

JAMES

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

James wrote to a church beset by a number of problems. Giving shape to and electrifying these problems were the presence and popularity within the community of errant teaching. It allowed its followers to understand the church as one among many opportunities for social climbing and the exhibition of social snobbery. James combats this teaching. He points out that the rich will be humbled and the poor exalted, that the poor are God's elect, and that far from being a sign of divine displeasure, periods of adversity are used by God to purify and strengthen those whom he loves.

There is no good reason to suppose that James the brother of Jesus is not our author. Moreover, references to James in Paul (1 Cor 9:5; 15:7; Gal 1:15–2:12) and Acts (15:13–21) make clear that James the brother of Jesus held a prominent place in early Palestinian Christianity.

BOOK OUTLINE

- I. Address and Greeting (1:1)
- II. Building Christian Maturity (1:2–27)
 - A. Trials and Temptations (1:2–11)
 - B. The Evil Desire (1:12–18)
 - C. True Religion Is Compassion in Action (1:19–27)
- III. Building a Healthy Community (2:1–5:18)
 - A. A. The Effects of Sickness (2:1–26)
 - B. The Source of Sickness (3:1–18)
 - C. Symptoms and Antidote (4:1–5:18)
- IV. Conclusion: The Forgiveness of God (5:19–20)

JAMES 1:1

Original Meaning. James describes himself as the servant “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” a construction found only here in the New Testament. In part James may write it in this way to communicate that loyalty to Jesus Christ does not undermine loyalty to God; that, in fact, they are one and the same. He writes to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (cf. 1 Pet 1:1). James addresses his letter to the scattered church comprised of both Jews and gentiles, but the native thought world of the letter is messianic Judaism.

Application. Servanthood and authority. James, like Paul in Philippians 2, issues a strong call for the basic character of the

Christian life to be that of servanthood, after the model of Jesus himself. The witness of the Gospels is that Jesus was the Servant-Messiah. The model of servanthood is to be lived out especially by those in leadership in the church.

JAMES 1:2–11

Original Meaning

Trials (1:2–8). The “pure joy” James speaks of here is a complete, overflowing joy (v. 2). Although it seems strange, trials are to be occasions of such joy. Here “brothers and sisters” could be used of fellow Jews, but the overwhelming use in the New Testament is of fellow Christians in contradistinction to the world at large. Why should we rejoice in the face of trials? Trials have a purifying quality; they are the arena in which and the process through which something good develops. Trials can have this effect as a result of the means of “testing” (*dokimion*, v. 3). The root of this word means “approved character,” so we can see the close link between the testing and its intended result.

The result of the testing of faith is “perseverance” or endurance (*hypomoneē*)—a highly prized trait (v. 3). Yet *hypomoneē* is a means to an end. We should not be satisfied with constancy, as important as this virtue is, but we should let it grow to its fullest, in order to become “mature and complete, not lacking anything” (v. 4). The “complete” person is one whose character is fully formed according to Christian standards; it is not “perfection” according to some standard common to popular culture.

While human beings are, at least in part, responsible for their moral development, wisdom comes only from God (v. 5). In the New Testament generally, wisdom is allied to understanding God’s purposes and plan and indicates a determination to live accordingly. James goes on to say that God gives generously without hesitation. James conveys the notion that God’s spontaneous generosity is unwavering, regardless of our previous record.

With the words “and not doubt” (v. 6a), honest intellectual doubts are not in view. After all, to doubt is human, as the Psalms attest. Yet amid this honest doubt as reflected in the Psalms, the psalmist is reminded of all that God has done for him in the past, and he gains the hope necessary to continue.

In verse 8 with the words “double-minded and unstable,” James is speaking of someone who constantly changes allegiances and cultivates the appearance of faith, wrongly thinking

mechanistic action to be the heart of faith. James calls us to be people of character whose faith manifests itself in action commensurate with what God has called us to be.

Poverty and Wealth (1:9–11). It is possible that the rich in James includes the wealthy of the Christian community whose pattern of life gave little or no evidence of Christian commitment, thereby disqualifying them from true membership. The humble should rejoice because their material poverty provides an arena for their faith to be tested and thus for endurance to grow, as well as because they will be eventually exalted, just as the prophets and Jesus had promised.

Application. The wisdom of God. With wisdom through prayer comes an appreciation for the timing of God. In trials we ask for wisdom in prayer, and trials push us to contemplate Scripture, to pray, and to seek God's face. In so doing we become more like God himself, as his love wells up within us more and more. This requires, and fosters, patience.

JAMES 1:12–18

Original Meaning

The Crown of Life (1:12). In calling Christians who endure “blessed” (*makarios*) in verse 12, James is saying that Christians belong to God. We are a part of his family and life. Like true children, we are to be like him. This idea includes intimacy with God and participation with him in accomplishing his purpose.

Temptations and Their Source (1:13–15). James knows the origin of temptation. It is not God, nor is it Satan and Satan alone. It is instead a personal desire born of self-interest that renders us susceptible to the evil inclination and therefore, at times, to the wiles of the evil one. We may wrongly seek to blame others, Satan, or even God, but ultimately we are morally responsible. According to him, we are “dragged away” and “enticed” by evil desire (v. 14).

The Father of Lights (1:16–18). In the phrase “the Father of the heavenly lights” (v. 17), James has combined two pairs of important theological ideas. The first is that God is the Father of the universe and that he has power over the heavenly luminaries as their creator (Gen 1:14–18; Ps 136:7; Jer 31:35); both concepts recall the creation account. The second pair is the notion of God as Father and of God as light.

James further describes God as one “who does not change like shifting shadows” (v. 17). God is light, and in him there is no shadow. God is also the creator of the heavenly luminaries, which do shift like shadows. As Father, God is ultimately

reliable. He does not change, whether in the specific (he is always and will always be the one who gives good things) or the general (God is unchangeable and good).

God controls all of the things to which we wrongfully attribute power, whether we do so from ignorance or to avoid responsibility. God supervises and controls political forces, economic forces, Satan, fate, and the stars. Perhaps James is contrasting God as Father of the heavenly lights with the pretenders to his throne, the forces of the political order, which are mere shadows, unstable and unreliable.

The teaching of verses 12–18 might be summed up as follows. Since we were created by God with the full potential for truth and life, let us avail ourselves of it and do not foolishly squander it or trade it for the false lure. If we stand firm amid trial, if we do not capitulate to the evil desire to blame God and thus engage in sin, we will receive the crown of life in the age to come and its foretaste in the present. Let us remember that God is trustworthy and wholly good, and this will sustain us amid any difficulty.

Application. James calls us to learn spiritual discernment and to judge with right judgment, so that we will be able to see difficulties as opportunities for spiritual growth rather than suppose that in them is evidence that God does not care. To follow Jesus is to learn an attitude of mind and heart that is sensitive to the will and presence of God. God seeks and waits for our attention and for our hearts to be turned to him. The first step is the simple but profound one of opening the door to God in prayer, of asking God to be at work in our minds and hearts, and to change us into his image and likeness.

JAMES 1:19–27

Original Meaning

Receive the Word in Humility, Speak without Anger (1:19–21). The opening verb, “take note of this” (Gk. *iste*, v. 19), can by form be either indicative (a simple statement) or an imperative (a command). It is most likely a command, and it introduces the thoughts that follow: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

James then turns his attention to two examples that illustrate his point: human anger and the righteous life that God desires. In verse 20 James seems to confirm our suspicion that in the background is to be found a concern with the character of Christian community, for he says that human anger does not produce the righteousness of God. James seems to have no particular type of anger in view, but puts before us the proposition that anger is deleterious to the righteousness God desires of us.

In verse 21 James opens with a brief catena of behaviors that should not characterize the life of a Christian. The first

involves both restraint and renunciation: Christians should “get rid of” (NIV) or “strip off” certain behaviors (v. 21a). James instructs us to remove “moral filth” and “evil.” These terms are among the strongest he has at his command and imply not only general moral evil, but also a premeditated, evil intent.

But turning from evil is not enough. James also places before us an alternative path: “Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (v. 21b). Humility is significant not only because the attitude is necessary in order to allow the word to flourish, but also because it is the essential attribute of the poor, those without resources who are dear to the heart of God.

God’s word has the power to save us. We are to nurture it, for it is a motive force in the process of saving us. The result of this process is that we will achieve ultimate salvation.

Hearing without Doing Is Worthless (1:22-25). Living a life of holiness requires a life of action. James makes this point with the present imperative “do” (*ginesthe*, v. 22), which has the force of “continue to do.” God’s people must continue to grow in carrying out the commands laid on them by their hearing of God’s word. This hearing is most naturally the public reading of the Scriptures in the context of worship. But hearing alone is insufficient. To hear and not to take action is to lie to oneself, to “deceive” ourselves. Having introduced the idea of eschatological judgment (v. 21b, the word is able to “save” us in ultimate salvation at the day of judgment), James’s warning here takes on grave consequences.

In verses 23-24 James’s point is that the image in the mirror, whether the product of a furtive glance or an adoring gaze, quickly dissipates; whatever impression forms in the mind and heart while looking in a mirror is temporary.

Verse 25 offers a positive example, but this verse is perhaps the thorniest theological problem in the entire book. For James “perfect law” and “word” are related. Like Jesus, James does not have in mind a new law, but rather the fuller expression or more perfect distillation of the Mosaic law. For the Christian this law is still the will of God, but a more refined apprehension of that will. The perfect law, the word implanted and allowed to take root, is ultimately the very teaching of Jesus.

Pure Religion (1:26-27). Two links connect this section to what has gone before. First, verse 26 highlights the sin of rash speech, the theme that opened the passage (v. 19). Second, here is provided an extension of the teaching of “not merely hearing but doing,” in that worship is described as worthless without actions impelled by a godly character. In both this and the previous section, self-deception plays a significant role. The practice of “pure religion” is described here as the control of speech, acts of charity, and resisting temptation.

Application. Intemperate speech. While as children we may have chanted, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” the ditty is actually an exercise in whistling in the dark. Words have great power to both wound and heal. Our speech has the power to encourage and nourish life or to snuff it out. Which shall we choose?

When is righteous anger justified? James cautions a slow and deliberate approach. When is righteous anger justified? Perhaps the best answer is to investigate biblical patterns, especially that of the prophets. The prophets certainly expressed righteous anger, as did our Lord Jesus. Yet James advocates slowness of speech. We easily become numb to injustice. Oppression of the powerless needs to be pointed out, and in whatever terms necessary. But not every situation is such a crisis. James would have us choose words that are, in fact, appropriate to the issue.

JAMES 2:1-13

Original Meaning

No Favoritism Based on Appearance (2:1-4). James gives a practical illustration of favoritism in the guise of a question (vv. 2-4). The situation posits the image of two guests at a church meeting. The first is obviously wealthy and not reticent to display that wealth. The second guest is adorned in the garb of the poor. The point is that it makes no sense to show favoritism to wealthy Christians just because of their wealth. After all, it is wealth and status that grants to non-Christians the ability to oppress the church. It makes no sense for Christians to show favoritism based solely on factors that on other occasions are used to exploit Christians.

James’s question in verse 4 implies that the known and accepted norm within the Christian community was egalitarian. Such an ethic stands in stark contrast with the surrounding culture. The Old Testament affords no shortage of passages with a similar message.

The Wisdom of Experience Is against Favoritism (2:5-7). James links strong teaching and harsh words with the term *agapētoi* (“beloved”; NIV “dear,” v. 5a). Ever the pastor, James conveys a stern message with the tones of gentle tenderness. James buttresses his case by employing an experiential argument. “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” (v. 5).

The word James uses for “poor” (*ptōchos*) had by the late first century acquired the sense of the poor who put their trust in God and not in (the hope for) material wealth. For James the contrast is stronger than simply between materially rich and poor; it has to do with those who trust in God and with those

whose trust in God is mixed with a trust in the standards of the world.

The phrase “to be rich in faith” indicates that these poor, unlike the rich, not only have “true riches” here in this life but also eschatological riches in that theirs is the kingdom. James lays out for us the proposition that it is not poverty alone that issues forth in this inheritance, but rather the faith that poverty germinates.

Despite the principles outlined by Jesus (and Paul), which James expects his readers to have known, the community has “dishonored” the poor (v. 6). This insult is rendered all the more unbelievable in that by favoring the rich, some in the church are favoring the very class of people who seek to harm the church, for it is the wealthy and powerful who drag Christians to court (v. 6) and slander the name of Christ (v. 7).

The wealthy, Christian and non-Christian alike, were presumably bringing suit against the poor within the church. James implies in verse 7 that whatever the charge, at least part of the reason had to do with the faith of the poor. Even if the charges were not in any sense motivated by the faith of the poor, one motivation would have to be the protection of the wealth and status of the rich, which is itself contrary to the gospel. James’s point is that to curry favor with anyone simply because of their wealth is fundamentally to misunderstand the gospel and to do injury to the faith.

Scripture Is against Showing Favoritism (2:8–13). James refers to the specifically Christian understanding of the Old Testament law as “the royal law” (*nomos basilikos*, v. 8). The beauty of this law is that it takes seriously both law and mercy, both sin and grace. God does not excuse us from our sin, but he does forgive us. To excuse is to claim that the offending party is not, in fact, guilty of the offense or to deny the seriousness of the offense. To forgive grants full weight both to guilt and to its seriousness, but it nullifies the guilt.

James goes on to argue that showing favoritism is sin, and this behavior convicts one of breaking the royal law (v. 9). In verse 10 James again echoes Jesus’s teachings when he says that to stumble at just one point of the law is to be guilty in all points. The point here is that the injunction to love the neighbor as yourself is total: Christians cannot pick and choose who is to be the neighbor or when they are to follow this law.

James links profession and action (see v. 12). His appeal to judgment is not foreign to the thought of the New Testament. Here is a strong reminder of the true center of the Christian life—the perfect law that is planted within us. For both Jesus and James, the law that is the fulcrum of judgment is the law of love for one’s neighbor.

In verse 13 James continues to follow in the Jesus tradition by arguing that for those who do not show mercy, no mercy

will be shown. A merciful attitude is one of the evidences that a person truly is alive in Christ. Few commentators argue that the judgment here is eschatological—that is, that one case of showing favoritism condemns the perpetrator to eternal damnation. This seems hardly the point. Rather, James is pointing to the danger of allowing this attitude to grow within both the individual and the church, because if its growth is not retarded and reversed, this attitude will result in a basic thrust of character and will come to dominate future decisions, which will, in fact, affect one’s eschatological judgment. It is this total failure to live out the implications of the faith that James sees as evidence of no faith at all—faith without works is dead.

Application. The peril of favoritism. Our culture influences the evangelical church in the showing of favoritism, embracing certain expectations based on various markers. In America there are clearly defined roles and professions that, we think, deserve greater respect than others. Wealth is the clearest marker of social status in our culture. Compared to the first century, our age offers a variety of options for its display. James is not against wealth, but he is against the church becoming an arena for the display of wealth used to enhance status.

JAMES 2:14–26

Original Meaning

The Poor Christian Brother or Sister (2:14–17). The passage opens with rhetorical questions (v. 14). What good is faith without deeds? Can authentic faith find expression in a confession of right doctrine alone? Can authentic faith be expressed merely as sentiment that never reaches the point of action? Or is it by necessity a faith that goes beyond these to include practical action? The “faith” in view in the second question of verse 14 is workless faith, not faith per se. James is loathe even to dignify this position with the term “faith.”

James then offers an illustration from the life of the church. He envisions a situation in which church members fail to display even the most basic forms of charity to one another. The example is stylized and so obvious that the point cannot be missed.

Having given a hypothetical example of crystal clarity, James surprises his readers with a response that seems unbelievable (v. 16). Who could respond to such a clear need in so deficient a manner, so obviously motivated by an empty heart! James goes on to say that faith without deeds is dead—fails to accomplish the aim of true faith. Without deeds faith is not really true faith—it is only a shadow, a shade, an impostor of true faith.

True Faith, Dead Faith (2:18–20). James next offers a rational argument in order to show that while there may be a type of

“faith” that does not issue forth in deeds, such faith is dead; it has no saving power. True faith, he insists, always changes the heart and therefore results in acts of mercy and compassion. The view expressed at the end of verse 18—that there is a legitimate faith without deeds, and another faith with deeds—is consistently denied in James.

In verse 19 James then remarks that to believe in the one God is an excellent starting point, but such an intellectual conclusion is not true faith, for even the demons know this much. Religion that is worth something involves action that grows from the heart. While both James and his opponents believe that a faith with deeds exists and is a saving faith, James cannot agree with his opponents that there is a saving faith that exists without deeds.

In verse 20 the point is that “faith” without works is “faith” in name only. It cannot be saving faith, because it lacks the strength either to attain the proper end of faith (salvation) or the ability to understand that biblical faith is always tied to character and therefore to action. James even makes his point with a bit of wry humor in the form of a wordplay: faith without works (*ergōn*) does not work (*argei* = *a* + *ergos*).

The Example of Abraham (2:21-24). James next employs the example of Abraham to demonstrate the linkage between faith and deeds. This link is not new, he claims, but is in fact the desire of God from the beginning. “Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” (v. 21). It is possible that the opponent(s) of James had cited Genesis 15:6, which stated that God reckoned righteousness to Abraham because he believed. James, understanding the revered status of Abraham, wishes to point out that the faith of Abraham was not a sterile intellectual assent; rather, it was a faith that manifested itself in trusting actions that were often great risks, such as the near sacrifice of Isaac.

The Example of Rahab (2:25-26). James then uses the example of Rahab to further buttress his claim concerning the unity of faith and deeds. Although a woman of dubious reputation, her actions were evidence of faith. In Jewish tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, Rahab married Joshua and became the ancestor of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (b. Megillah 14b, 15a), and in Christian tradition she is included as among the ancestors of Jesus (Matt 1:5). She showed hospitality to the spies (just as Abraham did to the three strangers). This example is chosen because the church has refused to show hospitality to those whose outward appearance indicated that they had no ability to benefit the church. Yet both Abraham and Rahab showed hospitality to those whose outward appearance mirrored the poor in the church.

Application. In the hallowed halls of universities and colleges, in the sanctified confines of churches, issues such as community development, social action, and justice are studied and discussed. Yet Christian social reformers like John Perkins and his family have lived them out in the concrete, with their blood, sweat, tears, and joy. They offer to us a living monument to the potent caliber of hope for what can be—faith that results in action, a passion for the good of others, and compassion that flows from the very heart of God. James would have these virtues lodge in our hearts and minds, verities whose pursuit is worth the commitment of a lifetime.

JAMES 3:1-12

Original Meaning

Teachers and Pure Speech (3:1-2). Within the early church the position of teacher was one of high status. As noted earlier, the human desire for status was endemic to the Roman world, and some sought illegitimately to meet the need by joining the church and then seeking to become teachers. James provides a strong note of caution in view of the final judgment (v. 1). By nature of their position teachers have an inordinately great opportunity to influence others within the congregation—both for eternal benefit and harm.

In verse 2 James admits a very human truth—none of us is perfect; we all stumble frequently. Moreover, there is at least one sin that is common to everyone, the sin of the tongue. The notion of “perfect” must be that of completeness and maturity, just as in 1:4. This is completeness in Christian virtue, not sinless perfection.

The Tongue Can Control Us (3:3-5). In verses 3-4 James begins a series of illustrations from everyday life meant, in part, to bring home to his readers the power of the tongue either to corrode or to nurture. The first two analogies are not quite precise (the tongue does not control the body in the fashion that a bit controls a horse or a rudder a ship), but the meaning is plain enough.

In verse 5a James displays some of his literary skill, particularly alliteration: the tongue is a small (*mikron*) member (*melos*) but boasts of great things (*megala*). In verse 5b James turns to a new image, that of a fire set by a small spark. Here the image is clearly negative. Few disasters in the ancient world were more feared than fire, as the ancients possessed precious few resources to battle them. The point of the image is to emphasize the great destructive power of the tongue.

The Power of the Tongue (3:6-12). The statement that the tongue is a fire clearly echoes Old Testament imagery concerning the tongue and inopportune speech. But in choosing to use

kosmos ("world"), James has left us with a term rich in various meanings. The linkage of this word with "evil" in verse 6 suggests that it here refers to the world and its forces opposed to God. James clearly believes that the false teachers are citizens of that world, or are at least under the influence of that world, even if they lack this self-awareness.

The tongue is often guilty of realizing its potential for evil and, in so doing, infects the rest of the body. This, in fact, is what James says at the end of verse 6, that the tongue can corrupt or stain the entire person (*sōma*, literally "body"). Here is another way of making the point that he has already registered: although small, the tongue controls the larger whole (3:2, 3, 4). The tongue can corrupt all of life, whether that of an individual or that of a community. In his phrase "is itself set on fire by hell" (v. 6b), James traces the root of evil, the mouthpiece of which are the teachers and the expressions of which are (particularly) favoritism and antinomianism.

In juxtaposition to the inability of human beings to control the tongue, James offers the idea that human beings can train, and have trained, members of the animal kingdom (v. 7). The inability of the human race to tame the tongue is evidence of the irrational nature of its orientation and effort. The image James uses here is of a barely and inadequately caged beast, which breaks forth with irrational destructive power (v. 8).

Having made the claim that the tongue is untrustworthy and duplicitous, James goes on in verse 9 to provide an example. The reference to "blessing" (NIV "praise") is of pointed significance, for it refers to and calls to mind God himself, as well as to the relationship between humans and God. The fact that the verb "curse" (*kataraomai*, v. 9) occurs in the present tense cements the interpretation that James has in mind a concrete and not hypothetical situation in the church. How can worshipers consciously mistreat their fellows and then expect to worship God in purity (v. 10)?

In verses 11–12, James continues to make the point that abusive speech is irrational. The triple image of the illogicality of expecting trees and vines to produce fruit not their own and of a salt spring to produce fresh water are all intended to round out the point he has made again and again.

Application. Several years ago, a group of friends was backpacking in northern California. On the morning of the last day, during a thunderstorm, they realized that a forest fire was not far away. As the day wore on, the air became increasingly thick with smoke. All day long they could hear and sometimes see the planes as they prepared to drop fire-arresting chemicals on the blaze. When they reached their car and turned on the radio, they learned that the fire had burned to the area where they had camped just the night before. After burning several hundred acres, the fire was arrested by a combination of the

storm and the efforts of fire fighters. It had started as the result of one careless match. There is great potential stored up in the tongue, just as there is great potential in the position of teacher. Both must be exercised with the wisdom of God.

JAMES 3:13–18

Original Meaning. James begins this new section by offering an alternative vision of wisdom to that of his opponents—namely, that true wisdom is marked not by ambition and a desire for status, but rather by humility. Clearly the teachers whom James has opposed are in view. They have arrogated to themselves a position of authority as those qualified to instruct the Christian community, and in so doing have offered themselves as "wise" (v. 13a).

In verse 13b the phrase *en prautēti sophias* ("in the humility that comes from wisdom") is somewhat unwieldy, suggesting that its origin is Hebrew and not Greek. There are parallels in both the Old Testament and the New. Neither Moses (Num 12:1–3) nor Jesus (Matt 11:29) were interested in personal popularity or power, nor did they defend themselves, but in humility pointed others to God. In similar fashion the Christian in humility is to do good deeds to the glory of God. This is the spirit of true wisdom.

Verse 14 presents a contrasting picture: a bitter and selfish person. The term the NIV translates as "selfish ambition" is *eritheiā*. Discord has come to the Christian community as a result of status-seeking, and some of these have usurped the spiritual offices of the church in order to teach and propagate this worldly philosophy.

Significantly, in verse 15 James does not call what his opponents espouse wisdom, preferring to refer to it in veiled fashion. Their "wisdom" is not from God, which can be had simply by asking (1:5). In saying this James makes a clear argument that the wisdom of these teachers is not neutral or trivial. He does this by arranging the sources of this "wisdom" in an escalating crescendo of perniciousness. The first is *epigeios*, or "earthbound" (NIV "earthly"). Here the image of the world, as elsewhere in James, plays a negative role. Next, this wisdom is *psychikos*, or "unspiritual." The term denotes beings possessing merely life, bereft of the touch of the Spirit of God. Finally, such "wisdom" is, worst of all, demonic in origin. This term, *daimoniōdēs*, is rare; it appears nowhere else in Scripture and is not to be found in Greek literature before James. Such teaching and its derivative behavior is instigated by demons and the fallen spiritual world.

In verse 16 James argues from the perspective of the practical. The wisdom of his opponents, rooted in "envy and selfish ambition," has done nothing to strengthen the body, but rather has served only to bring "disorder and every evil practice."

Their teaching has not added anything good to the church, but instead has caused the church to seriously question its direction, and even its heart and soul. Combined with this is all manner of evil practice.

In verse 17 James has arranged seven virtues to employ assonance, first with *e*, then with *a*: peace-loving (*eirēnikē*), considerate (*epieikēs*), submissive (*eupeithēs*), full of mercy (*mēstē eleous*), good fruit (*karpōn agathōn*), impartial (*adiakritos*), and sincere (*anypokritos*). Such wisdom also creates a peace-making spirit (v. 18). This is of particular importance here, given the problem of discord in the church.

Application. Do not be fooled or cowed, James intones. False teaching, and the failure to recognize and resist it, is dangerous in the extreme. The poison begins innocently, in the fertile receptacle of our minds and hearts. It grows to dominate our actions. Finally, through our actions it spreads to infect the community around us. The most effective course to avoid this evil, James reminds us, is to walk firmly and with resolve in the path of heavenly wisdom and its fruits.

JAMES 4:1-10

Original Meaning

Prayers Offered in Anger and Desire (4:1-3). The church is beset by jealousy, selfish ambition, slander, anger, a willingness to depart from received teaching, and a host of other ills that follow the pattern of its culture. Certain teachers had won a following by offering a philosophy that encouraged the pursuit of status. Arrayed against these were believers loyal to the gospel who correctly understood the threat. The members of this group reacted variously to those following the teachers of false wisdom—some wanting peace at any price, others advocating a fight for the soul of the church.

Within the Christian community there is a wide variety of impulses. James says their disputes come from the “desires” within them (v. 1). In verses 2–3, James points out that the prayers his readers have offered are marked by their desire for “pleasures.” The prayer was not answered positively because, in part, the prayer assumed a certain arrogance, the presumption that the one praying knew what was best. What is needed, of course, is patience and a willingness to be molded by God.

The Bane of Compromise (4:4–6). In verse 4 James adopts the mantle of elder and offers a rebuke as to errant children. By designating them “adulterous people,” he recalls a frequent Old Testament rebuke and artfully holds out to his readers inclusion even as he wields the whip of chastisement. Many choose friendship with the world without realizing that it means enmity with God.

Verse 5 presents at least two problems of interpretation. First, what Scripture does James have in mind, for there is no Old Testament text to correspond to the quote? It is possible that James here summarizes the many Old Testament passages that speak of the jealousy of God. James’s point is that God earnestly desires his spirit to reside in us. Second, what is the subject and what is the object of the verb “longs for” (*epipothei*)? The point is plainly that God desires with all of his heart for us to come home and to live with and in him. Instead, we follow the wisdom of the world, whether knowingly or unwittingly, and by following that errant path we can never achieve what we truly seek.

In verse 6 James holds out a lifeline to those who have apparently been ignorant of the gravity of their situation. God’s grace, he says, is still available and abundant for them if they will humble themselves. Yet they are warned, for God’s face is set against the proud.

Repentance and Forgiveness (4:7–10). Verse 7 opens a series of ten imperatives, or commands, built on the foundation laid in verse 6. These commands comprise James’s recipe for humility before God. The idea of submission carries with it the full range intended by the term *repentance*, which is not only a change of direction but also a humble and contrite spirit. If this path is chosen, the response of God is forgiveness. James then expands these points.

The first component of submission to God is to “resist the devil” (v. 7b). The idea that the devil can be resisted is known in both Jewish and Christian thought. Within the theology of the New Testament the power of Satan was severely curtailed at the crucifixion and resurrection, and it is possible that James has this in mind. The correlate to “resist the devil” is “come near to God” (v. 8a).

To the admonition to cleanse themselves James adds obvious and perhaps even public acts of contrition (v. 9). In urging grief and a shift from laughter to mourning and joy to gloom, James reminds his readers that the false paths they thought would lead to true laughter and joy are dead ends and need to be abandoned.

Application. Community. James 4:1–10 offers a strong call to community, and especially community created by a spirit of humility and forgiveness. Certainly the congregation to which James wrote needed such direction. Our world is awash in facsimiles of true community. An avenue often attempted by evangelicals in America is that of reforming the state. Evangelicals must do more than work for structural change, for structures are weak and easily co-opted by Satan. The heart must change, for without these deeper values, the law is merely external. James implores us to draw near to God, not merely to adopt moral guidelines of which God would approve.

JAMES 4:11-17**Original Meaning**

Pure Speech Does Not Condemn (4:11-12). The verb the NIV renders as “slander” is *katalaleō*, which means “to speak ill of,” though it can also carry the more narrowly focused meaning of speaking falsely. James has in mind harsh criticism and condemnation. What is so keenly disturbing for James is the central place this command occupied in the ethical teaching of Jesus. To ignore this command is, in effect, to repudiate Christ and to render the self-description “Christian” a falsehood.

Here James is again in touch with a widely held tradition, that Christians should not judge others. According to James, when we judge others, we not only arrogate to ourselves what belongs to God alone, but we also invite and pronounce judgment on ourselves. This is not meant to exclude honest and healthy discussion among believers, but it is to make clear a strong warning that the line demarking proper from sinful discourse is easily crossed.

Do Not Boast, for Tomorrow Is Uncertain (4:13-17). Verse 13 contains a quotation; presumably James has heard that such statements have been on the lips of the merchants in the city. James is not arguing against the making of money or even against the desire to make money; rather, he is against the attitude of self-contained certainty, the same smug attitude that marked the teaching of the false teachers. Such certainty is revelatory of an attitude that does not take God seriously enough, a mind-set for which the making of money outstrips devotion to God in importance.

At this point it is proper to ask about these traders and merchants. We know of several New Testament Christians with wealth. Chloe, for example, a female leader in the church in Corinth, had enough money to send some of her people with a message to Paul (1 Cor 1:11). So the reference to travel and the considerable resources that such travel indicates do not necessarily preclude these traders from membership in the church.

The idea of the uncertainty of riches is universal, but Old Testament parallels are instructive. For James the real question is how to approach life when the outcome is uncertain. His answer is to trust in God’s graciousness, not in human plans.

There is no clear biblical referent for the formula James records in verse 15, although the idea of the Lord’s will pervades Scripture (e.g., Prov 19:21). This verse makes it clear that James is not against planning. Rather, James wants such planning to be given its proper priority, and none higher. God must be in control of such planning.

In verse 16, James sets limits on speech. He has already mentioned boasting. This boasting is the sin mentioned in verse 13: the merchants plan and carry on as if God were unimportant or

did not even exist. Instead, they should have made their plans in prayer and in the anticipation that God may in fact change those plans.

In verse 17, James argues that sins of both commission and omission are grievous, especially when done knowingly. The making of plans as though the future is certain is itself a sin, because functionally it is a denial of God, either his importance or even his very existence. Then to boast about it is a further sin. James may perhaps be building on the saying of Jesus in Luke 12:47. Knowledge of right places us under a moral obligation to do right.

Application. *The folly of boasting in the uncertain.* When James counsels us that tomorrow is never certain, he is right. For Christians to rely on anything other than God is to lack integrity; it is to be double-minded. Jesus made decisions on the basis of principles rooted in Scripture and a sensitivity to the will of God. James would have us lead lives of similar fidelity—lives that integrate heart, mind, attitudes, and actions.

JAMES 5:1-6**Original Meaning**

Condemning Introduction (5:1). James begins by condemning the unfeeling and selfish attitude of the wealthy landowners. These wealthy people must “weep and wail.” The reason is not their wealth per se, but the fact that they have not sought to use their wealth to alleviate the sufferings of the poor.

A Catalogue of Futility (5:2-3). Having condemned the wealthy landowners for their indifference, James next points out that riches are worthless when it comes to eternal salvation. Just as it would be criminally ridiculous to hoard wealth when the parousia is imminent, so Christians who have heard Jesus’s message and yet shortchange needy workers and hoard wealth are morally liable. The treasure awaiting them is not fine clothing or gold, but misery.

An Inventory of Selfishness (5:4-6). James then lists specific behaviors that have contributed to the hoarding of wealth. For one thing, they have not paid their hired laborers their due, thereby robbing their own neighbors of earned pay. Because God has already heard their cry, the voice of judgment against the wealthy has already begun to sound.

In verse 5 James turns his attention from the hardship imposed on others to the ease and sloth of the wealthy. The point of verse 5 recalls the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. In both the rich can expect nothing but torment in the next life.

The final accusation aimed at the landed class is their

plotting of the wrongful treatment and even murder of the innocent (v. 6). The death referred to here may be the result of starvation caused by the withholding of wages. They suffered and died, and the landed class was not even aware of their plight. This is perhaps an even more grievous offense than if the wealthy were watching this suffering with sickening glee.

Application. *The power and the peril of wealth.* What would James think of the way American evangelical churches and parishioners spend money? We are generally upper middle class, owning luxury cars, swimming pools, and the latest clothes. James warns us that our bent to ignore God and others while enjoying material goods and that our desire for money render us open to misery and judgment. The idea of judgment in the New Testament is enormously complex; it includes both chastening judgment, which has as its aim restoration (1 Cor 11:32), and separation from God and eternal destruction (John 3:19; Heb 10:27). It is unclear which James has in mind in our text, but neither is to be coveted. At the very least the “misery” he imagines is the realization that the wealth and the material goods in which we trusted have turned; they have proved untrustworthy, having rotted before our eyes.

JAMES 5:7-11

Original Meaning

The Call to Patience (5:7-8). Christians are enjoined to be patient until the Lord comes (v. 7). The use of *parousia* here signals the expected return of Jesus, and so “Lord,” a term often used in James to refer to God (see, e.g., 5:4), here refers to Jesus. Some have argued that James is wholly without Christology. Here a statement of high Christology is present.

As a practical illustration of such patience, James refers to a farmer who waits patiently for harvest time and for the autumn and spring rains. In a similar manner the Christian and the Christian community must wait patiently for the coming of the Lord, for nothing can be done to speed the *parousia* on its way. Whether or not James envisioned an imminent return of Christ, perhaps the point here is that as Christians we are to live in community with one another as if the new day has already dawned.

Avoid Complaining (5:9). If we are correct in seeing that this section has as its primary audience the poor, then in verse 9 James has a warning for them as well: despite the abuse you have endured, do not grumble. Life does bring trials, of course, but no one is served by the cultivation of a spirit of complaining.

Biblical Examples of Patience (5:10-11). The prophets endured, patiently and hopefully waiting for the judgment and

the mercy of God. Those who have gone into the presence of God with such a life of perseverance are truly “blessed.” From the example of the prophets James turns to the specific example of Job (v. 11). As a result of his sufferings, he gained greater knowledge of God, which may indeed be God’s purpose and the hope James has as the result of the sufferings that are the background to this passage.

Application. *Patience.* People in times of trouble naturally hope for release. But James uses the language of eschatology to prepare his readers for spiritual growth. Within the history of Christian spirituality, difficult circumstances are considered a normal and necessary part of the process of spiritual growth and bear certain results that prepare us for the age to come.

JAMES 5:12-18

Original Meaning

The Taking of Oaths (5:12). The point at issue in this verse is the taking of an oath—that is, invoking the name of God in order to buttress the truthfulness of what one has said. Here James is fully in line with the teaching of the Old Testament that false swearing and the giving of oaths is forbidden (e.g., Lev 19:12). James is likely drawing on a saying from Jesus here (see Matt 5:34-37). The problem is, of course, that sometimes people utter falsehoods knowingly, but at other times they are unable to accomplish what they intend. The prohibition recognizes this and serves to limit and to exclude these unintentional infelicities.

Prayer (5:13-18). While the most obvious feature of this section may seem to be healing—more specifically, the prayer over and anointing of the sick (v. 15)—the true theme of the passage is prayer (v. 16). The entire section is caught up by issues involving prayer, as prayer is mentioned in every verse. James here deals with the prayer of the individual (v. 13), the prayer of the elders (vv. 14-15), the prayers of friends and companions for one another (v. 16), and finally the prayer of the righteous prophet Elijah (vv. 17-18).

The first issue raised is that of suffering (v. 13a). In such times James advocates neither anger nor stoic resignation, for the former poisons the spirit and the latter dulls the mind. Instead, he advocates prayer. It is a response that allows us to be active and positive and keeps us in communion with God.

Then James discusses the case of those who are happy (v. 13b). The word he uses (*euthymeō*) refers to a deeply rooted happiness, a contentment of the heart. James wants his readers to remember that God desires and deserves our prayers and praise in both difficult and pleasant times.

The sick person is to be “prayed over” (v. 14b). It is obvious

that the basis for this action is the firm belief that God is the source of healing. The chief issue is whether the verbs refer to eschatological and therefore spiritual healing, or to physical healing. While these verbs can be made to bear an eschatological nuance, the weight of the grammatical and lexical evidence is on the side of a physical understanding of the passage. After all, the person about whom this is written is still alive! James clearly teaches here that sickness caused by sin can be alleviated through public confession and prayer for healing.

James concludes with the thought that just as the prayer of the righteous Elijah resulted in the refreshing of the earth, so the prayer of the righteous believer can result in the refreshing and healing of a Christian afflicted by sickness caused by sin.

Application. Prayer and joy in adversity. We inhabit a social and cultural world in which a great premium is placed on the elimination of discomfort. In the face of this potent cultural norm, evangelicals need to go against the grain and appropriate a biblical understanding of adversity. God uses adversity in the interests of spiritual preparation. Prayer in adversity also urges us to renounce the materialism and the self-centeredness of the world. This has been a constant theme in James.

JAMES 5:19–20

Original Meaning. In this laconic conclusion James returns to the themes of sin and forgiveness. In so doing he reveals his pastoral heart. The passage is related to the previous section in that forgiveness follows confession.

The passage is short—in fact, a single sentence. But it should not be missed that in this one sentence James marshals no less than three significant theological ideas:

1. Christians have the opportunity and the responsibility to care for one another through the task of loving doctrinal and moral correction. The theme here is not evangelism but the care and maintenance of the Christian community.
2. The penalty for sin is death; James will not equivocate on this.
3. In this process, the agent of reconciliation “covers” a multitude of sins.

James ends his letter abruptly by reminding his readers that the wise person walks with God in wisdom. Sin is a problem both corporate and personal. It is subtle, tenacious, and dangerous; it should not be underestimated. Christians have a responsibility to their world and to one another.

Application. Forgiveness and discipline. The teaching of James throughout his letter often feels harsh and even rigid. Yet here, at the end of his letter, James provides a strong touch of grace. The note that has sounded softly through most of the letter here rings out loud and true. Forgiveness must be offered, but it must be balanced with faith that is active, faith that has captured mind and heart and body. James calls God’s people to moral purity and to maintaining a heart of forgiveness. When we do so, we give evidence that we are true children of God, combining both faith and actions in the fashion that James has taught.