

# New Testament Studies

## James (*RVS Notes*)

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## James: A Faith That Works

**Author and recipients**—The author identifies himself as James (1:1). There are four people named James mentioned in the New Testament, two of whom have been seriously suggested as the author of this book—James, the son of Zebedee and one of the Twelve, and James, the half-brother of the Lord. The Apostle James was probably martyred too early (44, see Acts 12) to have been the author. The book's authority was not immediately accepted, largely due to questions about its authorship. The main objection to the authorship of James, the step-brother of the Lord Jesus is the polished Greek of the letter, allegedly beyond the competence of James. However, James probably had a better education than the critics grant, had time and the need to develop rhetorical skill, the reality that the Greek language and culture had indeed spread to include Palestine to a significant degree, and the widespread use of amanuenses to assist a writer's Greek usage are very adequate replies to the critical objection. The book was generally accepted by the time of Eusebius (265-340) and recognized as canonical at the Council of Carthage in 397.

James was probably the oldest of Christ's half-brothers, since he heads the list given in Matthew 13:55. He did not believe (Mk. 3:21; Jn. 7:5) until Christ's post-Resurrection appearance to him (1 Cor. 15:7). He was the leader of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and became very prominent in the early Church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:9; 2:9; Jude 1). James was known as James the Just, admired for his piety, his advocacy for the rights of the poor and his denunciation of the oppression of the rich. Tradition tends to exaggerate James' ascetic tendencies, presenting him to posterity as a Nazarite from his mother's womb who interceded for God's people so frequently that his knees grew hard like a camel's. He was martyred around 62 when executed by the high priest Ananus II in between the procuratorships of Festus and Albinus. Ananus II was later demoted for his illegal act.

"[T]he twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1) probably refers to Jewish believers from the early Jerusalem church who fled Palestine for Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch after the persecution arising from the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:3; 11:19).

**Date and occasion**—The letter was penned in Jerusalem, probably prior to the Jerusalem Council in 49. Proponents of this early date point to the following:

- Jewish character of the letter;
- Simple church order reflected;
- No reference made to the Gentile controversy (James was a central character at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15);
- Greek term *synagoge* is used to designate the meeting places of the church, indicating its continuing ties to Judaism.

Not all agree. Some point to a date in the early 60s, just before James' martyrdom. The reasons advanced for the later date include:

- The distinctive doctrines of Christianity are presupposed. This suggests an audience that had been believers for some time;
- The presence of wealthy believers favors a later date. Christianity's initial appeal was to the lower classes.

Whether in the late 40s or early 60s, this period was soon to become a difficult one for Christians. The Emperor Claudius persecuted the Jews in the late 40s, eventually banning them from Rome in 49.

Jewish Christians may have suffered in this period as well. In the early 60s, there were sporadic periods of persecution, most notably Nero's persecution after the great fire of Rome in 64.

**Purpose and theme**—James' purpose is to instruct and exhort Jewish believers who are going through tough times. He is their pastor in absentia urging them to make the needed changes in their lives and to live true to the faith. The theme of the book is that real faith works. James emphasizes vital, practical Christianity. His emphasis on faith showing itself in good deeds caused Martin Luther to describe this book as “a right strawy epistle in comparison with them (the writings of Paul and John), for it has no gospel character to it.”

### **Guiding Concepts**

**Wisdom writing**—James has been described as the “Proverbs of the New Testament”. Its style is reminiscent of Proverbs, full of pithy sayings strung together like beads on a string. This style is described by Greek writers as *parenthesis*, a series of loosely related exhortations. Thoughts from Proverbs are also explicitly or implicitly behind many of James' ideas:

James 2:5	Proverbs 2:6
1:19	29:20
3:18	11:30
4:6	3:34
4:13-16	27:1
5:20	10:12

James is writing to a first century audience where oppression by the wealthy was growing in Palestine as well as throughout the Empire. In Palestine, there was the growing opposition to Roman rule that was to break out into open rebellion within a few years. James addresses the pride and oppression of the rich (1:9-11; 2:1-9; 4:13-17; 5:4-6) as well as those tempted to retaliate with violent acts (2:11; 4:2 or words (1:19-20, 26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:9). He calls for heavenly wisdom (1:5; 3:14-18), faith (1:6-8; 2:14-26), and patient endurance (1:9-11; 5:7-11).

Many have also noted James' similarity to the Sermon on the Mount. Compare

James 2:5	Lk. 6:20
3:10-12	Matt. 7:16-20
3:18	5:9
5:12	5:34-37

**Faith and works**—James emphasizes vital, practical Christianity. He wants to “see the goods”. He brings this perspective to faith. The type of faith that works regeneration in the life of the believer must show up in what that person does. James wants to see faith validated by what Christians do.

When James is placed next to Paul, at first, there seems to be a contradiction (compare James 2:24; Eph 2:8, 9). But not really. James is saying that deeds complete faith; they are the outworking of genuine faith. He is railing against superficial faith that has no wholesome effect in a believer's life. On the other hand, Paul is combating legalism, the belief that one may earn saving merit before God by one's good deeds. Consequently, Paul insists that salvation is not by works, but by faith alone. Note the perspectives:

- Paul is emphasizing the root of righteousness; James the fruit of righteousness;

- Paul has Gen 15 in mind; James has Gen 22 in the forefront;
- For Paul, faith is *fiducia*; for James faith is *assensus* absent deeds;
- Paul is concerned with how one stands before a holy God; James is concerned with how one walks around, representing that holy God.

***Marks of a mature Christian:***

- Patient in testing;
- Practices the truth;
- Power over the tongue;
- Peacemaker, not troublemaker
- Prayerful amid troubles

***Detailed Outline:*                    **James: A Faith That Works****

- I.        Trials and Temptations: Faith Tested (1:1-18)
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## James: A Faith That Works

**I. Trials and Temptations: Faith Tested (1:1-18)**—James has been described as the Proverbs of the New Testament. His style is reminiscent of Proverbs, full of pithy sayings string together like beads on a string. At times that makes the thread of his thought challenging to follow. In this initial section, verses 5-11 appear between two segments focusing on trials or temptations (1:2-4, 12). Are they on a common thread or another?

**A. Salutation (1:1)**—James describes himself as a servant (*doulos*) of God. The description indicates a state of willing, indeed eager, spiritual bondage. The twelve tribes are Jewish Christians outside of Palestine. They were probably believers from the early church in Jerusalem who, after Stephen's death by stoning (Acts 8:11), were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:19).

**B. Trials' intended result (1:2-4)**—Trials are intended to test and strengthen our faith. The word translated trials here (*peirasmoi*) can be translated temptations when the context suggests that. Thus, both outward difficulties (1:2-4) and inner temptations (1:15-18) are meant to test and strengthen our faith. We can rejoice when trials come because of the wholesome effects they produce in our lives.

**1:3-4**—This is a rhetorical form known as concatenation where one point leads to another, yielding a list of several items. Perseverance (*hupomone*) speaks of tenacity and staying power. It is more than patience that passively endures. It is the quality that enables people to stand on their feet and face the storm. It is the steadfastness that provides the atmosphere for spiritual growth.

**C. Wisdom and single-mindedness (1:5-8)**—Wisdom is understanding that lives skillfully. It avoids evil and lives rightly. James counsels coming to God forthrightly and often with your needs for he gives liberally without finding fault (*haplos* = without guile).

**1:6**—Doubt (*diakrinomenos*) indicates a wavering between two opinions. Doubt sets up a disquiet in the soul which prevents one from leaning on the Lord. It usually suggests not so much a weakness of faith, but a lack of faith. James illustrates doubt by the waves of the sea, noting that waves are the random products of other forces. The challenge of faith is the challenge of not being a wave. Is our faith the real deal or are we double-minded and like waves tossed about by this wind or that situation.

**1:8**—The double-minded (*dipsychos*) person is described as unstable. *Dipsychos* is literally double-souled. Indecisiveness as to heart orientation negates effectiveness in prayer.

**D. Rich and poor: leveling of position (1:9-11)**—The high and low positions may refer to general standing in society or to the leveling that persecution brought to people, regardless of economic status. The backdrop of oppression becomes apparent quickly in this letter. Wisdom stressed that riches quickly fade, that God vindicates the oppressed and the poor in the end, and that he judges those who stockpile wealth and do not share with the poor.

**1:11**—The scorching heat mentioned in 1:11 reflects the Middle East reality of a sirocco, a scorching windstorm, that brought sudden destruction to vegetation. James makes the simile to the wealthy individual and his or her life.

**E. Reward for perseverance under trial (1:12)**—Stood the test (*dokimos*) was used of the

successful testing of precious metals and coins. The term is applied to the persevering believer. Scripture mentions several crowns for believers who persevere:

- The crown of life (Jas. 1:12; Rev. 2:10) given to those who successfully endure trials.
- The crown that will last forever (1 Cor. (:25) given to those who master, by God's grace, the old nature.
- The crown of rejoicing (1 Thess. 2:19) given to those who win others.
- The crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8) given to those who long for and are motivated by his appearing.
- The crown of glory (1 Pt. 5:4) given to faithful elders.

**F. Source of temptation (1:13-15)**—"Trials" and "temptations" translate the same Greek word, depending on the context. The term is *peirasmos* (used in 1:2, 12) here refers not to outward trials but to inner temptations. While God does test people, he never tests us seeking for us to faith rather than persevere (1:13-15). While James would not deny that Satan does tempt us with an eye to failure, he assigns responsibility for sin to our desires run amuck. People choose to sin and dare not assign God responsibility for their failures amid testing. There is always the human tendency to excuse ourselves by blaming God. God tests us, but not with the evil intent to cause us to sin.

The progression is from temptation to desire to sin to death:

- Desire (1:14)—Evil desire (*epithumia* = lust) is pictured as first attracting our attention. This word implies that they are lusts, the gotta-have kinds of urges. These desires can be our servants or our masters.
- Deception (1:14)—Dragged away (*exelkomenos*) persuades us to approach what is forbidden and then lures us (*deleazomenos*) by means of bait to yield to the temptation. The bait not only attracts us, but it disguises the yielding to the desire that will eventually produce sorrow and punishment. The bait keeps us from seeing the consequences of our sin.
- Disobedience (1:15)—We move from emotions (desire) to intellect (deception), to the will. Christian living is a matter of will not feeling.
- Death (1:15)—Sin eventually yields death. It may take a while, but its result is inevitable. Whenever you face temptation, get your eyes off the bait and look to the consequence of sin.

**G. Source of blessing (1:16-18)**—Nothing but good comes from God. He wills what is best for us and bestows what we need to fulfill his purpose. Of all of God's gifts, the new birth is the greatest and most important. We are described as the first fruits of the new creation.

**II. Listening and Doing: Word Practiced (1:19-27)**—An open ear, a controlled tongue, a calm spirit, and a clean heart are the prerequisites to a teachable spirit which humbly receives and acts on the truth. To listen and to engage in formal religious activity is not enough. Genuine faith is marked by love (doing good) for others and holiness before God.

**A. Listening and humble acceptance of the Word (1:19-21)**—A non-stop talker cannot hear anyone else. An angry attitude does not contribute to an atmosphere in which right living and right attitudes flourish. We are to get rid of our old, bad habits and humbly accept the Word's direction.

Some commentators understand these verses in the backdrop of growing militant Jewish resistance to the oppression of the authorities and contrasts wise biblical counsel with the spirit of revolution sweeping the land. Jewish resistance emphasized striking out at Rome and her aristocratic Jewish

toadies while James associates righteousness with peaceable non-resistance.

**1:21**—Moral filth (*rutarian* = refers to wax in one's ear that deadens sound) and evil (*perisseian kakias*) speaks to any "hangover" of previous habits of the old nature. Get rid of them (*apothemenoi*), like taking off an old set of clothes.

**B. Listening to and doing the Word (1:22-25)**—To listen without doing is to deceive (*paralogizomenoi* = to reckon wrongly or reason falsely) yourself. We are to take good hard looks at our lives and align them with the precepts of God's Word. People must not only know but also obey the truth.

**1:22**—Hearers (*akroatai*) refers to an academic auditor who listens and takes notes but has no assignments, responsibilities, and takes no tests.

**1:23-24**—Look in verses 23 and 24 is a variant of *katanoeo*, which refers to the scrutiny of an object. Those who merely listen to the Word were like people looking at themselves in the mirror and immediately forgetting what they look like. Given that most people back then did not have mirrors, their memories of their appearance were easily erased. Likewise, the force and counsel of the Word can be erased in our living.

**1:25**—The person who will be blessed is the one who looks intently (*parakupto* = peering into something carefully) into God's revealed truth and continues to make it his or her daily delight and practice. Obeying the moral law does not enslave a person to external practice but frees that person to be and become what they were created and intended to be.

2 Corinthians 3:18 is a text that says what James is saying in this passage: "And we with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, and being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Paul was reflecting on Moses' experience of glowing after being in the presence of Yahweh. When we look intently into the Word, we see the Son of God and we are metamorphosized by the Spirit to share in the glory of God.

**C. True religion (1:26-27)**—Three areas mentioned are speech, practical help for the disadvantaged, and worldliness. The three speak to individual purity, God's compassion tangibly reproduced and operating in his children, and a lifestyle not polluted by worldly attitudes and activities. Religion as the scrupulous attention to formal, ritualistic detail, unaccompanied by holy living is self-deceiving. James is not reducing religion to a prissy purity of conduct supplemented by almsgiving. He is emphasizing that genuine religion is a life-changing dynamic resulting in expressions of love for others and a set apart lifestyle before God.

**III. Respecters of Persons: Favoritism Banned (2:1-13)**—Favoritism/partiality/discrimination is prohibited in this section. James stresses that favoritism should not be shown to the wealthy and socially elevated people of the culture. James rails against favoring the rich with solicitous attention while treating the poor scornfully. If there is a place where class distinctions should break down, it is worship. The world system is always assessing people, sizing them up, putting them down, establishing a pecking order to make those engaged in the comparison game feel superior. James wants the church to be a haven reflecting the generous, universal love of God. He presents three arguments against favoritism: social (2:5-7), moral (2:8-11), and the reality of accountability in judgment (2:12-13).

**A. Favoring the rich in meetings (2:1-4)**—James states the issue of favoritism forthrightly. The Greek construction here is used of forbidding a practice already in progress. Faith and partiality are



incompatible. Favoritism exposes a divided allegiance (to serve God and mammon) and reveals us to be judges with wrong motives. Yet, partiality and discrimination has been the bane of believers through the centuries.

The Jewish people of that day coveted recognition and honor. They vied with one another for the praise of the fellow Jews. The Lord Jesus did not play that game and in fact exposed it in parable (Lk. 14:7-14) and in denunciation (Mt. 23). He wasn't impressed with wealth and social status, but with the sincerity of heart. He himself was rejected and despised and his followers were a motley crew by the world's estimation (Acts 4:13).

**2:1**—Favoritism (*prosotolempsiais*) is a compound word that means “to receive by face”. One lifted the chin of a person to see who he or she was before deciding how to handle a situation. The glory of Christ was revealed in poverty and humiliation and thus a most suitable starting point for this discussion of favoring the rich at the expense of the poor.

**B. God's choice and their favoritism contrasted (2:5-7)**—The poor often respond first to God's mercy because they sense their spiritual bankruptcy (Mt. 5:3) and because God clearly receives the credit (1 Cor. 1:26-29). In short, it's easier for the poor to get over themselves.

The irony in their favoritism of the wealthy was that those people were likely to be their oppressors, perhaps even their persecutors. They were the ones dragging others into court. They were the ones getting unjust verdicts because they worked the system to their own advantage. Calvin comments: “It is odd to honor one's executioners and injure one's friends.”

**C. Royal law contrasted with showing favoritism (2:8-11)**—The royal law is the law of loving your neighbor as yourself. It is the supreme law to which all other laws governing human relationships are subordinate. Favoritism is incompatible with the royal law. Christian love means that we are to treat others (to do good to them) as God has treated us. This type of love does not marginalize people. Indeed, it does more than that, it elevates people, it seeks to help them do better.

**2:10-11**—People cannot pick and choose between God's laws. To violate one command is to violate God's will and contradict his character. James points out that the law must be obeyed in its totality or one is in violation of it. The law is like a sheet of glass. If it is broken, it's broken. To say that it is a little bit broken does no good.

The commands prohibiting adultery and murder appear in Exodus 20:13-14 and Deuteronomy 5:17-18. Reasons provided by commentators for James' inverse of these commands appear to be speculation.

**D. Judgment and mercy: Mercy received must be extended (2:12-13)**—We are to live realizing that each of us will be judged at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). In addition to our accountability, those who have received mercy ought themselves to practice it. Shakespeare reflects this spirit in the Merchants of Venice:

But mercy is above this scepter'd sway;  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;  
It is an attribute of God Himself;  
And earthly power doth then show like God's  
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore  
Though justice be Thy plea, consider this,  
That in the course of justice none of us

Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;  
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
 The deeds of mercy.

**IV. Faith and Works: Faith Without Works is Dead (2:14-26)**—This passage is often seen as conflicting with Paul’s discussions of justifying faith in Romans 3-5 and Galatians 3-4. James is saying that deeds complete faith; they are the outworking of genuine faith. He is railing against superficial faith that has no wholesome effect in a believer’s life. On the other hand, Paul is combating legalism, the belief that one may earn saving merit before God by one’s good deeds. Consequently, Paul insists that salvation is not by works but by faith alone. Note the perspectives:

- Paul is emphasizing the root of righteousness, what happens at the point of justification, and the focus is on God’s work. James is emphasizing the fruit of righteousness, what happens after the point of justification, and the focus is on people’s activity.
- Paul has Genesis 15 in mind where Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness (15:6). James has Genesis 22 in mind where Abraham obeyed God in going to Mt. Moriah with Isaac (22:15-18) thus validating his faith.
- For Paul, faith is what the Reformers called *fiducia*, it is personal saving faith in God that results in justification. “Works” are seen independent of faith and a means of self-justification. For James faith as he uses the term in this passage is what the Reformers called *assensus*, the intellectual acceptance of certain truths about God that do not necessarily affect one’s conduct. “Works” are those deeds only done when faith is real.
- Paul is concerned with how one stands before a holy God; James is concerned with how one lives, representing that holy God.

James’ argument is that faith must be evidence by works (2:14-19). Living faith has the power and desire to meet the pathos of human life with something of the infinite pity God shown humanity in the Lord Jesus Christ. He then provides Old Testament examples of genuine faith working in the cases of Abraham and Rahab (2:20-25). Then he punches home his conclusion that faith without deeds is dead (2:26).

Both James and Paul would affirm the basic message of this text: genuine faith is a reality upon which one stakes one’s entire life, not merely passive assent to doctrine. Luther’s formula for this concern: We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

**A. Faith to be evidenced by works (2:14-19)**—Genuine faith is demonstrated by how one lives. Our faith is on display in what we do and what we give ourselves to. Genuine faith is not indifferent, but involved (2:15-16). It is not independent, but in partnership (2:17). It is not invisible, but on display (2:18). It is not merely intellectual, but from whole person (2:19).

**2:15-16**—James gives a simple illustration where believers see need without attempting to meet that need. One of the works James expects to see among believers is caring for the poor. To see need and not act tangible to meet it is not acting on biblical faith. A faith that never works out in practical ways, isn’t real. This text parallels 1 John 3:17. John calls for love in action; James for calls for faith to take action.

**2:18**—Who is the referent for “you” versus who is the referent for “I” may be debated. However, the

point is clear: faith cannot be demonstrated or shown (*deixon*) apart from works.

**2:19**—James cites the ancient Jewish mantra that God is one but then insists that this must translate into action. He notes the deficiency of merely intellectual faith—even the demons have that.

This verse is often cited to show that what the Reformers called “assensus” (e.g. intellectual assent to gospel truth) is not saving faith. The Reformers spoke of faith in three tiers:

- Notitia—This was the basic substance of true biblical faith. We need to come to God as he is and not as we imagine him to be or wish him to be. Ours is a revealed knowledge, not a made up one.
- Assensus—This is the confidence that biblical true is indeed true.
- Fiducia—This is faith in the sense of reliance. I stake my life on biblical truth, on the reality of the atonement of the Lord Jesus and the new life within prompted by the Spirit.

Calvin comments: “Knowledge of God can no more connect a man with God than the sight of the sun can carry him to heaven.”

**Illustration:** A man was praying in seeming earnestness at a church’s weekly prayer meeting. “Fill me, Lord. Fill me, Lord.” On and on he went, building to a crescendo. Finally, his wife interrupted him. “Don’t do it, Lord. He leaks.”

**B. Old Testament proof: Abraham and Rahab (2:20-25)**—Dynamic faith is based on the Word of God, prompted by the Spirit of God, and takes on shoe leather. The mind understands the truth, the heart desires the truth, and the will acts on the truth. James illustrates faith in action by referring to Abraham (2:20-24) and Rehab (2:25).

**2:20-24**—Genesis 15 and 22 provide the background for this illustration. Genesis 15:6 records Abraham’s faith that was counted to him as righteousness. “Counted” is a legal or accounting term that means to “put to one’s account”. Here, it speaks of justification, an act of God whereby he declares a believing sinner righteous based on Christ’s atonement. For Abraham it was the anticipation of Christ’s yet future work. Paul focuses on this experience. James focuses on Genesis 22, where Abraham believes and trusts God to do what he said. On Mt. Moriah, Abraham trusted God to the uttermost in doing what he thought God wanted him to do (offer up Isaac). Abraham was not saved by the addition of works to faith but by a faith that showed its true nature by his obedience.

**2:21**—Justified (*edikaiothe*) usually means “to declare righteous”. James is not speaking of the original imputation of righteousness to Abraham in Genesis 15, as Paul does in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6, but of the proof of that righteousness and faith in Genesis 22, some thirty years later. What Abraham did in Genesis 22 was the outworking of the faith described in Genesis 15.

**2:22**—Faith and action working together (*sunergo*). Faith was continually cooperating with Abraham’s deeds; it is an action producing faith.

**2:24**—“Justified” here in effect means “shown to be righteous”. This does not contradict Pauline texts like Ephesians 2:8-9 or Titus 3:5. James is confronting superficial faith while Paul was confronting legalism. However, at the end of the analysis, both want to see faith in action. Translating belief into action is James’ concern in this passage as seeing faith working through love was Paul’s concern (Gal. 5:6). Both would agree that good works are the product of genuine faith (see Eph. 2:10).

**2:25**—Rehab is James’ next example. Her faith was demonstrated in hiding the Hebrew spies and by sharing the good news of deliverance with her family (Josh. 6:25).

**C. Faith without works is dead (2:26)**—James concludes this section by reiterating 2:17.

**V. Taming the Tongue (3:1-12)**— James addresses the taming of the tongue. He begins by addressing the warning particularly to teachers (3:1), then notes how a small thing can have such large effects, noting examples of the bit controlling a horse and a rudder a boat (3:3-6). He notes the toxic venom that can proceed from the tongue (3:7-8). This little instrument can praise God and curse those made in God’s image. The section closes with this incongruity (3:9-12). In short, the tongue has the power to control and direct (3:3-4), the power to destroy and tear down (3:5, 9-10), and the power to refresh and build up (3:9-10).

The tongue was a particular problem for James’ readers. The tongue is often the last bit of a human being that learns the lesson of self-control. It is so easy to blurt out unedifying and harmful words. He’s telling them to clean up their speech.

**A. Warning to teachers (3:1)**—Teachers were held in high regard in the Jewish tradition. They are warned of being held to a stricter standard. Teachers can become critical in their work and need to be reminded of their personal accountability. Calvin remarks on this text: “It is the innate disease of [humankind] to seek reputation by blaming others.”

**B. Tongue as barometer of spirituality (3:2)**—A vile tongue betrays an inner reality that needs to be transformed. It telegraphs the condition of the heart.

**C. Tongue's capacity for corruption (3:3-6)**—The tongue is compared to a bit controlling a horse and the rudder of a boat. It is then compared to fire. The point of comparison with a bit and the rudder is that the tongue, while a small item exerts a powerful influence. The potential destructiveness of the tongue is compared to fire. The origin of this tameless fire is hell itself. The thought is that the tongue represents the unrighteous world in our members. Its influence is not limited to the speaker but affects all around him or her. It has tremendous power to do harm. Behind one’s teeth lies a lethal weapon.

**Illustration**—It has been estimated that for every word in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, one hundred and twenty-five lives were lost in World War II.

Shakespeare speaks to this power to do harm in *Orthello*:

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,  
Is the immediate jewel of their soul.  
He who steals my purse, steals trash.  
‘Tis something, nothing. Twas mine, ‘tis his, and will be slave to thousands.  
But he who filches from me my good name,  
Robs that which not enriching him, makes me poor, poor indeed.

**3:6**—Set on fire by hell (*gehenna*). This is the Greek form of the Hebrew name for the valley of Hinnom (*ge-hinnom*), a spot south of Jerusalem where the rubbish of the city was deposited and burned. This was used figuratively of a place of eternal torment and suffering.

**D. Impossibility of taming the tongue (3:7-8)**—While humankind has kept some sense of dominion over the creation even after the Fall, we have lost dominion over ourselves. That is attested to by our inability to tame our tongues.

**3:8**—The tongue is a restless evil (*akatastaton*). It is full of deadly poison. It is never sufficiently at rest to be brought under control by natural man.

**E. Tongue's inconsistencies (3:9-12)**—James points out how inconsistently the tongue is used. We praise God and curse people made in his image. Calvin speaks to this situation: “He then who truly worships and honors God, will be afraid to speak slanderously of [people].” Indeed, it is not the verbal blessing of God but the cursing of people that is the true index of what lies within the speaker. James uses apt examples to point out the tongue’s inconsistencies. Do we draw fresh water and blackish water from the same spring? Can a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine yield figs?

**VI. Heavenly and Earthly Wisdom (3:13-18)**—James contrasts earthly (3:14-16) and heavenly wisdom (3:17-18).

**A. Wisdom that is known and shown (3:13)**—Once again, James begins by addressing teachers. Wise (*sophos*) was a term used among the Jews for a teacher, scribe, or rabbi. Understanding (*epistemon*) refers to an expert, one with special knowledge or training. The outstanding characteristic of those with wisdom and knowledge should be humility. This is a temper of spirit in which we accept his dealings with us without dispute or resistance. It is the opposite of self-assertiveness or the clever promotion of one’s own interests.

**B. Earthly wisdom characterized (3:14-16)**—The mere possession of knowledge is no guarantee of wise and truthful utterance. James elaborates on the characteristics of false wisdom:

- Arrogance (3:14) in the persistent justification of one’s own sins.
- Self-deceit, which is implicit in the type of arrogance spoken of in 3:14.
- Earthly (3:15), in that it views life from the limited perspective of this world.
- Natural (3:15), in that its thinking is circumscribed by the unregenerate nature.
- Demonic (3:15), not in the stark, raving, but having its origin and orchestration from evil.

**3:14**—Selfish ambition (*eritheian*) speaks of a self-serving attitude bent on gaining advantage and prestige for oneself. Bitter envy (*zelon pikron*) is selfish, sinful zeal. It is all about getting ahead.

**3:16**—Where selfish ambition and bitter envy exist, you find disorder (*akatastasia*) and evil practice. The scene is set in anarchy, turmoil, and in petty, worthless considerations. This emanates from self-occupation and self-assertion.

**C. Heavenly wisdom characterized (3:17-18)**—James describes heavenly or true wisdom:

- Pure that is wholly free from defilement.
- Peace-loving and promoting concord.
- Considerate (*epeikes* = gentle and kind).
- Submissive, in that it is easily persuaded or willing to yield one’s own rights.
- Full of mercy, a deep sympathy for those in misfortune.
- Impartial (*diakritos*), that is not making discriminatory distinctions.
- Sincere and without hypocrisy. The hypocrite in the Greek theater was one who wore multiple masks. The sincere person has learned to live without masks.

These kinds of virtues don’t just suddenly appear. They only appear when there has been a steady habit of prayer and self-discipline. Heavenly wisdom comes from above and comes through the Spirit in perseverance and discipline. There is a challenge for Christian people here to be able to tell the truth about the way the world really is and about the way unregenerate people are really behaving without

becoming perpetual grumps. There is a vast amount of beauty, love, generosity, and goodness in the world, even in its fallen state.

**3:18**—There can be no peace until the claims of justice are met. Heavenly wisdom attends these concerns.

**VII. Submitting to God as a Remedy for Worldliness (4:1-17)**—James examined false, worldly wisdom in 3:14-16. In this text, he elaborates on worldly attitudes. Friendship with the world puts you at enmity with God. James is getting into his readers' faces. They are backbiting and fighting just like people in the world around them. They were spiritual adulterers, married to God and yet having a long-running affair with the world. He identifies sources of antagonism between people (4:1-3), reproves spiritual unfaithfulness (4:4-6), urges submission to God (4:7-10), and critiques fault-finding (4:11-12) and arrogant self-sufficiency (4:13-17).

**A. Causes of conflict and quarrels (4:1-3)**—James speaks of fights and quarrels in their midst and queries about the source of these. Was it not because of their self-seeking attitudes turned sour? Was it not that they were lusting and fighting rather than praying? Was it not that when they prayed, they prayed to gratify themselves rather than to please God or help others? Were they not reducing the sovereign God to a celestial bellhop?

**4:1**—Fights (*polemai*) and quarrels (*machai*) were normally terms used of national warfare and had become forceful expressions of any kind of open hostility. Why was this the case for these people? Because their pleasure (*hedonon*) was the overriding desire of their lives. *Hedonon* is the term from which we derive our word "hedonism".

**4:2**—You kill (*phoneuete*) is hyperbole for hatred and intense dislike, akin to the thought of texts like Matthew 5:21-22 and 1 John 3:15.

**4:3**—Spend (*dapanesete*) on your pleasures is the same word used for the excesses of the Prodigal son (see Lk. 15:14).

**B. Friendship with the world is hatred toward God (4:4-6)**—Spiritual infidelity was behind the conflict and quarrels noted in 4:1-3. Adulteress is a figure of speech for this infidelity (see Hos. 2:2-5; 3:1-5; 9:1). Friendship with the world (*kosmos*) was preferred to fellowship with God. *Kosmos* as used here refers to the world system controlled by the evil one rather than the created, physical world. The Lord longs for our devotion and will richly shower his grace on those who humbly come to him. The Lord sets a high standard for his people's wholehearted love and devotion but gives grace greater than the rigorous demand he makes.

**4:5**—This verse speaks of God's jealous longing for his people's love and devotion. It is not a direct Old Testament quote but combines the thought of texts like Exodus 20:5 and 34:14. Jealousy (*phthonos*) often denotes a malicious ill-will towards those more fortunate. However, it is not always used negatively, especially when used of the expectation of exclusivity in our relationship with God or our spouses.

**4:6**—This verse quotes Proverbs 3:34, which speaks of God opposing the proud but richly supplying grace to the humble.

**C. Submitting to God (4:7-10)**—The flesh (4:1), the world (4:4), and the evil one (4:7) orchestrate a resistance to the Lord God's good direction. James urges us to humble submission to God

and to draw near and be cleansed. James issues a series of commands calling for immediate response. It is a forceful way to demand action. The imperatives James uses moves from resisting the devil and coming near to God, to purifying themselves, to repenting of worldly demeanors and actions, to a concluding reference to the humility he initially referenced (4:6). Note how humility bookends these imperatives (4:6, 10).

James highlights major deficiencies in the world of his day—humility and faith. They needed to repent and clean up their act. To humble themselves and turn away from their double-mindedness (4:8; see 1:8). This is the stuff of sustained spiritual re-direction. This is not an I’m so sorry line, a quick nod to God and back to the real stuff—worldly business. That simply won’t do. They needed to resist the devil and his lures and submit to God and acquire their souls with patient endurance.

**4:8**—Those who approach God most frequently live closest to him and find it easier to resist Satan. “Wash your hands” uses Jewish ceremonial backdrop to demand pure conduct. “Purify your hearts” insists on purity in thought and motive.

**4:9**—This comes across like a killjoy text. However, it must be seen as a counterweight to their basic hedonism described in 4:1. The joy and laughter referred to here is worldly pleasure. It is the people’s burning lust for pleasure than occasions this powerful call to repentance.

**D. Backbiting and judging (4:11-12)**—Here, James is illustrating the Christian’s danger of compromising with the world by emphasizing a sphere of conduct where he or she might be tempted—that of worldly talk which runs other people down. He warns of judgment on those who slander and judge others. Backbiting and judging ought not characterize the people of God.

**4:11**—Slander (*katalaleite*) conveys a sense of speaking about others behind their backs. Backbiting is a subtle form of self-exaltation and places the slanderer in the position of passing judgment. In passing judgment, the critic has usurped a position of authority reserved for God alone.

**E. Presumptuous confidence rebuked (4:13-17)**—James pictures a conversation between self-confident traveling traders as a warning to believers of the worldliness which causes its victims to neglect God and arrange their lives as though he did not exist and they alone were masters of their destiny. God had no place in their plans. Such presumptuous confidence for the future is denounced in Proverbs 27:1 and in the parable of the rich fool (Lk. 12:16-21). Indeed, they are ignorant of what the future holds, and frailty and transience of their existence undercuts any presumption. Both life itself and what we can do with it depend on the divine will. To leave God out of our plans is an arrogant assertion of self-sufficiency, a tacit declaration of independence from God.

**4:16**—Boasting (*alazoneia*) is an arrogant presumption concerning the future. The same word is used in 1 John 2:16, the boastful pride of life.

**4:17**—Knowing what should be done, obligates a person to do it. It may be true that we more often leave undone the things we ought to do than to do the things we ought not to do. Our lives and faith tend to grow passive in the way that James is relentlessly criticizing. This verse proscribing sins of omission has wide-ranging implications.

**VIII. Retribution for Rich Oppressors (5:1-6)**—Throughout the rural areas of the Roman Empire, including much of rural Palestine and Galilee, rich landowners profited from the toil of people who worked their massive estates. James holds up the unrighteous rich as an example of divine retribution awaiting those who misuse wealth. He first declares the coming judgment on wealthy oppressors (5:1)

then lists their crimes, including hoarded wealth (5:2-3), unpaid wages (5:4), luxury and self-indulgence (5:5), and the murder of innocent people (5:6).

The wealthy are taken to task for the way they acquired their wealth. They withheld wages (5:4) and they perverted justice (5:6a). They had the political power to get what they wanted, and they backed that up with the world's version of the golden rule—he who has the gold, makes the rules. The rich are also taken to task for the misuse of their wealth. They hoarded it (5:2-3), kept it from others that were due (5:4), and lived wastefully in luxurious self-indulgence (5:5). James speaks of what misappropriated and misused wealth does to people—

- It erodes character (5:3);
- It promotes injustice to sustain itself (5:4, 6);
- It misses the opportunity to do what is right (5:3);
- It will certainly be judged (5:1, 4, 5).

Like the Lord Jesus, James is taking on the economic oppression built into the fabric of Judean society. The official rulers bore most of the blame and stole most of the coin, whether in the Temple practices or the agricultural labor practices of the day. They also set the tone of injustice that ran through the entire system. Individuals certainly made these practices worse, but there was systemic inequity all around.

The difference between his denunciation of the rich and the violent speech he condemns elsewhere in the letter (1:19, 26; 3:1-12; 4:11) is that James appeals to God's judgment rather than to human retribution and retaliation. Note that this type of denunciation by James concluded in costing him his life. In the interim between the Roman procurators Felix and Albinus, a Jewish high priest had James illegally executed for his denunciations of the Jewish wealthy class, including the high priest and his pals.

**A. Their misery prophesied (5:1)**—Weep (*klausate*) and wail (*ololyzontes*) could be paraphrased shriek. This conveys misery exploding through the lips. The wealthy oppressors are receiving a serious wake-up call. There are eternal consequences for their injustice.

**B. Their misery justified (5:2-6)**—James lists the offenses—hoarding (5:2-3), unpaid wages to the deserving poor (5:4), decadent luxury and self-indulgence (5:5), and the condemnation and murder of innocent people (5:6).

**5:2-3**—The first crime charged is hoarding. Their wealth rots rather than relieving the misery of the poor. The corrosion of wealth is a witness to their greed and selfishness. The treasury of accumulated wealth becomes in effect the treasury of divine wrath from which God will draw in judgment.

**5:4**—Their second crime is withholding wages (see Deut. 24:14-15; Mal. 3:5). The rich were of a tyrannical disposition and thought that the rest of humankind lived only for their benefit. “The Lord Almighty: is a transliteration of “God Sabaoth”, referring to the Lord's sovereign omnipotence. He will be the champion of the poor.

**5:5**—Their third crime is luxury (*etryphesate*) and self-indulgence (*espatalesate*). *Etryphesate* refers to soft enervating luxury that demoralizes. *Espatalesate* refers to extravagant, wasteful living. The rich were fattening themselves for judgment. This is one of sharpest warnings about careless luxury in the Bible.

**5:6**—The fourth crime was murder. Their decadent and oppressive ways did not even respect life itself,



even when there was no offense and no defense was offered. They became fiends to sustain their unjustified position and wealth.

N.T. Wright zeroes in on 5:6 and asserts that what other translations render “innocent men or people” should be “the Righteous One”, meaning the Lord Jesus. He thinks that these oppressors in this segment are the Jerusalem elite, who were the murderers of Messiah.

**IX. Perseverance in Suffering (5:7-12)**—The oppression of the rich (5:1-6) is the backdrop of this call for patience (5:7-12). He urges his readers not to retaliate but to exercise long-suffering patience towards the rich who oppress them. He is calling for stout-hearted perseverance through trying circumstances. This exhortation is built around three illustrations: the farmer (5:7-9), the prophets (5:10), and Job (5:11).

**A. Perseverance in view of the Lord's return (5:7-9)**—Patience is the self-restraint that enables the sufferer to refrain from hasty retaliation. It relates to long-suffering with people rather than things. The farmer’s patience was in waiting for the crop to mature. In Palestine, the early rains came in October and November soon after the grain crop was sown. The later rains came in April and May as the grain was maturing. The farmer’s patience through this process points to our waiting for the Lord to appear and make things right. Coming (*parousia*) was used to describe the official visit of a monarch to a city within his dominion. A Christian is to remember that the Lord is coming back when tempted to take his own vengeance.

**5:9**—Grumble (*stenazete*) can be translated “sigh” or “groan”. It speaks of inner distress more than open complaint. Christians are not to grumble, groan, or complain against one another.

**B. Examples of perseverance: Prophets and Job (5:10-11)**—The second and third examples of patient perseverance are the prophets and Job. The prophets experienced affliction and responded with long-suffering patience (*makrothumia*), the self-restraint that does not retaliate. However, in 5:11, the term is perseverance (*hupomone*), which is the long-suffering determination to face severe trials without giving in to infidelity. Job’s suffering is the example cited.

**C. Plain speech and perseverance (5:12)**—Swearing and irreverent oath-taking is common when we are under extreme stress, and we want to emphatically support what we are saying. James commands plain, truthful speech. This text has been used by people to ban the taking of any oath, even national loyalty oaths. I don’t think James is saying that there is no place for formal oaths (e.g. in a court of law, in swearing in ceremonies, etc.) but rather is denouncing levity in the use of God’s name. However, I think oaths in the church need rethinking. Requiring an oath or similar embellishments to our own forthright statements is like debasing the coinage. Our honest, plain statements are not enough, we need the extra embellishment that the world requires. Really? And exactly why is this? Does it highlight control needs and community suspicion that is unbecoming?

**X. Prayer in all Situations (5:13-18)**—James 5:13-16 constituted a call for prayer in every circumstance. Are you in trouble? Pray. Are you sick? Pray and call for the elders to anoint you for healing. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed. James 5:17-18 illustrates the effectiveness of sincere prayer by pointing to Elijah.

James addresses this subject with great integrity. He was known as a man of prayer to the point of bearing the nickname “Camel knees”. He was the physical embodiment of Jim Eliot’s quote: “The saint

who advances on his knees never retreats.”

**A. Call for prayer (5:13-16)**—Are you in trouble? Are you happy? Are you sick? Do you feel the need to confess or to intercede for others? James thinks it’s time to pray. Indeed, it seems that he always thought that it was time to pray. We are to allow God to be our internal monitor through the vicissitudes of life.

James’ terse, Proverbs-like style leaves some of these sayings with the difficulty of discerning their context. Does 3:14-15 deal with faith-healing or does it combine prayer with the best medicinal practices of the day? Does 5:16 authorize auricular confession of sins to a priest? En-mass public confessions? Confessions to a spiritual mentor? Does 5:16 imply that they were sick because they were sinning?

**5:13**—Trouble (*kakopathei*) was a term used in reference to the Old Testament prophets’ troubles and those of the early Christian evangelists (see 2 Tim. 2:9, 4:5). Prayer rather than introspective self-pity is in order. Happy (*euthumei*) speaks of exuberance for which prayer is a proper outlet.

**5:14-15**—The oil’s application here has been interpreted in a sacerdotal manner, as a medium for miraculous faith-healing, and as symbolic for the best medical practices of the day. Roman Catholics see this text as pointing to Extreme Unction, now called Anointing for the sick, where a priest anoints a sick person with consecrated oil in the belief that such anointing is an effective medium for the forgiveness of sins where the sick person cannot avail themselves of the sacrament of Penance. Faith healers see this text as involving God for miraculous healing. Those tending to avoid either the sacerdotal or the faith-healing views emphasize the oil’s medicinal value and assert that James is calling for prayer and the application of the best medicinal practices of the day. The last sentence of James 5:15 suggests the possibility of sickness as a disciplinary agent (see 1 Cor. 11:30).

**5:16**—Is James advocating public confession as a typical practice? Is this confession to be with spiritual mentors? Is the force of this text that only brethren who are reconciled with one another can pray effectively for one another?

This text has been cited by the Roman Catholic Church to justify the practice of auricular confession to a priest. Luther incisively replied: “A strange confessor! His name is ‘one another’.”

**B. Effectiveness of sincere prayer: Elijah (5:17-18)**—James illustrates the effectiveness of prayer by citing Elijah. He was human like the rest of us (*homoioopathes*), inheriting the same nature, emotions, and weaknesses. That is on display in 1 Kings 17-18, when he ran from Jezebel. The text does not explicitly say that Elijah prayed, but that can be inferred from 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:42. James mentions Elijah prayed and rain ceased for three and one-half years. That length of time is not recorded in 1 Kings 17. It reflects the later rabbinical tradition and the Lord’s own words (see Lk. 4:25).

**XII. Reclaiming Straying Saints (5:19-20)**—The connection of this section with the previous one would seem to be in the privilege and duty of prayer in all circumstances. There is a time to reclaim wayward brethren, but this must be done in gentleness and humility (see Gal. 6:1-2) and in dependence on the Holy Spirit. When dealing with another’s offense, watch your heart attitude. You are to be a restoring agent, not a prosecuting attorney.

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