and dishonor a poor man (2:1-7). Why? Because believers should be nicer? Because charity to the poor is a religious duty? No, the issue is more fundamental. We toady to the rich because we value money; we want to be associated with those who have it; and we even hope that some of it will come our way. (Tell me that you would not take notice if Bill Gates joined your church and started tithing.) In contrast, a poor man has nothing that can do us any worldly good. No prestige, and certainly no money, will come to us. James must remind his readers what their faith tells them about who and what is truly valuable: “...did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (2:5). Who is truly rich? The unbelieving rich of this world, who will lose everything and enter into judgment? Or believers, poor though they may be, who stand to enter into the riches of eternal life in the kingdom of God?

Third, trials, therefore, are not necessarily hardships. The rich of James’s day, it is true, brought suffering upon many (2:6-7; 5:4-6). But the rich may try your

faith just by attending the assembly. They may be a trial simply because, in a worldly sense, they have more to give than lowly widows and orphans. In fact, they may be a trial by the example they set, by the worldly ambition they may incite in the heart. In all of these situations, the worldview of believers is under trial. Do the rich understand the salvation of their souls to be their real need? Can the transitory riches of this world amount to real wealth, or is that only found in the eternal promises of the gospel? How can they say that they “believe” the gospel preached by the apostles if they refuse to accept any of its implications for their values, goals, and lives?

### *Staying the Course*

Perseverance (NASB “endurance,” from *hypomonē*) is a major theme in the New Testament, starting with the teaching of Jesus (see especially Luke 8:5-15). In the face of whatever obstacles, pressures, and temptations they may encounter, believers are called to persevere in the faith. In 1:3, James describes perseverance as resulting from the proving of our faith; in 1:12, he implies that persevering under trial is the proof itself. These two ideas fit well together and demonstrate how James conceives of perseverance: Perseverance is the inevitable result of genuine faith under trial, because such faith stays the course and thereby shows itself to be genuine.

In a way, perseverance as a test of faith is easy to understand. A man shows his unbelief clearly if he walks away from the faith, saying, “I’ve changed my mind; Jesus is a fraud.” James, however, seems to have a more subtle concept of perseverance. Nowhere in his letter does he warn his readers against abandoning the

doctrines concerning Christ. Unlike the book of Hebrews, where the author genuinely fears that his readers will walk away from belief in Jesus as the Christ, James shows no such fears for his readers. He is not worried about people abandoning their religion; he is afraid that they are refusing to act on the implications of that religion. James is sometimes criticized for his lack of Christological material; Luther is well known to have complained about it.<sup>7</sup> But we need to recall that James addresses a specific situation, and that he is apparently not concerned about the doctrines of his readers. Instead, he is worried about the values, attitudes, and actions that ought to be resulting from those doctrines. James fears that his readers are abandoning the faith in everything but name.

If my friends “persevere” in calling themselves my friends over the years, and yet ignore me, refuse to help me, and gossip about me, what does their persevering “friendship” really mean? They may call themselves my friends, but they act instead as my enemies whenever they are faced with a choice. Such is James’s concern for some who claim to have “faith.” Their religion tells them that Jesus is the king of God’s kingdom, but they live as if the kingdom were not real and did not impinge on their practical living. The hope of gaining citizenship in that kingdom makes every believer rich, but James sees many of his readers living as if only people with money are rich. If people fail to live according to the gospel, then what do they mean in saying they “believe” it? If people live contrary to the gospel, then their professions of faith are vain and meaningless. For James, true perseverance means following the implications of the gospel wherever they may lead. If I will

not live out the implications of the gospel, then I have not “persevered,” however long I may hold to the Christian religion.

### **Perfect and Complete**

“And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (1:4-8).

### ***Lacking in Nothing***

So far James has used the word *hypomonē* (“endurance, perseverance”) once, asserting that it is the desirable outcome of the process that proves our faith. Although I have looked ahead in the letter to suggest that James has a concept of perseverance deeper than just “remaining a Christian,” his opening comments in verse three use the term without clarification. The clarification begins with verse four. In order to see the nature of James’s argument, it is helpful to discuss two issues of translation. First, the use of the word “let” (in “let endurance have”), although acceptable as a translation of a third person imperative, can be misleading. James is not saying that perseverance would have a perfect result if only we would “allow” it to do so. What would that mean? Can we somehow sabotage a genuine, from-the-heart perseverance in faith and keep it from having any impact on our lives? No, I regard the imperative

as explaining what must characterize “perseverance,” if it is truly to be a faith-affirming, joy-producing aspect of a believer’s life. “Perseverance is to have a perfect work,” he says. Perseverance is meant to have a certain result, implying that if this result is lacking, then one’s faith is not genuine.

Second, James says that perseverance is intended to have an *ergon teleion* (“perfect work”) in the believer’s life. “Perfect” is another potentially misleading translation; it seems to suggest a moral perfection that is not James’s intent. A clearer (if perhaps pedestrian) translation might be “perseverance is to have a *fully-developed* work, so that you might be *fully-developed* and complete, lacking in nothing.” *Teleios* refers to “arriving at the goal,” “becoming all that you were intended to be.” An adult is a child that has become *teleion* (as in Heb 5:14); an oak tree is an acorn that has become *teleion*. “Mature” is often a good translation. For James, it is faith that must mature. Faith must arrive at its appointed goal, so that believers are not deceived (1:16), are doers and not just hearers (1:22), have a religion that is not worthless and defiled (1:26-27), have a faith that can truly save them (2:14), demonstrate the wisdom from above (3:17), and strengthen their hearts (5:8). According to James, faith is immature and incomplete if it has not yet persevered under trial and grown thereby.

We can see the concept of a perfected, fully-developed faith by considering the story of Abraham in the light of James’s discussion in 2:21-24. Abraham heard the promises concerning his son Isaac, and he believed them. But later God tested Abraham, requiring him to act on his belief by offering up Isaac. James says, “faith was working with [Abraham’s]

works, and as a result of the works, faith was *perfected* (from the verb *teleioō*.)” Faith has been completed and fully-developed when the believer faces the implications of that faith and acts on them. An untested faith may be genuine, but it has yet to manifest itself in its shaping of the believer’s mind and actions in observable ways.

The world in which James’s readers live provides the arena in which faith can become “perfect” through action. Left to themselves, they would undoubtedly choose a life without troubles or even difficult choices. But this is not an option. They live in a world where rich people have all the power, including the power to make their lives miserable, and where riches seem to promise to make life fulfilling now. Their even poorer brethren seem at best negligible and at worst obstacles to fulfillment. Jealousy and selfish ambition are tearing their assemblies apart, as each “believer” vies with the others for power. Under such pressures, the believers must decide what their inheritance in the kingdom of God means to them. To turn away from the desire for riches and find contentment in the promise of God is a life-changing, faith-maturing kind of decision. The doctrine that Jesus is the Christ takes on a personal significance that has been forged under pressure.

### ***But What If You Do Lack?***

In this section of the essay, I connect v. 5 “if any of you lacks wisdom” with v. 4, “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Unlike the approach taken by Dibelius mentioned above, I understand that the repetition of “lack” is crucial in showing the flow of James’s thought. Not all scholars agree that these verses should be connected, and I sympathize with their

reservations. Two aspects of vv. 5-8 can give the impression that they stand alone in James's thought: (1) the meaning of "wisdom," and (2) the nature of James's teaching on prayer.

First, there is some question about what James means by "wisdom." In the popular preaching that I have heard, the assumption is often made that James is talking about divine guidance. We are told that if we do not know God's will in a certain situation—if we "lack wisdom"—we should ask God for guidance, believing we will receive it.

But it is unlikely that James means "divine guidance" when he refers to "wisdom" in v. 5. In chapter three, James describes "the wisdom from above," and he defines it entirely in terms of the godly behavior of the wise person. I would summarize James's argument in this way: Not many of James's readers should become teachers because of the caustic power of the tongue, the organ that reveals the state of the heart beneath. If any would claim to be wise, then let them remember what a godly wisdom looks like. Having accepted the implications of the gospel, wisdom has abandoned jealousy and selfish ambition, and so promotes peace. In other words, wisdom is the fruit in the life of a mature, tested Christian, the only sort of person who should be a teacher. Moreover, in 1:5, James describes God as giving this wisdom "generously and without reproach." It is difficult to conceive how God could justly reproach us for not having His divine guidance in advance, but He could certainly reproach us for not having wisdom, that is, for being fools. The tenor of James's letter shows that he fears exactly that for many of his readers; their worldliness suggests that they are

ungodly fools. James 1:5, then, is the first of several gracious and redemptive comments James makes. James knows that the maturing process has not, in fact, happened for many of his readers. They should be growing in maturity and wisdom, as they struggle with the implications of their faith in the midst of their trials. The difference, for example, between God's wealth and the world's wealth should be clearer to them, since life has been forcing them to confront those very issues. But what if that is not happening? What if his readers are indeed fools? What should they do? They should turn to a gracious God and ask Him to give them wisdom.

Second, another piece of evidence that might suggest that 1:5-8 is unconnected with the previous discussion of "trials" is James's exhortation to pray. James's words sound like a typical, stock exhortation to believe that your prayers will be answered. At first glance, this seems to have little connection with rejoicing in trials. Given my understanding of the preceding verses, however, it makes sense that James would qualify his promise of God-given wisdom. Is wisdom given automatically to whomever asks? No, God's response depends on what has led to the lack of wisdom in the first place. Is it mere immaturity, or is it rooted in a stubborn refusal to believe what God has promised? That is the issue that leads James to make the qualification. When James's readers ask God for wisdom, they must decide again whether they believe, as Hebrews 11:6 puts it, that God "exists and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." God will give wisdom to fools, but not to fools who refuse to believe.

## Our High Position

“But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; and let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away” (1:9-11).

Two points should be made about this section. First, in light of the above discussion, this section has a stronger connection to what precedes it than is initially apparent. In the midst of the trials of James’s readers, perseverance should be fostering wisdom, a new and mature perspective on life. One way this new perspective will manifest itself is in their attitude toward the rich. Even if the believers are poor, they understand that their position is exalted in comparison with the rich, who will lose all that they have in the end. Rather than envy and pursue the rich, believers will rejoice in their own exalted status as heirs of a great kingdom.

Second, unlike some commentators,<sup>8</sup> I do not think that James is contrasting the brother of humble circumstances with the rich *brother*. There are two alternative explanations for the absence of a noun with the adjective “rich”: (1) James expects the word “brother” to be understood from the first clause, or (2) the adjective “rich” is being used as a noun itself, “rich (one).” The second alternative is just as plausible as the first, since rich (usually plural but sometimes singular)<sup>9</sup> is often used alone as a noun. Which explanation fits the context best? In his letter, James reminds the believers that the rich drag them into court (2:6), blaspheme the name of Christ (2:7),

withhold pay from their laborers (5:4), and put to death the righteous man (5:6). This suggests that James conceives of the rich not as their brothers, but as enemies of the faith. Not every rich person is an unbeliever, but given the cultural situation of the time, James uses his rhetoric to make a legitimate generalization: the rich are persecutors and unbelievers. The commentators who reject the idea that James means “rich unbelievers” are put off by the idea that James would sarcastically tell the rich to “glory” in their downfall, but that should not surprise us; chapter five has a very similar ironic tone. Verses nine through eleven are James’s (first) reminder to the brethren of the way God inverts the scales: Those who seem to have it all will be brought low, but those who seem to have only God in this life will be exalted in the end.

## Who Are the Blessed?

“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (1:12).

Who is truly blessed? Who is truly fortunate? Who is truly to be envied? These questions are addressed throughout the Bible: in the Prophets and the Writings; in the teaching of Jesus; and here in James. James 1:12 is arguably the key statement in the entire book of James. It is not the rich who are to be envied; it is the man who has real faith and knows it is real because it has been tested and approved. The crown that is life has been promised to those who love God. How do we know who loves God? They are those whose faith has been proven through their perseverance under trial.

This, then, is the culmination of James’s

opening exhortation: “Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials.” I would paraphrase 1:2-12 as follows:

I know that your difficulties seem sorrowful, but I urge you to see them as the testing of your faith and to rejoice in them. After all, the process that proves the genuineness of your faith results in your persevering in that faith, and that is highly desirable. I do not mean that just “being a Christian” for a long time means anything. True perseverance is the kind of wrestling with the truth that ultimately brings about the completion and maturity of your faith; it makes you wise. Now, many of you may recognize that you have not been living out your faith in this way; you are not wise, but fools. Take heart; ask God and He will graciously raise you up to the wisdom you lack. But there is no cure for the folly rooted in stubborn unbelief. You still must decide that God exists and that He keeps His gracious promises. Now in your particular trials, let me remind you of a profound bit of wisdom that many of you have been forgetting: it is believers, even if they are poor in this life, who truly have everything, and those who seem to have everything in this life will lose it all in the end. After all, who are the truly blessed ones? Those whose faith has been tested and proven, those who stand to enter into eternal life. *This* is why we rejoice in the testing of our faith: a tested and matured faith is the mark of citizenship in God’s kingdom, a prize above all else.

### **Implications for Sanctification and Assurance**

In the light of the first twelve verses in James, (at least) two important implications emerge. Over the years Christians have proposed many different models for the process we call “sanctification.” Some of those models strike me as being somewhat incoherent, with little connection between the faith that saves and the resulting sanctification. Just as if someone

said to me, “Stand on your head, and I will give you a dollar,” God tells me, “Believe that Jesus rose again, and I will inject you with something that makes you ‘good.’” In that scenario, sanctification seems like an unrelated prize (or perhaps burden) that happens to accompany belief. This model, since it can suggest no natural connection between belief and sanctification, tends to drift toward seeing sanctification as *optional* as well. God saves those who “believe”; the next step of reforming one’s behavior may or may not be taken by the believer.

The model James articulates is very different. The “works” that emerge through the testing of our faith are intrinsic to the very nature of faith itself. We believe that God is good, and in the midst of life we have the opportunity to act on that belief. We believe that the crown of life awaits the faithful, and in the midst of life we must decide whether that crown is more valuable than the things of this world. Sanctification is not an extra benefit/obligation tacked onto faith; sanctification is faith becoming itself.

This perspective can be difficult to see if we assume (which James does not) that “faith” is simply “believing that Jesus is the Christ.” Under that assumption, it might seem logical to argue that there is no connection between belief and sanctification.<sup>10</sup> But to James, believing that Jesus is the Christ means believing that His kingdom will truly come to pass and that citizenship there is valuable beyond anything else. Such a faith confronts the believer with a choice that cannot be avoided: Do you believe that Christ’s kingdom is the treasure God says it is? That choice is made in the midst of real-life situations.

Some theological traditions have

resisted the idea that assurance of salvation should or could be tied in any way to our works, i.e., to the way we live our lives. This is often done for very good motives. Those traditions are trying to help us avoid the self-righteousness about which Paul warns us so eloquently and focus our attention on the work of Christ on the cross. This is a worthy goal. But James will not allow us to divorce assurance from our works. Instead, as shocking as it might sound to some, James makes a case for assurance through sanctification. Faith is a real decision to believe what God has proclaimed and promised. The reality of that decision, however, is hidden in our hearts until life forces us to act on our beliefs. Why are trials something to rejoice over? Because anything that makes us act on what we really believe forces our hearts out into the open. To see our own faith emerging as a real, vital force in our own life is a blessing because the crown of life goes to people with such faith.

The connection between assurance and sanctification is sobering; salvation comes to those who have a living faith. But this should be sobering, not terrifying. We are not being asked to prove our worthiness for salvation; salvation is a gracious gift to real people with real weaknesses, yet people who also have a real commitment to the truth. God is not testing our moral perfection; He is testing our faith. As a Christian of many years who has talked to many other Christians about their experience, I think I know something of how God accomplishes His testing among us. One person sees the irrevocable shattering of a lifetime dream and must ask himself, "Can I trust God? If my only success in this world is to find a place in God's kingdom, am I a winner or a loser?"

Another person falls into the moral failure she has always condemned in others and must finally ask herself, "Will I submit to the humiliation of grace? Will I admit that I have just as much need for forgiveness as anyone else?" These trials represent turning points for the soul; ideas to which I once submitted in theory I am revisiting in practice, in the hard light of real life. We do not go through such times easily or gracefully. The journey of faith can look bad at times, as it did for some of James's readers. But James reminds them that God is gracious: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (4:8). One day you will look back on these troubled times as the best days of your life, the days when you began to know yourself as a believer and to learn wisdom.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the NASB unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) 77.

<sup>3</sup> James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 20.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of *peirasmōs* and *peirazo* referring to "temptation," see Matt 4:1, 1 Tim 6:9. For the meaning "testing," see John 6:6, Heb 3:8.

<sup>5</sup> Contra Adamson, 70.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the lexical issues, see F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961) §263.2; Walter Grundmann, "*dokimos*, et al.," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2:255-260.

<sup>7</sup>A brief discussion of Luther's views is found in Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 20-21.

<sup>8</sup>Some commentators who opt for the "rich brother" in 1:10 are: Adamson, 61; James H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978) 146; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 68. An argument for the "rich unbeliever" is found in Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 77.

<sup>9</sup>For the plural of *plousios* used substantively, see Mark 12:41, and Rev 13:16. For the singular, see Matt 19:23, and Luke 16:21.

<sup>10</sup>For an argument asserting that there is no logical connection between faith and how we live, see Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 27-29.



# The Wisdom of James the Just

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## Introduction

It has long been recognized that James has, among the New Testament books, a special relationship to Jewish wisdom literature. A quick glance at the margins of a Nestle-Aland text turns up more than thirty cross-references to Jewish wisdom literature of the Old Testament or intertestamental period, versus ten to the Pentateuch, eighteen to Prophets, and seventeen to Psalms (some of which are “wisdom” psalms). While Jewish wisdom literature clearly influenced James, scholars still debate the nature and extent of that influence. Almost all scholars who have studied James agree that there is some kind of relevant background in Jewish wisdom literature. However, while some would go so far as to call James the “wisdom” book of the NT,<sup>1</sup> and a few even suggest that it was originally a strictly Jewish wisdom text that was only later Christianized,<sup>2</sup> others such as Ropes and Dibelius argue that, though James seems to be influenced in some way by Jewish wisdom materials, the essential nature of the book is hellenistic.<sup>3</sup> Most interpreters in the last few decades have landed somewhere in between, recognizing the influences of both Greek rhetorical devices and language, and Jewish material content and forms. Further, the Jewish influence is not restricted to wisdom. The margins of Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> also reveal that of the eight actual *quotations* in James, only two are wisdom texts, most citations being from the Pentateuch. Moreover, the fierce invective of 5:1-6 certainly sounds more like Israel’s prophets than her sages.

The object of this study is two-fold: first, to identify more precisely the relation of James to the *genres* of Jewish wisdom literature, and second, to describe the character of James’s particular “wisdom” content. That is to say, we will ask, first, “Can James be called ‘wisdom literature’ in any sense,” and, second, “What is the nature of the wisdom that James urges believers to ask for?”

## James and Jewish Wisdom Literature

Before we can address the first question, we must ask, “what is Jewish wisdom literature?” This is not easy to answer, since those books that are generally identified as wisdom are so diverse, both in form and in content. Though scholars give various answers to this question, some general distinguishing marks are frequently mentioned.

First, we agree with Crenshaw that the term “wisdom” can apply either to certain *generic forms* that appear in the wisdom literature (e.g., series of aphorisms, instruction books, nature lists, extended dialogic poetry, self-addressed reflection) or to the *themes* that wisdom tends to address in various forms (e.g., the meaning of life, the problem of suffering, mastery of one’s environment, grappling with finitude, and the quest for truth that is assumed to be concealed within the created order).<sup>4</sup> Wisdom literature can be identified by form or by content.

Second, wisdom is a practical matter. It is not a quest for knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge of how to live. Wisdom “is the reasoned search for specific

ways to assure well-being and the implementation of those discoveries in daily existence."<sup>5</sup> It also appeals to the human desire to have some measure of control over what happens to us. Wisdom's admonitions are expressed not in terms of *duty* but of *advantage*.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, wisdom is, at least in its earlier forms, something hidden. Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon are all *searching* books, which try to ascertain the truth of the matter. Wisdom is typically linked to creational rather than covenantal theology because wisdom is looking for the inherent order in the world, which enables humans to control their world. But Jewish wisdom books, coming from a cultural environment that depends on God, must struggle with the tension between the self-reliance implicit in such a search and dependence on God's mercy and disposition, which certainly cannot be controlled by human effort.<sup>7</sup>

Does James fit this pattern? First of all, we must note that there is no question that there are several points of similarity. E. Baasland<sup>8</sup> has noted at least eight "wisdom" elements in James:

(1) James knows and uses Proverbs. James 4:6 cites Proverbs 3:34, and James 5:20 at least directly alludes to Proverbs 10:12. To this we might add the echo of Proverbs 27:1 ("do not boast about tomorrow") in James 4:13-16, and many other parallels, though these do not necessarily evince direct dependence.

(2) James explicitly refers to wisdom in 1:5 and 3:13-18.

(3) According to Baasland, at least 40 of the 108 verses of James have literary parallels in wisdom literature.

(4) The language and style of James reflect wisdom origins. Baasland refers to the work of Halson,<sup>9</sup> who notes that of James's 67 NT hapaxes, 34 are found in the wisdom litera-

ture of the LXX. And of the 21 words that James shares with only one other NT author, 19 occur commonly in the wisdom books.

(5) James is fond of using highly pictorial language, in ways similar to Sirach and other wisdom writers. Some of this is directly paralleled in Sirach. Compare Sirach's "double-heart" (Sir 1:28) and testing by fire (Sir 2:5) with James's double-minded doubter (1:8) and the fire of the tongue (3:6). But it is the sheer quantity of these vibrant illustrations that marks James as clearly standing in this tradition. The stream of illustrative examples on the tongue in James 3:3-12 is breathtaking: bits in horses' mouths, great ships and little rudders, sparks and forest fires, the taming of animals, fresh and salt water springs, and fruit trees, all in just ten verses. The reader also encounters dead bodies (2:26), waves and wind (1:6), misty vapors (4:14), mirrors (1:23), fading flowers (1:10), and patient farmers (5:7-8).<sup>10</sup>

(6) James, alone among NT writers, specifically names Job as a pattern to be emulated.<sup>11</sup>

(7) Verses that are transitional from one general subject to another are typically drawn from wisdom tradition (Jas 1:4-8, 27, 4:6, 5:19).

(8) Most important are particular themes of James that, while sporadically found elsewhere in the Bible, are *central* in wisdom. For example, James highlights the themes of concern for widows and orphans,<sup>12</sup> respect of persons, use and misuse of the tongue, and caution regarding future planning.

To this list many other points of contact could be noted. Especially noteworthy is the relationship of James to Sirach. Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup> notes no fewer than 11 allusions to Sirach in James, compared with 6 allusions and 2 citations from Proverbs. Moreover, there are some very obvious shared themes: the dangers of the tongue (Sir 19:6-12, 20:5-8, 18-20, 22:27, 28:13-26, 35:7-9), the notion that wisdom is a gift from God (Sir 1:1-10), the dangers

of pride (10:7-18), and the warning against blaming God for sin (Sir 15:11-20).

In addition to these parallels between James and second temple Jewish wisdom, there are similarities in their way of thinking:

(1) A person's life is lived *either* in good connections or in *bad*. An ethical dualism predominates in both James and in Jewish wisdom. Note in particular the contrast between sin giving birth to death, and God giving birth to "us" (1:15, 18), the father of lights vs. the shifting shadow (1:17), the perfect (*teleion*) work of patience (1:4) vs. the maturation (*apotelestheisa*) of sin (1:15), and the single-minded (*haplōs*) giving of God (1:5) vs. the double mindedness (*dipsychos*) of a human being (1:8).

(2) As in Jewish wisdom literature generally, there is a fairly strong thematic concern in James that deeds have consequences. (Baasland refers to this as Tat-Folge Denken).<sup>13</sup>

Not only the themes, but also the generic forms of wisdom literature are evident in James. Davids notes that James exhibits an "apparently disjointed and proverbial nature of style."<sup>14</sup> Many of the sayings in James, even though they have contextual linkages within the Epistle, could easily stand alone. This aphoristic style is one of the most notable features shared by James and Proverbs. Halson counts 23 short, isolated aphorisms. But also like Proverbs, James has a few somewhat longer discourses, of which Halson identifies seven or eight (2:1-9, 2:14-26, 3:13-17, 4:1-6, 4:13-16, 5:1-6 and possibly 5:16b-18).<sup>15</sup> Compare the "my son" discourses in Proverbs 1-7, and the virtuous wife discourse in Proverbs 31:10-31.

Several recent studies highlight similarities between James and specific instances of Jewish wisdom literature. For example, in 1993 D. E. Gowan showed the

similarity of the presuppositions of James 1:2-5 with those of 4 Maccabees.<sup>16</sup> And just recently D. Verseput noticed the structural similarities with one of the wisdom texts found at Qumran (4Q185).<sup>17</sup>

But as Verseput also warns, "the pervasiveness of wisdom elements throughout all the literature of the Second Temple period suggests that the Epistle of James cannot be accurately grouped among the wisdom documents by merely pointing out sapiential motifs or by imprudently associating its structure with wisdom instruction."<sup>18</sup> And James certainly has some characteristics that do not fit the wisdom pattern.

First, at the very least it must be said that James is incomprehensible apart from certain Christian presuppositions. U. Luck points to such things as God the father giving birth to us by the word of truth (1:17-18), the implanted word (1:21), the reference to the audience as "beloved brethren" (1:19, 2:5, cf. 2:1, 14), the importance of and nature of true faith (2:14-26), and the "elders of the church" (5:14) as all stemming from the unique social environment of early Christianity.<sup>19</sup> These things have no parallel in wisdom literature.<sup>20</sup>

Second, James does not seem so much concerned with the intellectual search for wisdom as with moral action befitting true wisdom.<sup>21</sup> While James is not unique among his Jewish contemporaries in thinking of wisdom as a moral matter, when speaking of wisdom itself (3:13-18), he appears to be setting a true, active, socially conscientious wisdom over against a false kind of wisdom that boasts and abandons social obligations in favor of private, intellectualized concerns.<sup>22</sup> This contrast of true and false wisdom is at best rare in wisdom literature (though it does have an interesting counterpart in

the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians.

Third, James does not fit into the literary categories of wisdom literature. Crenshaw lists eight such categories: proverb, riddle, allegory, hymn, dialogue, autobiographical narrative, noun lists, and didactic narrative.<sup>23</sup> Of these only the proverb and the dialogue have a generic counterpart in some of James's aphorisms and the literarily constructed interlocation of James 2:18. But whereas these genres are indigenous and constitutive in wisdom literature, they are only useful tools in James, and his main arguments can be sustained without them. Most of James, as already noted, is imperatival in tone,<sup>24</sup> even to the point of upbraiding the hearers and calling down woes, more like OT prophets than sages.

But the most significant difference is that James appears to be deeply conscious of *real* existential problems, not just generalized truths. The exhortations to "stop fighting" (ch. 4) and to anoint and pray for the sick (ch. 5) have no counterpart in wisdom literature. And the diatribe against favoritism in chapter 2 bears the vivid marks of real occurrences. Though the situations may be common enough that James can address them in a circular letter, they are specific enough to characterize James not as a book of wisdom *per se*, but as a work that uses the wisdom tradition and forms familiar to his audience. Nor can we place James firmly in the camp of Hellenistic diatribes or paraenesis.<sup>25</sup> If nothing else, the passion of James 4:1-6, 5:1-6, 2:4, and 2:14-17 ought to clue us in to the fact that the author of James is neither a remote sage in his school nor a hellenistic preacher uttering generalities. He is a pastor concerned for his people.

Nevertheless, James does recognize

that his audience values wisdom, and offers a picture of what true, godly wisdom looks like. An examination of his letter reveals at least five characteristics: (1) True wisdom is a divine gift (and therefore related to faith); (2) true wisdom is primarily ethical rather than intellectual; (3) wisdom is eschatologically motivated; (4) wisdom is spiritual in nature; and (5) true wisdom is the wisdom of Jesus. The first three of these have points of similarity with some (though by no means all) other Jewish wisdom; the last two are uniquely James.

### Wisdom Is a Divine Gift

James actually mentions wisdom twice in his epistle (1:5 and 3:13-18). In both places the concern is not for wisdom generally but on true wisdom, which is of divine origin. "If anyone lacks wisdom let him ask from the God who gives to all unstintingly." The notion that wisdom is obtained by asking God for it is rooted in the prayer of Solomon (1 Kings 3) and the relationship between wisdom being a gift and, therefore, the need to ask for it is developed in Wisdom of Solomon 8:17-9:18.<sup>26</sup>

The longer discussion of wisdom occurs in 3:13-18. P. Hartin regards this as the "very heart and centre of the body of the epistle."<sup>27</sup> Whether that is the case or not, certainly James shares the opinion of other Jewish wisdom that wisdom is a divine gift.

In addition, because true wisdom comes "from above" it is, therefore, singularly inappropriate to boast about it (3:14), for to do so gives the lie to one's claim to be speaking the truth.<sup>28</sup> True wisdom is therefore humble.<sup>29</sup>

But James goes further, because wisdom in James is closely related to *faith*.

Baasland, who is willing to call James a Christian wisdom book, nevertheless recognizes a clear distinction from common Jewish wisdom. James's exhortation to wisdom is on the basis of faith (and according to Baasland, baptism); it is not a "clan" wisdom or simply the "Torah" wisdom found elsewhere, but an eschatological, Christian wisdom. Notice the relationship of true and false wisdom in 3:15-17 to true and false faith in 2:14ff. Compare for example 3:13 and 2:18:

- 2:18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.
- 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by his good behavior his works [done] in the meekness of wisdom.

Just as true faith produces good works, so does true wisdom.

In 5:7-11, James contrasts the farmer's wisdom, patiently waiting for God, with indifference to the poor. This seems an odd juxtaposition, but this seemingly odd contrast shows the connection with faith. Faith also waits in trust, but if it is indifferent to the poor it is no true faith.

Finally, James says that faith without works is vain, empty (*argē*). Vanity is of course a wisdom concern: Ecclesiastes particularly dwells on the emptiness and vanity of life in this world. James seems to pick up on this, so that even a life of faith is vain, empty, and meaningless, if it is a "faith" that does not act in accordance with its precepts. True wisdom is true faith.

### **Wisdom Is Ethical Rather than Intellectual**

The "first of all" attribute of wisdom

in 3:17 is that it is pure (*hagnē*). For James wisdom is essentially an ethical quality.<sup>30</sup> Knowledge, "savvy," cleverness, and wit may all be considered forms of wisdom, but these can be used for impure purposes. They may easily become both the grounds and means of boasting. But ethical purity, if it boasts, ceases to be purity, and hence a wisdom that is contentious or boastful ceases to be wisdom.<sup>31</sup> Because of this basic quality of purity, true wisdom produces its other ethical fruit: peacemaking, gentleness, etc.

As already noted, just as faith is associated with ethical behavior, so is wisdom. Wisdom exhibits good behavior and meekness (3:13) and runs contrary to bitter envy, ambition, boasting and lying (3:14). At no point in James is wisdom simply a matter of the knowing of facts (theoretical knowledge) or even of know-how (practical knowledge).

In particular, the wisdom of James focuses on two ethical issues: speech ethics and humility. The speech ethics of James is the subject of a special study by William Baker, who gives ample evidence for James's roots in the speech ethics of the ancient Near East, particularly as found in Jewish wisdom.<sup>32</sup> But the ethics of *humility* is certainly a dominant theme in Jewish wisdom as well, and many, if not all, the economic and social ethical matters in James essentially stem from concern for humility. The description of wisdom in 3:13-18 is largely a description of humility: it lacks bitter envy, ambition, and boasting, and is instead peacable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy. And consider the ills that James rails against throughout the book: boasting (1:9), blaming God for sin (1:13-14; cf. Sir 15:11-20), favoritism (2:1-7; cf. Prov 14:21), friendship with the world (4:1-10, including a

quotation of Prov 3:34 [LXX] and the exhortation to “humble yourselves” in v. 10), judging brethren (4:11-12; cf. Wis 1:11), and merchant planning without recognizing God (4:13-17; cf. Prov 27:1). Pride lies at the root of them all. Even the evils of the tongue may be classified here, since the section in chapter 3 begins with the warning that not many should be teachers. Apparently, the desire to be called “rabbi” survived in the church, even though Jesus had discouraged it (Matt 23:7-8).

Of course, the ethical character of wisdom is not unknown in Jewish wisdom. As noted below, later Judaism recognized all or almost all the books of the OT as the word of God, and the ethical demands of Torah stood as the supreme standard of life, so an increasingly revelational notion of wisdom permeated later Judaism. And indeed much of the later Jewish wisdom literature identifies Wisdom with God’s law.<sup>33</sup> The identification of wisdom with Torah may have its roots even in the earliest levels. In Proverbs 9:10 the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and “the fear of the Lord” in Psalms 19:9 appears in synonymous parallelism with the law, the decrees, the precepts, the commandment, and the ordinances of the Lord.<sup>34</sup>

Since the Torah is the ultimate source of wisdom, it is a freedom-giving Torah (2:12), but James takes an additional step and refers to the word of God as *implanted* (1:21). Here is another way in which James’s uniquely Christian application of wisdom finds expression. For the wise, freedom-giving Law of God to be effective, especially the royal law of love (2:8),<sup>35</sup> it must be implanted (1:21).<sup>36</sup> Once implanted it must be received humbly.<sup>37</sup> Sustaining the agricultural metaphor, the humble response to God’s planting of ethical wisdom eventuates in the produc-

tion of good fruits (3:17). The following verse encapsulates this in what sounds like a wisdom saying, “fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who do peace.”<sup>38</sup>

Since wisdom is primarily a moral or ethical entity in James rather than intellectual or cognitive, the prayer mandate of 1:5 comes into clearer focus. The *lack* of wisdom that one should pray to have remedied is not an intelligence gap, but a moral gap. The one who prays should ask for *moral* fortitude in order to face suffering and temptation, and thereby become “perfect.”

### **Wisdom Is Eschatologically Motivated**

Though the eschatological dimension of James, particularly in his exhortations to patience, is clear enough, the recent work of Todd Penner has brought new focus to this dimension of James’s thought. Penner shows that the eschatological dimension more thoroughly penetrates the whole of the epistle than had previously been observed.<sup>39</sup>

Such an eschatological focus is not typical of wisdom literature. Ancient Near Eastern wisdom generally takes its cue from *creation* and focuses on God’s work and truth in the created order. Eschatology receives its impetus from redemption, stemming from a distrust of this world and a longing for the future overthrow of the present order. In wisdom, the idea is to avoid the natural retributions and seek the natural rewards of this present age; eschatology recognizes that this world is not fair, and seeks reward and punishment in the future.

However, two forces were at work to merge these notions. First, wisdom became frustrated by the problems of

unjust suffering. Just as Jewish prophets struggled with the cognitive dissonance generated by a belief in Israel's election in the face of Israel's poor political situation, so Jewish wisdom struggled with the cognitive dissonance of a world where traditional wisdom did not always work. Hence intertestamental Jewish wisdom was drawn increasingly towards the redemptive-eschatological framework of the prophets.

Second, the nature of the wisdom concept changed. As awareness grew of a *revealed* wisdom from God (as opposed to what humans are able to figure out for themselves), wisdom became more associated with participation in God's wisdom, not just in creation, but in redemption and law.<sup>40</sup> The seeds of this change are already there in such passages as Isaiah 33:6, where wisdom and understanding are *eschatological* blessings, and Isaiah 11:2, where the spirit of wisdom is a messianic endowment. Already in Daniel, wisdom and eschatology were being fused (Daniel was a sage, but his wisdom was supernatural), and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs has many instances of both traditional wisdom and eschatological expectation. Eschatology and wisdom also come together in Wisdom of Solomon and 4 Maccabees.

James stands in this stream. As Bauckham says, "an eschatological orientation is not therefore anomalous; it is to be expected in wisdom paraenesis from the first century C.E."<sup>41</sup> However, while the later wisdom books have an interest in God's judgment and refer to eschatology as a way of resolving certain wisdom questions, the sayings and admonitions of James, like those of Jesus, have an eschatological dimension not found in

classical Jewish wisdom material.<sup>42</sup> This is no doubt because James recognizes the fact that the eschatological expectations are already being fulfilled. Although the parousia is still to come (5:7), James knows that the messiah has already come (2:1). Hence the divine gift of wisdom is now freely available to all who ask in faith (1:5-6). Above all, the readers are the "firstfruits of his creation" (1:18) who were given birth by the word of truth. The eschatological harvest has already begun.

### Wisdom Is Spiritual

Remarkably, James never refers to the Holy Spirit in his letter.<sup>43</sup> J. A. Kirk<sup>44</sup> is probably right in arguing that wisdom is effectively functioning in James as the Holy Spirit does in other NT writings. Kirk observed the following:

- (1) First, wisdom in James, like the Holy Spirit in the Gospels, is a good gift that is requested of the Father. James 1:5 speaks of asking God for the gift of wisdom, which 1:17 goes on to speak of as every good gift, which comes down from above, from a heavenly Father (Father of lights).<sup>45</sup> This is very much like Matthew 7:7, which speaks of asking the heavenly Father for good gifts, and its parallel in Luke 11:11-13, which identifies the good gift requested and given as the Holy Spirit.
- (2) James 3:9 also refers to God's fatherhood as the reason for his giving of wisdom. Here the wisdom from above provides the ability to control and direct the tongue.
- (3) There are some striking parallels between the fruit of wisdom in James 3:17 and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-6:8. (Note again that wisdom in James is not primarily intellectual but moral.)
- (4) Several references to wisdom elsewhere in the NT also refer to the Spirit. Ephesians 1:17 is the most obvious, where the author prays "that the Father may give you the Spirit of wisdom." The Spirit of wisdom is of course the Spirit given to

Messiah in Isaiah 11:2. Likewise where Colossians 1:28 relates the Spirit to maturity and trials, James 1:4-5 connects maturity and trials with wisdom. In contrast to the Holy Spirit and true wisdom is false wisdom and the spirit of the world in 1 Corinthians 2:12.<sup>46</sup> First Corinthians 12:8 identifies the Spirit as the source of the utterance of wisdom. Finally Acts 6:3, picking up again on the messianic promise of Isaiah 11, refers to those qualified to be deacons as those “filled with the Spirit and wisdom.”

Kirk found the roots of this wisdom-Spirit identification in the Old Testament and Jewish wisdom literature. Throughout the OT, wisdom and the presence of God’s spirit are closely linked (Gen 41:38-39, Exod 31:3-4 [cf. Exod 28:3], Deut 34:9, Isa 11:2). The activity of the creator Spirit of Genesis 1:1-2 resembles the activity of wisdom in Proverbs 8. Likewise Sirach 24:3-5 portrays wisdom in terms of the Spirit of Genesis. In Genesis Rabbah 85, Solomon’s wisdom is identified as the product of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And Haggai 2:5 suggests an identification of the pillar of cloud and fire as “my Spirit,” i.e., the Spirit of God (echoed in Wis 10:17). Broadly speaking, the functions of the Spirit of God in the OT frequently become in the intertestamental period the functions of wisdom (cf. *1 Enoch* 5:6-9 with Isa 11:2ff).

Hence Peter Davids suggests, “if some works have a wisdom christology, James has a wisdom pneumatology, for wisdom in James functions as the Spirit does in Paul.”<sup>47</sup> This may be somewhat overstated, but James conceives of wisdom not as an abstract intellectual ability or cleverness at manipulating life, but as God’s eschatological gift to the believer (the one who asks in faith) that empowers him or her to live rightly and to endure persecu-

tion and trials. James’s wisdom is no “earthly” wisdom: it comes down from above (3:15).

### Wisdom Is the Teaching of Jesus

The correspondences of James with the teaching of Jesus are numerous. Mussner<sup>48</sup> documents twenty-seven instances where James’s teaching reflects that of Jesus. Of these, eleven are identified as “Q” material, six as uniquely Lukan, seven as uniquely Matthean, and two as Markan (though in one case the Markan material is also found in Matthew and in the other in all three Synoptic Gospels). Hence the correspondence with Matthew is very high, with twenty-one of the twenty-seven references being found in Matthew. Fourteen of these are found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Some of these correspondences may be found elsewhere in Jewish literature. For example, the notion that the one who keeps the whole law but stumbles in one matter has become guilty of all (James 2:10), occurs in both Jesus’ teaching (Matt 5:19) and in Jewish teaching (*m. ‘Abot* 2:1, *Sifre Deut* 96:3.2),<sup>49</sup> though James and Jesus seem to have strengthened this notion somewhat. Likewise the warning against slander or grumbling (Jas 4:11, 5:9; Matt 7:1-5) resembles Wisdom 1:11.

Jesus and James reflect Jewish wisdom in the form as well as the content of their teaching. R. Bauckham,<sup>50</sup> referring to the work of David Aune in classifying the aphorisms of Jesus,<sup>51</sup> notes several points where the aphorisms of James, Jesus, and Jewish wisdom literature have formal (not necessarily material) resemblances.

These similarities, among other things, have led to the recent burgeoning of scholarship suggesting that Jesus was a wisdom teacher, a Jewish sage.<sup>52</sup> But Jesus did

not just echo the traditional wisdom of other Jewish sages. Much of what is found in traditional Jewish wisdom is absent from both the teaching of Jesus and James.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, not only was his overall message of the presence and imminence of the kingdom unique, many of his specific ethical instructions were unique as well or, at least, not known elsewhere in Jewish literature. But curiously, some of these *are* known in James. The most outstanding example is the prohibition against swearing (Matt 5:34-37; Jas 5:12). The similarity here is very evident:

James 5:12	Matt 5:34-35, 37
Above all, my brothers, do not swear —not by heaven or by earth or by anything else.	But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.
Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned.	. . . Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

seems to be the case is rather that James is either writing prior to the formal solidification of the Greek tradition of Jesus’ words, and thus “quoting” in a different form than we have it in the Synoptics, or (more likely) he is paraphrasing and reapplying the ethical teaching of Jesus.<sup>56</sup>

Reinforcing Baasland’s opinion is the work of Bauckham, who notes five highly distinctive characteristics of Jesus’ teaching that are echoed by James: (1) Radical ethics, (2) the rejection of social stratification, (3) eschatological judgment, not social advantage, as the criterion for right and wrong, (4) God’s mercy as of greater importance than his distributive justice, and (5) the concern for renewing and reconstituting Israel as God’s people.<sup>57</sup> Just naming them here, I think, is sufficient for the reader familiar with both the Gospels and the Epistle

of James to notice the similarity.

Though some Jewish wisdom literature warned of the dangers of taking oaths (Eccl 5:4; Sir 23:9-13), none prohibited it entirely. Only 2 Enoch 49:1 resembles the statements of James and Jesus, and most scholars view this as a Christian interpolation.

Baasland rightly observes that James’s wisdom is decidedly drawn from the Jesus tradition. Where James reflects traditional Jewish wisdom, those aspects of Jewish wisdom are also found in Jesus’ teaching. On the other hand, wherever James differs from Jewish wisdom tradition, he is demonstrably at one with the preaching of Jesus.<sup>54</sup> This is true even though James never quotes any saying of Jesus as found in the Gospels.<sup>55</sup> What

All this is to show that wisdom for James is what it was for Jesus—it involved both the hearing and the doing of Jesus’ words. According to Jesus, it is the *wise* man who built his house upon a rock, and is like the one who “hears these words of mine and does them.” And this further demonstrates the essential Christianity of James. While Paul refers to Christ himself as the wisdom of God (Col 2:3), James understands the teaching of Jesus to be wisdom, and Jesus as the ultimate sage, along the lines already suggested by the passage found in Matthew 12:41-42 and Luke 11:31-32: “the Queen of the South... came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one

greater than Solomon is here.”

If the goal of wisdom is the formation of character<sup>58</sup> then certainly James is wisdom. And his unique interest in the practical application of the moral instruction of Jesus, and his frequent use of aphoristic style, may very well earn his epistle the epithet, “the wisdom book of the New Testament,”<sup>59</sup> so long as it is clear that it is a *New Testament* wisdom, and that this wisdom is addressed not to hypothetical, but real *church* situations. Inasmuch as Jesus himself used Jewish wisdom (both its form and content), it ought not surprise us that Jewish wisdom tradition was taken over in the Jewish church. Thus there certainly is no need to suppose that James was originally a non-Christian wisdom piece that was later Christianized, nor is there good reason to think that James was not explicitly Christian. True, the great Pauline issues of christology and redemptive history do not arise much in James (only peeking out from passages like 1:18, 2:1 and 5:8), but no writing should ever be judged for what it does *not* say. Rather James ought to help us expand our notion of what is characteristically Christian. Without James, much of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus might have been lost. James reminds us that the essential matter is not hearing or understanding the word of Jesus, but doing it. That is his wisdom.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. Conzelmann, “Wisdom in the New Testament,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 960: “the entire letter of James is a wisdom document in parenetic style.” C. F. G. Heinrici (*Der Literarische Charakter der Neutes-*

*tamentlichen Schriften* [Leipzig, 1908] 75, cited in Baasland, “Der Jakobusbrief Als Neutestamentliche Weisheitsschrift,” *Studia Theologica* 36 [1982] 123) likened the relationship to that between Revelation and other Jewish apocalyptic: “Der Brief [Jakobus] verhält sich zu den alttestamentlichen Spruchbüchern ebenso wie die Offenbarung des Johannes zu der Apokalyptik des Spätjudentums.”

<sup>2</sup> L. Massebieau, “L’épître de Jacques, Est-Elle l’Oeuvre d’un Chrétien?” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 16/32 (1895) 249-83; F. Spitta, *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur Des Urchristentums II* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1896) 382-391.

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916) Introduction Section 2; M. Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, ed. and rev. H. Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 1-11.

<sup>4</sup> J. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, rev. and enlarged (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 20-30.

<sup>5</sup> Crenshaw, 15.

<sup>6</sup> W. Zimmerli, “Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom,” in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James Crenshaw (New York: Ktav, 1976) 177.

<sup>7</sup> Crenshaw, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Baasland, 123-124.

<sup>9</sup> B. R. A. Halson, “The Epistle of James: ‘Christian Wisdom?’,” *Texte und Untersuchungen* 102 (1968) 309.

<sup>10</sup> Such illustrative language is, of course, not limited to Jewish wisdom. James’s illustrative grab bag has parallels in Greek moral literature as well, leading Ropes and Dibelius to think of James as primarily a hellenistic Greek work

(Ropes, Introduction Sec. 2; Dibelius, 1-11), but it still stands as one more similarity to Jewish as well as other wisdom literature.

<sup>11</sup>The use of great OT personalities as exemplars is common in Jewish wisdom; cf. e.g., Sir 44:1-49:16.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. also F. C. Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature" in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, 161-173.

<sup>13</sup>Baasland, p. 124, adds a third similarity in thought patterns: A person is not regarded as an isolated entity but is always part of a given set of social connections. However, this appears to me to be hardly peculiar to wisdom literature—it runs throughout the Bible—and indeed if anything it is somewhat lessened in the later wisdom books.

<sup>14</sup>P. H. Davids, "The Epistle of James in Modern Discussion," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Part 2, *Principat*, ed. W. Haase (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 1988) 25:3635.

<sup>15</sup>Halson, 311.

<sup>16</sup>D. E. Gowan, "Wisdom and Endurance in James" *Horizons of Biblical Theology* 15 no. 2 (1993) 145-153.

<sup>17</sup>D. J. Verseput, "Wisdom, 4Q185, and the Epistle of James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 no. 4 (1998) 691-707.

<sup>18</sup>Verseput, 692.

<sup>19</sup>U. Luck, "Die Theologie Des Jakobusbriefes," *Zeitschrift für Theologie u. Kirche* 81 (1984) 1-30. Luck argues that James does, however, differ from Paul in still holding to the Jewish wisdom notion that a person's identity lies in what he does.

<sup>20</sup>Proverbs does use a similar address, but it is from the vantage point of a father ("my son") rather than of a sibling ("beloved brothers"). Ropes calls it "utterly different" (Ropes, 17).

<sup>21</sup>Cf. below on the ethical nature of wisdom.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. W. Bindemann, "Weisheit Versus Weisheit: Der Jakobusbrief Als Innerkirchlicher Diskurs," *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 86 (1995) 216.

<sup>23</sup>Crenshaw, 27.

<sup>24</sup>These generic differences from other Jewish wisdom texts are precisely why J. H. Ropes and M. Dibelius found James to be generically much closer to Greek forms of hortatory literature.

<sup>25</sup>It is curious that even Ropes himself points out so many marked differences between James and Greek diatribes (Ropes, 15-16) that one wonders why he stuck with calling James a diatribe. Given Dibelius's inability to provide any *positive* characteristics for an ostensible genre of paraenesis other than the use of *Stichworten*, and the paucity of evidence for paraenesis as a *generic form*, as opposed to a rhetorical device, we must also conclude that Dibelius too has failed to find any convincing generic model in hellenism. (Dibelius's only other characteristics of paraenesis are negative, such as the lack of organization, and the lack of continuity of thought. And as he himself shows, the use of catchwords is so common in much Jewish literature that their use can hardly be called evidence for paraenesis being a distinct

*genre*.) Dibelius, 1-11.

<sup>26</sup>Indeed the entire rest of the book of Wisdom of Solomon may be intended to be read as the prayer of Solomon. Note the continued use of the second person throughout the book.

<sup>27</sup>P. Hartin, *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplementary Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 97. Though his chiasmic analysis of 2:1-5:6 is rather forced, it is no doubt true that at least the gaining of true wisdom from God by humbly asking for it in submission to God is a major concern of James.

<sup>28</sup>V. 14 (NIV: "if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth"). The implication is that to boast of one's wisdom, to be proud of knowing truth, is to belie the very truth one professes to know, since that truth includes the fact that if one has wisdom, it is purely by grace. Cf. F. Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief*, 3rd ed. (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament XIII; Freiburg, 1975) 171. Teachers in the churches should read this verse twice a day until they take it to heart. Pride at one's knowledge is as much the source of much strife in our day as in James's day, and is no product of true wisdom (v.16).

<sup>29</sup>Instead of the proud self-serving wisdom of the guru, James advocates the humble wisdom of Jesus who was himself humble (Matt 11:29) but nevertheless spoke a wisdom that demanded a great deal of

his hearers (P. H. Davids, *Commentary on James* [NIGNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 209).

<sup>30</sup>U. Wilckens, "sophia, etc." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 7:524-525.

<sup>31</sup>S. Laws points out that James actually avoids referring to this "earthly" thing as "wisdom." S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 163. There is only one wisdom, and that which is contentious, self-seeking, and boastful is not it.

<sup>32</sup>W. R. Baker, *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James* (Tubingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995).

<sup>33</sup>This seems to be the particular contribution of Sirach 24, particularly vv. 23-24. Later Judaism adopts this idea generally, e.g., *Pirqe Aboth* vi.7 gives a series of attributes of Torah, which in Proverbs are a description of wisdom. *Genesis Rabbah* begins with the words of Prov 8:30, and applies it to Torah: By looking into Torah, God created the world. Cf. also Bar 3:9-4:4.

<sup>34</sup>If there is such a thing as a "wisdom" psalm, Psalm 19 is surely it, moving from the creation theology of vv. 1-6 to the praise of God's law for its guidance and protection in vv. 7-10 to the warning and safety of Torah, which uncovers what is hidden, in vv. 11-13.

<sup>35</sup>It is likely that the "royal law" refers to Lev 19:18 quoted in James. The commandment is a royal (*basilikon*) law probably because it is connected with the kingdom (*basileia*) of 2:5, which may in turn

have roots in Jesus' proclamation of "the kingdom of God" (*tēs basileias tou theou*) (cf. Jesus' comment to the scribe who acknowledged this command that he was "not far from the kingdom of God" [Mark 12:34]). A passage from the Wisdom of Solomon shows well how Judaism related the notions of Torah, wisdom, and kingdom: "The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her, and love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, and immortality brings one near to God; so the desire for wisdom leads to kingdom" (Wis 6:17-20; the translation is that of P. Hartin, in *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus*, 92).

<sup>36</sup>Luck, 17.

<sup>37</sup>It seems to me inherently much more sensible to take *en prautēti*, "in humility," not with *apothemenoi*, "laying aside," (as the punctuation in NA27 suggests) but with the following *dexasthe*, "receive." Thus v. 21 is not a tautologous "receive what you have received" but instruction on *how* to receive that which has been implanted, a sentiment echoed in 3:13.

<sup>38</sup>It has been suggested that this may be an *agraphon*, a saying of Jesus that was known to be such in the early church, but not written down and specifically attributed to him.

<sup>39</sup>T. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology: Re-reading an Ancient Christian Letter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>40</sup>Certainly by the second century B.C., all or almost all of the books

in the Hebrew Bible were known and regarded as authoritative by all Jews, so that Jewish wisdom teachers such as ben Sirach, Baruch, 4 Maccabees and Ps-Phocylides drew freely from Law, Prophecy, and Apocalyptic as sources for the divine wisdom as much as the Wisdom literature.

<sup>41</sup>R. Bauckham, *James: The Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (New York; London: Routledge, 1999) 34.

<sup>42</sup>Hartin, 64-69.

<sup>43</sup>Whatever that enigmatic verse 5 in ch.4 means, I, along with most commentators, think it highly improbable that the "spirit" is the Holy Spirit, whether or not it is the subject of *epipotei* ("desires"). The best option is to give *pneuma* here the same meaning it has in its only other occurrence in James (2:26), namely the vivifying breath of life, a meaning common in wisdom literature (Job 27:3, 33:4, 34:14-15, Wis 12:1, Eccl 1:14, 2:11, 4:4 etc., cf. also Gen 2:2, 7:15, Isa 2:22).

<sup>44</sup>J. A. Kirk, "The Meaning of Wisdom in James: Examination of a Hypothesis," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1969) 24-38.

<sup>45</sup>The best explanation for "Father of lights" is as creator of the heavenly lights of Genesis 1. As creator of lights he is source of all light, and hence cannot be shadowed or darkened or mistaken. Referring to the creator as "Father" personalizes the creator's relationship even to the non-human world, much as God's relationship is personalized in wisdom literature by the personification of wisdom itself, which is deeply involved in creation.

<sup>46</sup>J. A. Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit : An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1.18-3.20 Against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

<sup>47</sup>P. H. Davids, *Commentary on James*, 55-56.

<sup>48</sup>Mussner, 48-50.

<sup>49</sup>G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Century of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (New York: Schocken, 1927) 1:467-468.

<sup>50</sup>Bauckham, 37-47.

<sup>51</sup>D. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

<sup>52</sup>B. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 236-244; R. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 2-3. Witherington thinks that James only used the traditionalist "orderly" parts of Jesus teaching, or misunderstood Jesus in a traditionalist direction, and failed to grasp Jesus' "counter-order" teaching (244-246). But Bauckham, pp. 94-95, thinks this may stem from Witherington's prejudicial construal of the nature of Jesus teaching, and suggests that, instead of "counter-order" versus order construal, it is better to speak of kingdom teaching, which does not fit into either category.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. Bauckham, 95, who then goes on to list several missing instructions, e.g., exhortations to work hard, advice on what kind of friends to have, good and bad wives, and raising of children.

<sup>54</sup>Baasland, p. 126, "Was Jk von der

jüdischen Weisheitsliteratur unterscheidet, verbindet Jk mit der Verkündigung Jesu. In der neueren Forschung ist es klarer geworden, dass auch übernommene Weisheitsworte durch die Verkündigung

vom Reich Gottes und der eigenen Person in einem anderen Licht erscheinen."

<sup>55</sup>This is one reason why Hartin's view (*James and the Q Sayings of Jesus*) of James's direct dependence on Q is not convincing. See R. Bauckham's review of Hartin in *Journal of Theological Studies* 44 (1993) 298-301.

<sup>56</sup>This would apply as well if any of the sayings in James suspected of being *agrapha* are in fact such. These possible *agrapha* are generally of the form of a wisdom saying that is unknown outside the church. 5:12 is an example of a *known* saying of Jesus that has been brought forward by James, that also occurs in Matthew (I assume here that the saying in Matthew 7 is an authentic *verbum Christi*). The sayings in James 4:17, 5:20, 3:18 sound like they could be references to traditional teaching stemming from Jesus.

<sup>57</sup>Bauckham, 97-107.

<sup>58</sup>Crenshaw, 3.

<sup>59</sup>Baasland, 124



# Sermon: The Power of the Tongue

James 3:1-12

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## Introduction

It is one of the smaller organs of the body. The weight for a male is about 70 grams, for a female, 60 grams. However, its potential for evil is so great that God saw fit to imprison it behind a double jailer: the teeth and the lips. I am talking about the human tongue.

Why is it that this small 2-3 inch skeletal muscle covered with mucous membrane is so dangerous and lethal? An initial investigation could lead one to the conclusion that the problem is its location. Recent research has revealed that there are few places more infested with harmful bacteria than the human mouth. More than 100,000,000 microscopic critters live in there. Fungus grows in the oral cavity. In 1999 *Medical PressCorps News Service* reported that a study led by Dr. David Relman, assistant professor of medicine and of microbiology and immunology at Stanford University, found evidence of 37 unique bacteria in the human mouth that microbiologists had never before recorded. Dr. Alan Drinnan, a professor of oral medicine at the school of Dental Medicine at the State University of New York at Buffalo, found this rather mundane. He said, "It's really no big surprise. It just reiterates what has been known a long time: That there are many bugs that you can collect from the mouth but can't grow in vitro, in a lab." It is not a pretty picture. Mouths have viruses that may cause disease. The top of the tongue is the main breeding ground for bacteria that attack the teeth and gums. The white

blood cells from another person's saliva will attack once inside your mouth. Indeed you are better off, in one sense, kissing a dog like my Great Dane Samantha, than you are kissing another human, because at least a dog's mouth contains many enzymes that fight infection!

However, as interesting as all of this is, the problem is not the tongue's physical location, but its spiritual connection. For in terms of spiritual anatomy, the tongue is directly wed to the heart, and it is the heart that motivates and manipulates the tongue for good or evil, to bless or curse. Jesus understood this very well. In Matthew 12:35-37, He said, "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give an account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

James, like his half-brother the Lord Jesus, was very interested in the activity of the tongue. He gives attention to it in each of the five chapters of his letter (cf. 1:19, 26; 2:12, 14, 16, 18; 4:11, 13, 15-16; 5:12). Yet his most detailed treatment of the tongue is 3:1-12. James knew the tongue "is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person . . ." In fact, Scripture variously describes the tongue as "wicked, deceitful, perverse, filthy, corrupt, flattering, slanderous, gossiping, blasphemous, foolish, boasting, complaining, cursing, contentious, sensual, and

vile. And that list is not exhaustive.”<sup>1</sup>

The tongue possesses unspeakable power. Proverbs 18:21 teaches us, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” What lessons would James want us to learn concerning this “subject that is in everybody’s mouth?”<sup>2</sup> Six principles are set forth for our careful consideration.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Tongue Tests Our Teachers (3:1)**

James begins this section by again addressing his readers as “brethren” (*adelphoi*). This is his favorite form of address in the letter, occurring 15 times (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). It serves as both a term of tenderness and often as a transition to a new subject. Here he starts at the top with teachers, and in a surprising move, seeks to discourage persons from too quickly aspiring to that office. In 2:14-26 James hammers home the importance of good works in the Christian life. He was also acutely aware that “in the absence of works, there is usually an abundance of words.” Far too often, those whose faith is anemic are all too “eager to talk about their faith and to instruct others in its delicate theological nuances!”<sup>4</sup> James uses one of his 54 imperatives and warns that those who would seek this position should be very careful. “Let not many of you become teachers.” With greater privilege comes greater accountability. “We” (he includes himself) shall receive a greater judgment.

As heirs to the Jewish synagogue, it was natural that the early church would honor the office of teacher. *Rabbi* meant “my great one.” So great was the respect accorded these teachers in Judaism that if a man’s parents and his rabbi were captured by an enemy, “duty demanded that the rabbi be ransomed first.”<sup>5</sup> This respect

for teachers carried over into early Christianity. As A. T. Robertson points out, “In the *Didache* (xiii. 2, xv. 1,2) teachers are placed on par with prophets and higher than bishops and deacons.”<sup>6</sup>

Teachers of the Word of God bear an awesome responsibility for the health of the Church. The spiritual and theological well being of God’s people rest heavily upon their shoulders. That they are faithful to the Scriptures is not an option; it is an imperative. Phil Newton says in *Reformation and Revival* concerning the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, “The preacher must expound the Word of God or else he has failed in his calling. He may be a wonderful administrator, a winsome personal worker, and effective leader. But if he fails to expound the Word of God, he is a failure to his calling to preach the Word.”<sup>7</sup> George Zemek at the Masters Seminary adds, “Today there is a great need, not for plausible pulpiteers, but for powerful preachers. Contemporary communicators, saturated with arrogance, given to humanistic tactics, and practiced in manipulation, abound. Yet there remains a real drought for the dynamic Word of God conveyed through humble men of God by the powerful Spirit of God.”<sup>8</sup>

It is a weighty assignment to be called by God to teach His Word: whether it be a public ministry behind a pulpit to thousands, or one that is private in a family room to your children. The stakes are high. Eternity looks over one shoulder and the Lord Jesus over the other. It is a great honor to teach the Word. It is, in one sense, an unbearable mission for which no person is sufficient. I believe John Piper captures something of the gravity of the situation when, in the context of preaching, he writes,

All genuine preaching is rooted in a feeling of desperation. You wake up on Sunday morning and you can smell the smoke of hell on one side and feel the crisp breeze of heaven on the other. You go to your study and look down at your pitiful manuscript, and you kneel down and cry, ‘God, this is so weak! Who do I think I am? What audacity to think that in three hours my words will be the odor of death to death and the fragrance of life to life (2 Cor 2:16). My God, who is sufficient for these things?’<sup>9</sup>

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers.” As teachers, we must be careful with our mouths. As teachers, we must be mindful of our motives.

### **The Tongue Measures Our Maturity (3:2)**

James now moves to speak not just to teachers but to everyone, including himself. “We all stumble in many things.” Stumble is in the present tense and means to sin or offend. “Many things” refers “not to the number but to the variety of sins.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, “we all sin many times in many ways.”<sup>11</sup> His statement was proverbial in the ancient world.<sup>12</sup> It carried the weight of “an indisputable principle drawn from practical life.”<sup>13</sup> It is universally evident, “we all make mistakes, we all show the signs of the debilitating effects of sin.” The false accusation that James is a theological lightweight is even more unjust when we consider his doctrines of sin (v. 2) and anthropology (v. 10).

While we could understand James as speaking in general terms, reading him in that way misses the point. His concern still lies with the tongue. With a twist of irony, James affirms if one could simply avoid stumbling in word, he would be a perfect man, a truly mature man (*teleios anēr*), able to bridle indeed the whole body.” What

is James’s meaning here?

The most difficult activity to control is our speech. Words have a way of slipping off the tongue and past our lips before we even know it. Often this occurs with tragic results, either for us or others or both. Just consider for a moment the wisdom of the Proverbs in this area:

Proverbs 16:28—“A perverse man sows strife, And a whisperer separates the best of friends.”

Proverbs 18:6—“A fool’s lips enter into contention, And his mouth calls for blows.”

Proverbs 18:7—“A fool’s mouth is his destruction, And his lips are the snare of his soul.”

Proverbs 19:9—“A false witness will not go unpunished, And he who speaks lies shall perish.”

Proverbs 26:7—“Like the leg of the lame that hangs limp, Is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.”

Proverbs 26:28—“A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, And a flattering mouth works ruin.”

It is not difficult to sin in our speech. If we could just muzzle our mouth and tame our tongue, everything else would seem simple by comparison. By using the word “bridle,” James looks back to 1:26. Perhaps he remembered the counsel of David who wrote in Psalm 39:1, “I will guard my ways, that I sin not with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle.” Solomon adds in Proverbs 13:3, “He who guards his mouth preserves his life, But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.”

Only the spiritually mature can control their tongue. It is an unmistakable evidence of God’s work of grace in their life. It is also one of the ways our maturity is measured against the standard of our Master. First Peter 2:21-23 reminds us, “Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

‘Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth;’ who when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

When you go to your doctor, one of the first things he examines is your tongue. It tells him a lot about your physical condition. If it is coated, you probably have a fever. If it is yellowish, your digestive system may be out of sorts. By looking at your tongue, a doctor can tell a great deal about your physical condition. Similarly, by a tongue examination, we learn quite a bit about a person’s spiritual condition as well. Justin Martyr, Church Father and Apologist, wrote, “By examining the tongue of a patient, physicians find out the diseases of the body; philosophers find out the diseases of the mind; Christians find out the diseases of the soul.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Tongue Determines Our Direction (3:3-4)**

Beginning in verse 3, James “launches into a series of illustrations to reinforce his belief that a comparatively small ‘member,’ such as the tongue, has influence out of all proportion to its size.”<sup>15</sup> As a wise teacher in touch with the times, he draws from a well of illustrations that were common in the ancient world.

The horse is a magnificent beast weighing nearly half a ton. In terms of raw power, it was unmatched in James’s day. However, place a two-inch bridle in its mouth and a 100-pound child on its back who knows what he is doing, and that animal which once ran wild and appeared uncontrollable can be made to dance and prance with remarkable grace and charm. Indeed, it is the same with men and horses; control their mouth and you are

the master of all their actions.

Or consider the large ship. Even in the midst of fierce winds, the pilot holds the key to the direction of the ship by virtue of the control he exercises over the small rudder hidden beneath the water at the back of the ship.

A bit will direct the actions of a horse, though it is quite small in comparison to this great beast. A rudder will determine the direction of a ship in spite of its insignificant size in comparison to the great sea vessel. Likewise, the tongue will direct the actions and determine the direction of our entire body, despite the fact that it is one of the smaller parts of our body.

Our life is destined to go in some direction. It is inevitable. For good or evil, the activity of your tongue is certain to be a determinate factor. Indeed, the right word at the right time may open doors of ministry that will set the course of your life’s work. On the other hand, the wrong word at any time, even an unsuspecting time, may close doors, establish a reputation, and mark your ministry for ill. Words can most certainly determine our direction.

### **The Tongue Inflames Our Iniquity (3:5-6)**

James now compares the tongue in its smallness to the bridle and the rudder. “Even so,” just like the bridle and the rudder, “the tongue a little (*mikron*) member is.” James now develops his case a step further. First, he notes this little member boasts continually (present tense) great things (*megala*). “The tongue is powerful and vainly boasts of its might, a comment that goes back to Ps 73:9: ‘their tongue struts through the earth . . .’”<sup>16</sup> Second, he introduces his most striking imagery: the tongue is a fire, guilty of verbal arson in

an instant.<sup>17</sup> The NKJV states, “See how great a forest a little fire kindles.” “Forest” translates a Greek word that means “wood.” James is probably referring not so much to a “forest” (a rare feature of Near Eastern topography) but “to the brush that covers so many Palestinian hills which, in that dry Mediterranean climate, could so easily and disastrously burst into flame.”<sup>18</sup>

Verse 6 may be the most severe statement in all of Scripture concerning the evil destruction that may leap from the tongue. James identifies four aspects of the tongue’s danger. First, it is a fire, a world (*kosmos*) of iniquity or unrighteousness, “a world of wrong” (TEV). Calvin, commenting on this phrase said, “By adding that it is a world of iniquity, it is the same as though he had called it the sea or the abyss. . . . A slender portion of flesh contains in it the whole world of iniquity.”<sup>19</sup> Second, “The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body.” “Defile” is in the present tense and means to stain or corrupt. A contaminating stench emanates from our tongue and infects the whole person like a cancer. Third, the tongue “sets on fire the course of nature,” literally, “the wheel of origin or existence.” The NIV translates the phrase as the “whole course of life,” capturing James’s meaning quite well.<sup>20</sup> The evil of the tongue works within and without. It defiles us on the inside and destroys our life on the outside. It leaves nothing unscathed. Fourth, the tongue “is set on fire by hell.” The word translated hell is *gehenna*. This is its only occurrence in the New Testament outside the Synoptic Gospels. The word refers to the valley of Hinnom, just southwest of Jerusalem. Pagan child sacrifices took place there (cf. Jer 32:35). Trash and the bodies

of dead animals and criminals were dumped there. “The place was considered unclean and unfit for any decent usage. . . . Because the fire burned all the time and maggots were always present, the Lord used *gehenna* to represent the eternal, never-ending torment of hell. . . . Hell is Satan’s place, prepared for him and his demons (Matt 25:41). As such, it is used here as a synonym for Satan and the demons.”<sup>21</sup> The tongue is a tool that the devil is well trained to use. Whenever we make it available to him, he is delighted to use it for his destructive goals.

That fires can be caused from mere sparks became clear to me on a January Sunday in 1985. We were invited to Sunday dinner at the apartment of some friends in Dallas, Texas who lived next to Eastfield Jr. College. The husband, a man named Bruce, decided to entertain my small sons after lunch by shooting bottle rockets out into a big field on the Eastfield campus. They loved it, until one of the rockets ignited a little spark in the field. Bruce and the boys came into the apartment to get a pitcher of water to put out this tiny flame. However, in the few moments it took for them to come inside for the water and to return outside, a strong wind from the north had fanned the flame into a great conflagration moving rapidly toward a trailer home business about 200 yards away. Fortunately, the fire department arrived to douse the fire less than 20 feet from the trailers. Such a great fire burning several acres, and it all began with a tiny spark.

Proverbs 16:27 reminds us, “An ungodly man digs up evil, And it is on his lips like a burning fire.” Proverbs 26:20-21 adds, “Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; And where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to

burning coals, and wood is to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.”

### **The Tongue Reveals Our Rebellion (3:7-8)**

The little word “for” which begins verse 7 reveals the connection these verses have with the previous proofs of the tongue’s uncontrollable nature. James now describes the tongue additionally as untamable. He cites four classifications of animals, an argument of amplification by accumulation, emphasizing the totality of our ability to tame animals.<sup>22</sup> The fourfold division also reflects Genesis 1:26 and man’s dominion over the animal kingdom.<sup>23</sup> Both the present and perfect tenses are used in affirming man’s ability to tame or domesticate the animal world. Man is continually taming and has successfully tamed the creatures that God has placed under his watch care. But there is one beast no man can tame. It is wilder, more powerful, and more elusive than any animal in the jungle: the human tongue. Several things should be noted about verse 8: (1) The word “tongue” actually occurs first in the verse for emphasis and contrast with verse 7; (2) No man, no human, is capable of taming the tongue. Though not stated, it is possible that what man cannot do, God can; (3) This tongue is “unruly,” the same word James used in 1:8, translated as “unstable,” in reference to the double-minded man. The tongue is unstable, unruly, restless, it lacks single-mindedness; (4) It is full of death bearing poison. A venom more deadly than that of a cobra, a toxin more lethal than cyanide, the tongue is a murderer assassinating a man’s character, destroying the tender fabric that holds a marriage together. Psalm 140:3 says of evil men, “They sharpen their tongues like a ser-

pent; The poison of asps is under their lips.”

Steve Stephens drives home the importance of our words in our marriage. He writes, “There is nothing more painful than having unhealthy communication with the one you love. It is through communication that we connect and our spirits touch. If that connection becomes contaminated, it is only a matter of time before the whole relationship is poisoned. . . . I have gathered together some close friends and asked them what not to say to your spouse. Here is their list:

- “I told you so.”
- “I can talk to you until I am blue in the face and it doesn’t do any good.”
- “You’re just like your mother.”
- “I can do whatever I like.”
- “You’re always in a bad mood.”
- “If you don’t like it, you can just leave.”
- “It’s your fault.”
- “Can’t you do anything right?”
- “What’s wrong with you?”
- “That was stupid.”
- “All you ever do is complain.”
- “All you ever do is think of yourself.”
- “I can’t do anything to please you.”
- “If you really loved me, you’d do this.”
- “You get what you deserve.”
- “You’re such a baby.”
- “Why don’t you ever listen to me?”
- “Turnabout’s fair play.”
- “Can’t you be more responsible?”
- “You deserve a taste of your own medicine.”
- “What were you thinking?”
- “What’s your problem?”
- “You’re impossible.”
- “I can never understand you.”
- “I don’t know why I put up with you.”
- “Do you always have to be right?”<sup>24</sup>

Words reveal our rebellion. Words can wreck a marriage. Words can be full of deadly poison.

### **The Tongue Compromises Our Confession (3:9-12)**

James concludes his argument by noting the inconsistency of the words that proceed forth from the tongue. "It is a veritable Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Such inconsistent usage is utterly unfit for believers (3:10b). The world of nature is not guilty of such duplicity (3:11-12)."<sup>25</sup> To allow our tongues to function like this compromises our confession because it is inconsistent with our profession of Christ. On the one hand, we use our tongues well and "bless the Lord and Father" (literal translation). We then turn around and "curse men who are made in the likeness of God." Amazingly, blessings and curses come out of the same mouth. James issues a strong rebuke. "These things ought not to be so." James clinches his argument by the use of three illustrations: The first and second in the form of a question, the third in the form of a statement. First, does a spring (or fountain) gush forth both sweet and bitter water? The obvious answer is "no." Second, can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine produce figs? Again, the answer is "no." Finally, neither can salt water produce fresh. Bottomline: Bad things don't produce good things and good things don't produce bad things. "Whatever comes out of the mouth unfailingly reveals what is on the inside."<sup>26</sup> Such inconsistency compromises our confession, and in the family it can scar our children. Have you ever stopped to think what it is like to be a child and hear some of the things they hear coming out of the mouth of mom and dad? The same mouth that hopefully says,

"I love you, I'm so proud of you, I thank God, He gave you to me," may also be heard to say,

Shut up. Put that down. Stop that right now. I don't care what you are doing, come here right now. Listen to me. Give me that. Don't touch that. Not like that, stupid. Go away. Leave me alone. Can't you see I'm busy? Boy, that was really dumb. Can't you do anything right? You'd lose your head if it wasn't screwed on. Hurry up, we don't have all day! What's the matter with you? Can't you hear anything? I don't know what I'm going to do with you. You will never grow up to amount to anything.

And with words like these we don't bless, we curse. We don't build up, we tear down. And parents, words are powerful when directed at our children.

John Trent tells the story of the first time a father took his little girl out for a "daddy date." After getting their pancakes at a fast food restaurant, the dad decided this would be a good time to tell her how much she was loved and appreciated. "Jenny," he said, "I want you to know how much I love you, and how special you are to Mom and me. We prayed for you for years, and now that you're here and growing up to be such a wonderful girl, we couldn't be prouder of you."

Once he had said all this, he stopped talking and reached over for his fork to begin eating . . . but he never got the fork to his mouth. His daughter reached out her little hand and laid it on her father's. His eyes went to hers, and in a soft pleading voice she simply said, "Longer, Daddy, longer." He put down his fork and told her some more reasons they loved and appreciated her, and then again he reached for his fork: a second time, and a third, and a fourth, each time hearing the

words, “Longer, Daddy, longer.”

Though this father did not get much to eat that morning, his daughter got exactly what she needed. In fact, a few days later, she spontaneously ran up to her mother and said, “I’m a really special daughter, Mommy. Daddy told me so.”<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

“The mouth is the open door to the soul . . .”<sup>28</sup> Jesus said in Matthew 15:18, “Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man.” Peter, quoting Psalm 34:12-13, wrote, “He who would love life and see good days, Let him restrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit.” A hateful heart will not produce helpful and healing words. No man can tame the tongue (v. 8), but God can. It is my hope and prayer for me, and for every person who calls Jesus Lord, that God will so fill our heart and thereby control our tongue, that Proverbs 16:24 will be truly said of us, their “pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”

A careless word may kindle strife,  
A cruel word may wreck a life;  
A bitter word may smite and kill,  
A brutal word will accomplish nil;  
but  
A gracious word may smooth the way,  
A joyous word may brighten a day;  
A timely word may lessen stress,  
A loving word may heal and bless.

It was said of Jesus in John 7:46, “No man ever spoke like this Man.” As we live in the power of His grace, may it be that others will say the same of us.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John MacArthur, *James* (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary; Chicago:

Moody, 1998) 144.

<sup>2</sup>James Merritt, “Don’t Be Hung By Your Tongue” (Sermon on James 3:1-12, preached 3-12-95 at the First Baptist Church of Snellville, Georgia).

<sup>3</sup>Duane Watson has analyzed James 3:1-12 according to Greco-Roman rhetorical patterns of argumentation. His study demonstrates the unity of the pericope (contra Dibelius) and also provides guidance for the expositor who is interested in honoring both the form and content of the inspired author’s work. He argues that “James 3:1-12 exhibits the pattern of argumentation for the complete argument or theme” (51-52). See Duane Watson, “The Rhetoric of James 3:1-12 and a Classical Pattern of Argumentation,” *Novum Testamentum* 35 (1993) 48-64.

<sup>4</sup>Zane Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Irvine: GES, 1994) 77.

<sup>5</sup>Cited in William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 84; Kent Hughes, *James* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1941) 126; and MacArthur, 146-147.

<sup>6</sup>A. T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James* (Nashville: Broadman, n.d.) 105.

<sup>7</sup>Phil Newton, “Biblical Preaching,” *Reformation and Revival* 9 (Winter 2000) 19.

<sup>8</sup>George Zemek, “Paul’s Personal Paradigm for Preaching,” *New Testament Essays*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1990) 37-38.

<sup>9</sup>John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 37-38.

<sup>10</sup>Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 150.

<sup>11</sup>Hughes, 129.

<sup>12</sup>Watson, 55.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted by Merritt in his sermon; cf. n. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Moo, 152.

<sup>16</sup>Ralph Martin, *James* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1988) 112.

<sup>17</sup>Merritt.

<sup>18</sup>Moo, 155.

<sup>19</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries On The Catholic Epistles*, Vol. 22, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, rpt. 1996) 320.

<sup>20</sup>Moo, 159.

<sup>21</sup>MacArthur, 157.

<sup>22</sup>Watson, 61.

<sup>23</sup>Moo, 160.

<sup>24</sup>Source unknown.

<sup>25</sup>D. Edmond Hiebert, "The Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (July–Sept 1978) 227.

<sup>26</sup>Hughes, 142.

<sup>27</sup>John Trent, "Longer, Daddy... Longer," in *Stories for the Heart*, comp. Alice Gray (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996) 157-158.

<sup>28</sup>W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons in the Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 72.