

# The Letter of James

## Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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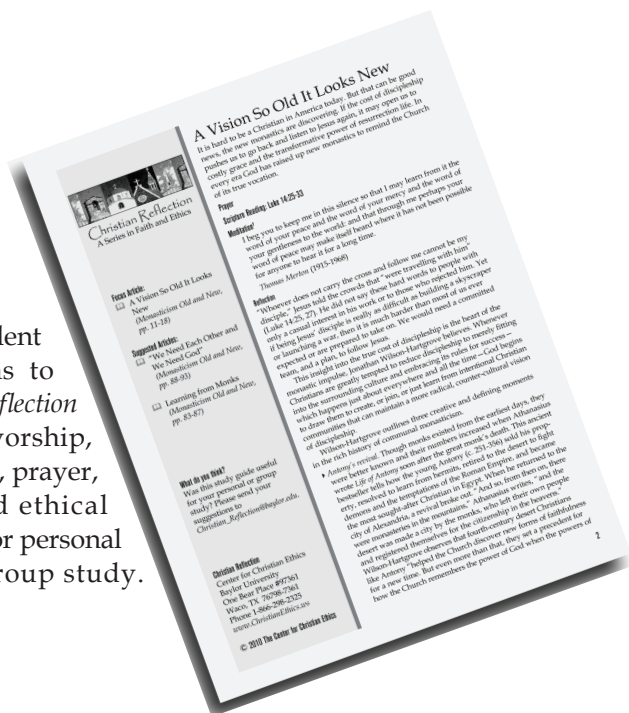
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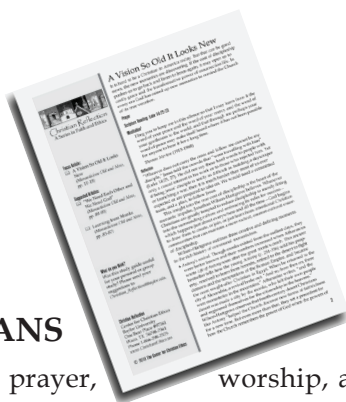
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### GOD GAVE US BIRTH

On a common misreading, the letter of James seems like an awkward misfit that constantly focuses on works instead of the grace of God through Christ. Instead, the letter is an appeal for disciples to become what they are: the firstfruits of a restored creation, set free to live according to God's character.

### FAITH-IN-ACTION: AN ETHIC OF "PERFECTION"

James challenges us to live faithfully, to "be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Such wholeness or completeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together. Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith.

### TAMING THE TONGUE

The things that we say or fail to say serve as a barometer of our Christian character, according to James. The ability to master our words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity.

### JAMES'S THEOLOGICAL GRAMMAR

A theological grammar of James, guided by the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith, can help us uncover the letter's rich Trinitarian theology. It enables a faithful community to mine this sacred text for a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs "every good work."

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One who hears the Word of God but doesn't act accordingly is like one who "observes his bodily face in a mirror" but turns away and forgets what he looks like. In James's parable, Kierkegaard explains, we learn that Scripture is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should govern our lives.

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James calls the Church to be a living sacrament of friendship with God, a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a more promising and truly human way of life. This is what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.

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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Though often neglected by scholars and church members alike, the letter of James has much to teach us about God's grace and our faithful response within the Church. Our contributors sift James's vivid illustrations, pithy parables, and trenchant sayings for their transforming possibilities for our discipleship.

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Though it is too often neglected by scholars and church members alike, the letter of James has much to teach us about God's grace and our faithful response within the Church, the body of Christ. Yet to hear and practice its wisdom, Timothy Luke Johnson has warned, we must let this epistle speak to us "in terms of its own voice rather than in terms of its supposed muting of Paul's voice." Our contributors do this by sifting James's themes for their transforming possibilities for our discipleship.

According to one common misreading, the letter of James is a theological embarrassment for Christians, ignoring the grace of God through Christ and exhorting readers to pull themselves up by their spiritual bootstraps. But the opposite is true, as Miriam Kamell shows in *God Gave Us Birth* (p. 11). "James sees God as beginning a new work of creation in the Church," she writes. "This work is initiated by God's will and sustained by his presence, but now the word has been implanted and the calling is thereby higher and yet truly achievable."

Another problem is that the letter of James can seem to wander about in a disorganized way. In *James's Theological Grammar* (p. 36), Robert Wall orders the epistle's major teachings around five themes—the Creator God, Christ Jesus, Community of the Spirit, Christian Life, and Consummation—to help us uncover its rich Trinitarian theology. James insists that religious



orthodoxy must be thoroughly embodied, Wall notes. "James articulates practices a 'pure and undefiled' congregation performs as acceptable to God: a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality."

Patrick Hartin in *Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of "Perfection"* (p. 20) traces the theme of purity through the epistle. To be "pure" or "unblemished" or "perfect" (*teleios* in Greek), according to James, is to be complete and authentic. This involves giving oneself wholeheartedly in obedience to God in the context of God's people. "Such wholeness or completeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together," Hartin concludes. "Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith." In *Taming the Tongue* (p. 29), Todd Still notes how frequently James returns to the subject of purity or integrity in speech. "For James, what one says or fails to say serves as a barometer of one's Christian character," Still writes. "The (in)ability to master one's words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity."

The moral instruction in James often comes alive through vivid illustrations, pithy parables, and trenchant sayings. No wonder, then, that James was a favorite epistle of Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth-century Christian philosopher who loved arresting word-play. As Stephen Evans explains in *Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word* (p. 62), Kierkegaard understood James's parable of the mirror (1:22-27) as a sly exposé of our strategies to avoid hearing God's word as addressed to us. We will squabble about the most difficult passages in the Bible or study "ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries" to indefinitely postpone really hearing what God is saying to us.

An especially arresting image is James's depiction of Abraham as "a friend of God" in stark contrast to the "friendship with the world" that so tempts us. In *Living as the Friends of God* (p. 70), Paul Wadell explores how friendship of God unfolds in community through joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. "James calls the Church to be a living sacrament of friendship with God, a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a more promising and truly human way of life," Wadell concludes. "This is what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them."

When our other contributors meditate on the rich illustrations, parables, and sayings of James, they express their reflections in words. For the art cover of this issue, we asked graphic designer Paul Soupiset to meditate on James through sketching. In *Drawing James* (p. 46), Heidi Hornik describes Soupiset's process of "liturgical sketching," in which he draws inspiration from both the biblical text and the iconographic tradition. She traces elements of Soupiset's *James the Less* (on the cover) to El Greco's *Apostle St. James the Less*, Orthodox icons, Gothic church windows, and medieval Gospel illuminations.

Bruce Gillette and Carolyn Winfrey Gillette offer a worship service (p. 53) based on the themes of wisdom and friendship in James. Carolyn is a prolific hymn writer, and the Gillettes' liturgy features two of her fine hymn texts, including "O Lord, May All We Say and Do" (p. 60) written especially for this issue. They capture the spirit of James in a beautiful litany of thanksgiving, which begins "We know that we cannot earn your love, but we can respond to your love. You call us to live holy lives out of gratitude for all that you have done for us," and goes on to thank God for many specific people who are daily exemplars of faith in action.

In *James's Amazing Grace Gumbo* (p. 79), Bert Montgomery marvels at the biblical characters who James admires as exemplars. "A reckless reading of the epistle sees only legalism," Montgomery warns. "But if we take time to savor its flavor like a Cajun making gumbo, because James stirs in a heaping amount of Abraham, a good sprinkling of Elijah, and just a pinch of Rahab, we will taste rich grace through and through."

"Faithfulness in the epistle of James does not stop with a profession of faith, but is a ticket to a life of continued transformation and conversion," Jeremy Colliver observes in *Following James's Map* (p. 83). "James offers a map to a continuing life of transformation. Along its two roads—a responsible relationship with others and a personal struggle against sin—that Jesus laid out and James takes up, we are to walk ourselves and to lead others." By the students with whom Colliver ministers, these roads are too often confused with "religious busyness." So, he concludes, "We must help them understand that doing church activities is not the life of faith, but it can lead to a life of faith."

In *Finding a Central Thread in James* (p. 87), David Moffitt reviews three recent studies—Patrick Hartin's *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James*, Luke Timothy Johnson's *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*, and Richard Bauckham's *James*—which share two themes: "James is not a random, unconnected collection of moral teachings; and James should be freed from being read primarily in terms of its apparent contradiction of Paul." The authors tease out different unifying threads in the epistle, but with a common purpose of making James relevant for the Church today. "What strikes me most about these volumes," Moffitt concludes, "is the refreshing ways they attempt to bring together what many biblical scholars hold asunder—substantive historical analysis, exegetical work, and constructive theological engagement." Surely James would approve. ☩

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# God Gave Us Birth

BY MARIAM J. KAMELL

The letter of James is commonly misread as an awkward misfit that constantly focuses on works instead of the grace of God through Christ. Instead, the letter is an appeal for disciples to become what they are: the first-fruits of a restored creation, set free to live according to God's character.

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According to a common but unfortunate reading, the epistle of James appears to be an awkward New Testament misfit that constantly focuses on works instead of the grace of God through Christ.<sup>1</sup> It is assumed that James needs justification instead of allowing it to challenge our presuppositions. In fact, James has a profound theology that undergirds the whole epistle, but as with other wisdom texts, the theology provides the foundation and frame for the epistle without being often overt. There are several places, however, where the theology does become explicit, and James's view of salvation becomes most clear in 1:16-18, 21, and 2:12-13.

James follows the covenantal pattern set up by God's interactions with Israel in the Old Testament. "The ideal relationship that should exist between YHWH and Israel is a relationship of love," Alexander Rofé notes. "YHWH loved the Patriarchs (Deuteronomy 4.37; 10.15) or Israel (7.8) and for that reason elected the nation. The nation, for its part, must respond to him with complete love (7.5; 10.12; 11.1, 13, 22), which means absolute loyalty to YHWH and acceptance of his service with all one's heart."<sup>2</sup> God, of his own free will, chose Israel and made them his people in love. The correct response to such love from God would be love demonstrated through obedience. God promised immense blessings for obedience, but disobedience brought oppression in its wake. This was not a capricious punishment on God's part, however. Israel was called to be an image of God in a world that

followed the path of Lamach, to be a light to the nations, and this calling was to be made possible because of God's choice of and presence with Israel.

Where Israel failed, however, James sees God as beginning a new work of creation in the Church. This is a work again initiated by God's will and sustained by his presence, but now the word has been implanted and the calling is thereby higher and yet truly achievable. In retaining this covenant-

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**James sees God as beginning a new work of creation in the Church. This work is initiated by God's will and sustained by his presence, but now the word has been implanted and the calling is thereby higher and yet truly achievable.**

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al pattern into the New Testament, James is not a rogue teacher but closely following his own teacher, Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The same teacher who promised, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28), also told the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23-35). In the parable, a king grants mercy to the first servant of his own free will. This mercy ought

to have evoked a similar mercy in the servant toward another, but its failure to do so leads the king to revoke his initial mercy. Jesus' point is clear: God's mercy is not fickle, but it will bear fruit in keeping with God's character.

Given this background in the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching, the questions we should ask when approaching James are twofold. First, how does James see the relationship with God commencing in his audience? Is there any sense of God's initial mercy as appears in Jesus' parable of Matthew 18, or does James present an a-theological ethic for which he is often condemned? And second, can James's language of judgment and mercy reveal this to be a profoundly freeing epistle? These two questions will guide us as we sift the subtle theology of James.

### **A COVENANTAL PATTERN OF SALVATION (JAMES 1:16-18)**

The epistle of James follows in essence the three-fold pattern of God's covenant with Israel: a choosing done solely by the will of God, a law being given, and later judgment or mercy to be attained on the basis of adherence to that law. James, however, makes some subtle changes to the pattern, making it clear that something has shifted within this Jewish framework.

First, James issues the caution of 1:16: "Do not be deceived, my beloved." This initial warning against deception serves as a hinge verse, standing both as a rebuke for blaming God for falling prey to one's own temptation, as well as pointing forward to the truth of what God does give. Often verse 16 is paired with verses 13-15 (as seen in the NRSV), but the warning may actually

be better joined with the following statement regarding God's character. Placed with verses 17-18, verse 16 functions to reiterate and underline 1:6-7: doubting the goodness and generosity of God's character is dangerous and can lead to one not "receiving" from the Lord (1:8).

James gives a solid introduction to the God about whom the audience must not be deceived. While it is not always emphasized, James's theology of God is central to the epistle, laid out most clearly in chapter one as the foundation of the commands that follow. James sees God as the good and generous giver (1:5-8, 17-18, 21) and the just judge (1:9-11, 12, 26-27). These themes repeat and intertwine throughout the epistle in ways crucial to understanding the theology of salvation therein. For instance, the fact that God is the one "who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" (1:5) makes the illustration of an ungenerous faith in 2:14-17 all the more shocking. Faith in *this* God, James argues, should make persons generous, for they have experienced such a character of generosity themselves; their ungenerous behavior toward the hungry, therefore, calls their faith into question. In the same way, calling God the source of temptation and doubting his good generosity implies that one has not actually known him.

Having warned the audience not to be misled about who their God is, James proceeds to make God's character apparent, beginning in 1:17 with the redundant "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down...." This repetitive statement highlights the extravagant generosity of God, from whom good gifts keep coming. These gifts are not the same as the outcome of endurance in 1:12 (the rewarded "crown of life"), but the sum total of every good aspect of life that cannot be earned, such as wisdom (1:5) and redemption (1:18). In contrast, to those who sought to argue that God could be both the source of good gifts and yet also responsible for temptation, James adds that in this God "there is no variation or shadow due to change." Commenting on this image of God's constant goodness, Dan McCartney states that in contrast to the heavenly "wanderers" (i.e., the planets), "God cannot be made to wander, nor does he entice people to wander.... [This] solidity and reliability of the wisdom of God was important, and the steadiness of the believers as lights is an important corollary in demonstrating the divine wisdom to the world."<sup>4</sup> God consistently seeks to give his people the good things—above and beyond what they need—so that they can live lives marked by God's consistency and generosity.

To James, life like this is not a dream or something gained by a simple grit-your-teeth ethic, but rather stems from God himself, as seen in the first half of verse 18: "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth." That initial expression, "in fulfillment of his own purpose," all derives from a single participle that begins this profound verse in a highly emphatic position. Most likely a causal participle, it can also be translated, "because he was willing." Here is where James makes his most profound theological statement: as with all prior covenants with his people, every-

thing begins with God's willingness — with his work in electing and redeeming his people. Luke Timothy Johnson recognizes the power of this verse, which was widely picked up by the early church writers, when he calls it one of the "noblest" statements about God in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> God was willing, and more than that, he willed that this process of a birth begin and brought it into being; James emphasizes that this is the only reason the com-

munity exists.<sup>6</sup> The language of birth here contrasts with the "birth" of death in 1:15 as a result of giving way to sin. Having been reborn by this "word of truth," the audience is no longer bound by their fallen natures to sin.

Having been birthed by the "word of truth," the second half of the verse is where James indicates that he is not simply thinking in terms of Jewish covenantal patterns: "so that we would become a

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**James 1:21 commands readers to be what they are. The same word, by which they have been reborn, they still have yet to "receive." Although the word has been implanted, it cannot take root and grow in a hostile environment.**

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kind of first fruits of his creatures."<sup>7</sup> The language of firstfruits brings overtones of the Old Testament sacrifice, the tithe due to God, as well as Pauline language in which Christ is the firstfruit of the resurrection and the new order. While firstfruit language is typical of the Old Testament, here James intimates that he and his audience have become the firstfruit of creation — something new, different, and indicating a greater fullness to come. The firstfruit language is a powerful indicator of James's revolutionary thinking, for this community to whom he writes is not simply a continuation of God's covenantal pattern but rather indicative that God is doing something new.<sup>8</sup> Here we see the first hint that James has moved into a new covenant theology, affirming the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-34. James's use of the qualifier "a kind of," however, may well speak to his awareness of the "already/not yet" nature of this new birth. The believers have been reborn, but still struggle with obedience (James 1:13-15), something not anticipated by the prophets. This birth by the word of truth, however, has set the audience apart as the consecrated firstfruits, signs of a greater harvest to come, birthed by and dedicated to God. Typical to covenant patterns, love and obedience ought to follow. Election and service cannot be separated.

Essentially, James 1:16-18 provides the most crucial statement of James's theology of salvation. It includes an affirmation of God's true nature as consistently generous and good in contrast to the believers' own wavering natures. This passage then spells out the greatest of those gifts as salvation unto firstfruit status, a reality brought about solely by the will of God



through his word. Because of this remarkable change of status, James is then able to move on to implications for the Christian life.<sup>9</sup>

### **A TRANSFORMED LIFE (JAMES 1:21 AND 2:12-13)**

James's theology does not simply end with new birth. The implications of the firstfruit identity are far reaching and require cooperation. It is crucial, however, to hold in mind always the starting fact: original birth into this community is done solely "because he willed it," and the subsequent cooperation has its starting point solely within this willed work of God. It becomes clear, however, that people may choose not to make that work of God a reality in their own lives.

The place this is most evident is just three verses later, in 1:21. There James writes the twofold command: "Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." The first half of the verse is a call to purity, a call to cleanse themselves of the moral filth that defiles. The participle that begins the verse is usually translated as a command: "rid yourselves," or "take off, put off." There are two things worth noting. First, this is after verse 18, where the audience has already been "given birth by the word of truth" and declared "firstfruits," so this work they are to do is in context of already having a new identity. Second, however, it is also a command for them to engage themselves into the process, for they have to choose to separate themselves from the moral filth that currently marks them. This is not an order for their passivity: it is not that something will *be done* to them. Rather, they are to *do* this cleansing.

Taken as a whole, verse 21 commands that the audience *be* what they *are*. The same word, by which they have been reborn, they still have yet to "receive." Although the word has been implanted, it cannot take root and grow in a hostile environment. This verse may echo Jesus' teaching about the sower and the seed on varied grounds (Matthew 13:1-9; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8), for depending on the condition of the ground receiving it, the seed was not always able to bear fruit. In the same way, the "word of truth," as it is implanted in the soul, requires a hospitable environment if it is going to produce its fruit: the saving of their souls. Obedience makes it possible for the word to do its work.

Significantly, it is not obedience that does the saving; the *word* is what has the power to save souls, but it can reach its effect only when it is received in purity and humility. Contextually, the hearers have already been reborn, have already had the word implanted, but still the ground must be prepared if the word is to have its effect. The following verse makes the need for active reception even clearer: "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (1:22). To hear the word of salvation but not obey it is simply another self-deception of a salvation-threatening sort. James does not teach salvation by works, but a salvation made possible by

obedient preparation for the word to work, reflecting the teachings of Jesus.

Another passage that should be discussed in relation to the covenantal nature of James's theology is James 2:12-13. Having moved away from the inception of salvation (birth by the word of truth), James now points to the final judgment. He warns his readers: "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." James's view of salvation in this passage fits a wisdom paradigm about the reciprocal nature of showing mercy. This view can be found throughout the Old Testament (especially Deuteronomy and the writings of the prophets), but is codified in the book of Proverbs. For instance, in Proverbs 21:13, the sage observes, "If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard." This proverb states the same negative principle of James 2:13, Bruce Waltke contends, that "The merciful obtain mercy (Proverbs 3:3-4; 19:17; Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:38), but the callous will not be pitied (cf. Psalm 109:6-20; Matthew 18:23-35; 25:31-46; James 2:13)."<sup>10</sup> Throughout the wisdom literature when God's justice is held up for examination, it is found repeatedly that the wicked receive judgment and the righteous receive mercy either in this life or afterward. Furthermore, one of the consistently crucial characteristics of the righteous is mercy. Mercy begets mercy, as will be finally and ultimately pronounced by Jesus: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). The sages and Jesus all recognize a truism in God's character: those who are merciless to the helpless earn a reciprocal mercilessness for themselves in their time of need. Regarding Jesus' beatitude, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison query whether in the Gospel of Matthew "'mercy' and its cognates imply that merciful action is the concrete expression of loyalty to God, and that what God demands is not so much activity directed Godward ('I desire...not sacrifice') but loving-kindness benefiting other people ('I desire mercy')," and suggest that the beatitude refers to "the hope of receiving mercy at the last judgement."<sup>11</sup> All of the wisdom tradition leading up to and including Jesus agrees that the character of mercy is crucial for a merciful assessment at the final judgment.

This background informs our reading of James 2:12-13. He begins with obedience to the "law of freedom," which contextually is closely tied, if not identical with, the "word of truth" by which the entire process of salvation was started in 1:18 (the shift from "word" to "law" happens within the single paragraph of 1:22-25). Judgment will be done *according to the same entity* as that by which we are saved. James is not introducing a new, unexpected standard of judgment; instead, it can be described as "of freedom" (2:12) because it is the same "word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21). That encouragement, however, is paired with the equally strong warning of the necessity of mercy. On the one hand, a lack of mercy indicates a failure of fruit from the implanted word, and reveals us as self-deceived as to our status. On the other hand, James focuses on the responsiveness of God to



human actions. Just as human mercilessness invokes a reciprocal response, the positive restatement of 2:13a is that human actions of mercy can *succeed* in averting a negative judgment! Indeed, human acts of mercy evoke a response of mercy from God (cf. again Matthew 5:7).

Hence the exultant statement in 2:13b, that mercy triumphs over judgment. *Because God is just*, when his people live in accordance with his word, God *in his justice* responds to his people with mercy, not judgment. In the wisdom literature, perfection is never required for a merciful judgment by God, but a repentant heart that seeks to live in accordance with God's own character receives mercy. Mercy is a crucial sign of a life lived according to the law of freedom, of the fruiting of the implanted word of truth in a receptive heart. This is an unsurprising conclusion from the God who declared "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; citing Hosea 6:6).

## CONCLUSION

Salvation, begun by the work of the good and generous God in his willing choice to give birth to a new people, comes full circle as he responds to seeing his own character now bearing fruit in his people. Kent Yinger observes that in Judaism, "one's *works* are not viewed mechanically or atomistically, but are a unitary whole revealing one's inner character of faith. Faith and works are not in competition with one another. Rather they represent two sides of the single coin of human response in the light of God's gracious covenantal arrangement."<sup>12</sup> As Moses reminded the people that God did not choose the Israelites because they deserved it but because he loved them of his own will (Deuteronomy 7:7-8), so also James sees God working again in creating a new people as the firstfruits of a renewed creation, chosen by his will (James 1:18). But in the same way Israel is warned against being a stiff-necked people who think they are "safe even though [they] go [their] own stubborn ways" (Deuteronomy 29:19), so also James warns those who deceive themselves and think that merely hearing the word is sufficient (James 1:21-25). For both groups, the warning of Deuteronomy 29:20 stands stark: "the LORD will be unwilling to pardon them, for the LORD's anger and passion will smoke against them. ...the LORD will blot out their names from under heaven," or, as James puts it, "judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy" (James 2:13a).

In contrast, those who accept their status as firstfruits, actively receiving the word of truth in humility and obedience, find that their character begins to resemble that of their God. Their lives reveal the truth of the implanted word, through their *doing* of it (James 2:22-25); they become people marked by endurance, mercy, and wisdom. The implanted word has the power to save their souls precisely because it transforms them into people who mirror God's image and he recognizes himself when it comes time for judgment. Just as the king in Matthew 18 expected his mercy to bear fruit and the sower in Matthew 13 expected his seed to bear fruit, so also the implanted word

ought to bear the fruit of a character transformed to the likeness of God, and thereby bring about the salvation of the person.

Salvation in James begins with God's willing choice and ends with God's willing recognition, but in between is the individual's choice to submit and obey in humility. Without that step, the implanted word is like that seed that fell on rocky soil and sprang up, but quickly withered and did not bear fruit. James 1:21 implores the hearer to "welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." It is an appeal to become what they are: the firstfruits of a restored creation, set apart by the creative word of God to be the very images of God, set free to live according to his character and therefore triumphant over the threat of judgment.

## NOTES

1 The epistle of James is not given much respect in biblical and theological circles. Within the newly reviving field of James studies, Martin Dibelius (1883-1947) famously claimed, "James has no theology" (Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, translated by Michael A. Williams, [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976], 21, 22). Alexander Chester concludes that "James's theology is limited in many ways," with little to no development on any theme but that of works (Alexander Chester, "The Theology of James," in Andrew Chester and Ralph P. Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 44-45).

2 Alexander Rofé, *Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 13. Ray Carlton Jones, "Deuteronomy 10:12-22," *Interpretation* 46:3 (1992), 281, simplifies thus: "Election and service belong together in the Bible. The consequence of the Lord God's sovereign election of Israel is that Israel must serve the Lord."

3 Regarding the relationship of James to Jesus' teaching, see Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999). In Robert W. Wall and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, eds., *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), see Patrick J. Hartin, "James and the Jesus Tradition," 55-70; John S. Kloppenborg, "The Reception of the Jesus Tradition in James," 71-100; and John Painter, "James as the First Catholic Epistle," 161-182.

4 Dan McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 109. David Garland, in "Severe Trials, Good Gifts, and Pure Religion: James 1," *Review and Expositor* 83:3 (1986), 392, observes "God's goodness... is not as periodic as the full moon or the morning sunrise. It does not fade into the west." See Donald J. Verseput, "James 1:17 and the Jewish Morning Prayers," *Novum Testamentum* 39:2 (1997), 177-191, for a plausible background for this description of God as the "Father of lights" within Jewish prayers said each morning to thank God for his faithfulness in bringing the new day and his mercy evidenced thereby.

5 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 204.

6 Tim Laato observes, "The participle [*boulêtheis*] expresses (with the same sense as with Philo) the free and sovereign will of the creator. It underscores the independence of salvation from human powers." See his "Justification According to James: A Comparison with Paul," translated by Mark A. Siefried, *Trinity Journal* 18:1 (1977), 43-84, here citing 48.

7 For more regarding James and the new covenant, see Miriam J. Kamell, "Incarnating Jeremiah's Promised New Covenant in the 'Law' of James," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 83:1 (2011), 19-28.

8 In contrast with my interpretation, L. E. Elliott-Binns, "James 1:18: Creation or Redemption?" *New Testament Studies* 3:2 (1957), 148-161, views this as a reference "to the original creation of which man was the crown and the promise." So also Martin Klein, "Ein Vollkommenes Werk": *Vollkommenheit, Gesetz Und Gericht Als Theologische Themen Des Jakobusbriefes*, *Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament* 139 (Stuttgart, Germany: Kohlhammer, 1995), 129-134; and Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, *Black's New Testament Commentary* (London: A. & C. Black, 1980), 77-78. There is broader support that this refers to a work of new creation, e.g., Dibelius, *James*, 104-107; Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 435; J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Macmillan, 1897), 57-58; Franz Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 1975), 94-95; Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 89-90; and Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, *Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 105. Also Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 130, reminds us that the Christian view of new creation included the entirety of creation in its final revelation.

9 See Matthias Konradt, *Christliche Existenz nach dem Jakobusbrief: eine Studie zue seiner soteriologischen and ethischen Konzeption* (Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), for the most systematic work toward these conclusions regarding James 1:18 and 21. He acknowledges the importance of the rebirth imagery in 1:18 and the consequent, inherent move towards obedience, but does not see a connection with 2:12-13 and the nature of judgment there.

10 Bruce K. Waltke, *Proverbs 15-31*, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 178-179. On the other hand, Tremper Longman, *Proverbs*, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 393, suggests this proverb refers only to human reciprocity.

11 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, volume 1 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 455.

12 Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds*, *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series* 105 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62, where he also qualifies, "One's works of obedience are not viewed as *merits*, each to be recompensed in atomistic fashion, but instead are the observable manifestations of the covenant loyalty of the unseen heart.... The requisite obedience (righteousness) was never viewed as *flawless perfection*, but might be better described by such terms as *consistency*, *integrity*, and *authenticity* of action."



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# Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of “Perfection”

BY PATRICK J. HARTIN

James challenges us to live faithfully, to “be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Such wholeness or completeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together. Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith.

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Our world has an obsession with perfection. We are bombarded by commercials on television, advertisements on the Internet, and communications on social media websites that offer hope for attaining the perfect body, the perfect partner, the perfect house, the perfect job. The Pulitzer-Prize author Chris Hedges has pointed out that science and reason have been so elevated within our culture that society believes it is on the path to perfectibility. This ignores the fundamental understanding of human nature and sin:

The concept of sin is a stark acknowledgment that we can never be omnipotent, that we are bound and limited by human flaws and self-interest. The concept of sin is a check on the dreams of a perfect world. It prevents us from believing in our own perfectibility or the illusion that the material advances of science and technology equal an intrinsic moral improvement in our species.... The secular utopians of the twenty-first century have also forgotten they are human.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately the search for perfection is rooted in the human desire for happiness. Augustine captured the essence of this human desire for happiness in his prayer to God, “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, there is a certain unease in talking about perfection in the context of our discipleship. In the first instance, it runs

counter to the foundational concept of Christianity that we are all God's children in need of God's grace to sustain our lives. We cannot attain our own perfection without God's help. Further, as Hedges points out above, such a concept of perfection leads us to deny the reality of sin in the world. Since we are human, we are all capable of sinning, of turning from God to place trust in oneself. In this article I will examine the concept of perfection in the letter of James to illustrate how it applies equally to us today in the twenty-first century.

## **PURITY AND PERFECTION IN JAMES**

Like the Book of Proverbs, James embraces the Hebrew concept of Wisdom that comes from God to enlighten believers in a practical way about how to lead their lives.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

*James 3:13, 17*

The letter's opening address defines the ethos or identity of James's audience, "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1). In the Greek text, James uses the article in conjunction with the word "Dispersion" to show he has in mind a literal understanding of the Diaspora as those areas outside Palestine where the people of Israel live.<sup>3</sup> Further, the title, "the twelve tribes" refers to the people of Israel who trace their origins back to the twelve sons of Jacob (see Exodus 24:4; 28:21; and 39:14). Since the time of the great King David, the people of Israel have been hoping for the reconstitution of their twelve-tribe kingdom, as Ezekiel 37:21-22 states: "Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land...."

In this opening address, James expresses hope in the fulfillment of this twelve-tribe kingdom. James goes farther by identifying his audience as "the first fruits of [God's] creatures" (James 1:18); they are descendants of the people of Israel and are those who have been reborn ("first fruits") as followers of Jesus Christ. James situates them as living outside of Palestine. His admonitions (ethics) strive to socialize this audience and form their identity (ethos). In effect, he says to them: "You are part of that people of God stretching way back to the patriarch Abraham and now given a new identity as the 'first fruits' of God's creatures in the person of Jesus Christ." For James, his instructions remind them of who they are. Their identity requires them to lead their lives in a specific way. By embracing these guides to action, the members of the community show their distinctiveness from the wider society.

The epistle is characterized by the frequent appearance of the adjective “perfect” (*teleios*).<sup>4</sup> I have examined elsewhere the background to James’s use of this word in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Septuagint.<sup>5</sup> The Septuagint used the Greek adjective *teleios* (as well as the adjective *amōmos*) to translate the Hebrew word *tamim*.<sup>6</sup> An examination of these words points to an origin within the Hebrew cult, especially that of the sacrificial Temple

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**For James, an authentic integral life is not achieved on one’s own. It can only be accomplished through God’s grace. God alone is the one who empowers the individual to attain wholeness and completeness.**

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worship. Cultic laws required all offerings to be free of any defect, “unblemished” (*teleois*). For example: “Your lamb shall be *without blemish* (*teleios*), a year-old male” (Exodus 12:5). This concept was analogously applied to other dimensions of life. For example, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless (*teleios*) in his generation” (Genesis 6:9).

The conceptual meaning of *teleios* gives expression to

three essential dimensions. First, it expresses the idea of wholeness or completeness, of a being remaining true to its original constitution. Second, it refers to giving oneself wholeheartedly and unconditionally to God in the context of God’s people. When persons were grounded in this relationship, they would be whole, perfect. Third, such a wholehearted dedication to the Lord is expressed through obedience to God’s will. Since the Torah expresses God’s will for God’s people, a wholehearted dedication to the Lord embraces a life led in obedience to the Torah, to the laws of the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

This threefold understanding of *teleios* explains James’s meaning. His first appeal to believers occurs while their faith was being tested (James 1:2-4). Perseverance in time of trials produces “a perfect work” (1:4, KJV). The second use of the term *teleios* in this verse—“so that you may be *perfect* [*teleios*] and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4, ESV)<sup>8</sup>—refers directly to believers who persevere and remain true to their faith in the midst of trials. They are perfect and complete, as are unblemished offerings in the Israelite cult that are offered to the Lord. They are people whose faith is undivided and who conform to their original constitution as God intended. The cultic dimension continues when James says believers hold a special place in God’s plan of creation: they are “the first fruits of God’s creatures” (1:18). This cultic image is a reminder of Israel’s offering of the first fruits of their fields and flocks to God. Against this background, the hearers/readers as the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” are the first of God’s creatures to begin the reconstitution of God’s people.<sup>9</sup>



For James, perfection is a search for wholeness as an individual and as a community in relationship to the one God who guides them through the Torah. The rhetorical aim of James's advice is the socialization of a community of believers. He relies upon the fundamental notions of purity and holiness within his society, notions that he owes to his Jewish heritage.<sup>10</sup> James describes the Torah as the "perfect law" (James 1:25). The law spells out the way the believing community acts in order to maintain access to God and to keep their wholeness. John Elliott notes, "To be holy, according to James, is to be whole—with respect to personal integrity, communal solidarity, and religious commitment."<sup>11</sup>

In expressing his understanding of perfection as wholeness, James reflects the heart of Jesus' teaching. The greatest commandment is the law of loving God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). In other words, Jesus challenges his followers to the love of God with their entire being. This embraces a wholeness in *thought* (heart, soul, and mind) and *actions* (strength). Matthew's Jesus stresses that one cannot be divided in loyalty to God: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). This corresponds to James's stress that one cannot seek friendship with God and with the world: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

### **JAMES FOR TODAY: PEOPLE OF FAITH-IN-ACTION**

The message of James continues to challenge us to live out our faith. The basic understanding of perfection in James relates to the idea of *wholeness or completeness*, "so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:4, ESV). Wholeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together. Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith. In a world becoming more and more secular, the guiding light of faith must enlighten our path forward.

For James, an authentic integral life is not achieved on one's own. It can only be accomplished through God's grace. God alone is the one who empowers the individual to attain wholeness and completeness. Believers are "the first fruits of God's creatures" (James 1:18). If anything is lacking, God is the one who promises to provide (1:5).

The word "integrity" captures the meaning and intent of James's concept of perfection.<sup>12</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines integrity in this way: "1. The condition of having no part or element wanting; unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety. 2. Unimpaired or uncorrupted state; original perfect condition; soundness.... 3.a. Innocence, sinlessness.... b. Soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue; uprightness, honesty, sincerity...."<sup>13</sup>

Integrity demands consistency between faith and actions. Jesus called for integrity in his disciples. He constantly challenged the lack of integrity in the religious leaders of his own tradition. His criticism of the religious authorities is well summed up in his use of the word “hypocrite” to define them: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs...” (Matthew 23:27-28).

Believers should be a sign to the world of the consistency between faith and action that defines their lives. James’s stress on the importance of actions is always to be seen as a unity with one’s faith. He calls us to be people of faith-expressed-in-action.

### **EMPATHY WITH THE PAIN OF OTHERS**

There are a number of concrete ways in which the message of James challenges us to be people of integrity. First, we should express integrity through *empathy with the pain of others*. Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels demonstrates that he wants people to be whole, healthy, and connected. This is evident from the numerous miracles where Jesus reaches out to the sick who come to him for healing. For example, the leper who comes to Jesus and begs, “‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’” (Mark 1:40-41).

We can appreciate better the pain of others when we too have experienced similar struggles. The epistle of James opens with a positive evaluation of the experience of trials and sufferings in an individual’s life or as part of a community, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (James 1:2). James does not embrace sufferings for themselves. Instead, he embraces them as a means of strengthening one’s faith, perseverance, and adherence to one’s beliefs.

Since we are all made in God’s likeness, we share a bond with each other as children of the one Father. Being part of a community, we embrace as our own the struggles and pain of the individual members of that community. This is the context for James’s warning against gossip and hateful speech: “No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those are made in the likeness of God” (3:8-9).

In his first encyclical, *God Is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI expressed the responsibility we have to share in the pain of others:

For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.... The Church is God’s family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of the pain and sufferings of others should awaken in us a response of solidarity. As followers of Jesus, we should strive to make



whole once again whatever dehumanizes another. James draws attention to aspects that dehumanized the workers of his day, such as withholding daily wages from day laborers (James 5.4). Such action deprived a family of what was essential for their survival. Today we live in one of the wealthiest nations on the planet. Yet much of what we consume relies on the exploitation of migrant workers or on sweat shops demanding hard long hours of work for meager pay. James's message is as relevant today as it ever was. Give attention to the exploitation and sufferings of those on the margins of society and do something to make society whole.

### **UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR THE POOR**

Jesus' message called for a reversal of attitudes toward the poor and those who are marginalized. We encounter his outreach to the poor and marginalized throughout all the pages of the Gospels. James follows the same path in his instructions to his communities. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). Jesus challenged his disciples to help the cause of those against whom society discriminates. James continues this same challenge in his plea to ensure that faith and action go hand in hand.

I love this graphic parable that James offers so forcefully:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

*James 2:14-17*

Jesus' final parable of the judgment of the nations in the Gospel of Matthew expresses the same message:

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

*Matthew 25:37-40*

Undoubtedly faith brings with it a social responsibility. The message of James is an application of the message of Jesus to his own world. The message of James challenges us in our turn to take this message of Jesus to heart.

James stands in a line reaching back through Jesus to the prophets who challenged social injustices and opened the eyes of their people to the needs of the poor and marginalized within their society. If God champions the poor, so too should God's people. James is a voice for the voiceless, a champion of the poor. He speaks out strongly against any form of discrimination against them. On one thing James is certain: God hears the cries of the poor (James

5:4) and ultimately James believes that the greedy rich will be overthrown (5:5-6).

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Every believer today is challenged to take James's message to heart. James speaks to our world as much as he did to his first-century world and asks us to embrace an option for the poor as Jesus did. "That James takes up their cause as an apostle of Jesus Christ demonstrates his option for the poor," Pedrito Maynard-Reid writes. "Like James, we,

as modern representatives of Jesus Christ, are called to take that option and to take up the cause of the oppressed."<sup>15</sup>

James's message of concern for those who are discriminated against resonates very strongly with me. The image in James 2:2-4 of the rich man and poor man entering the synagogue together and how they were treated differently is a striking parable that challenges every situation analogously where discrimination occurs. I was born and grew up in South Africa during the Apartheid era. Discrimination against another human person (created in the likeness of God) simply on the basis of the color of their skin was an accepted way of life for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Every aspect of life was determined: where you could live, where you could go to school, whom you could marry, what employment you could seek—all this on the basis of the color of your skin! What is even more horrendous was that the vast majority of the people in South Africa confessed that they were Christian! Faith and action were totally divorced from each other. This same challenge that James identifies lies at the heart of our concerns for our present world where struggles for justice continue that center around overcoming discrimination in the areas of race, gender, and class.

### **EMBRACING AN AUTHENTIC WAY OF LIFE**

The heart of James's message calls for an authentic human existence that brings faith and action into perfect harmony. James takes seriously the equali-

ty of all, an equality that avoids every form of discrimination. Christians belong to a faith community that embraces the same ways of acting with one another, with Jesus (through faith in him), and with God (through friendship with God [James 4:4]).

I have drawn attention to the two dimensions of authentic Christian perfection: the individual and the community. We live in an individualistic society where we view everything from the individual's perspective. However, the biblical writers generally address the individual as a member of the community. It is a wonderful reminder as we read the Sacred Scriptures to see that God's message is addressed to us as members of a community. Ours is the task to rediscover our bonds within the family of the Christian community and to challenge the Christian community to remain true to the call to integrity by embracing those values that James stresses: values of equality, integrity, concern for the poor. James's ethic of perfection remains as valid today as it was for the first generation of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

Contrary to the hope of our culture that sets such a store in the "dream of human perfectibility,"<sup>16</sup> where science and reason are saviors, the letter of James draws attention to the reality of human nature and of sin. We place our hope in the "wisdom that comes from above." Through the power of almighty God's grace we are able to put faith into action. Through God's grace the believer leads a life that strives for maturity, integrity, and perfection. It is imperative to realize that nothing can be accomplished alone: in union with the community and through God's grace one grows in a more perfect relationship with God and with one's community.

As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote,

Nothing worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

1 Chris Hedges, *I Don't Believe In Atheists: The Dangerous Rise of the Secular Fundamentalist* (London: Continuum, 2008), 14.

2 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

3 Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, Sacra Pagina 14 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 50-51.

4 The adjective *teleios* appears four times in chapter one (twice in 1:4, and in 1:17 and 1:25) and again at 3:2. The verb *teleioō* "to make perfect or complete" appears at 2:22, while

the verb *teleō* “to fulfill, to accomplish” occurs at 2:8. This clearly shows it is an important concept for this letter.

5 See Patrick J. Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 22-32.

6 You can see this in the following passages: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless (*teleios*) in his generation” (Genesis 6:9); “Your lamb shall be without blemish (*teleios*), a year-old male” (Exodus 12:5); and “You must remain completely loyal (*teleios*) to the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 18:13).

7 Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 26.

8 Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

9 Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 89.

10 The social-scientific study of Christian origins recently has increased our understanding and awareness to the role that cultic, moral, and social purity rules played in Second Temple Judaism and the world of early Christianity. See Mary T. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966); George W. Buchanan, “The Role of Purity in the Structure of the Essene Sect” *Revue de Qumran* 4 (1963), 397-406; John H. Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy*, Novum Testamentum Supplements XII (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1966); John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981); John H. Elliott, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical and Social Scientific Perspective: Holiness-Wholeness and Patterns of Replication,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (1993), 71-81; Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1973); Jacob Neusner, “History and Purity in First-Century Judaism,” *History of Religions* 18 (1978), 1-17; and Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 149-183.

11 Elliott, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical and Social Scientific Perspective,” 78.

12 See Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 101.

13 *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, volume 1 (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1088.

14 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2006), §25, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html).

15 Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 98.

16 Hedges, *I Don’t Believe in Atheists*, 184.

17 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 63.

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# Taming the Tongue

BY TODD D. STILL

The things that we say or fail to say serve as a barometer  
of our Christian character, according to the letter of James.  
The (in)ability to master our words is both a metric for  
and a mark of spiritual maturity.

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When former Utah governor Jon Huntsman announced that he was “suspending” his campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, he called upon the remaining Grand Old Party contenders vying for the chance to challenge the sitting President to abandon their “current toxic form of political discourse,” maintaining that it “does not help our cause.”<sup>1</sup> Truth be told, contemporary presidential hopefuls do not have a corner on the market of “rancorous rhetoric.” If careless, unsavory, slanderous, and hostile speech all too frequently typifies political campaigns, it also weasels its way into Christian conversations and congregations.

Richard J. Bauckham reckons that in the letter of James “control of the tongue” is a pivotal ethical and spiritual concern, rivaled only by the call to be in “solidarity with the poor.”<sup>2</sup> Careful reading of and reflection upon the epistle lend support to Bauckham’s contention. The purpose of this essay is to explore what “Just James” has to say to “the twelve tribes of the Diaspora” (1:1) regarding speech and the ethics thereof.<sup>3</sup> An overview of the letter with regard to this matter will give way to a more thorough examination of James 3:1-12, the passage within the epistle which deals most expansively with our subject. By way of conclusion, I will consider how contemporary Christians might best appropriate James’s instruction regarding the (mis)use of words.

## WHAT IS THAT YOU SAY?

Although instruction regarding speech is present elsewhere in the New Testament,<sup>4</sup> it is ever-present in the letter of James. Were one to go through the letter line-by-line, one would discover that “speech matters” permeate

the epistle. In fact, some forty-six of the letter's one hundred and eight verses — an arresting forty-three percent of them! — touch upon "speech matters" in one fashion or another. Put otherwise, two out of every five verses in James have something to do with speaking.<sup>5</sup>

James 1:19 is the first passage in the letter that directly addresses speech ethics. There, James enjoins his audience to be "quick to hear" and "slow to speak." Furthermore, at the close of the first chapter, James describes the "religion" (*thrēseia*) of people who do not bridle their tongues (that is, control their speech; cf. James 3:2-3) as "worthless" (*mataios*).

Turning to chapter 2, James calls his recipients to conjoin faith and works, for "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17; cf. 2:26).<sup>6</sup> Those who "hear the word," James insists, must "do the word" (1:22-25). Words alone will not suffice; one must put words to work. James asks, "What good is it...if you *say* you have faith but have not works?" (2:14, italics added). It is altogether likely that James intentionally addresses the topic of the tongue (3:1-12) on the heels of his instruction regarding faith and works (2:14-26) in order to underscore the necessary congruence between one's words and works. Believers are to "so speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty" (2:12).

Passing over James 3:1-12 for now (see further below), we note in 3:14 the admonition not to be boastful and (thereby be) false to the truth. James denounces boasting more forcefully still in chapter 4. In chiding prideful profiteers for presuming upon God and the gift of life, James asserts that they are boasting in their arrogance. Moreover, he maintains, "All such boasting is evil" (4:15-16). Instead of boasting before God, James commends humble, faithful prayer, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (4:6; cf. Proverbs 3:34; Job 22:29; see, too, James 1:9; 4:10). Thus, those who lack wisdom should ask of God in unwavering faith (James 1:5-6; note also 5:15). Not only does God give to all people "generously and ungrudgingly" (1:5; cf. 1:17) as a "compassionate and merciful" Lord (5:11), but also, James reminds by offering an example from the life of the prophet Elijah, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5:16-18).

Apart from James 3:1-12, there are two other extended passages in James where speech features. The first 4:11-12, where James instructs believers not to "speak evil against one another" or to "judge" another sister or brother. To do so, James reckons, is tantamount to speaking evil against and judging the law, which in turn places one in the tenuous and untenable position of judging the law as opposed to doing it. Given that there is but one lawgiver and judge—God—and that God, who is one (2:19), is the only one "who is able to save and to destroy" (4:12), believers should resist the temptation to judge their neighbor (cf. 4:7). On the contrary, they are to love their neighbor (2:8; cf. Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14) and to be marked by mercy, since "mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:13; cf. Matthew 5:7; 9:13; 12:7).



The other verse to consider here is James 5:12. In language strikingly similar to Jesus' teaching (Matthew 5:34-37),<sup>7</sup> the letter's auditors are told not to swear "by heaven or by earth or with any other oath." Their "yes" is meant to mean "yes," and their "no" is meant to mean "no" (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:17). Straightforward truth-telling renders unnecessary verbal props and additional assurances. What is more, it safeguards believers from incurring divine (eschatological) judgment (cf. James 3:1). In another probative parallel, Jesus declares, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37).

### THE PROSPECTS AND PERILS OF SPEECH

The most protracted and arresting section of instruction regarding speech in James (or, for that matter, elsewhere in Scripture) appears in 3:1-12. At first glance, it is not entirely clear how James's contention that not many recipients of the letter should become teachers (3:1) coheres with his tightly woven, highly rhetorical "attack on the tongue" that follows (3:2-12). Upon further reflection, however, the link is logical. Whatever else teachers do, they talk. Would that they used their words and influence wisely!

Given that they do not always do so, teachers can lead others astray through that which they say. Therefore, people should not receive the mantle of teacher precipitously or take the responsibility lightly, "for [those] who teach will be judged with a greater strictness" (3:1). Indeed, those who would presume to teach others need to teach themselves (note Romans 2:21) and to bear in mind that "to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). Furthermore, those disciples who serve as teachers do well to remember that there is truly only one teacher and instructor, namely, the Christ (Matthew 23:8, 10) and that they must take every necessary precaution not to place a stumbling block in the path of other believers, especially the so-called "little ones." As it happens, millstones are rather heavy and seas rather deep (note Matthew 18:6-7; cf. Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-2).

Instead of wagging their tongues, believers (including teachers!) are meant to bridle them. People, James maintains, stumble in many ways (James 3:2). That being said, those who do not stumble in what they say are said to be *teleios* ("perfect, whole, complete").<sup>8</sup> In fact, James reckons that those who are able to control their speech will be able to bridle the entire body or whole self. If a person is capable of taming one's tongue, which is depicted in this passage none too favorably as "an unrighteous world among our [bodies'] members" (3:6, RSV)<sup>9</sup> and "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8), then it stands to reason in James's moral vision that such an individual will not succumb to other sins and temptations either. For James, what one

says or fails to say serves as a barometer of one's Christian character. The (in)ability to master one's words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity.

This programmatic passage regarding speech continues with three analogies in James 3:3-5. These comparisons borne of observation demonstrate that smaller things like the tongue can in fact control bigger things like the

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**Here's the problem: pure lips require pure lives, but we have unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips. James pulls no punches. His evaluation of the human condition is decidedly pessimistic (or, one might maintain, realistic).**

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body. In the first example James notes that riders of horses place a bit, a relatively small instrument, into the horse's mouth in order to control the whole horse (3:3). In another apropos metaphor, James invites his listeners to consider something even larger than a horse—a ship. Despite its size, indeed so big that it requires strong winds to move it along the water, a comparatively little rudder guides the ship as the pilot

wills (3:4). What is true of a horse's bit and a ship's rudder is no less true of the tongue: albeit a "small member" of the human body, "it boasts of great exploits" (3:5). This correlation between the tongue and the bit and rudder (3:5a) gives way to another illustration in form of an exclamation: "How small a fire sets ablaze how large a forest!" (3:5b). Once again James observes that what is minute (a flame) can control and, in this case, consume what is massive (a great forest). By now James's point is acutely clear and amply reinforced: relative to its size the tongue wields disproportionate power. One must be circumspect in speech, therefore, lest it range out of control like an unbridled horse, a wayward ship, or raging fire.

The tongue (i.e. one's words), James figures, is an extension of one's person, a microcosm of one's character. Herein lies the problem: pure lips require pure lives, but we—like the prophet Isaiah of old—are of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5). James pulls no punches. His evaluation of the human condition is decidedly pessimistic (or, one might maintain, realistic); indeed, it is no more positive than the Apostle Paul's.<sup>10</sup> This much is made crystal clear by James's incriminating depiction of the tongue and his bleak conclusion that no human is able to tame the tongue (James 3:8).

Having noted an entire forest can be destroyed by a small fire, James declares "The tongue is a fire" (James 3:6). By employing this analogy, James has none of the valuable effects of fire in mind (for example, providing



warmth, light, or beauty), as the remainder of the verse reveals. As a fire, the tongue is “placed among our [bodily] members as a world of iniquity.” It, we are told, stains the entire body. What is more, it sets on fire the course of one’s life and is set on fire by Gehenna.<sup>11</sup> James’ scathing, relentless attack on the tongue resurfaces in 3:8, where he decries the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (cf. Job 20:16).

The ostensible fact that “no human being is able to tame the tongue” (James 3:8a) takes James aback. People, he notes, can tame and have tamed all sorts of animals. Humanity has managed to tame beasts that roam the earth, birds that fly above the earth, reptiles that crawl upon the earth, and sea creatures that swim “under” the earth. If people have tamed “lions and tigers and bears, oh my,” then why on earth do they seem impotent when it comes to taming the tongue? This question exercises James and should also animate us.

James regards duplicity in general (note his critique of being “double-minded,” or literally “two-souled” [*dipsychos*], in James 1:8 and 4:8) and duplicitous speech in particular to be deplorable. That believers would use their tongues to “eulogize (*eulogeō*) the Lord and Father” on the one hand and to “curse those who are made in the likeness of God” on the other (3:9) scandalizes him. His incredulity arises from the incongruity of such speech acts. By denouncing the incompatibility of blessing the Creator and cursing those fashioned in the *imago Dei*, James is saying more than “Stop speaking out of both sides of your mouth!” Rather, his instruction that “blessing and cursing” (3:10) ought not come forth from the same mouth of those who are believers in the “glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1) is predicated upon an ethical, biblical principle that those made by God and for God ought to be treated with dignity and respect (see, for example, Genesis 9:6).

Thus, for James, speech ethics is not simply a facet of do-goodery propped up by syrupy sentimentality like that expressed by Thumper in the movie “Bambi.” (Recall, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothin’ at all.”<sup>12</sup>) Far more than a peripheral, external accouterment meant to adorn ethical life, James sees speech to be a decidedly moral matter that is integral to the good life. Indeed, he regards unbridled, duplicitous speech as sinful and unnatural. Even as a single spring cannot produce both sweet and bitter water, nor salt water become fresh, and even as a fig tree cannot yield olives, nor a grapevine grow figs (3:11-12), neither should those who have received the “implanted word” (1:21) and who hold to the “faith of our Lord” (2:1, RSV) seek to bless God and curse others.

## HOW, THEN, SHALL WE SPEAK?

Throughout his letter James instructs believers to eschew hurtful words that tear down. He considers speech characterized by partiality (2:3-4), hostility (2:7; 3:9; 4:11), false piety (2:16), egocentricity (3:14; 4:13, 16), duplicity (3:10), and dishonesty (5:12) as sinful and harmful. On the contrary, he

encourages the letter's recipients to speak helpful words that heal, words of intercession (1:5-6), liberation (2:12), submission (4:15), confession (5:16), and restoration (5:19-20). Unwise words, like false wisdom, are to be avoided (note 3:14-16); wise words, like true wisdom, are to be articulated (see 3:17-18).

According to Ecclesiastes 3:7, there is "a time to keep silence and a time to speak." James implores his listeners to be "quick to hear" and "slow to speak" (1:19). Wisdom is required to discern when and when not to speak. James assures that God will give wisdom to those who ask (1:5). Those who seek to speak wisely do well to ask for wisdom and to allow their speech to be directed by the following question: Is that which I am about to say truthful, charitable, profitable, necessary, and timely?

In order to become wise, and not simply in our own eyes (Proverbs 26:12), so that we might speak wisely and ethically, James would insist, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8). Turning to God for wisdom through intercession (1:5) and for exaltation through humiliation (4:10; cf. 1:9) is a necessary first step for those who would serve God and speak in God-honoring ways.

Communion with and faith-filled deeds offered to God do not (only, or even primarily) occur in isolation. According to James, interaction with other believers, not to mention outsiders, should shape one's sensibilities and commitments. Chaste speech is a gift to the community and a mark of spiritual maturity.

In addition to fostering fervent prayer and congregational commitment, Scripture can shape our cognitions and help to transform our speech proclivities and patterns. Citations, allusions, and illustrations drawn from Scripture are woven throughout the letter of James (for instance, 1:1; 2:8, 11, 23, 25; 4:6; 5:11; 17-18). We would do well to be steeped in Scripture and to hear and heed what James (which is Scripture, despite Luther) says: "Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21).

All too frequently we sin with the tongue (and I include myself in this indictment). But let us hear James's invitation to consider anew how our words can woo or wound, help or harm. Then, having done so and having redoubled our commitment to use speech wisely and ethically, let us set out to undo one conversation at a time the mistaken notion that "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." In carrying out this "speech revolution," may these words of promise echo in our ears: "Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle" (James 3:2). And, more pointedly still, let us hear James's warning: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless" (1:26).

## NOTES

1 “Jon Huntsman Quits GOP Race,” *Associated Press* (January 16, 2012), [www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/01/16/jon-huntsman-quits-gop-race](http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/01/16/jon-huntsman-quits-gop-race) (accessed February 24, 2010).

2 Richard J. Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 204. Cf. William R. Baker, *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995): “James has made control of speech the premier ethical and spiritual task of [hu]man[ity]” (99).

3 On the figure of James, see John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*, *Studies on Personalities of the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999). Regarding authorship of the letter of James, see especially Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, *Anchor Bible Commentary* 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 89-123.

4 See, for example, Matthew 5:21-26; 12:36; Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14; Galatians 5:15; Ephesians 4:29, 31; 5:4; Colossians 3:8-9, 14, 16-17; 4:6; and 1 Peter 3:9-12, 15-16; 4:11. For further biblical and roughly contemporaneous non-canonical parallels, see Baker, *Speech-Ethics in James*.

5 These verses in the epistle treat speech: James 1:5, 6, 9-10, 13, 26; 2:3, 7, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 23; 3:1-12, 14; 4:2-5, 11, 13, 15, 16; 5:4, 9, 11, 12, 13-18.

6 On this oft-debated topic, see for example Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 37-43.

7 For additional correlations between James and what we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 734-735.

8 Bauckham (*James*, 177) notes that the adjective *teleios* and its cognate verb *teleioun* occur seven times in the letter (1:4 [twice], 17, 25; 2:8, 22; 3:2) and reminds that seven signifies “completeness.” Furthermore, Bauckham maintains that wholeness “is not just one important theme [in James], but the overarching theme of the whole letter, encompassing all the other major concerns.” Cf. Jesus’ admonition in the Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore, you yourselves be perfect [*teleioi*] as your Father in heaven is perfect [*teleios*]” (Matthew 5:48). Patrick J. Hartin explores James’s focus on perfection in “Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of ‘Perfection’” on pp. 20-28 in this issue.

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10 See further James 4:4, 8. Cf. especially Romans 1:18-32 and 3:9-20.

11 The phrase translated “cycle of nature” (NRSV) suggests the entire course of one’s life. Gehenna is the Jewish term for “hell” (cf. Matthew 5:30; Mark 9:45; and Luke 12:5).

12 As it happens, if Thumper’s motto were the measure of things, then James might not pass the test! See, for example, 2:20 (“senseless person”); 4:4 (“adulteresses”); and 4:8 (“sinners”).



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# James's Theological Grammar

BY ROBERT W. WALL

A theological grammar of James, guided by analogy to the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith, can help us uncover the letter's rich Trinitarian theology. It enables a faithful community to mine this sacred text for wisdom that saves and Christian maturity that performs "every good work."

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A literary grammar provides a body of rules that orders the flowchart of a composition and governs how its various parts are related together to convey meaning to its readers. The grammar of a biblical composition, such as the letter of James, consists of a body of interpenetrating theological agreements that help explain what is written and provides a *gubernaculum interpretationis*—"governor for interpretation"—to make certain a faithful community mines the sacred text in search of a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs "every good work" (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

While the theological grammar of any biblical composition is constructed from the raw materials the text itself provides, its detection is guided by analogy to the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith. For this reason the grammar statement of any biblical composition will be Trinitarian in substance, narrative in its flow, and formative in its effect. Scripture's simultaneity, which is otherwise impossible to detect amidst the sheer diversity of its witnesses, is only evinced when the interpretation of all its parts is carefully monitored by this Rule.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I attempt to construct a theological grammar of the letter of James.<sup>2</sup> It is organized by Tertullian's version of the apostolic Rule boldly set out as a body of five theological agreements in his *Prescription against Heretics*, §13. I follow his somewhat later version of the apostolic Rule for

two reasons. First, his narrative is fully Trinitarian, thereby placing it more firmly on a trajectory beyond Irenaeus's precedent that aims us toward the Nicene Creed, which is the definitive creedal analogy of apostolic faith. Second, Tertullian's articulation of apostolic religion seems prescient of the importance posited in the dialog between Scripture's Pauline and Catholic letter collections. In this sense, Tertullian's Rule helps facilitate a constructive dialog between these two disparate but complementary canonical collections.

## THE CREATOR GOD

According to Tertullian, "there is only one God, and that he is none other than the creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through his own Word, first of all sent forth."<sup>3</sup>

In like manner, James claims that God is the one and only true God (2:19). God is Creator of all things who has made every person in God's own likeness (3:9; cf. 1:17-18). God is therefore personal, to whom the believer turns when lacking in wisdom needed to pass daily spiritual tests (1:5). God is heavenly Father (1:17, 27; 3:9), from whom the wise humbly receive (1:21) good and perfect gifts (1:17) which are generously provided by God, in every case (1:17) and without discrimination (1:5). Therefore, this generous God sends forth the "word of truth" to reveal the Creator's perfect plan of salvation in order to guide the redeemed humanity into the age to come (1:18), which is a restored creation, made complete, perfect and lacking in nothing (1:4).

In particular, God has chosen those out of this broken and corrupted world who are its last, least, lost, and lame to be enriched by their love for God (2:5): as Scripture teaches, "God gives grace to the humble" (4:6b). Thus, not only are the sick healed and the sinner forgiven by the Lord in the present age (5:14-16), their worship of God (5:13) will be vindicated at God's coming triumph when those who oppress them will be destroyed (5:5-6) and their own material fortunes will be reversed (1:9-11). Indeed, God promises future blessing, "the crown of life," to all those who love God (1:12).

To love God is to do God's will; for life is granted to those who do God's will (4:15). In that God is also our Judge (4:11-12; 5:9), with the authority to save and destroy (4:12), humanity is obliged to do God's will. A concrete record of God's will is transmitted by the gift of the biblical Torah which is the rule of faith for the faith community (2:8-13). God will save those who obey the law (1:25; 2:13) and will destroy those who live foolishly and disobey the law of God. As Scripture also teaches, "God opposes the proud" (4:6a). The apocalypse of God's triumph over enemies (the deceived, the slanderous teacher, the arrogant rich, the impatient complainer, the sinner and apostate) is imminent (5:7-8), at which moment creation will be purified and restored (1:4; cf. 5:17-18), the reign of God will be secured on earth (2:5), and blessing will be dispensed therein to all those who evince by their wise

responses to their spiritual tests a robust love for God (1:12; 2:5) – such as Abraham, who is called a “friend of God” (2:23).

## **CHRIST JESUS**

According to Tertullian, “[Jesus is] the Word who is called God’s Son, and, under the name of God, was seen ‘in diverse manners’ by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth he preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, he rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, he sat at the right hand of the Father.”

The Christology of James is famously underdeveloped. Instead of more explicit formulations of Christ’s coming into the world, James rather says that God sends forth “the word of truth” into the world (1:17-18) to fulfill the promise of blessing (1:12) and to save God’s people (1:21) from the result of their deception and sin (1:13-16), which is death (5:19-20). This “word” from God reveals the plan and purposes of God’s promised salvation (1:18) and as such is a “good and perfect gift” (1:17). The word comes down from heaven as a revelation of divine wisdom (1:5; 3:17) and is especially apropos for believers during a season of spiritual testing (1:2-3). As with every article of divine revelation, this word of divine wisdom is trustworthy (1:18) and effective (1:21) in passing the spiritual test because it accords with God’s promise and plan of salvation (1:18; cf. 1:12). As such, the way of wisdom is a ‘word on target’ which points humanity toward the complete restoration of human existence so that it lacks nothing (1:4). Toward this end, then, the word is the instrument by which God creates an eschatological community which will be recipient of God’s promised blessing in the age to come (1:18; cf. 1:12; 2:5).

This heavenly word is “implanted” within the faith community (1:21) by the word of its faithful teachers (3:1), who are “wise and understanding” (3:13). Only within this community of the wise is the divine word “received” by believers who are both receptive to it (1:21; 5:12) and “pure” (i.e., spiritually mature; 1:21; cf. 1:27). They promptly do what the word requires (1:22-24) and are saved as a result (1:21), ultimately receiving the blessing promised to those who love God (1:25; 1:12; 3:18).

The subject matter of the word is summarized in 1:19 as “quick to hear” (i.e., obey the biblical Torah; cf. 1:22-2:26); “slow to speak” (i.e., use ‘purifying’ language toward and about others; cf. 3:1-18); and “slow to anger” (i.e., resist one’s innate passion for pleasure; cf. 4:1-5:6). To refuse this wisdom because of duplicity (1:6-8; 3:9-12) or deception (1:16; 1:22), and then to substitute a false wisdom (3:15), will only result in spiritual failure, social chaos (3:16), personal evil (1:13-15), and ultimately death (5:19; 1:15). On the other hand, to apply divine wisdom to our spiritual tests results in life (1:12; 3:18;



4:15; 5:20). Of this the community's sacred tradition supplies many notable exemplars such as Jesus (2:1), Abraham (2:21-24), Rahab (2:25), Noah (4:4-5),<sup>4</sup> Job (5:9-11), and Elijah (5:16b-18).

In particular, Jesus received divine approval as the "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1) because of his obedience to the "royal law" (2:8): Jesus loved his poor neighbors, who are the chosen of God (2:5), and resisted their discrimination by the rich (2:1-4). Thus, he "did well" (cf. 2:8). Indeed, as is also true for Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25), Jesus' obedience to God's will is exemplary of an observed wisdom that is quick to act upon the wisdom of "the perfect law of liberty" (1:22-25; 2:12), and especially its "royal (= kingly) law" (2:8) – the rule of God's coming kingdom (2:5). In this light, the realization of God's promised blessing (1:25) in the coming kingdom extends to all those who hold to the faith of "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1) by caring for the marginal poor and resisting worldly evils (1:27).

But this narrative of God's redemptive agent differs from the Pauline witness and is largely responsible for the disquiet that James evokes among its Protestant interpreters. According to Paul's story-line, God sends forth a Christological rather than a sapiential word, which discloses and inaugurates the promised "righteousness of God." Under the weight of Paul's Christological monotheism and his Gentile mission, this Christological word is kerygmatic in subject matter – a proclaimed "word of faith" (Romans 10:6-8) that draws near to people in order to evoke their profession of faith that "Jesus is Lord" for their salvation (Romans 10:9). The test of faith for Paul, then, is not an observed wisdom (cf. Romans 8:5) but rather an obedient faith in the trustworthiness of his proclaimed gospel (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

Further, Paul taught that the "faith of Jesus" (Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:20; 3:22), which is revealed on the Cross, resulted in his exaltation as glorious Lord (Philippians 2:5-11; cf. Acts 2:36)

and blessing for those whom he loved (Galatians 2:20). However, Paul's Christological monotheism is concentrated on Jesus' messianic death and not his ministry among the poor: salvation is the pluriformed result of Jesus' death. This conception of the messianic mission put Paul at odds with his Jewish tradition, requiring him to re-think Scripture's story about God's salvation: for him, Christ is divine wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30) and the "end of the law" (Romans 10:4).

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**James's narrative of Jesus, God's redemptive agent, differs from the Pauline witness and is largely responsible for the disquiet that this letter evokes among its Protestant interpreters.**

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## COMMUNITY OF THE SPIRIT

Tertullian's conception of church is more local and congregational; his confession that "Christ sent instead of himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe" has particular communities of believers in mind. James does as well. According to the letter, a community is created anew by the "word of truth" (as described above) that comes from God to save the world (1:18). According to God's will, the community is constituted by the "poor in the world" who are chosen to be "rich in faith" (2:5); and those pious poor who persist in their love for God will ultimately be blessed (1:12) and vindicated (5:4-6) at the coming triumph of God's reign (2:5; 5:7-11).

Members of this congregation are displaced within the world order (1:1) and face many trials as a result (1:2). A life of constant hardship and heart-break, perhaps the result of their poverty and displacement, tests their love for God (1:3). Indeed, some of the members have failed their test and have 'wandered from the truth' in sin and error; and the prospect of their eternal life is imperiled (5:19-20).

The trials that threaten the community's relationship with God come from a variety of places (1:2). The principal location is within each person, where a spiritual struggle rages. The evil spirit of envy (4:5), fashioned by the Creator but directed by the Evil One (4:7), inclines even the believer toward "friendship with the world" and hostility toward the purposes of God (4:4). Interpersonal strife, leading even to murder, results from an inward passion for pleasure (4:1-2), which corrupts the petitioner's address to God (4:3) and understanding of God's will (4:13-17). As such, the believer's desires for an easy life or vile thoughts of a rival give birth to sin and so death (1:14-15; 3:14-16) rather than to wisdom and life (3:17-18).

Without spiritual maturity, the community also falls prey to "deception" about the nature of a true and approved religion (1:16, 22, 26; cf. 1:27), rooted in a faulty understanding of God and of God's requirements for God's people. Thus, for example, a congregation may come to believe that God approves of religious orthodoxy (2:19; cf. 2:8) that is merely confessed but never embodied (1:26; 2:14-17). But the requirements of God's covenant partner are more morally demanding and active than this (2:21-26).

Clearly, the congregation is the object of hostile forces outside of itself. Not only are there rich and powerful outsiders who undermine the community's faith (2:6-7) in order to exploit poor members for their own advantage (2:2-4; 5:1-6), the congregation is surrounded by a "world" which is God's enemy (4:4). Living within an anti-God society leads naturally to the accommodation of its impurity which threatens to contaminate the congregation's life together (1:27), specifically its caring treatment of the poor, whom friends of the "world" neglect and exploit (2:2-4, 6-7; 5:3-6); its language about one another (3:6); and the resigned contentment with one's lot in life (4:4-6, 14-15), which is necessary to resist a concern for Mammon and serve the interests of God (4:7-10).



Whether besieged by the forces of evil found within the individual believer or outside the believing community, the exhortation is the same: know God's spiritual/inward and social/external requirements and be wise in response to spiritual testing. Christian formation is directed by the "wise and understanding" teachers (3:13; see "elders" in 5:14), by whom the revelatory word is "implanted" and from whom it is humbly "received" (1:21). They are summoned by the sick to administer healing "prayer in faith" (5:15) in expectation of God's imminent healing of all creation (1:4) in accordance with the Creator's ultimate purposes (1:18).

Let me only add the following footnote to the preceding portrait of the community, which according to James is covenanted with God for eternal life. The sources for the idea of wisdom in James remain contested between scholars. However, they clearly include the *topoi* and rhetorical patterns of Hellenistic moral culture.<sup>5</sup> In keeping with this intellectual tradition, the wisdom that guides the faith community through its spiritual testing is applied to an internal moral world which calls the believer to accountability for wise or foolish actions. Yet, the overarching conception of this "way of wisdom" remains largely biblical. Thus, with Scripture, James pairs wisdom with Torah (1:22-25; 2:8-10): doing the law of God (essentially moral rather than cultic) is the wise thing to do because it not only results in purity but in God's blessing for the coming age. The test of faith, then, is an observed wisdom, exemplified by Jesus and Job, Abraham and Rahab. It is a way of wisdom that fairly summarizes the biblical proverbs to love the poor neighbor (2:1-8), to speak well of others (3:17), and to resist coveting worldly pleasures that the mature believer can ill afford (4:1-5).

The character of this community for James is unrelated to its cultural or cultic identity as Jewish believers. Rather, the theological crisis is whether their poverty and powerlessness, and the spiritual test it naturally provokes, inclines them toward a more pious devotion to God (1:2-3). The status of their election (2:5) and their historic relationship to Abraham (2:21-24) is not primarily ethnic but is sociological and moral in emphasis: they are the marginal heirs of Abraham's promise (1:12; 2:5), who are friends of God (2:23) rather than of the world (4:4) because they perform merciful works like those of exemplary Abraham (2:23-24). In this sense, the sort of Christi-

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**Without spiritual maturity, a congregation may believe that God approves of religious orthodoxy that is merely confessed but never embodied. But, for James, the requirements of God's covenant partner are more morally demanding than this.**

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anity that is approved by God is an ethical religion; its witness to God is measured by the purity of its collective and personal life (1:27; 2:14-26). That is, God's eschatological requirement is for an embodied wisdom that commends the community characterized by its merciful treatment of its own poor (1:22-2:26), the purity of speech among its word-brokers (3:1-18), and the denial of worldly affections among its aspiring middle-class (4:1-5:6).

How would Paul respond to this article of the 'Gospel according to St. James'? The historical contingencies of the Gentile mission forced a different accent from Paul. While he too rejects a definition of divine election that claims Israel's special destiny and prerogatives on socio-cultural grounds, his concern in drafting a "spiritual Israel" is missiological: to include Gentile converts, who are not also Jewish proselytes, within the Christian community. Thus, God's promise to Abraham and election of his Gentile children are deduced by the presence of the Spirit and the gospel among Gentile converts (Galatians 3-4). The mark of their membership within the covenant community is not ethical but Christological: whether they have faith in Christ.

### **CHRISTIAN LIFE**

Although Tertullian does not supply a core belief about the Christian life in his articulation of the apostolic Rule of Faith, he supplies a grammar statement in his seminal essay on the incarnation, *On the Flesh of Christ*. I use it here to complete his articulation of the Rule. In my mind, this statement captures the essence of his conception of Christian existence as a new creation, but one conceived of as a bodily or material, even a mundane creation rather than of a form cast in docetic and largely inward ways. In his incarnation, the Son assumes a human body like our human bodies—a finite, frail, "earthen vessel" capable of sinning. That Jesus lived a sinless life is not due to having a special body unlike our own; but it is due to his selfless devotion to the Father, maintained by the power of the Spirit. Likewise, the prospect of the believer's doing the good works of God's will is not so much the effect of Christ's death and resurrection, as Paul puts it in Romans 6; it is by his sinless example that sin itself is abolished, which his disciples may now imitate even if ultimately in martyrdom—the "baptism by blood." In any case, here's Tertullian's statement: "For in putting on our flesh, [Christ] made it his own; and in making it his own, he made it sinless" because "in that same human flesh he lived without sin."<sup>6</sup>

According to James, then, covenanting with God to receive God's promised blessing is conditioned upon following a pattern of new life exemplified by Jesus. The community addressed by James is in a "diaspora"—a place of dislocation where its marginal existence occasions a testing of its faithfulness to the ways of God. James addresses immature believers in particular who are especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a difficult life. They must obey this "word of truth"—heavenly wisdom—and practice "pure and undefiled" behavior as the public mark of friendship with God.

Rather than a code of right conduct that demands rigorous compliance, the most important element of the moral universe shaped by James consists primarily of congregational purity practices. While the interior life of the individual believer is surely an important feature of this same moral universe, the community must resist the moral pollutants of the surrounding “world” (or anti-God) order and care for the needy neighbor in accordance with God’s “perfect law of liberty” (1:27; cf. 2:1-13). There is a sense in which the rest of the composition articulates more fully what practices a “pure and undefiled” congregation performs as acceptable to God (cf. 2:24).

We note four purity practices mentioned in James that are consistent with the idealized portrait of the church in Acts. First, the legacy of the Jewish piety personified by legendary James is articulated in the letter as a *piety of poverty or powerlessness*, of which the Lord Jesus himself is exemplary (2:1), which may occasion suffering that tests the community’s devotion to God. In fact, according to James, the hallmark of religious purity is to protect and care for the poor (1:27; 2:2-7) in keeping with Torah’s stipulation (2:8; cf. 1:25). This practice of a community of goods reflects an asceticism that has replaced the world’s preoccupation for material goods with a heartfelt devotion to God (4:1-5:6; cf. 1 John 2:15-17).

Second, the concern of a *community of goods* for a radical social purity extends also to speech (3:17) as a principal element of good human relations, which identifies a collective interest in healthy speech patterns as a fundamental moral property of Christian existence (cf. 1 Peter 3:13-17; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 1 John 3:18; 3 John 10).<sup>7</sup>

The literary *inclusio* of James (1:1 and 5:19-20) delineates a kind of spiritual Diaspora that frames a third practice of the community’s ethos: a commitment to *rescuing wayward believers* from theological and moral error not only to preserve doctrinal purity but also to insure their end-time salvation (cf. 2 Peter 2; Jude 17-25).

Finally, the virtue of *hospitality*, especially to the poor and powerless members of one’s own congregation (James 1:27; 2:14-17), introduces a theme that is central to the discourse on Christian life in the Catholic Epistles (cf. 1 Peter 1:22; 4:9-11; 1 John 3:17-20a; 2 John 9-11; 3 John 5-8). In fact, hospitality toward other believers is not only an effective means for maintaining a congregation’s solidarity against its external threats, but also the concrete demonstration of its separation from the world order (cf. James 1:27).

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**James articulates practices a “pure and undefiled” congregation performs as acceptable to God: a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from error, and hospitality.**

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## CONSUMMATION

According to Tertullian, “Christ will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh.”

James centers the community’s hope on the event that concludes the biblical story: the coming triumph of the Lord at the end of this age (5:7-9). At this climatic and cosmic “any-moment,” the eschatological community will be confirmed and vindicated, even as their enemies are judged and destroyed (5:4-6); for God will judge the foolish and bless the wise (1:12; 2:12-13; 4:11-12; 5:5-11).

On the ultimate import of this final event, James and Paul substantially agree. Both assent that divine judgment and blessing are finally creational activities, which bring about the new order of things (1:4; 1:18; 3:18; 5:17-18). Both agree that the Lord’s *Parousia* is imminent, so that the convictions of Christological monotheism and the demands of public witness are made more urgently and embodied more readily. The time for repentance is short because the time of judgment is at hand (5:7-9; 5:19-20).

## CONCLUSION

James stands at the head of the Catholic Epistles, which are the seven New Testament letters addressed to the early Christian churches at large. The theology of James can be an interpretive guide to the other six letters in this collection—1 and 2 Peter, 1 John (and by extension 2 and 3 John), and Jude.<sup>8</sup>

This conclusion is counterintuitive in the modern academy, which has long argued that the intractable diversity of the Catholic Epistles requires their independent analysis.<sup>9</sup> But the Church’s reception of these epistles into the canon as a sevenfold collection commends that the faithful interpreter read and use them together for Christian formation as the integral parts of an interpenetrating whole. Moreover, the Church’s placement of this collection in the New Testament canon alongside of an existing collection of Pauline letters cues a mutually-informing conversation between them, perhaps one the Church already had come to recognize is essential for a right reading of an oft-misunderstood Pauline witness!<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1 For more discussion of this point, see my “The Rule of Faith in Theological Hermeneutics,” in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 88-107.

2 A few paragraphs of this grammar are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 27-34.

3 When quoting from the *Prescription against Heretics*, I slightly modify the translation by Peter Holmes in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3, edited by Alexander Roberts, James

Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.), as revised by Kevin Knight for New Advent, [www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm) (accessed March 12, 2012).

4 The allusion to Noah is demonstrated by Lewis J. Prockter, "James 4.4–6: Midrash on Noah," *New Testament Studies*, 35:4 (October 1989), 625–627. Prockter suggests that James 4:5, which he translates "the spirit which [God] has caused to dwell in us inclines strongly toward malice," evokes memories of Noah and the flood (cf. Genesis 8:21).

5 See, for instance, Sophie S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980); Howard Clark Kee, *Who Are the People of God? Early Christian Models of Community* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 29–39, 55–87; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995); and Duane F. Watson, "James 2 in Light of Greco-Roman Schemes of Argumentation," *New Testament Studies*, 39:1 (January 1993), 94–121, and "The Rhetoric of James 3:1–12 and a Classical Pattern of Argumentation," *Novum Testamentum*, 35:1 (January 1993), 48–64. Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 75–81, locates wisdom in the wider Jewish culture of antiquity. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011) takes a mediating position and suggests that James draws from the wisdom traditions of Hellenism and Judaism.

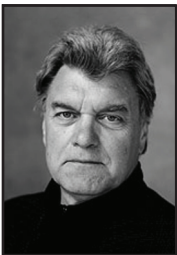
6 Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, § 16, slightly modified from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3, revised by Kevin Knight for New Advent, [www.newadvent.org/fathers/0315.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0315.htm) (accessed March 12, 2012).

7 Todd D. Still explores James's speech ethics in "Taming the Tongue," on pp. 30–37 in this issue.

8 The following observations are more fully developed in a series of essays in Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr and Robert W. Wall, eds., *Catholic Epistles and the Apostolic Tradition: A New Perspective on James to Jude* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

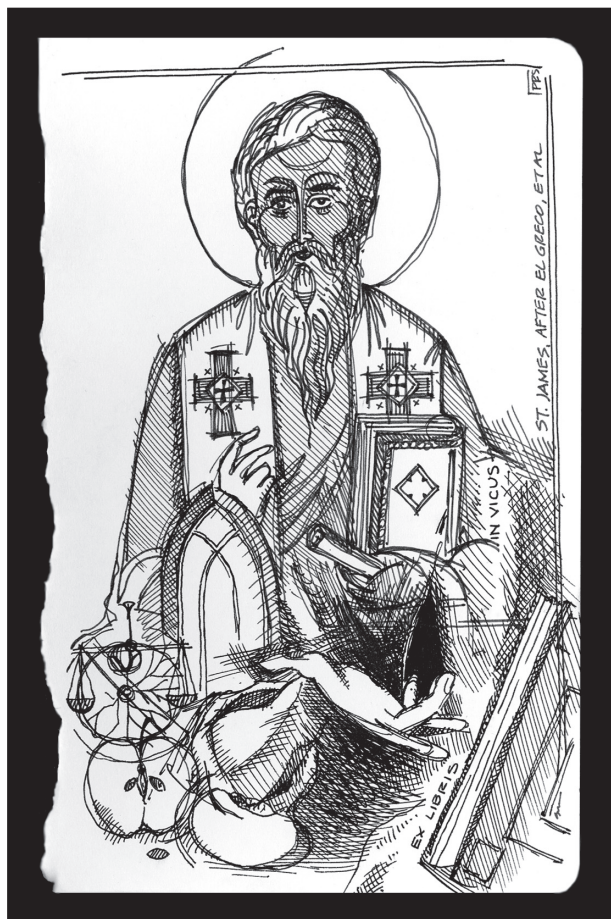
9 A quick survey of more than a dozen of the most widely used critical introductions to the New Testament finds that not one frames the study of the Catholic Epistles as a collection. Whether arranged by region, date, apostolic tradition, or methodological interest, the Catholic Epistles collection is broken apart and subdivided in different ways that subvert its canonical intent and effect.

10 See David R. Nienhuis, *Not By Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).



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Through its homage to the iconographic tradition,  
Paul Soupiset's *James the Less* draws us into the  
artist's personal meditation on the letter of James.



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# Drawing James

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The letter of James declares that it is written by “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1), but it gives us no further information about who this is. We can gather from the letter’s contents that he must have been an important Christian leader who embraced his Jewish roots. Many scholars identify him as the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:8), who in Christian tradition has been called James the Just. However, the very few extant visual depictions of the author of the letter of James vary, some going with James the Just, but others depicting James the Less (so called from Mark 15:40).<sup>1</sup>

Drawing inspiration from this complex visual tradition as well as from the letter of James itself, Paul Soupiset sketched *James the Less* for the cover of this issue of *Christian Reflection*. His image incorporates symbolic elements from several Armenian and Russian Orthodox icons of James the Just, Bishop of Jerusalem, and from El Greco’s *Apostle St. James the Less*, which is the most well-known painting to associate that figure with the epistle of James.

Paul Soupiset has been the creative director and lead designer at Toolbox Studios in San Antonio, Texas, since its inception in 1996. This full-time graphic designer and self-described armchair theologian characterizes his personal artwork, like *James the Less*, as “liturgical sketching.”<sup>2</sup> Originally he developed this phrase as a working title for a book that would follow the lectionary calendar for a year. He sees liturgical sketching as a way to read the lectionary Scripture texts devotionally and enter into daily dialog with them by creating sketchbook drawings. Although his book project remains on hold until he finds a publisher, this sketchbook practice has become Soupiset’s primary form of art.

The artist prefers to work with the laity and somewhat in the margins because, he says, “That’s where the creative energy and best stories seems to be.” While he hesitates to identify himself as a lay liturgical leader, he does enjoy creating spaces for interactive and participatory worship. He collaborates with friends in creating installations, retreats, seasonal events, and prayer stations. For instance, at an upcoming workshop at Laity Lodge on the Frio River near Leakey, Texas, he will encourage participants to sketch poetry and, hopefully, demystify the craft of an artist.



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*Domenikos Theotokopoulos, known as El Greco (1541-1614), APOSTLE St. JAMES THE LESS (1610-1614). Oil on canvas. 43" x 34". Museo del Greco, Toledo, Spain. Photo: © Universal Images Group / Art Resource, NY. Used by Permission.*

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Soupiset worked out the themes of *James the Less*, both verbally and visually, in a series of notes and drawings on small moleskine sketchbook pages that are illustrated here. His undergraduate study of western art and fascination with all types of iconography fuels what he calls a “sort of a *visio divina*” — personal meditation and contemplation on the key images associated with the letter of James. “My work tries to take these great ancient works and dismantle, reconsider, and recontextualize them,” he writes. “Frequently, I’m taking powerful hegemonic images from my faith’s past and placing them in a new context to dethrone them, to subtly speak truth to power, to

be a small voice offering checks and balances to the institution of Christendom, or to comment on my own ambivalence toward my privilege.”

El Greco’s *Apostle St. James the Less* (p. 48) is the primary visual inspiration for Soupiset’s sketches of James. Domininkos Theotokopoulos, who became known as El Greco, was born in Crete. He began his artistic career there, but moved on to Venice and Rome and finally settled in Spain in 1576. He was one of the most innovative painters of his generation. When he departed from the Byzantine flatness popular in his native Crete, he had to travel to Italy and Spain to find the patrons who would appreciate his Mannerist style of painting, which featured elongated and exaggerated proportions. El Greco’s portrait of James is one of a series of paintings of apostles intended for the Cathedral of Toledo, Spain. Today they are gathered together again in the Museo del Greco, Toledo.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Soupiset enjoys the intimacy and small-scale of the sketchbook format rather than the fine art that hangs on gallery walls. He was a journalism major with a studio fine art minor when he studied at Baylor University. His courses in drawing, graphic design, and art history shaped his work both personally and professionally, but he never desired to be an exhibiting artist. “When I’m ready for others to see my work, it’s often a simple process of handing over a sketchbook,” he explains.

The three-quarter length drawing *James the Less* (on the cover and p. 46) was the first one that Soupiset drew. It has the border motif of a journal entry and is ripped out of a sketchbook. There are clear echoes of the El Greco painting, Orthodox icons, other sources such as Gothic church windows and medieval Gospel books. James is seen in the robes of a cleric; two Greek Orthodox crosses are visible on the vestment. A halo of sainthood is prominent behind his head. His left arm cradles a book, while his right hand is raised with two fingers straightening, quietly approaching a gesture of blessing.

An additional, larger hand extends outward to the viewer in the lower portion of the composition. This open right hand, originating in the El Greco painting, is prominent in all of Soupiset’s sketches. In the process of drawing and contemplation, the artist was inspired by James’s themes of friendship with God (James 2:23) and the gentleness of wisdom (3:13). He comments, “This process [of liturgical sketching] allows me to approach the text, the story, with an open hand, with contingency, inviting the Spirit to do what the Spirit will, or won’t. It’s not about the mastery of the texts, but about inspiration, illumination, and contemplating the ancient paths.”

Paul Soupiset offers his work to us with a sincere heart to guide our personal reflection on the figure and emblems taken from the letter of James. The phrase “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:18) influenced the seeds and fruit imagery in the lower left corner of *James the Less* and again in the upper right corner of *The Seed – James the Less* (p. 50). In the latter image, the boat is the artist’s medi-

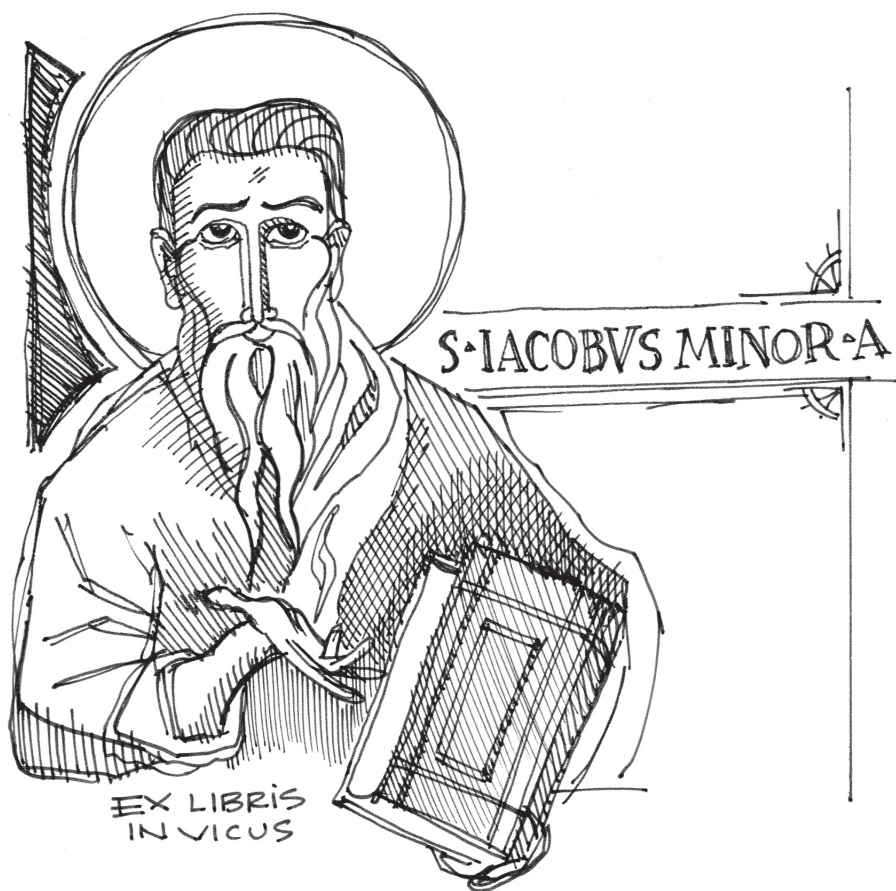


Paul Soupiset (b. 1969), *THE SEED – JAMES THE LESS* (2012). Pen on paper. 4" x 4". Photo: © Paul Soupiset. Used by permission.

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tation on the warning, "But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6); the facial features of James – with the exaggerated nose, sunken eyes, and beard – are the closest to El Greco's depiction.

*Ex Libris – James the Less* (p. 51) is inspired by several Orthodox icons of James the Just and the painted depiction of Gospel writers in the Medieval period of art history. James has the same pensive look as in the first two sketches, but here his visage is flattened as occurs in the icon tradition. Soupiset labeled the saint "S. JAVOBVS MINOR A" after seeing a sculpture with this identification on its base.



Paul Soupiset (b. 1969), *EX LIBRIS – JAMES THE LESS* (2012). Pen on paper. 4" x 4". Photo: © Paul Soupiset. Used by permission.

Words and images interact throughout Soupiset's work. Sometimes a word or phrase from Scripture will inspire part of a drawing and manifest itself like an illuminator's marginalia; other times the emerging image will speak a word to the artist which gets incorporated into the drawing. For instance, while drawing the Bible in *Ex Libris – James the Less*, the phrase "ex libris" (Latin for "out of the books") came to Soupiset's mind, and he added "in vicus" ("into the village") to the phrase to approximate a Jamesian admonition to "get out of the books and into the neighborhood." Soupiset continues, "I think James has a lot to say to any Jesus-follower interested in issues of missional living, justice, restoration, and peacemaking. His take on

the gospel seems to dovetail well with a roll-up-your-sleeves Kingdom-minded theology.”

In the three sketches that he has created to guide our reflection on the letter of James, Paul Soupiset not only shares his knowledge of and homage to the historical visual past, he also offers us, with an open hand if you will, his personal meditation on Scripture. His Christian art is an invitation for us to make time in our busy lives—even a few brief, but meaningful moments—to reflect on the Scriptures and allow them to mold our discipleship. How can we make the time? Soupiset’s answer is to draw in his sketchbooks, mostly during lunch breaks, before going back to his regular job and home to his family.

## NOTES

1 I thank David Gowler, The Dr. Lovick Pierce and Bishop George F. Pierce Professor of Religion at Oxford College of Emory University, for sharing with me his research on images of the author of the letter of James.

2 For more information about Paul Soupiset, see [soupiset.typepad.com/about.html](http://soupiset.typepad.com/about.html) (accessed March 5, 2012). My quotations from the artist are taken from a personal interview with him via email and phone on February 27, 2012.

3 For the Museo del Greco, see [www.spain.info/en/conoce/museo/toledo/casa-museo\\_de\\_el\\_greco.html](http://www.spain.info/en/conoce/museo/toledo/casa-museo_de_el_greco.html) (accessed March 5, 2012).

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# Worship Service

BY BRUCE GILLETTE AND  
CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

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## *A Prayer for Reflection before Worship*

Eternal God, we confess that we live very individual lives.

We want to follow our own paths in life.

We want to make it on our own.

We want to find our own happiness.

We want to live by our own rules.

O Lord, even in our faith, we tend to think in very individual terms.

We talk about a personal relationship with you as if it is just about  
“you and me.”

We are tempted to think that faith is what we do in church on Sunday mornings.

Yet you show us a different way.

For in your word you teach us ethics.

You show us what it means to live in a community of faith.

You call us to care for the poor and those in need.

You remind us again and again that a living faith includes faithful actions and deeds.

Help us to live in this world in joyful obedience to you,  
out of gratitude for all that you have done for us,  
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## *Call to Worship* (based on James 4:8, 10)

Draw near to God,

and God will draw near to you.

**Humble yourselves before the Lord,  
and God will exalt you.**

O Lord, help us through our worship  
to draw closer to you.

**Help us to be humble  
and to seek your way.**



## *Gathering Hymn*

“Be Doers of the Word of God”<sup>1</sup>

Be doers of the word of God,  
not simply those who hear.  
Be ones who look into God’s word,  
obey, and persevere.  
Be quick to listen, slow to speak,  
and slow to anger, too.  
Put wrath aside; instead, be meek  
and let God work in you.

Religion that is undefiled,  
religion that is pure  
will reach to help the orphaned child  
and welcome all the poor.  
If people come here poorly dressed,  
to judge them is a sin.  
The rich aren’t better than the rest;  
God welcomes poor ones in.

O Christ, you save us by God’s grace  
from having to obey.  
Then freed to love, we can embrace  
a life that seeks your way.  
May we be doers of the word;  
may faith shine through our deeds;  
and as we seek to trust in God,  
may ethics follow creeds.

*Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2003)*

*Tune: ELLACOMBE*

## *Words of Greeting*

We welcome you to this time of worship in the name of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, who draws us, through his Body, the Church, into friendship with God and with one another. In this time of worship, let us still our minds and claim the divine promise: “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10).

## *Discipline of Silence*



### *Call to Confession*

The letter of James promises, “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation” (1:12). Yet we know that too often we give in to temptation and do what is wrong. Let us confess our sins together before God.

### *Unison Prayer of Confession*

O God, we want to have our cake and eat it, too:  
we want to be a friend of the world and still be your friend.

Yet, Jesus taught us: “No one can serve two masters.”

Give us strength and courage to get our priorities straight:  
help us to seek your kingdom first.

Help us to live faithfully and joyfully in the world,  
and to be friends with the people you call us to serve.

Help us also to remember that our best relationship  
is the one we have with you,

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### *Assurance of Forgiveness*

“The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (James 3:17). In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, and we are given a new way to live. Let us accept God’s grace, and live new lives of faith, obedience, and joy.

### *Sharing the Peace*

“A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” (James 3:18)

**Let us make peace, by sharing the peace of Christ with one another.**

The peace of Christ be with you.

**And also with you.**

### *Prayer for Illumination*

Loving God, you teach us that if we are lacking in wisdom,  
we should turn to you and ask for what we need,  
because you give to all generously and ungrudgingly.

We know that we have so much to learn about your way;  
open wide your word to us,

and give us wisdom to understand the things you want to teach us.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

*Responsive Reading: Psalm 1*

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
**or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;**  
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
**and on his law they meditate day and night.**

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

**In all that they do, they prosper.**

The wicked are not so, **but are like chaff that the wind drives away.**

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

**nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;**

for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,

**but the way of the wicked will perish.**

*Gospel Reading: Mark 9:30-37*

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

*New Testament Reading: James 3:13-4:8a*

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you

covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

*Sermon: "Who Is Wise and Understanding among You?"<sup>2</sup>*

*Hymn of Response:*

"O Lord, May All We Say and Do"

O Lord, may all we say and do  
reflect the faith we have in you;  
for faith is meant to change the way  
we live our lives from day to day.

God, may we open wide the door  
and welcome people who are poor;  
and may we share with them our bread,  
for faith without good works is dead.

Just as a spark can start a fire,  
our words can damage or inspire;  
we pray for wisdom from above  
to speak and act in gentle love.

May we not covet earthly things  
or seek the riches this world brings;  
may we not boast of all our plans,  
for, Lord, our lives are in your hands.

O Lord, possessions rust away,  
but your love fills us every day;  
through prayer and service in your name,  
may we live out the faith we claim.

*Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2012)*

*Tune: TALLIS'S CANON*

(pp. 60-61 of this volume)

*Litany of Thanksgiving*

O God, we thank you this day for Christians  
who seek to live out their faith in their everyday lives.

**We know that we cannot earn your love,  
but we can respond to your love.**

**You call us to live holy lives  
out of gratitude for all that you have done for us.**

We thank you for people who find joy in the midst of trials and difficulties:  
**for the hospital patient who gives hope and inspiration to the visitor,  
for the homeless person who teaches the social worker the meaning of faith,  
for the family that prays together in the face of death.**

We thank you for those who endure temptation:  
**for the young person who says “no” to a friend who wants to shoplift,  
for the office worker who refuses to join in negative conversation,  
for the company executive who puts justice before profits.**

We thank you for those who are ever-generous in giving to others:  
**for the child who puts her allowance in the church’s mission offering,  
for the young adult at a first job who dares to tithe his new income,  
for the neighbor who gets up at four in the morning to shovel his elderly neighbor’s sidewalk.**

We thank you for those who are quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger:  
**for couples who listen to each other in love,  
for people who count to ten before speaking their minds and then speak gently,  
for people who remain calm and loving when others’ tempers flare.**

We thank you for people who live out their faith by caring for orphans, widows and others in need:  
**for foster parents and adoptive parents,  
for those who seek to work for peace and justice  
so that fewer people will be orphaned and widowed,  
for those who share a cup of coffee with a lonely neighbor,  
for those who visit in nursing homes.**

We thank you for people who are doers of the word and not hearers only.

**O God, may we be counted among them.**

**Help us to hear your word and to find joy in doing what you call us to do.**

**May we live our lives in thankful obedience. Amen.**

## *Offering*

### *Prayer of Dedication after the Offering*

Loving God, you are so generous with us,  
and you call us to be generous in sharing your love with others.

Accept these tithes and offerings that we bring to you:

may they help those who lack daily food;

may they give warmth and shelter to those in need;

May our giving encourage in us a living and generous faith;

may our daily living be an offering of praise. Amen.

### *Sending Out (based on James 4:13-15)*

In James we read that we should not say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money."

**For we do not know what tomorrow will bring.**

Instead we should say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this and that."

**Our lives are in your hands, O Lord.**

**Be with us, guide us, and show us your way throughout each day.  
Amen.**

## **NOTES**

1 Text of *Be Doers of the Word of God*, copyright © 2003 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. All rights reserved. Used by permission. This hymn appears in Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *Songs of Grace: New Hymns for God and Neighbor* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2009), 69. The first two verses are based on phrases in James 1:19-2:7.

2 The sermon is a reflection on "the wisdom from above" (James 3:17) that God generously gives to all those who ask in humility and grateful obedience to Jesus Christ.



**BRUCE AND CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE**  
*are co-pastors of Limestone Presbyterian Church in  
Wilmington, Delaware.*

# O Lord, May All We Say and Do

C A R O L Y N W I N F R E Y G I L L E T T E

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O Lord, may all we say and do  
reflect the faith we have in you;  
for faith is meant to change the way  
we live our lives from day to day.

God, may we open wide the door  
and welcome people who are poor;  
and may we share with them our bread,  
for faith without good works is dead.

Just as a spark can start a fire,  
our words can damage or inspire;  
we pray for wisdom from above  
to speak and act in gentle love.

May we not covet earthly things  
or seek the riches this world brings;  
may we not boast of all our plans,  
for, Lord, our lives are in your hands.

O Lord, possessions rust away,  
but your love fills us every day;  
through prayer and service in your name,  
may we live out the faith we claim.



# O Lord, May All We Say and Do

CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

THOMAS TALLIS

O Lord, may all we say and do re -  
God, may we o - pen wide the door and -  
Just as a spark can start a fire, and our  
May we not cov - et earth - ly things or  
O Lord, pos - ses - sions rust a - way, but

flect the faith we have in you; for faith is meant to  
wel - come peo - ple who are poor; and may we share with  
words can dam - age or in - spire; we pray for wis - dom  
seek the rich - es this world brings; may we not boast of  
your love fills us ev - ery day; through prayer and ser - vice

change the way we live our lives from day to day.  
them our bread, for faith with - out good works is dead.  
from a - bove to speak and act in gen - tle love.  
all our plans, for, Lord, our lives are in your hands.  
in your name, may we live out the faith we claim.

# Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word

BY C. STEPHEN EVANS

One who hears the Word of God but doesn't act accordingly is like one who "observes his bodily face in a mirror" but turns away and forgets what he looks like. If we understand James's parable rightly, Kierkegaard explains, we will see how being a good hearer of the Word is linked to being a doer of the Word.

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Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is probably best known for his philosophical works, such as *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, all of which were attributed by Kierkegaard to pseudonyms. However, Kierkegaard himself believed that his "edifying" or "upbuilding" writings, published mostly under his own name, reflected in a deeper way what he hoped his readers would find in his authorship. These edifying or spiritual writings, which became the dominant stream of his authorship after 1846, are more deeply Christian as well as polemical than his earlier work. Kierkegaard calls these parts of his writings "Christian Discourses," since they are clearly designed to be delivered orally in church, yet he did not think they should be called sermons since Kierkegaard himself was not ordained as a pastor.

None of his books from this period is more significant than *For Self-Examination*, published in 1851, and no section of *For Self-Examination* has attracted more attention than the very first part: "What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?" which is an extended meditation on James 1:22-27. In this article I shall refer to this as "The Mirror of the Word" and use page numbers in parentheses.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard was of course a member of the Danish Lutheran Church, but Lutherans have not typically focused much on the letter of James, since Lutherans are known for their insistence that salvation is solely through faith, and James affirms that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-26). After all, Luther himself had called this book an “epistle of straw.”<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, however, clearly thinks that James is one of the most important books in the New Testament and he returns to it frequently in his edifying writings.

Kierkegaard no doubt anticipated the reaction of his Lutheran audience to a meditation on James, and so he opens “The Mirror of the Word” with some reflections on Luther, Lutheranism, and the contemporary Christianity he often calls “Christendom.” He begins with a rather standard (for a Lutheran) and perhaps not-altogether-fair critique of the medieval church as one in which the grace that is the essence of the gospel had been lost or obscured: “Everything had become works” (15). As Kierkegaard sees things, the error lay not in the focus on works themselves, but rather in the belief that works were meritorious. He warns his readers not to allow the error of the medieval church to be an excuse for a new error: that works can be completely ignored and forgotten (15). The problem was not in Luther himself, since Luther’s “life expressed works—let us never forget that—but he said: A person is saved by faith alone” (16). Luther “established faith in its rights” and properly understood that works were not a payment for salvation, but he recognized the importance of works as an expression of gratitude to God (16).

As Kierkegaard sees things, the Christianity of his own day (and he includes himself in this indictment) has perverted Lutheranism by simply taking it as a doctrine that the only thing that matters is faith. On such a view “we are free from all works,” free to seek “women, wine and song” (16). The problem is not that Lutheran doctrine is wrong, but that we humans are “cunning fellows” who misuse the doctrine in order to exempt ourselves from all striving (24). If Luther were to return in Kierkegaard’s own time, he would doubtless be shocked at how his doctrine was being used to rationalize a secular, worldly lifestyle, and perhaps would even say that “The Apostle James must be drawn forward a little, not for works *against* faith—no, no, that was not the apostle’s meaning either—but for faith, in order, if possible to cause the need for *grace* to be felt deeply...” (24).

### **READING GOD’S WORD PROPERLY**

James is well-known for his admonition that Christians must not only be hearers of the Word, but doers of it as well (James 1:22). Of course it seems necessary that to become a doer of the Word one must first become a “hearer or reader of it,” and Kierkegaard affirms that this is so (25). Thus he launches into an extended meditation on how to hear or read God’s word, taking as his main text James 1:23-24, which compares the person who hears the Word of God but does not act accordingly to a person who “observes his bodily face in a mirror” but who immediately forgets what he looks like once

he turns away from the mirror (13).<sup>3</sup> If we understand this passage rightly, we will see that being a good hearer of the Word is linked to being a doer of the Word. Hearing and doing cannot be sharply separated.

Kierkegaard takes seriously James's metaphor of the mirror, and thus begins his meditation by asking how we can obtain "true blessing" by looking at ourselves in the mirror of the Word (25). The fundamental purpose of God's Word is to give us true self-knowledge; it is a real mirror, and when we look at ourselves properly in it we see ourselves as God wants us to see ourselves. The assumption behind this is that the purpose of God's revelation is for us to become transformed, to become the people God wants us to be, but this is impossible until we see ourselves as we really are. The Scriptures are not given to us to satisfy our curiosity or our speculative impulses; God's Word is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should govern our lives. Kierkegaard emphasizes five things that must be kept in view to hear or read God's Word properly, all of them flowing from this understanding of the purpose of Scripture. I will briefly discuss each of these five themes.

First, *"Look at yourself in the mirror, not at the mirror."* If we are to hear what God wants to teach us about ourselves, we must listen for that message. We must not distance ourselves from the Scriptures, treating them solely as an objective treatise to be studied in a scholarly manner. There are of course many scholarly questions that can be raised about the New Testament: "Which books are authentic? Are they really by the apostles, and are the apostles really trustworthy?" When we turn our attention to the commentaries, we discover "thirty thousand different ways" of reading various passages, since there is a "crowd or crush of scholars and opinions" about everything (25). As Kierkegaard says, all of this makes it seem that God's Word is "rather complicated," and the complications make it confusing. "I very likely never come to see myself reflected — at least not if I go at it this way" (26).

Should the person who wants to read God's Word simply ignore what the scholars have to say? A careless reader might think that this is what Kierkegaard means, but this is not really correct. There is a place for scholarship (to be discussed below), and Kierkegaard is careful to say that he does not want to disparage scholarship (28). However, it is crucially important to distinguish between the attitude of the scholar who treats the Bible objectively as an artifact to be studied and the stance of the person who loves God and wants to hear what God has to say about his or her life.

In order to make the distinction between the two attitudes clear, Kierkegaard employs an extended metaphor in which the reader is asked to "imagine a lover who has received a letter from his beloved" (26). The metaphor seems appropriate if we assume that God's Word is just as precious to its reader as the love letter is to the person who receives it. For those who might object that the Scriptures are written in a foreign language that is not easy to understand, Kierkegaard enriches his metaphor by assuming that the letter

of the beloved is also written in a language that the lover does not understand (26). Before the lover can really read the letter, he must first find a dictionary (and perhaps some grammatical aids) and laboriously translate the letter so that he can understand it. This work may be tiresome but it is necessary. However, the tiresome labor must not be confused with the experience of reading the letter once the work has been done.

Kierkegaard imagines that the lover is interrupted by a visitor who sees the letter and says, "Well, so you are reading a letter from your beloved?" (27). On Kierkegaard's view, this comment will elicit an indignant response on the part of the lover: "Have you gone mad? Do you think this is reading a letter from the beloved! No, friend, I am sitting here toiling and moiling with a dictionary to get it translated....thank God, I am soon finished with the translation and then, yes, then, I shall read my beloved's letter; that is something altogether different" (27). The scholarly work is a necessary evil that must not be confused with the experience of reading the letter.

If we apply the analogy to the case of Scripture, the lesson is clear. Of course the Bible must be properly translated, and historical and scholarly study can be valuable if it helps us grasp the meaning. However, this scholarly work is not an end in itself, but a means to reading Scripture in an existential manner, in which one seeks to hear God speak and in particular to understand what God wants to teach one about oneself.

Kierkegaard's second theme is that *as a reader of God's Word, you should focus primarily on what you can understand about what*

*God wants done.* One might worry that the complications that appear to be present in Scripture make it hard to read from this practical point of view. Must I not have a clear understanding of what God wants me to do before I do it? In order to deal with the problem, Kierkegaard expands the metaphor of the love letter one more time by imagining that the

beloved's letter contains something that the beloved wishes the lover to do (27). The true lover will be "eager to fulfill his beloved's wish" as he understands it, and will lose no time in doing so. However, suppose the translation the lover has done is faulty, and he therefore misunderstands what the beloved wants him to do? Surely, the beloved will still appreciate the desire to please her that the lover has shown, and the lover himself will be glad he

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**The Scriptures are not given to us to satisfy our curiosity or our speculative impulses; God's Word is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should govern our lives.**

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acted, even if he acted on a misunderstanding, rather than doing nothing because of some possible doubt about what he was supposed to do (28).

It is not difficult to translate Kierkegaard's extended analogy to the case of the reader of Scripture. If I am listening to God's Word, I ought to focus on what I do understand and strive to live accordingly; only then do I have the leisure to worry about the parts I do not understand. In particular, I must not allow the fact that there are interpretive difficulties to be an excuse for doing nothing:

When you are reading God's Word, it is not the obscure passages that bind you but what you understand, and with that you are to comply at once. If you understand only one single passage in all of Holy Scripture, well, then you must do that first of all, but you do not first have to sit down and ponder the obscure passages. God's Word is given in order that you shall act upon it, not that you shall practice interpreting obscure passages. (29)

Worries about interpretation can easily become an excuse for disobedience, and Kierkegaard compares our scholarly, learned ways of reading Scripture to a little boy who is going to get a whipping and puts several layers of napkins under his pants to cushion the blows (35). Interpretive labor can easily become a way of distancing ourselves from God's Word and rationalizing our own inaction.

The third theme is *you should be alone when you are reading God's Word*. Kierkegaard tells us that in a certain sense it is dangerous to be alone with Scripture: "It is an imperious book — if one gives it a finger, it takes the whole hand; if one gives it the whole hand, it takes the whole man and may suddenly and radically change my whole life on a prodigious scale" (31). Just for that reason we are fearful of being alone with the Scripture. We prefer to listen to the chatter of our neighbors, who may well help us rationalize our disobedience and give us excuses. Or if we go into a room by ourselves to read the Scriptures, we carry with us "ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries," and thus we can indefinitely postpone really hearing what God has to say to us (32).

*You should remember that God's Word is addressed to you.* As an example of what it means to read the Bible from an existential, "subjective" point of view, Kierkegaard gives a powerful reading of the Old Testament story of David's affair with Bathsheba, which led to the death of Uriah, and the confrontation between Nathan the prophet and David (2 Samuel 11:2-12:15). Nathan comes to David and tells a powerful story of a rich man with many sheep who takes and slaughters the one lamb owned by a poor man, even though the poor man loved the lamb "like a daughter." David is angry when he hears the tale, and judges that the rich man deserves to die. Nathan immediately brings home the point of his story by saying to David, "You are the man."



Kierkegaard points out that David already knew the facts of the matter, and he no doubt already knew that it was morally wrong for him to have an affair with another man's wife and then arrange to have the husband killed to cover up the affair when the woman becomes pregnant. What then did David lack? Until confronted by Nathan, this knowledge that David had was simply objective knowledge. When Nathan tells him, "You are the man," then the story is transformed. What David needed was not knowledge; it was someone to say "you" to him and make it necessary for him to apply what he knew to his own life. Kierkegaard affirms that each of us, when we read the Scriptures, should constantly repeat these words of Nathan: You are the one. The words I am reading are addressed to me.

The last theme Kierkegaard emphasizes is that *to hear God's Word, you must be prepared to wait silently before God*. As a model for this silence, he describes the virtuous woman, who in Kierkegaard's day was required to keep silent in church. As Kierkegaard describes the situation, this silence is not merely for women. Rather, the woman who has learned silence properly has acquired the ability to teach men something they need to learn as well (46-51). We cannot hear God if we are always talking ourselves. If we are not to be like the person who goes away from the mirror and forgets what he looks like, then we must be people who are continually listening for God to speak.

### **A CORRECTION FOR A CORRECTION?**

Kierkegaard begins, as we saw, with a discussion of Luther's "correction" of the medieval church, and an argument that Luther's correction may not be what the contemporary church needs to hear, because the circumstances have changed. Kierkegaard then offers a kind of correction of Luther that he hopes will mitigate some of the vices of his time. What should we make of Kierkegaard's own correction?

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**We fear being alone with Scripture. If we go into a room by ourselves to read the Bible, we carry with us "ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries," and thus indefinitely postpone hearing what God has to say to us.**

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I find Kierkegaard's words about how Scripture should be read to be powerful and needed. He is right that scholarly study of the Bible does not always lead to really reading God's Word; in fact, it can be a substitute or evasion of reading God's Word. I need to be reminded that Scripture is addressed to me, and that its purpose is to allow God to speak to me and transform me. I need to remember Nathan's words that "you are the man" as I read the Bible.

However, just as Luther's situation differed from that in Kierkegaard's day, so also the situation in Kierkegaard's day differs from our own, and some of Kierkegaard's advice needs to be nuanced and qualified as well. Kierkegaard was writing to an educated audience, all of whom had been catechized, and who were familiar with the Christian creeds and the "rule of faith." His audience understood how the Scriptures were to be read; what they needed was to make what they knew existential.

Our situation is different in many ways. There are many in our society who, whether educated generally or not, lack even basic knowledge of the Bible. There are also those who see themselves as committed to the Bible but who read the Scriptures with little understanding of the Church or the rule of faith. For them God's Word is simply whatever they individually decide God is saying. In such a situation, some people may hear God commanding them to do acts of terrorism against others whom they understand to be God's enemies. For such people, God's Word should not be read alone but in community. They need to allow their individual interpretations to be challenged and corrected by what God's people as a whole have heard God saying. Where a misreading stems from simple misunderstanding of a passage, the commentators can also be helpful. In Kierkegaard's analogy of the love-letter, he thinks of the lover who misunderstands the request of the beloved as someone who does more than the beloved requires, but he clearly thinks of this "more" as an excess of loving and self-sacrificing behavior. I do not think Kierkegaard would assume that the beloved would find it excusable if the lover's misunderstanding caused him to do something cruel and inhuman. In such a case, the lover does need someone who can help him or her read the letter properly. Similarly, the person who hears God commanding us to do what is reprehensible needs a better understanding of the text.

It is also somewhat one-sided to think that God's Word consists solely of commands. In the Scripture God also tells us about himself and thus makes it possible for us to relate properly to him. In the Old Testament we learn that he is the Creator of the world and the one who called Israel to be a chosen people. In the New Testament we learn that he has sent his Son to die for us and to establish a people that will be Christ's body. We need to hear God tell us not only what we should do, but also who God is, and who we are in relation to God and God's people. God does not just reveal what we should do, but our true identity, which must shape what we do.

Again, these were things that Kierkegaard, writing to an educated and catechized audience, could assume his readers already understood. His correction then very properly was to emphasize the need to read the Bible in "fear and trembling," to apply our understanding of God and the Church to our lives. I think he is quite right to stress the fact that scholarly learning can be a substitute for devout hearing of God's Word. But it is not always

so, and perhaps we must also note the way in which the work of the scholar, as well as an understanding of the Church's traditional teachings, can make us more attuned to hear God's Word. However, Kierkegaard is surely right to insist that when God does speak, we must be willing to respond, promptly and with all our hearts. For God is the Lord, and if we do not acknowledge that lordship, we fail to hear God's Word as God's Word, however much scholarly knowledge of the Scriptures we may have.

## NOTES

1 The page numbers are taken from what is currently the best scholarly translation into English, *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

2 See *Works of Martin Luther*, edited by Paul Zeller Strodach, volume VI (Philadelphia, PA: Holman, 1932), 444.

3 Throughout this article, quotations from and allusions to Scripture are taken, not from a standard English translation, but from the Hong translation of Kierkegaard's scriptural quotations, which of course draw on a Danish translation.



### **C. STEPHEN EVANS**

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# Living as the Friends of God

BY PAUL J. WADELL

James calls the Church to be a living sacrament of friendship with God, a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a more promising and truly human way of life. This is what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.

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Words like these from the letter of James are guaranteed to wake up a slumbering congregation on any Sunday morning: “Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Never one to mince words, James exclaims that every Christian has a choice: we can choose either to be friends of the world or friends of God; but we cannot select both because each leads to very different, and indeed irreconcilable, ways of life. The friends of God are “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). They promise “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27). Friendship with the world breeds “envy and selfish ambition” and “disorder and wickedness of every kind” (3:16), while friendship with God is characterized by peace, gentleness, mercy, and righteousness (3:17).

To enter into a friendship is to take up a new way of life because every friendship in some way reorders our lives and creates new commitments and responsibilities. Too, friendships change us because they form our character, shape our beliefs and convictions, and encourage certain kinds of behavior in us.<sup>1</sup> As the letter of James testifies, this is especially true when the overriding commitment of our lives is to live in faithful friendship with God. One liability of speaking of friendship with God is that it can sound so abstract—so impossibly spiritual—that it can seem to have no practical con-

sequences for one's everyday life. We can think that friendship with God takes us out of the world instead of calling us to live in it in a very different way. The letter of James blasts this assumption by continually emphasizing that friendship with God is a distinctive and very challenging way of life characterized by specific habits and practices. It is a way of life that will transform us, sometimes in startling ways, by cultivating in us attitudes, dispositions, and behavior quite at odds with those who choose to make friends of the world. To enter into friendship with God, James assures us, is not to be introduced to a cozy and always reassuring life; rather, it is to become part of a community committed to embodying and practicing God's ways in the world. It is a community characterized by mercy rather than judgment (2:13); deep concern for the poor (2:15-16); patience in suffering (5:7-11); solicitude for the sick (5:14-15); and fraternal correction (5:19-20).

For James, this is the identity and mission of the Church. The Church is the community of the friends of God called to embrace, imitate, and represent Christ to others by witnessing the ways of Christ in their everyday lives. This is why for James a life of discipleship *is* a life of friendship with God, and why friendship is central to James's understanding of a faithful Christian community. Just as Abraham was rightly "called the friend of God" (2:23) because his faith was exemplified in his works, the Church is the community of the friends of God whose faith is manifest in its commitment to carry forward Jesus' ministry in the world. Put more strongly, the vocation of the Church is to be a sacrament—a compelling sign—of friendship with God. When the Church is this kind of community it offers the world something powerfully hopeful.

## **WHAT FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD REQUIRES AND MAKES POSSIBLE**

We can more fully appreciate James's vision of the Church by examining how a life of friendship with God was understood by two of the most influential theologians of the Church, Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Book VIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine's famous account of the first thirty-three years of his life, concludes with the story of his conversion. Book IX focuses on his life immediately after his conversion. Baptized at Easter in 387 by Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, Augustine begins to live the Christian life in a small community that included his mother, Monica, his close friend, Alypius, his brother, Navigius, his son, Adeodatus, two of his cousins, and two of his students. Like any real community (or any real congregation), Augustine and his cohorts hardly agreed on everything. But they were able to live together well because they were joined as one in what they took to be the fundamental calling of their lives, namely, to love God and to grow together in Christ. Friendships form around shared goods and purposes. We become friends with some persons rather than others not only because something about them attracts us, but also because we see in them cares and commitments similar to our own. At the deepest level, friends

share a vision of life, an understanding of what matters most in life, and a desire to help one another achieve it. This was eminently true of Augustine's fledgling community. Their heartfelt love for God and passionate desire to help one another grow in the holiness of Christ overshadowed whatever differences and disagreements might have existed among them, and did not allow those differences and disagreements to imperil their life together. Like James's community of the friends of God, they were able to live in peace and harmony with one another because Christ was the foundation and center of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Ten years after his baptism, Augustine wrote a rule of life for Christian communities that was inspired by Acts 4:32. Just as the first Christians "were of one heart and soul," Augustine believed that Christians in their lives together were to love God and be of "one heart and soul" on their journey to God. Like any good friends, they were to support and encourage one another, seek the best for each other, challenge and sometimes correct one another, and in everything to help one another grow in the way of love. In many respects, Augustine sees Christian community like a choir singing in harmony. Each voice brings its own distinctive gift to the choir; each voice makes its unique but indispensable contribution. And all those voices blending together create something beautiful. As a community of the friends of God, the Church is a choir of varied voices bonded together in love to create something beautiful and rich and hopeful not only among themselves, but also for the world.

And yet, no matter how appealing Augustine's vision of Christian communities might be, it may strike us as sadly naïve and hopelessly sentimental, especially when we consider how hard it is today to get people to be of "one heart and soul" about anything. This is true not only in society, but sometimes also in our neighborhoods, families, and even in our churches. Like James's account of those who live in friendship with the world rather than God, our lives today are often characterized by deception and mistrust, harshness and animosity, and discord and negativity more than love, kindness, truthfulness, patience, faithfulness, and compassion. Moreover, unlike Augustine's Christian communities, our lives together are often not rooted in the rich and substantive goods that lead to peace, contentment, and genuine joy. The letter of James—and Augustine's rule of life for Christian communities—remind us that status, prestige, wealth, celebrity, and possessions cannot give us the happiness that comes from loving and being loved by God, and loving one another as a fellow friend of God. And so today it is not surprising that so many people are lonely, and wonder if anyone truly knows them, despite all the technology that is supposed to connect us and bring us closer together. Neither is it surprising that people may be entertained, stimulated, and endlessly distracted, but nonetheless are haunted by an emptiness and desolation that mask a deepening despair. This is why James's vision of the Church, as well as Augustine's description of Christian

community, are utterly indispensable. If the Church is faithful to its calling, in their lives together Christians show that genuine community is possible, that we are happiest when we do not allow anything to become more important than our mutual love for God, and that people really can live together in peace. Instead of surrendering to the discord, polarization, fear, and anxiety of the age, Christian communities are called to counter and overcome them by faithfully embracing and exemplifying all that it means to live in friendship with God.

### **CALLED TO FRIENDSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD**

The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas provides an even fuller and more richly developed account of a life of friendship with God that can enhance our understanding of James's theology of the Church. Aquinas taught that human beings are created for, and find happiness in, fellowship and communion with God. We are made for intimacy with God, fashioned for friendship with God, because nothing less than God will content us, nothing other than God will bring us peace. For Aquinas, our most exquisite good comes from participating, as deeply as possible, in the love, goodness, and happiness that is God's very life. We are fulfilled and perfected when we who are loved and cherished by God love and cherish God in return. We find joy when we seek and delight in God's good just as God seeks and delights in ours. That is the language of friendship, and for Aquinas it is the most fitting way to understand the Christian life. We who are the children of God are called to become

the friends of God. Indeed, Aquinas described the theological virtue of charity as friendship with God, a way of life in which all of us *together* come to love God and all that God loves.

In his analysis of charity, Aquinas said that what distinguishes friendship with God from other friendships is the shared good or "communication" on which it is based. Charity is friend-

ship between God and human beings constituted by God sharing with us the very life and happiness that is God. As Liz Carmichael explains, "God imparts or communicates his 'beatitude,' his joyful life to us; and through this transforming gift we are enabled to share the divine life actively with him."<sup>3</sup> In the *communicatio* that establishes charity-friendship with God, God draws to us in love, welcomes us into the divine life, and offers us every-

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**We find joy when we seek and delight in God's good just as God seeks and delights in ours. That is the language of friendship. We who are the children of God are called to become the friends of God.**

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thing that is of God. Aquinas's point is that friendship with God cannot begin with us reaching out to God; rather, we can live in friendship with God only because God has first loved us and called us into the friendship of the divine life. Every friendship begins when one person takes the initiative to reach out to another and to welcome them into their life. Friendship with God begins when God offers to us in charity the very communion of love that is God. It comes to life with the outpouring of God's own happiness into our hearts, a divine happiness that is the divine friendship, the divine friendship that is the divine life.

For Aquinas, charity incorporates us into the Trinitarian life of God so that we can participate *as God's friends* in the love and goodness and happiness that is God, incompletely in this life, perfectly in the next life. What charity reveals about God is that God (as any friend would) wants our good, and our highest possible good is to dwell as fully as possible in the Trinitarian community of friendship that is God. Thus, to live a life of charity, as Aquinas understands it, certainly involves more than being thoughtful, nice, or congenial toward others. Although those things are obviously important, and to lack them would be contrary to charity, to think of charity only in those terms trivializes it. For Aquinas, what is most engrossing about charity, particularly when it is understood to define one's life as friendship with God, is that it incorporates us into the very life of God so that we can participate in, and be transformed by, the love and goodness of God.

Moreover, friendship with God is marked with the same qualities that characterize friendships among persons: mutual benevolence and a sharing of life around common goods and purposes. A friend is someone who wants another's good, is committed to bringing it about, and delights when it happens. The very offer of friendship testifies that God is committed to our good; however, a true friend of God is someone who seeks God's good as well through a heartfelt commitment to forward God's plans and purposes in the world. In a life of friendship with God, we return to God the love, affection, and goodwill that God has shown us by seeking God's will and living faithfully according to the ways of God. And we do this, the letter of James suggests, in our care for the neglected members of society (1:27; 2:14-17), when we extend mercy rather than judgment (2:13), and when we are "peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (3:17). For James, as well as Aquinas, authentic friendship with God is demonstrated by our willingness to embody and practice the ways of God in our everyday lives.

Thus, true friendship with God always unfolds in love for others. It is not a purely private and exclusively spiritual relationship with God that comfortingly insulates us from the needs of others, as if loving God would justify our becoming oblivious to others and indifferent to their well-being. Quite the contrary, friendship with God is never between God and ourselves alone, because the more we grow in friendship with God, the more we are

called to befriend others. A life of friendship with God links us to every man and woman who, like us, is loved by God and called to communion with God; as Aquinas insists, charity makes neighbors of us all. It calls us out of ourselves in love and service to others. It challenges us to become more attuned to the needs of our neighbors and to habitually consider how we might respond to them. It summons us to continually expand the circle of love to include all of our neighbors, even our most persistent enemies. “If Thomas is right,” William Young observes, “then friendship with God is not a private relationship, but rather a love that opens onto a life of virtue, justice, and concern for the world; only *through* this motion into the world does beatitude become possible.”<sup>4</sup> Or, as James proclaims, if we see that “a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food” (2:15) but do nothing to help them, can we honestly claim to be a friend of God?

### **A DISTINCTIVE AND CHALLENGING WAY OF LIFE**

Both James and Aquinas argue that friendship with God, if it is more than vacuous piety, has to be visibly displayed. It must be seen not as an escape from the world and the responsibilities we have for others, but as a distinctive and challenging way of life—indeed, a new kind of existence—identified through particular habits and practices. What would such a life look like? What would it involve? Aquinas answers this by identifying six “effects” or characteristics of a life of charity-friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. Considering them can enrich our sense of what friendship with God entails.

It is interesting that the first effect of charity that Aquinas identifies is joy. A community of the friends of God may know adversity and hardship—indeed, it is why James insists on the need for patient endurance (5:10-11)—but nonetheless should always be characterized by joy because God, who is the fullness of our

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**If friendship with God is more than vacuous piety, it must be visibly displayed. Thomas Aquinas identifies six characteristics of a life of friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction.**

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joy, has befriended us in Christ and the Spirit. For Aquinas, joy comes not from external prosperity, even the absence of suffering, but by being one with what we love. A community of the friends of God should always be marked by joy because they live in and from the love of God, a love that no amount of adversity can destroy (Romans 8:35-39). This is why gloom and desolation should never mark the Church. The joy that comes from friend-

ship with God frees us from the fear, anxiety, and listlessness that stifle the works of love, and imbues us with the energy and resilience we need to love well in all the circumstances of our lives.

Peace (or, concord) marks a community of the friends of God because instead of being divided by their differences, they are one in their collective love for God. Aquinas taught that peace is the result of a “union between

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**We know peace not when we agree with others about everything, but when we agree about the true and the good, about what is worthwhile. Christian congregations should exude peace because none of their members loves or desires anything more than God.**

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one’s own desires and those of another person.”<sup>5</sup> We know peace not when we agree with others about everything, but when we agree with them about the true and the good, about what is most worthwhile and deserving of our devotion. As a community of the friends of God, Christian congregations should exude peace because none of their members loves or desires anything more than they love and desire God. By contrast, discord, the antithesis

of peace, seeps into our families, our communities, and our churches when we can no longer agree on what is most deserving of our love – when we share no common good – and when we allow differences about secondary matters to divide us. Too, peace is lost when bitterness, jealousy, gossip, envy, and resentment get the best of us. These are the very things that James says mark those who choose to be friends of the world rather than of God. Christians are not strangers to these toxic forces; however, friends of God refuse to allow them to become permanent features of their lives. They counter the energies of discord and estrangement with gentleness, humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation, all vital aspects of a life of friendship with God.

Kindness is the practice of charity-friendship with God by which the friend of God regularly looks for ways to do good for others, whoever they may be. Aquinas notes that doing good for others is one of the principal activities of any friendship. We want to do good for our friends because of the love and affection we have for them. Similarly, kindness is one of the central practices of a life of friendship with God because such a life calls us to see *all* of our neighbors *as friends*, and thus to love them and do what we can to help them. Friends of God are to have goodwill toward every person (even their enemies) and, if the opportunity arises, to express that goodwill through visible acts of kindness. As Aquinas elaborated, “even though a man

is not actually doing good to someone, charity requires him to be prepared to do so if the occasion arises, and whoever the person in need may be.”<sup>6</sup> How different our lives together would be if we took that advice to heart!

Many members of the human community are suffering and afflicted and in pain. This is why mercy (or, compassion) is an indispensable practice of friendship with God. The friends of God do not ignore, shun, or turn away from those who are suffering, but befriend them and do what they can to help them. With mercy, the suffering of another speaks to us and touches us; their affliction draws us out of ourselves to do what we can to alleviate their pain. But the crucial point is that our hearts are sorrowful at the sight of others’ sufferings precisely because a life of friendship with God enables us to see them not as strangers but as *another self* to us, as fellow friends of God on our collective journey to God. Indeed, compassion compels us to recognize, honor, and be attentive to the broken and wounded ones around us because thanks to God’s befriending love, they are part of us as we are part of them. In fact, for Aquinas, mercy is so integral to how our love for God is meant to unfold in love for those who are hurt, wounded, and broken, that he names it the act by which we most resemble God.

Almsgiving is the practice of charity-friendship with God that calls us to respond to the bodily needs of others, particularly the most destitute and vulnerable members of society. Aquinas connects almsgiving with the traditional corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving hospitality to strangers, visiting the sick, ransoming prisoners, and burying the dead. Like James (2:15-16), he clearly could not fathom how one could live in friendship with God if he or she ignored the bodily needs of their neighbors. Through the corporal works of mercy, the friends of God minister God’s love, care, and compassion to others.

Lastly, when James says that Christians should “confess your sins to one another” (5:16) and confront anyone in the community who “wanders from the truth” (5:19), he is describing the practice of fraternal correction, another essential element for sustaining a community of the friends of God. It is always easier to talk about people rather than to them; but if we really do want another’s good we must be willing to bring to their attention attitudes and behavior that are not only detrimental to their relationship with God, but also to the life of the community. Healthy community life is only possible when people care enough about one another and their lives together to address behavior that is inimical to the community’s well-being. It is rare to find the practice of fraternal correction in congregations today, but it should be an abiding practice of communities of the friends of God because without it we cannot fulfill Jesus’ command to love our neighbor. Fraternal correction reminds us that sometimes love must take the form of challenge, confrontation, and correction. This is done not to deride or diminish a person, but to remind them of who they are called to be as a beloved friend of God.

## CONCLUSION

So James is right. We can choose to be friends of the world or friends of God. Each choice will take us down different paths, form us in very different ways, and lead us to quite distinctive destinations. It is easier to be a friend of the world – and this is an abiding temptation for congregations – because such a friendship asks nothing of us. Friendship with God, however, asks everything of us. It demands that we love God more than we love anything else and that we pledge to live according to the ways of God that have been revealed to us in Christ. For James, that is the mission of the Church. The Church is called to be a living sacrament of friendship with God. Wherever this happens, in congregations large or small, the Church becomes a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a richer, more promising, and truly human way of life. It is exactly what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.

## NOTES

1 For a more detailed explanation of friendship's role in our moral and spiritual development, see Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 46-69, and *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 67-76.

2 For a fuller account of Augustine's understanding of friendship and community, see Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 185-217.

3 Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London, UK: T & T Clark International, 2004), 111.

4 William W. Young, III, *The Politics of Praise: Naming God and Friendship in Aquinas and Derrida* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 100.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 2a2ae, q. 29, a. 3.

6 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae, q. 31, a. 2, reply 1.

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# James's Amazing Grace Gumbo

BY BERT MONTGOMERY

A reckless reading sees only legalism. But if we take time to savor its flavor like a Cajun making gumbo, because James stirs in a heaping amount of Abraham, a good sprinkling of Elijah, and just a pinch of Rahab, we will taste rich grace through and through.

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Willie Nelson appears a lot in my writings, and in one early column I declared him to be a saint. Every so often someone politely reminds me that when he is not singing really great hymns and spirituals, Willie does a lot of *other* things which obviously disqualify him from sainthood. Therefore, as a minister of the gospel I must be more discerning about whom I point toward as an example of Christian virtue.

Thomas Merton wrote that “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday.”<sup>1</sup> Merton was writing about himself and his coming to accept and embrace, rather than be ashamed of and try to hide, his past. That wonderful phrase — “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday” — illuminates our willingness to judge a person less and less as more and more time passes since that person died. In about seventy-five years people may very well remember the more godly things about Willie, but for now...well, let's just say I'm just avoiding the rush and getting an early start.

Merton's words are very important as we consider the cameo appearances of Abraham, Rahab, and Elijah as edifying figures in the letter of James, especially since James is very commonly understood as a works-rather-than-grace epistle. Such a generalization is not fair to James; in fact, in light of Merton's phrase, we may find that grace abounds throughout this work despite the fact we usually overlook it on a surface reading. James quickly tosses these three names out as examples of faith in action for us to emulate.

If we take the time to consider all the background that goes with these biblical characters, we indeed find a lot of grace embracing each one.

## ABRAHAM

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

*James 2:21-24*

Let’s face it, Abraham was an old codger who at times seemed to wonder what kind of joke God was playing on him — that is, after he got up off the floor and dusted himself off where he had just fallen on his face laughing at God’s joke about fathering a child at one hundred years of age with his old lady (in the literal sense of an old and, in this case, barren woman).

Who could blame Abe? After all, God had promised as much some years earlier, and Sarah (good wife that she was) deciding that since she was not going to be able to do her part, volunteered her maid, Hagar, to be her surrogate. However, Sarah then got mad and the pregnant Hagar fled. God told Hagar to go back, which she did, reigniting the marital discord, which only worsened when her son Ishmael was born. That is a lot of drama for a man in his mid-eighties.

At this point the “father of many nations” had just one son, whom his wife resented until God blessed Sarah with a baby boy, Isaac. It is sometimes said that every blessing is also a curse, and while Isaac’s birth doubled the likelihood of Abraham fathering many nations, it also quadrupled the domestic woe until, desperate for a moment of peace and quiet, he sent Hagar and Ishmael away for good.

Oh, and sometime after figuratively cutting himself off from one son, God told him to do the same with the other, Isaac — albeit in a bit more literal manner. Given Sarah’s demanding disposition in regard to all things maternal, Abe decided it was best not to worry her about it. We know the ending of that story, of course, but one has to think Abraham, not Kris Kristofferson, may have been the one who first crooned, “Why me, Lord?”

Rolling on the floor laughing at God rarely counts as good faith-like behavior, but to keep going when it appears you may be losing your mind does. Being *willing* to sacrifice Isaac then still live with Sarah afterward, let alone himself, is just plain crazy. It is either that or a blending of faith and works together that marked Abraham as a Friend of God. The latter is how James preferred to record it, with a stamp of grace.



## RAHAB

Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

*James 2:25-26*

Sing along, if you know the words: "There is a house in Jericho, they call the Rising Sun, and it's been the ruin of many a poor boy...."<sup>2</sup>

Rahab could very well have run a thriving business in New Orleans, and no doubt many a Baptist minister would have tried to save her soul, until the visits cost some of them their marriages and their churches. We really do not know much else about Rahab, except that being the kind of woman she was, she was not always keen on following the rule of law, and therefore probably found it a bit thrilling to play a little game of hide and seek with the king's men, thereby helping the Hebrew spies sent into Jericho by Joshua. We are not told exactly *why* the spies sent to Jericho ended up at Rahab's place (perhaps they aspired to save her), but as it turns out, it was the Madam who did the saving. And for that, James applies the stamp of grace upon the memory of Rahab and mentions her in passing as another example of righteousness through faith and works.

## ELIJAH

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

*James 5:16-18*

I sometimes imagine Elijah the prophet as a professional wrestler on television—strutting, bragging, trash-talking, and challenging his arch-nemesis to not just any old steel-caged match but a non-sanctioned, no-holds-barred, with extra obstacles tossed into the ring to make it even more fun steel-caged match. A little while later a new arch-nemesis appears, the girlfriend of the previous arch-nemesis, and she struts and brags and smashes chairs while stating what she's going to do to Elijah...and he cowers, hides, and cries like a baby.

A stickler for the law would question why anyone would point to Elijah as an example of faith in action. When he was "up" he was over-dramatic, arrogant, and obnoxious; he had an antagonist edge that kept him in conflict

with the majority of folks most of the time. And when he was “down,” that unstable emotional pendulum swung hard and fast and wide: there did not appear to be much faith at work when those mean woman blues drove Elijah to crawl inside a hole and wait to die. Noting that Elijah was really not all that different from any one of us, with all of our quirks and issues, James throws Elijah’s name out there as an example of a righteous man praying. Covering the width of Elijah’s mood swings with grace requires a rather large stamp.

### **A SIMMERIN’ POT OF GRACE GUMBO**

With its very clear directives on how to pray, what one should and should not say about the future, how to anoint with oil one who needs healing, and a strong emphasis on social action toward the poor, hungry, and outcast, James’s letter can come across as perhaps the most legalistic book in the New Testament. But when we take the time to savor the flavor like a Cajun making gumbo, because James stirs in a heaping amount of Abraham, a good sprinkling of Elijah, and just a pinch of Rahab, we will taste the richness of grace in which everything else rests.

As Merton said, “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday,” and this is certainly true with the letter of James. A reckless reading sees legalism, but a hearty bite tastes grace through and through.

### **NOTES**

1 Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 1981 [1953]), 32. As a side note, I am convinced that had Merton not died in 1968, he would have come to absolutely love Willie Nelson.

2 With apologies to “House of the Rising Sun,” a traditional folk song that is most widely known through the blues-rock arrangement by The Animals in 1964. Granted, some interpret this song to be about gambling and drinking, but generally folks think of it as a song about Rahab’s line of work.

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# Following James's Map

BY JEREMY COLLIVER

James provides a map to a continuing life of transformation and conversion. Along its two roads—a responsible and redeeming relationship with others and a personal struggle against sin—that Jesus laid out and James takes up, we are to walk ourselves and to lead others.

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As I cup my hands to fill them with water, I look up and see myself in the mirror. I close my eyes and splash water onto my face with the hopes of removing the remaining residue left by the shaving cream. My eyes open to my reflection staring back at me, as I flick the remaining water from my hands. I stand there for a moment, pausing to look at my reflection, and then I walk away to begin my day.

My day starts out like this every day, seeing my reflection in the mirror. Some days as I look into the mirror I do not really believe what I see, so before closing my eyes to splash water on my face I stop and lean in, tilting my chin toward the mirror so my face looks leaner. Other days I hardly notice myself as I close my eyes to splash water on my face.

Most days I am satisfied with what I see staring back at me. But there are days when I look into the mirror and realize that I need to do something to change, because I do not like what is looking back at me. After I rinse the shaving cream off my face, I open my eyes to my reflection staring back and we both agree that today we are going to do something to change.

James challenges us to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive [ourselves]” (James 1:22). There are several other options that we choose over the doing-of-the-word that James offers. One option is hearing the word but dismissing it. That is like the morning when we look into the mirror and see our reflection but dismiss what we see as not the truth. Another option is hearing the word but doing nothing with it. On those

mornings we simply look into the mirror and hardly notice ourselves as we go about our daily business. A third option is hearing, but being satisfied with just being able to hear. It is like those mornings when we look into the mirror to see our reflection and are satisfied that we are still here! The final option is hearing the word and doing something about it. These are

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**Faithfulness in the epistle of James does not stop with a profession of faith, but is a ticket to a life of continued transformation and conversion. Traveling down this path, of course, is not equivalent to religious busyness.**

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the mornings when we look at ourselves in the mirror and not only decide to do something, but walk out of the room and actually do it.

I am a minister with students, so I think about these options not only in terms of my own pilgrimage but also in relation to the formation of my students' discipleship. Those days of actually doing something about what we see in the mirror are the

kind of mornings I want to have and want my students to have every day. I want to join them in hearing the word and then doing something with it.

### **NOTICING THE MAP**

Too often in my line of work, ministering with students through the conversion process is reduced simply to how the word is shared. We focus on getting students to at least notice the word. We spend huge amounts of time, money, and other resources on transposing rich Bible passages into 140-character tweets, setting them to the newest flavor of music, printing them with retro or urban fonts to garner more attention, and even replacing them with catchier slick images. James does not discourage the hearing of the word, but he warns about merely hearing the word and not doing anything with it. Those of us who minister with students should see this huge, neon-glowing sign that James has placed before us: "STOP! Don't merely hear this!" Why do many of us run through this stop sign? Because rushing to embrace the next cultural fad in which we wrap the word for presenting to our students is the easy part. Maybe our students dismiss, do nothing with, or are satisfied with simply hearing the word because that is all that we focus on and expect them to do.

If we do not run carelessly through the stop sign that James has placed in the text, perhaps we will notice another neon-glowing sign he placed next to it—"Do this!" This is how to not merely hear the word but be a doer of the word: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

With this sign James provides a map that will lead to a continuing life of transformation and conversion. The map has two roads that sometimes run parallel, sometimes cross paths, and sometimes seem to run separate ways in our lives: those roads are a responsible and redeeming relationship with others and a personal struggle against sin.<sup>1</sup> Following this map, it is along these two roads, which Jesus laid out and James takes up, that we are to walk ourselves and to lead others.

### **TAKING THE PERSONAL PATH**

Early along this journey we come to an important point that many have mistaken for the very end of the road: it is the time of much rejoicing and celebrating when a person makes a profession of faith and the sacrament of baptism is performed. In a simple “dunk and done” theology we dry baptismal candidates off, pat them on the back, and wish them the best of luck. Granted, we have done something with the word, but James does not want us to use a profession of faith as a “refuge from ethical responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> Faithfulness does not stop with a profession of faith, but is a ticket to a life of continued transformation and conversion.

Continuing to travel down this path of “religion that is pure and undefiled before God,” of course, is not equivalent to religious busyness. Some youth today are encouraged by their parents and leaders or self-propelled into “doing” lots of church things, but they remain deceived about themselves. In a culture where everything is here and now, they may be looking to get in, get out, and be on their way. They have learned the vocabulary that is needed and actions that are to be performed to be really active, but may really be running in place. They are merely checking things off their spiritual “to do” list.

We must help them understand that doing church activities is not the life of faith, but it can lead to a life of faith. In addition to the doing there must be some fruit that comes, or all the doing is just another check on the list. Only when their actions flow from love of God and others will they see the fruit of the Spirit — “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23) — blossom and grow from their doings.

### **WALKING THE PATH WITH OTHERS**

Students crave community, so it is beneficial that they will meet many fellow travelers on the path. James highlights some of these fellow travelers “in their distress” and calls us to join in community with them. Students know a lot about social connection — they can follow someone on Twitter or friend them on Facebook — but being connected to others does not mean being in community with them. James calls for us to be present in the life of another person. That is why ministries for students must structure time for them to share life together — by eating together, being in one another’s homes, and supporting one another at competitions.

The fellow travelers that James envisions, and that we need on the journey of faith, include “orphans and widows.” These are two groups of people who had little power and were oppressed. Transformation and conversion will occur in a community when there is such diversity of life experience that can be explored and shared.

Though the journey of faith is sometimes difficult—indeed, we must “persevere”—the epistle of James offers us this hope. As we journey with a transformative community into “the perfect law, the law of liberty,...being not hearers who forget but doers who act—[we] will be blessed in [our] doing” (James 1:25).

## NOTES

1 Harold S. Songer, “James,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, volume 12, edited by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1972), 100-140, here citing 113.

2. Ibid., 101.

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# Finding a Central Thread in James

BY DAVID M. MOFFITT

The three studies of James reviewed here bring together in refreshing ways what many scholars hold asunder—substantive historical analysis, exegetical work, and constructive theological engagement. This holistic approach helps us to become doers of the word, not only better hearers of it.

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**T**he letter of James is often neglected in modern biblical and theological scholarship. Many scholars think this brief and unassuming epistle, with its assortment of general moral directives and only two passing references to Jesus, pales in comparison to the canonical contributions of such luminaries as Paul and John. Moreover, James's obviously Jewish perspectives on faith, works, and justification leave these scholars, particularly in the Protestant world, a bit cold. James appears to offer little of historical or distinctive Christological value.

James may never command the kind of attention that the Johannine and Pauline literature do, but renewed interest in the Jewish roots of early Christianity and the diversity of opinion among early Christians has encouraged fresh reflection on this epistle, along with other outlying canonical and non-canonical texts. The three studies reviewed here—Patrick J. Hartin's *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999, 204 pp., \$23.95), Luke Timothy Johnson's *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004, 300 pp., \$32.00), and Richard Bauckham's *James*, New Testament Readings (London: Routledge, 1999, 256 pp., \$44.95)—represent this recent trend. While each book has distinctive emphases, they share two sig-



nificant themes: contra the influential view of Martin Dibelius (1883-1947), James is not a random, unconnected collection of moral teachings; and James should be freed from being read primarily in terms of its apparent contradiction of Paul.



Patrick Hartin has four goals in *A Spirituality of Perfection*: to demonstrate that James has a unifying theme of perfection, which Hartin argues can best be understood as integrity; to discern the spiritual impulses of the letter and thus understand James's spirituality; to explain how James's ethical exhortation relates to the eschatological themes in the epistle; and to explore some ways in which James's spirituality of perfection can inform the active faith of contemporary Christians (pp. 9-11).

Hartin develops his case by examining the uses of "perfection" language (*teleios* in Greek) in ancient literature, including in biblical texts. In the Old Testament he claims to find "three essential aspects...[of] the biblical notion of perfection that [the word *teleios*] endeavors to capture" (p. 26). These are first, "The idea of wholeness, or completeness, whereby a being remains true to its original constitution"; second "The giving of oneself to God wholeheartedly and unconditionally, which includes a relationship between God and God's people"; and third, "The wholehearted dedication to the Lord that is demonstrated above all in obedience to God's will" (p. 26). Throughout the book Hartin treats these three elements as the "essence of [perfection's] meaning" (p. 36, cf. pp. 58-60, 89-92).

The idea that the word "perfection" has an essential, biblical meaning hobbles Hartin's argument. From a historical-linguistic point of view to speak of "the biblical notion" of a word is already questionable, since the collection of texts in the Septuagint represents an artificial and limited snapshot of the Greek language. More to the point, however, the conclusion that these three characteristics of the term "perfection" represent the *essence* of the term's meaning is problematic. Rather, Hartin has created a composite picture of various meanings of "perfection" culled from distinct and different contexts.

In spite of the problems inherent in Hartin's initial word study, he helpfully reminds readers to allow space for James to be James and not be too quick to force James into conversation with Paul. Further, Hartin rightly highlights the importance of the eschatological frame in which James's exhortations stand. He also suggests some ways that James can inform theological dialogue today.

The larger thesis of the book—that perfect faith in James is about integrity between belief/speech and action, and that this theme unifies the letter—is largely persuasive. What Dibelius took to be a disparate collection of exhortations is, as Hartin claims, more likely to be a unified ethical discourse aimed at encouraging a holistic understanding of faith. Integrity or coherence between belief and action is the mark of perfection in James.



Luke Timothy Johnson's *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God*, a collection of previously published articles, is a valuable resource for students of James. While some of these essays are quite technical and will be easier to follow for those who have a good working knowledge of Greek, the larger points of the articles are clear and accessible. In a few of these studies Johnson pursues the possibility and potential significance of the traditional position that James the brother of Jesus authored the text. He offers careful and insightful discussions on the relationships between James and Paul, and their epistles. Other essays trace how the letter of James appropriates the Old Testament and how it was received in early Christianity. The importance of the letter's Hellenistic context for understanding various elements of its rhetoric and content forms one of the overarching themes and points of method to which Johnson returns throughout the collection.

Let me highlight three points that Johnson makes in the final essay, "The Importance of James for Theology," which is a fruitful discussion of the ethical and theological contributions James can make to contemporary Christianity. The first is that "James grounds moral behavior in God rather than in the distinctive Christian set of experiences and convictions rooted in Jesus Christ." James's marked emphasis on theology proper and its corresponding "lack of explicit Christology," Johnson avers, are assets for Christian engagement in a pluralistic world. The paucity of explicit reflection about Jesus makes the document "a precious resource for ecumenical conversation, not alone between Christians and Jews, but also among all those belonging to monotheistic faiths, and perhaps even all those who interpret reality religiously" (p. 248).<sup>1</sup>

I am not persuaded that this claim does justice either to James or to an understanding of theology proper. Johnson is surely correct to note that the ethical exhortation in James, perhaps especially James's emphasis on caring for the poor, provides points of contact with the ethical traditions of other religions. Johnson's emphasis on the language of humanity as the "image of God" (not of Christ) in James 3:9 is also valuable (p. 249). What troubles me are the grounds from which he tries to develop such points. What can theology proper mean for a Christian if it is not fundamentally Trinitarian and thus always already inclusive of Christology? Even when one focuses on canonical texts such as James (or the Old Testament for that matter) in which that Christology is not explicitly discussed, how does one neatly divide theology and Christology?

Additionally, the fact that James does not explicitly mention Jesus apart from James 1:1 and 2:1 does not as easily underwrite the kind of divide that Johnson posits. Johnson does not, for instance, speak to the fact that Jesus is called "Lord" in 1:1 and 2:1. Yet the use of this title with Jesus at the outset of the letter would seem to suggest that the definite, absolute occurrences of

the title throughout the rest of the letter point back to Jesus (e.g., 1:7; 4:15; 5:7–15). The occurrences of the title in chapter 5 are especially intriguing in this respect. When in 5:7–8 James speaks of the “coming [*parousia*] of the Lord,” it is hard to imagine that he, as an early Christian, intends anything else than the return of the “Lord Jesus Christ.” It may be objected that in 5:10–11 the term “Lord” must refer to God the Father (cf. 1:17, 3:9) – that is,

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the God of Israel. More likely though, this language is indicative of the kinds of linkages in identity that early believers in Jesus were claiming between Jesus and the God of Israel. Indeed, the very introduction of the letter – where James describes himself as the slave “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1) – implies a close relationship between God and Jesus. Yet even if the historical validity of these points should be dis-

missed, the fact remains that James continues to be read today because of its presence in the Christian canon. One cannot, it seems to me, easily extricate the letter from this larger literary and theological frame of reference.

A second point worthy of special note concerns how Johnson turns James’s link between what one says and how one behaves into a brilliant reflection on Christian speech ethics. Taking his cue from Richard Bauckham’s brief account of speech ethics in James (to which I will return below), Johnson highlights the relation between creation and speech in James 3:1–12. Humans, like God, have the power to create by way of naming. “Language,” Johnson writes, “is a world-creating capacity, an awesome power by which humans can either structure life according to the ‘word of truth,’ so that humans are ‘a kind of first-fruits of his creatures’ (1:18), or make a structure of meaning in which God is omitted, ignored, or denied” (p. 251). I do not know if Johnson would be happy with the suggestion that human language is an expression of the divine image, but his insight here suggests this conclusion. Human speech may not create *ex nihilo*, but Johnson’s observation about the creative power of human speech is nevertheless right on target.

Thus, as Johnson points out, *language in the Church matters*: “The church has the responsibility to challenge, rather than be co-opted by, the distortions of language in our culture, which is a virtual babel of linguistic confusion and misdirection” (p. 251). Language is anything but neutral. I was reminded of this fact when I heard of congregations distributing “tickets” for Sunday

services. In at least one case a key rationale for this practice was to ensure that attendees had seating and thus “the best experience possible” (for some services were later described as “sold out”). Though at first glance this seems to be an innocuous practice, the problem is that such language derives its meaning from a linguistic discourse distinctly inappropriate for the Church. This language depends upon and propagates a structuring metaphor that runs counter to the discourse of worship—that of attending a show.<sup>2</sup>

The structuring metaphor of worship traditionally has been that of service (or, attending) to God. Thus, the focus of the discourse of worship has been properly theological, directing the Church toward the offering to God of praise, blessing, money, time, and so on. The discourse of attending a show, by contrast, is distinctly anthropological in focus: it directs our action toward the entertainment of the observing audience. To invoke the discourse of attending a show, therefore, is much worse than uttering a gauche theological malapropism. Such language has the power to recreate the Church’s constitutive activity of worship in the distorted image of the culture.

A third noteworthy observation in Johnson’s concluding essay is that James challenges the Church to be a community in solidarity with its neighbor. In particular, James highlights the need of the Church to embrace the poor, the fatherless, the widows, and to visit and care for the sick. The Church shows itself to be a friend of God rather than of the world when it turns away from the self-protective “logic of envy and arrogance” and toward caring for those who are weak. The world tends to isolate the sick and leave them behind because the “resources devoted to [those who are ill] sap our strength and diminish us” (p. 257). In the Church, though, we must care for the poor and the sick, rather than exclude them. To do otherwise belies the reality of our profession of faith.

Johnson’s volume is an excellent resource. Not only does he cover a great deal of historical and exegetical ground in these essays, he also fosters reflection on how the letter of James continues to speak to the life of the Church today.



Richard Bauckham’s *James* is part traditional commentary, part history of reception, part canonical examination, and part theological and philosophical reflection. Most impressive is the fact that Bauckham’s book accomplishes all of this while remaining so clear and readable.

In the prologue, Bauckham discusses Søren Kierkegaard’s programmatic use of the letter of James, especially the parable of the mirror (James 1:23-25) as a guide for reading Scripture and critiquing the Christianity of his day.<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard is referenced throughout the book and becomes a major dialogue partner again in the last chapter.

Bauckham makes a plausible case for the scenario that James, Jesus’ brother and head of the church in Jerusalem, wrote the epistle as a general

wisdom encyclical intended for various Jewish churches in the Diaspora. More importantly, though, he is careful to address the “So what?” question: this hypothesis explains, for example, why the moral exhortation is cast in such general terms.

The second chapter contains the book’s more traditional commentary material. As he is demonstrating how the epistle fits within the larger tradition of Jewish wisdom literature, Bauckham makes the important observation that wisdom and apocalyptic were not mutually exclusive categories in Second Temple Judaism. He goes on to discuss the variety of literary forms in James (for example, aphorisms, similitudes, and diatribe) and the literary structure of the letter. He highlights a number of passages in James that allude to sayings of Jesus or, more interesting still, adapt and revise sayings of Jesus. In James 2:5, for instance, the statement that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to be heirs of his promised kingdom looks like a “creative re-expression” (p. 86) of Jesus’ beatitude, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20, cf. Matthew 5:3). Comparing Jesus’ wisdom teaching as it is portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels and in James, Bauckham argues that James, in drawing upon the teaching of Jesus, is doing what other ancient Jewish sages did: they not only reflected on the prior wisdom traditions, they also added their own voices and perspectives to those traditions.

In the third chapter Bauckham examines the letter of James in its canonical context. He compares and contrasts James with a number of New Testament voices, but unsurprisingly spends the bulk of his time discussing the relationship between James and Paul. Bauckham helpfully challenges the tendency to evaluate “James’ theological and Christian value by the standard of Paul,” (p. 118) noting this has led to misconstruing the letter by placing disproportionate emphasis on James 2:14–26.

Bauckham challenges the assumption that James wrote the letter in order to rebut Paul. He shrewdly comments, “[T]he fact that the letter makes no reference to the issues of circumcision, food laws and other distinctives of the Mosaic law that are supposed to have been the focus of contention between Paul and the historical James makes this position difficult” (p. 119). James’s discussion of faith and works “is entirely intelligible and explicable, against a Jewish background, without reference to Paul,” Bauckham notes (p. 127). He concludes that both the apparent points of contact between James and Paul and their distinctive emphases are best explained by independent appeal to a common “Jewish tradition of discussion of Abraham” (p. 130). This is not to say that all tension between James and Paul can be easily resolved. In Bauckham’s view, however, the differences between James and Paul “should not be exaggerated at the expense of notable similarities, either in a historical reconstruction,...or by a canonical reading that highlights the distinctiveness of each canonical voice in order to demonstrate their complementarity” (p. 140).

In the final chapter on the theological appropriation of the letter of James, Kierkegaard returns as an active dialogue partner. Bauckham believes that Kierkegaard “leads us into the theological and existential dimensions of the text in a way that purely historical exegesis fails to do, so that...he helps to engage us with the text at a level appropriate to its content” (p. 172). Despite some interpretive missteps, Kierkegaard provides a helpful illustration of an interpretation of James that involves the very kind of action James calls for, which is moving beyond mental apprehension to the act of living out its message.

Bauckham suggests ways of applying James in the contemporary church on the themes of solidarity with the poor, speech ethics, and prayer. Bauckham’s insights on the power of speech to shape reality, especially to do harm (cf. James 4:11–12), are the basis for Johnson’s more developed reflection (which I praised above). In his discussion of prayer, Bauckham notes that prayer represents a challenge to the self-image of modern people. The illusion of control fostered by technological advances “has promoted a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency to which prayer is alien” (p. 207). Prayer exposes this lie and reestablishes our dependency upon our creator. Bauckham’s understanding of prayer might be combined with Johnson’s reflection on speech ethics and developed further: prayer is a mode of speech that has the power to redeem reality (cf. James 5:15–16).

Each of the books reviewed here are helpful resources, with Bauckham’s *James* being the most impressive and comprehensive of three. What strikes me most about these volumes is the refreshing ways they attempt to bring together what many biblical scholars hold asunder — substantive historical analysis, exegetical work, and constructive theological engagement.

## NOTES

1 Hartin makes similar points in *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 6–7, 125, and especially 164–166.

2 I borrow the term “structuring metaphor” from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980). They define structuring metaphors as metaphors that “allow us...to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another” (p. 61).

3 C. Stephen Evans explores Kierkegaard’s use of the parable in “Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word,” on pp. 62–69 in this issue.



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