

BODY BY JAMES

Life Group Leader Notes

Introduction

Thanks for your willingness to “lead/facilitate” a Life Group! You are an important part of our ministry team in our pursuit of spiritual growth and transformation as a church.

These notes are for your use as a Life Group leader. The idea is to give you a bit more background info on the book so you can lead with added confidence.

There are lots of great commentaries and resources available on the Book of James—so our goal here isn’t to “reinvent the wheel.” Instead, we simply want to sharpen your thinking and help you guide your group more effectively. Also, it’s important to note that this although this study guide serves as a companion to Pastor Mike’s teaching series, *Body by James*, it avoids overlapping it in every detail.

Who Is James?

The letter opens, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and since he does not offer any more information about himself, we can assume he was well-known enough not to require further introduction. Traditionally, this letter has been attributed to James, the eldest, half-brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18).

Carson and Moo came to this conclusion after looking at similarities between James’ speech in Acts 15:31-21 and his letter.¹ It is believed that James doesn’t identify himself as Jesus’ brother because it would give him no special advantage or additional authority to do so. This is relevant because it indicates James isn’t seeking status for himself—instead he identifies himself as a servant.

Some have argued against the authorship of James, but the language matches that of Acts 15 when James speaks to apostolic council and there is a mention of a letter sent out. Paul’s conversion was in 33 A.D. and the Jerusalem Council was in 48 or 49 A.D.² It is most likely this the letter was written around 45-48 A.D. it would have had to be written before 62 A.D., when James suffered a martyrs’ death.³

Readers, Setting & Purpose

James isn’t addressed to a specific church, but rather to the “twelve tribes scattered throughout the nations.” As a result, it has historically been classified as a “general” or “catholic (universal)” epistle. Yet, several pieces of evidence point to a specific group of recipients.

Certain features of the letter make it clear that the addressees were Jewish Christians: the familiar way in which the Old Testament law is mentioned (1:25; 2:8–13), the reference to their meeting place as a synagogue (2:2), and the widespread use of Old Testament and Jewish metaphors.

¹ D. A Carson and Douglas J Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 622.

² Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 627

³ Moo, *James*, 25

Furthermore, passages such as 5:1–6 suggest that the majority of the readers were poor — although a good case can be made that 1:9–11; 2:1–4; and 4:13–17 presume the presence of some wealthier Christians among the readers.⁴

Given that the letter’s recipients are likely Jewish, they would have understood James’ address to the “twelve tribes.” The author uses the term “diaspora”, a Greek word referring to all Jews living outside Palestine, though James is certainly not writing to *all* Jews.

In Acts 11 we read that persecution in Jerusalem forced many Christians to flee to the surrounding regions “as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch” (11:19). It is entirely possible that this is the “diaspora” to which he is writing. These are Jewish Christians being persecuted by non-Christian Jews, and James is writing to them to strengthen their faith and to rebuke some of them for failing to live according to Christ’s teaching. “The fact that the readers have been ‘dispersed,’ forced to live away from their home country, helps explain a second major characteristic of the readers of the letter: their poverty and oppressed condition.”⁵ This is why James writes so extensively about both trials and economics.

Most persecutions from 33 to 60 A.D. were attacks on Jewish leaders, although Acts states that persecution also occurred under Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great. “In the year 41, the Emperor Claudius had added Judea and Samaria to his former dominions, so that, at this time, Herod ruled over all Palestine. While exhibiting in life none of the restraints of religion, he was a strict observer of the Jewish ceremonies, and hostile to Christianity, because he thought it was subversive to Judaism.”⁶ Specifically though in Acts 11 these are Jewish Christians being persecuted by non-Christian Jews.

Paul similarly writes of persecution to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 8:1-2). He gave this account in order to spur the Corinthians to fulfill their promised collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. According to Witherington, Paul seems to be talking about how Jesus not only took on the humbling condition of all humanity, but also the specific socioeconomic status of poverty, which was the same status as the Macedonians. In light of Christ’s lavish, inexpressible gift, they should give out of concern for equity.⁷ At the present time in redemptive history, the Gentile believers can contribute financially, while the Jewish leaders can contribute spiritually and with ministry of the gospel, “so that there may be fairness.” (8:14)

The fact that James’ readers were “dispersed” helps explain their impoverished and oppressed condition. Wealthy land owners were taking advantage of them (5:4-6); rich people hauling them into court (2:6) as well as scorning their faith (2:7). One of the key purposes of the author is to encourage these suffering Christians in the midst of severe difficulties, reminding them of the righteous judgment of God that is coming (5:7-11) and exhorting them to maintain their piety in the midst of trials (1:2-4, 12).

While this is the likely situation of the original readers, Moo has some helpful words regarding the letter’s situation:

While the social and historical situation of the readers may help us understand the problems they are dealing with, those problems are ultimately both more general and more basic than

⁴ Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 628.

⁵ Moo, *James*, 24

⁶ <http://bible.cc/acts/12-1.htm>

⁷ Ben Witherington, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, p. 420

*the immediate situation. The displaced status of these Jewish Christians has brought to the surface some basic spiritual issues; and it is to these spiritual issues that the author directs his exhortations.*⁸

Thus, “James is writing to rebuke and exhort former parishioners about certain specific problems in their Christian practice.”⁹ It is a practical letter, written for practical concerns, and this has made it one of the most popular and frequently consulted epistles in the New Testament.

Basically, James calls attention to “double-mindedness” (1:8; 4:8), a “spiritual schizophrenia that interferes with prayer (1:5-8) and leads to a failure to put into practice what one professes to believe (1:21-27; 2:14-26)”¹⁰

Also worth noting is “the way in which James justifies condemnation of the rich in 5:1-6. Their doom comes because of specific sinful actions”¹¹... hoarding money at the expense of the poor (v.2-3), senseless luxury (v.5), defrauding workers (v. 4), persecuting the righteous (v.6). “The very possession of wealth, when others are going without the basic necessities of life, suggests James, is sinful (see 5:2-3). This is a word that the churches in developed countries need to hear and take seriously. If those suffering oppression are tempted to radicalize James’ message about poverty and wealth, those of us enjoying a comfortable lifestyle are equally prone to trivialize that message.”¹²

Why Study James?

Although Martin Luther was no fan of James, other reformers did not share his low opinion the book. Calvin’s view is one Moo describes as “standard among the community of believers...and surely the right one.”¹³ Calvin, like Luther, struggles with the lack of emphasis on the grace of God apparent in James, but comes to a favorable conclusion about it. He is worth quoting here:

*Though he seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behooved an Apostle to be, it is not surely required of all to handle the same arguments. The writings of Solomon differ much from those of David; while the former was intent on forming the outward man and teaching the precepts of civil life, the latter spoke continually of the spiritual worship of God, peace of conscience, God’s mercy and gratuitous promise of salvation. But this diversity should not make us to approve of one, and to condemn the other.... It is indeed full of instruction on various subjects, the benefit of which extends to every part of the Christian life.*¹⁴

Despite the opinion of some commentators who claim that this is not so much a letter as a storehouse of Christian teaching in the wisdom tradition of the OT, careful study reveals that “James addresses a specific church, or more likely, group of churches.”¹⁵ As we said above, this is a timely letter sent to a specific group of people in a specific context. It is worth studying because, as Paul wrote, “All Scripture is... profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

⁸ Moo, 25.

⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰ Moo, 25

¹¹ Moo, 36

¹² Moo, 36

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 192.

¹⁵ Moo, *James*, 7.

James has much to teach us; “for there are here remarkable passages on patience, prayer to God, the excellency and fruit of heavenly truth, humility, holy duties, the restraining of the tongue, the cultivation of peace, the repressing of lusts, the contempt of the world, and the like things.”¹⁶ We all fail at one time or another to live according to God’s will in these areas, and so we need the sometimes harsh words of James to inform us of who God is, what He wants, and to get us back on the right path.

This letter is not limited to “practical” concerns, however. While there is much teaching here about how the Christian life ought to be lived, we also learn about God’s character, that he is One (2:19); that he is unchanging and benevolent (1:17); that Christ is equal with God (1:1; 2:1; 5:7, 8); that he is gracious (4:6); that Christ will return as judge (5:8, 9); that he will lift up the humble at the last day (4:10); and that God is a law-giver who is concerned with how his people live (1:25). Thus, James’ theology is incorporated into the “practical” side of his letter.

Nor should we think that all this practicality can be divorced from the gospel of Christ Jesus. In what could be called the heart of his letter, James writes beautifully of the grace of God to such sinners as we (4:6-10). When we humble ourselves in faith and repentance, the resurrected Christ—who will come again in judgment (5:7-9) – lifts us up to eternal life (4:10). This grace that God revealed in Christ is the foundation upon which this letter is built; to deny this is to deny it is a Christian writing at all. James teaches us in his letter how to be wholly Christian in daily life, but we should not conclude that righteous living can be achieved apart from the work of Christ in our behalf.

Wisdom in James

What James advocates is seen in the elements of his teaching that champion the cause of the poor and persecuted.¹⁷ James refers twice to wisdom. In 1:5, he exhorts believers to ask for wisdom so that they can understand and respond properly to the trials they are experiencing. As in the Old Testament, wisdom here involves insight into God’s purposes and ways, leading to spiritual maturity.¹⁸

Wisdom also plays a central role in 3:13-18, where James contrasts “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” wisdom (v. 15) with the “wisdom that comes from heaven” (v. 17). Again, wisdom is tied to behavior. People with the wrong kind of wisdom are selfish and filled with “disorder and every evil practice” (v. 16). But those who possess divine wisdom are humble and eager to perform good deeds (v. 13).¹⁹

James 1:1-18

The main theme of this section is that trials produce a kind of spiritual wholeness that includes of wisdom.

1. *What is important about the opening of James’ letter?*

Many readers skim over the opening verses of New Testament letters to their detriment. The introduction to most NT most letters include more than mere names. They often provide valuable information about the writer and recipients in ways that give rich insight into nature and purpose

¹⁶ Calvin, 192.

¹⁷ WBC, lxxviii

¹⁸ Moo, 33

¹⁹ Moo, 33-34

of the letter. James is no exception. He makes it clear that he is writing a letter—not a story or theological treatise.²⁰

2. *How do doubting and double-mindedness relate to each other?*

If a person asks for wisdom—and doubts, that person's doubt will be a hindrance; they would have a double mind which includes both wisdom and skepticism.

Note: In the Greek middle voice reflexive, the concept of doubt means to “dispute with oneself.”²¹

3. *If I pray for something, but still struggle with doubt, will God give me what I ask for or not?*

According to Douglass Moo, “As the word's basic meaning suggests, James is probably thinking of a strong kind of doubting: a basic division that brings about wavering and inconsistency of attitude towards God.”²² Abraham, for example, “did not waver through unbelief (in God's promise)” (Rom 4:20) though we know that Abraham did laugh once regarding God's promise. (Gen. 17:15-18) The point is not that Abraham never entertained any doubt about God's promise, but that Abraham, over many years, displayed a consistency in his faith in God. James is not claiming that prayers will never be answered where some degree of doubt exists – for some degree of doubt on occasion is no doubt inevitable given our present state of weakness. Rather, God wants us to understand that He responds to us when our lives reflect a basic consistency of purpose and intent: a spiritual integrity.²³

4. *How can we avoid being double-minded?*

The person who doubts seeks wisdom from God one day, and knowledge from the world the next. The Greek word for *double-minded* is *dipsychos*, which literally translates “*double-souled*.”²⁴ Scripture commends people who pursue God with a “whole heart,” (Ps. 119:2) and condemns those who approach God with a “divided heart.” (Ps. 12:2; Hosea 10:2) The phrase in “all he does” reflects James' concern to portray an inconsistency in attitude. What James criticizes in his letter is a division that leads to thinking, speaking, and acting in ways that contradict a person's claim to belong to God.

5. *Does 1:9 suggest it is okay to be proud?*

The “lowly brother” in 1:9 is not actually exalted. Rather, since he is already humble, he is that much closer to being exalted (4:10) by the Lord. In light of this, he should “boast” in his nearness to God, since the Lord has chosen to be gracious to the humble (4:6). On the other hand, the brother who is rich should boast in his lowly estate. Why? Because as James reminds the brother who may be tempted to put his confidence in his worldly position, that he really *is* in a *humble* position before the Lord. That is what 1:10b-11 outlines. James's exhortation is rooted in the gospel of God's grace to those who, by faith, humble themselves before Jesus Christ and receive the exaltation of his righteousness before God.

²⁰ Douglass Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans ; Leicester, England : Apollos, 2000, p. 47

²¹ Douglass Moo, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, *James: an Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press ; Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1985, p. 60

²² PNTC, p. 60

²³ TNTC, p. 61

²⁴ PNTC, p. 72

6. *How can we avoid falling into trials?*

James makes it clear that God's people will face trials of "many kinds" in life He casts his net wide enough to include: sickness, loneliness, grief, and disappointment.²⁵

By placing trials in a prominent position in his letter, James indicates that the tough times these 1st-century believers were facing was a key reason for his writing to them. The Bible regularly reminds us that God brings difficulties into a believer's life for a reason, and that purpose can only be accomplished if we respond in the right way to our problems.²⁶ Part of James' teaching regarding trials involves an intense wrestling with the problem of undeserved suffering by the persecutions Jews endured during the inter-testamental period. Implicit in what James says is a conviction that the suffering of believers is always under the providential control of a God who wants only the best for his people.²⁷

7. *Anger does not bring about righteous life*

v. 20 Hasty, uncontrolled anger is sin.²⁸ The quick-tempered *What's the difference between righteous anger and "anger person*, as Proverbs 17:27 suggests, is one who speaks without thoughtful consideration. Uncontrolled anger leads to volatile speech. Words we later regret are often ones spoken in the heat of the moment.

Anger is a natural, God-given emotion. God created us with strong emotional responses so we're prepared to take action when necessary. Yet, since these emotions can be abused, we need to face our feelings of anger with honesty.²⁹

Famous theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an example of someone who expressed righteous anger. Based on his theological convictions, he left his safe haven in New York to join a resistance movement opposed to the dictatorship of Adolph Hitler. His courageous decision cost him his life.

In Ephesians 4:26, Paul quotes Psalm 4:4: "Be angry, and do not sin." The problem here is not the emotion of anger. The issue is anger mismanagement.³⁰ We can bottle up our anger resulting in an internal civil war. Suppressed anger can also cause us to subtly attack others through sarcasm, intolerance, and over-competitiveness. Similarly, it can lead us into unhealthy self-pity, depression, withdrawal, worry and even a false sense of pride.

Another form of anger mismanagement is exploding in verbal or physical attacks. When these forms of anger become chronic, they lead us away from the righteous life God desires for us.

Instead, we're called to build each other up and seek peace while not avoiding dealing with offenses by pretending that a relationship is okay when it's not. If someone has made us angry we are to first deal with the offense before God and then forgive the person. That way, by the time we approach the offending person our bitterness has been resolved enabling us to better listen and understand. This will allow us to avoid condemnation while working to resolve the relational aspects of forgiveness with them—if they are willing.³¹

8. *What does it mean to humbly accept the word planted in you?*

The "putting off of evil" is to be accompanied by the receiving of something else—the implanted word. (The Greek *emphytos* refers to something that has become implanted).

²⁵ Moo

²⁶ PNTC, p. 52

²⁷ PNTC, p. 53

²⁸ Douglass Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans ; Leicester, England : Apollos, 2000

²⁹ Burns and Brissett, *The Adult Child of Divorce*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1991, P. 89

³⁰ Burns, 90

³¹ Burns, 143-145

In Jeremiah 31:3 we read “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts.” That word becomes a permanent part of the believer, a commanding and guiding presence within her or him. The command to receive the implanted word means to accept what is binding and seek to live accordingly.

Christians demonstrate the humble acceptance of the Word as their authority for life instead of their own wills. The Christian prepares good ground in the heart so that the seed of the implanted Word will produce good fruit.

9. *Based on this passage, how can we deceive ourselves?*

James says people who hear the Word without obeying it are self-deceived. They haven't understood the gospel. For the gospel contains both saving power and a summons to obedience.³²

James 1:19-27

1. *Why is looking after widows and orphans “pure and faultless?”*

We misunderstand these verses if we think James intends to summarize all that true worship of God involves. Specific, concrete actions are essential to prove the reality of one's claim to “have religion.” The matters James mentions in these verses were problems for the Christians to whom he was writing. Concern for the helpless represents the heart of the Father.

In Exodus 22:22, the Lord commands, “Do not take advantage of the widow or orphan.” In the ancient world, with the absence of money-making possibilities for women and any kind of social welfare, widows and orphans were helpless to provide for themselves.³³

Isaiah 1:10 says, “Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow.” In these actions, as well as in the Book of James, the people were to imitate God Himself, “a father to the fatherless and defender of widows (Psalm 68:5).

One of the tests of pure religion is the degree to which we care for the “helpless” - whether handicapped, impoverished third world dwellers, or the fatherless of every skin color.

2. *How can we be in the world and yet keep ourselves from being polluted by it?*

The “world” is a common biblical way of describing the ungodly views and lifestyles that characterize human life estranged from the creator.³⁴ As Christ's followers we must seek to keep ourselves “spotless” from contamination. This is what the Bible means when it talks about “being in the world, but not of the world.”

In verse 23, the one who is a “hearer only” looks at “his face”; in verse 25, the “doer” looks intently at the perfect law that gives freedom.

Missionary Jim Elliot wrote, “Savior, I know Thou hast allowed me absolute liberty, to serve Thee, or to go my own way. I would serve Thee forever, for I love my Master. I will not go out free. Mark my ear, Lord, that it might respond only to Thy voice.”

Elliot did follow the Lord's voice and obediently went to Ecuador to share the gospel with an indigenous tribe. He went to be with the Lord forever after he was killed by the tribe he loved with the heart of Christ. But his obedience was also not without fruit.

³² TNTC, p. 82

³³ WBC, *James*, p. 97

³⁴ WBC, p. 97

James 2:1-13

The prohibition of partiality governs this entire section.

1. What is important to know about the assembly?

The Greek word *synagogue* was used generally of an assembly of people for a variety of purposes. James is probably referring to any occasion when Christians would gather and the general populace would be welcome.³⁵

2. What are the implications of verse 4?

The improper 'division' being made to visitors is nothing more than a reflection of the improper 'divisions' harbored in the minds of believers (*en heautois*- 'in each of you') James condemns partiality in the context of judging. It is perhaps this association that leads to the further characterization of "those with evil thoughts." Not only have they arrogated themselves to themselves to the role of judges; worse, they render their decision according to un-Christian, worldly standards.³⁶

3. What does it mean to love my neighbor?

We must first understand "who is my neighbor?" a question Jesus answers in Luke 10:25-37. In the Old Testament, "*neighbor*" was understood to mean particularly the fellow Israelite, but Jesus expands it to include every person we come into contact with, including foreigners and enemies (Mt. 5:44). James is in line with Jesus' teaching as he argues that love for neighbor forbids the church from discriminating against anyone that might enter its doors.³⁷

Paul had an idea of how to love the neighbors Jesus spoke about. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 he says, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings."

He found ways to identify with fellow image bearers of God, that they might share life together under the freedom of the gospel. His approach is a better alternative to building forts and treating others in a dehumanizing manner.

Paul realized the value of his actions when he wrote, "We do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (vs. 25-27). Paul humbled himself and willingly became a slave to others even as he made himself a slave of the gospel, just as Christ did.

4. Why does failure at one point render a person guilty?

Jesus warned, "Whoever relaxes at one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:19). Verse 11 explains why the law must be seen as a unity verses a series of individual commands. Yet all of them reflect the will of one Lawgiver. To violate a law is to disobey God Himself.³⁸

³⁵ Douglass Moo, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, *James: an Introduction and Commentary*, InterVarsity Press ; Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1985, pp. 89-90

³⁶ Moo, p. 90

³⁷ Moo, p. 94

³⁸ Moo, pp. 95-96

That Christians will be judged on the basis of conformity to the will of God expressed in the Gospel is asserted throughout the New Testament. Jesus warned that He would judge 'all the nations' at his return and reward only those that showed compassion (Mt. 25:31-46). The will of God now confronts us with a law of liberty—an obligation that is discharged in the joyful knowledge that God has both liberated us from the penalty of sin and given us, in His Spirit, the power to obey His will. Our merciful actions will count as evidence of the presence of Christ within us. It is on the basis of this union with the One who perfectly fulfilled the law that we can have confidence in vindication at the judgment.³⁹

5. *How does "mercy triumph over judgment?"*

God's mercy is stronger than the condemnation of the law. The Greek word for "triumph" means to "boast against."

This verse echoes Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Indeed, what is in view is that showing mercy is the way that love expresses itself in the new community. Here, Martin tweaks Moo to say, "It is only because of God's mercy that our acts of mercy (which are inspired by his) are accepted as evidence of a true life in the new creation (1:18) and thus characteristic of salvation."⁴⁰ Although Moo is here being critiqued for saying that our mercy triumphs God's judgment, he goes on to say, "Our merciful attitude and actions will count as evidence of the presence of Christ within us. And it is on the basis of this union with the One who perfectly fulfilled the law for us that we can have confidence for vindication at the judgment."⁴¹

6. *Who do we shun today?*

Perhaps today we know not to shun the poor person in raggedy clothes. But in the days of the Early Church the poor were outcasts and isolated in society. Maybe it's just that person who is different from you, that person considered "weird" by American standards you choose not to sit by or associate with. Perhaps it's that socially awkward person who doesn't quite fit in, the one just outside the box of acceptability, who you judge with evil thoughts.

James 2:14-26

The emphasis in these verses is on saving faith that is a faith-in-action.

1. *What about Romans 4 and does James 2:21 contradict it?*

In claiming that Abraham was justified by works, James appears to be contradicting Paul who states clearly that Abraham was justified by faith and not works (Rom. 4:1-3). However, when we read the context, we realize that Paul and James are not in conflict, but use the Greek word "justify" differently. Ultimately, the difference is in what the authors are trying to clarify. Paul wants to make it clear that one "gets into" God's kingdom by faith; James insists that God requires works from those that *are already in*.⁴²

James and Paul, when interpreted in their own contexts, are not opposed to each other. They give an appearance of conflict because they are writing from very different vantage points in order to combat different problems.⁴³

³⁹ Moo, pp. 97-99

⁴⁰ Martin, Word Biblical Commentary: James, p. 72

⁴¹ Moo, p. 99

⁴² Douglass Moo, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, *James: an Introduction and Commentary*, InterVarsity Press ; Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1985, p. 110

⁴³ Douglass Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans ; Leicester, England : Apollos, 2000, p. 47

Martin Luther said that whoever does not do good works is an unbeliever: “He looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks about faith and good works.” Thus, it is not that a person earns his salvation, but rather than the one who claims to have faith yet doesn’t act like it probably doesn’t have saving faith.

2. *What can we learn from the demons?*

James may be intending irony by demonic reactions to belief. The word “shudder” was used in some ancient texts of the effect that is desired to be brought about. Shuddering was not the same as prostrating oneself in worship. “But at least it is a response” which apparently was more than what some of the professing “believers” were doing.⁴⁴ This is James’ point.

3. *What can we learn from Abraham and Rahab?*

Alongside the celebrated ancestor “friend of God,” James places an obscure Gentile woman with a past in prostitution. James is implying that anyone is capable of acting on his or her faith—whether a patriarch or a prostitute. Rahab is an example of someone who did something very small. But she did *what* had to be done, *when* it needed to be done.⁴⁵ The world needs more people like Rahab whose actions demonstrate their beliefs. Abraham is an example of the difference between a friendship with God and a friendship with the world.

4. *Does 2:16 mean I am supposed to give whatever is asked of me?*

James isn’t necessarily asking us to go bankrupt on behalf of others, but to do SOMETHING rather than nothing. For example, if someone is sick, it’s better to bring a meal and wish them well at the door rather than just calling and wishing them well.⁴⁶ A person in need already knows they should stay warm and well-fed. But they can’t. A person with saving faith can direct them to helpful resources if they can’t provide direct help themselves. We are not called to serve God only when it costs us nothing. True faith often prompts us to “radical inconvenience.”

James 3:1-12

This passage zeroes in on the problem of dissensions and disputes within the community illustrated by the themes of selfish ambition and bitter envy.⁴⁷

1. *Why is it important to mention teachers here?*

Teachers play a prominent role in the life of the church. Somewhat similar to a Jewish rabbi, teachers were entrusted to transmit Christian doctrine. They were especially prominent in a society where few could read or advance in social status if they were poor or in lower classes. It’s not surprising that the teaching ministry would have a certain appeal. Out of a concern that some might join the teaching ranks for the wrong reasons, James warns, “Let not many become teachers.” Jesus similarly warned that “to whom much has been given, much will be required.” This aligns with James’ notion of being judged with greater scrutiny as a teacher.

In Philippians 1:15-18, Paul notes that even if someone has become a teacher with the wrong motives, it doesn’t mean God won’t necessarily bless or work through their ministry as long as they are teaching correct theology and the true gospel. The gospel always speaks for itself.

James’ goal isn’t to discourage teaching. He merely wants to underscore that a teaching ministry should be entered into based on proper motivations.

⁴⁴ TNTC, p. 107

⁴⁵ Doriani, 98

⁴⁶ Dan Doriani, *Reformed Expository Commentary: James*, PR & Publishing, Philsburg, NJ, 2007, p. 85

⁴⁷ Douglass Moo, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, James: an Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1985, p. 118

The main tool for a teaching ministry is the tongue, and the tongue is what most often places a teacher in the greatest amount of danger. Yet, by verse 2, James extends his warnings about the tongue to include everyone. This is indicated by the use of the first person plural. This is a problem for each member of the church.⁴⁸

2 *Why does the tongue cause so much trouble?*

It is set on fire by hell. Proverbs 11:9 says, “With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape.” Again, we are pointed back to wisdom.

The tongue, though tiny by comparison, determines the destiny of the entire body. When a believer exercises proper control of the tongue, it can be safely assumed that he is able to direct his whole life: he is a “perfect” man (v. 2). But when it is unrestrained, the body is likely to be uncontrolled and undisciplined.⁴⁹ Words have the power to heal or destroy, and controlling the tongue involves more than just a resolution of the will.⁵⁰

Jesus pointed out: “The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart and these make him unclean” (Matthew 15:8).

In Matthew 12:33-35 he says, “How can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”

James 3:13-18

1. *What’s the cure for such selfish ambition and bitter envy?*

It is radical repentance, a humbling of one’s self before God (4:4-10), and embracing the wisdom from above, with its fruits of humility and peace (3:13-18). Only through the transformation in the attitudes of individual’s will is it possible to avoid sinful speech and bring healing to the community’s divisions.⁵¹

James 4:1-12

In chapter 4:1-10, James prophetically lays bare the sin of his Christian readers, calls them to repentance, humility and submission to God, and then strengthens his argument by reminding them of life-giving divine grace.

He notes that God gives grace to the humble, explains the meaning of humility (4:7-9) and sets before them the divine promise of life to the humble (4:10). They will be lifted up to the heavens by God himself.

1. *What is the nature of humility and submission which seems to have been characteristic of early Christian teaching?*

It’s clear that submission to God is demonstrated by resisting the devil and drawing near to God. The eight imperatives between “submit yourselves to God” (4:7), and “humble yourselves before the Lord” (4:10), “spell out some of the aspects and implications of the overall call” to submission.⁵²

⁴⁸ Moo, pp. 120-121

⁴⁹ Moo, p. 122

⁵⁰ Doriani, p. 109

⁵¹ Moo, p. 118

⁵² Douglass Moo, *Letter of James*, 192

Sins which James spells out in his letter includes pride in knowledge, hearing the Word but doing nothing, reckless speech that says anything to get a laugh or gain an advantage,⁵³ the desire to plunder society rather than to remain unpolluted by it.

2. *What does it mean to submit to God?*

James calls his readers to resist the devil as a way of combating their double-minded error. To submit to God *means* to resist the devil, for the Christian can't serve two masters (4:4). If James's readers serve God alone, as they are called to, they will naturally resist the devil as an enemy of their King, as a rival vying for power and devotion from God's people (John 12:31). That the devil will flee is certain because the Lord has subjected the spirits to his people (Luke 10:20), and because the Almighty Lord is on their side (Rom. 8:31). Submission to God means devoting oneself to him alone, obeying his will⁵⁴, resisting the ruler of this world, drawing near to him in trust and faith, as well as accepting correction for their misdeeds.

3. *When will God lift us up?*

Christian humility (James 4:6) is fleshed out in the resurrection. James calls his readers to humble themselves in light of their sin and God's divine grace. He points his readers to Christ, to humble themselves before him, and to trust in the gracious promises he has given to them. Jesus promised that "everyone who looks on the Son of Man and believes in him shall have eternal life, and will be raised up on the last day" (John 6:40).

4. *Why are we to not slander one another?*

James' justification for his prohibition is interesting: to speak against or to judge one's brother is to speak against or judge the law. Here, not only the Levitical law command (19:6) is in view, but also the wider body of teaching, especially the teachings of Jesus. Since James contrasts 'judging the law' with doing the law, he links failure to do the law as involving an implicit denial of the law's authority.

However high our view of the law might be, a failure to do it actually says to the world that we do not, in fact, put much stock in it.⁵⁵

Speaking evil of fellow Christians is wrong not only because it involves judging the law; it is wrong because it involves judging our neighbor. This is when we both fail to love the neighbor and make an arrogant presumption on the rights of God Himself. When we criticize and condemn others, we are pronouncing our own verdict over their spirituality and destiny. This is not to exclude the necessary discrimination that every Christian should exercise. James is addressing a bitter, selfish spirit that was causing divisions in the church, including perhaps cursings (3:10) and denunciations of one another. Such "spiritual" divisions were in fact more of a manifestation of a worldly spirit (3:15) and must be replaced with a wisdom from above.⁵⁶

5. *What are some examples of this?*

The question, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" can perhaps be answered with the words of Paul: "By the grace of God, I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

An e-mail was circulated around about three years ago mentioning the deaths of three famous people. When depicting one of the celebrities, the text talked about the person's drug addiction, reducing the person's life to that of an addict. It mentioned *nothing* else about this man, as though using drugs was the sole act of his life. I then hailed one good person and said that the death of these three on the same day was no coincidence.

⁵³ Dan Doriani, *James*, 140

⁵⁴ Doriani, 146

⁵⁵ Moo, 152

⁵⁶ Moo, 152-153

Such a message makes a judgment and comparison of the righteousness of others, when God alone measures sin and knows their end.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis says something similar to Paul. To paraphrase, Lewis asks, how can we know if, given the same background or genetic make-up or set of circumstances, that we would act any differently from anyone that we look down upon?⁵⁷

James 4:13-17

These verses are a touchstone for prohibiting the arrogant, boastful attitude that neglects to take into account the transitory nature of this life.⁵⁸ James bids his readers to join him on the path of humility.⁵⁹

1. *Why is boasting evil?*

People not only leave God out when planning their lives; it is the essence of sin that they brag about it as well. 'I' takes the center stage in place of God. This kind of boasting is evil because the objects of boasting are instances of arrogant disregard for God.⁶⁰

2. *What is the explanation for Verse 17?*

James adds this saying as an encouragement to do what he has just said. He has told them what is right. If they fail to do it, they will be sinning. They cannot take refuge, therefore, that they have done nothing positively wrong.

Sins of omission are just as important as sins of commission.⁶¹

3. *Can you think of some examples from Scripture of this?*

The servant in Jesus parable who fails to use the money he was entrusted with (Luke 19:11-27) the goats who failed to care for the outcasts in society (Mt. 25:31-46) are condemned for what they failed to do.⁶²

James 5:1-6

The main point of James 5:1-12 is bringing together the related concepts of divine reckoning and recompense. Endurance in this context is to be understood as elsewhere in James, set against the backdrop of God's sovereign control of events and the need of patience for Him to act in His own time and in His own way. As Martin describes, "It is a rugged determination not to renounce one's faith and not to fall out of the race."⁶³

1. *Is misery coming upon all rich people?*

We see in the following verses that "rich people" is referring to the people who have denied workers the wages due to them and have hoarded wealth. They are the rich who think that they are unstoppable.⁶⁴ Moo titles verses 1-6 as a condemnation of those who *misuse wealth*.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

⁵⁸ Douglass Moo, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, James*, 153

⁵⁹ Daniel Doriani, *Reformed Expository Commentary, James*, 162

⁶⁰ Moo, 157

⁶¹ Moo, 158

⁶² Moo, 158

⁶³ Martin, *James*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 196

⁶⁴ Daniel Doriani, *Reformed Expositors Commentary, James*

⁶⁵ Douglass Moo *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, James*, 158

David, Solomon, Joseph of Arimathea, and Zacchaeus were heroes of the faith who were also rich. Riches are not evil in themselves, but wealth, gold and silver are transitory. On the other hand, Jesus does say, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24). Perhaps Eccl. 5:10 hits the meaning of James 5 on the nail: "Whoever loves money never has enough." If someone simply must have more, their pursuit of wealth might be lawless.

What is worse is that the rich farmers denied wages to workers who could not stand up for themselves. First Century Palestine, before 70 A.D. witnessed an increasing concentration of land in the hands of very wealthy landholders. As a result, the holdings of many farmers were assimilated in these larger estates, and these farmers were forced to earn their living by hiring themselves out to their rich landlords.⁶⁶

2. *Who is being addressed in 5:1-12?*

Doriani and Moo take the position that unbelievers are being addressed in 1-6, while Martin notes an idiomatic form of address: "James is content to warn his readers against siding with the rich who turn out to be the church's enemies. The rich are personally confronted with direct address."⁶⁷ As we are told that the oppressors are being set apart on the Day of Judgment, they cannot also be Christians at this point. Martin explains further that James' speech is intended to serve as an encouragement to his Christian brethren (verse 7) who have suffered at the hands of the rich. (Chapters 1, and 5:6)

Yet no Christian is entirely immune from the sins that James describes. Even if 1-6 did address rich unbelievers, Doriani notes that it still has value for Christians. "We still need to know how God sees the lifestyle that leads to judgment."⁶⁸ Few of us are certifiably rich and few have social and legal power to gain an advantage over others.

Still, everyone who sets wages has an obligation to keep their employees from living on the edge of hunger or illness. If we have any authority or work in public policy, we should promote policies that ensure justice for laborers.⁶⁹

But we all are prone to use power to gain an advantage over others. We are all tempted to use whatever money and materials we do have in self-indulgent ways.⁷⁰ Everyone needs these warnings.

3. *Do James and Jesus forbid all oaths?*

James 5:12 closely parallels Jesus' words in Matthew 5:34-37. It does not seem that they are forbidding being sworn in for court: rather, it is voluntary oaths which are in mind. Even then, the main point is to zoom in on oaths made with the intention of avoiding absolute truthfulness. This seems to be what Jesus was addressing in Matt. 23:16-22. Concern about the devaluation of oaths because of their indiscriminate use and the tendency to try to avoid fulfilling them by swearing by 'less sacred thing' led to warnings not to use oaths too often.

We are not to invoke God's name, or substitutes for it, as a guarantee for what we say. ⁷¹ The law does not forbid oaths, but demands that a person be true to any oath he has sworn (Lev. 19:12).

4. *How should I live my life in response to 5:1-6?*

Any of us can be tempted to favor the rich. Their wealth and talents can be useful to us and the

⁶⁶ Moo, 163

⁶⁷ WBC, 172

⁶⁸ Doriani, 166

⁶⁹ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 158.

⁷⁰ Doriani, 166

⁷¹ Moo, 173-175

church. Yet we must be willing to confront the rich and powerful when necessary, as James does, since God charges us to confront all sin.⁷²

5. *Have I complained recently against a brother or sister in Christ?*

The solution is to go to this person first in a spirit of humility and forgiveness.

6. *Do you hope wealth will gain you respect?*

In our achievement oriented society, when our performance falters, honor plummets. Lasting respect derives from the fact that we are created in the image of God.

7. *Do you hope wealth will help you achieve acceptance?*

In our society any flaw can spoil our rank, but God accepts us regardless of our flaws if we put our trust in him and him alone.

8. *Do you hope wealth will gain you significance?*

If so, note that we can't find permanent significance in temporary things. Significance is found by joining the kingdom of God.

James 5:13-20

1. *Who heals?*

"The Lord will raise him up." Note that it is in the *name of the Lord* that the sick are anointed with oil.

When the apostles healed people they made it clear that they did so only through the power and authority the Lord Jesus gives (Acts 4:7-12). The gift of healing (1 Cor. 12:9, 28) is directed by the Holy Spirit who gives all gifts. Note that it is the prayer, not the elders, that the power to heal resides.⁷³

Elders are spiritual leaders recognized for their maturity in the faith. It is natural for them to pray for healing and should desire for them to do so given their depth of experience to discern the will of God.⁷⁴

At the same time, the church at large is also called to actively pray for healing (v.16a).

2. *Whose prayers are powerful and effective?*

We're told that Elijah was a man just like us. Powerful prayers are not limited to the great prophets of the OT or the Apostles of the NT, but a direct result of the same access every Christian has to the throne of grace because of what Christ has done for us.

3. *What is meant by covering in verse 20?*

Scripture often associates salvation with the complete blotting out of sins.⁷⁵ James 5:1-6 allude to Proverbs 10:12, where love "covers all offenses." We know from 1 Cor. 13 that love is patient, as 5:7-12 calls for patience in the midst of offenses caused by rich farmers.

4. *What else can we take away from verses 19-20?*

If the Book of James considered as something of a sermon, the last two verses are a fitting call to action. Not only should the readers "do" the words James has written, they should help others

⁷² Doriani, 173

⁷³ Douglass Moo, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, James*, 183

⁷⁴ Moo, 185

⁷⁵ Moo, 190

follow through by operating out of love and concern. It is by sharing with James the conviction that there is indeed an eternal death, to which the way of sin leads, that we should be motivated to deal with sin our lives and in the lives of others.⁷⁶

The point of James 5:13-20 is that although God may not heal every person, his will is for us to have faith in his capacity to heal *any* person as well as the power to do extraordinary things.

⁷⁶ Moo, 190-191