



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 God Gave Us Birth
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 11-20)

Suggested Article:

📖 James's Amazing Grace
Gumbo
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 79-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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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 first fruits of a restored creation, set free to live according to God's character.

Prayer

Eternal God, we confess that we want to follow our own, individual paths in life. Yet you show us a different way. You show us what it means to live in a community of faith that cares for those in need. You remind us that a living faith includes faithful 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.

Scripture Reading: James 1:16-21

Reflection

The letter of James is so full of ethical instruction, it is easy to think it is a good-works-rather-than-grace epistle that ignores the grace of God through Christ and exhorts us to pull ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps. But that is really a bum rap.

James follows "the threefold 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," but makes subtle adjustments to show "something has shifted within this Jewish framework," Miriam Kamell writes. "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."

Kamell highlights five themes in James's interpretation of the covenantal paradigm in light of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

- ▶ *Salvation begins with the work of the good and generous God.* We should "not be deceived" about God (1:16): God does not cause temptation (1:13), but gives the good gifts we need but cannot earn—like wisdom (1:5) and redemption (1:18). Kamell writes, "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."
- ▶ *Salvation begins with God's choice.* "Life like this [in a generous community] is not a dream or something gained by a simple grit-your-teeth ethic," Kamell notes, but is given by God "in fulfillment of his own purpose" (1:18a). God gives new life that is brought to "birth by the word of truth" (1:18a); this stands in contrast to the death that is birthed by sin (1:15).
- ▶ *God is doing something new,* remaking us "so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (1:18b). Kamell says this phrase indicates "James's revolutionary thinking," suggesting we are being remade into "something new, different, and indicating a greater fullness to come." The qualifier "a kind of" may reflect



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“the ‘already/not yet’ nature of this new birth. The believers have been reborn, but still struggle with obedience (1:13-15).”

- ▶ *Individuals can choose to cooperate with God’s grace.* Kamell writes, “James’s theology does not simply end with new birth. The implications of the firstfruit identity are far reaching and require cooperation.” Indeed, we must “welcome with meekness the implanted word” and cooperate with God in eradicating “all sorts of wickedness” (1:21). She notes, “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.”
- ▶ *Salvation ends with God recognizing his image in redeemed individuals and communities.* Kamell summarizes James’s view of the final judgment (2:12-13): “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.”

Kamell concludes that according to James, “those who accept their status as firstfruits . . . 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.”

Study Questions

1. How does James exemplify the threefold pattern of God’s covenant with Israel? What adjustment does it make to this pattern in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. For James, what’s the role of good deeds in the Christian life?
3. Consider how “first fruits” is used in Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23. How do each of these passages illumine James’s unusual description of faithful disciples as “a kind of first fruits of God’s creatures” (James 1:18)?
4. According to Mariam Kamell, how does the view of mercy in the biblical wisdom tradition help us understand what it means to be judged “by the law of liberty” (James 2:12-13)?
5. With Thomas Merton’s phrase “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday” as his guide, how does Bert Montgomery find “amazing grace” in James’s choice of Abraham, Elijah, and Rahab to be examples of faith-in-action? What do these selections reveal about James’s understanding of judgment by the law of liberty?

Departing Hymn: “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
praise him, all creatures here below;
praise him above, ye heav’nly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Thomas Ken (1692)

Suggested Tunes: OLD 100th or O WALY WALY

God Gave Us Birth

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan	Dual Session (#1)	Dual Session (#2)
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 2:21-26; 5:16-18
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss “James’s Amazing Grace Gumbo”
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss how the letter of James emphasizes the gracious activity of God in Jesus Christ that brings salvation.
2. To explore the role of God’s mercy in judgment “by the law of liberty,” according to James.
3. To consider why James presents Abraham, Rahab, and Elijah as exemplars of faith-in-action.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” locate the familiar tune OLD 100th or O WALY WALY in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“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,” Bert Montgomery admits. Yet then he notes the unlikely figures that James holds up as exemplars of righteousness: an old man who fell down laughing at God’s plan, a once-cowering prophet, and a woman with a sketchy past—who stand before us not in their own merit, but due to their grace-filled response to God’s call. Thus, if “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,” Montgomery concludes. “A reckless reading sees legalism, but a hearty bite tastes grace through and through” (*The Letter of James*, 82).

In this study Miriam Kamell guides us to the passages in James where the theology of God’s grace that undergirds the entire epistle, including its choice of edifying figures, is most clear.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 1:16-21 from a modern translation.

Reflection

We begin our reflection on the moral instruction in James by exploring how this epistle grounds our discipleship in the gracious activity of God in Jesus Christ. Miriam Kamell explains the rich metaphors in James 1:16-21, and Bert Montgomery examines James’s unusual choice of moral exemplars. They deflect two criticisms: that James teaches we are saved by good works, and that salvation is entirely an individual affair. The letter 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 believe the author is either the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:8), who in Christian tradition has been called James the Just, or someone who identifies with this figure. Kamell and Montgomery help us understand how he draws on his Jewish heritage to explain our discipleship of Christ.

If your group would like to extend their study of the role of grace in the letter of James to a second session, you might explore James 1:16-21 in the first session and then discuss James's account of judgment and choice of exemplars in the second session.

Study Questions

1. Mariam Kamell summarizes God's covenant with Israel: "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... and this calling was to be made possible because of God's choice of and presence with Israel."
Similarly, James says believers were given birth "by the word of truth"; this was done "in fulfillment of [God's] own purpose" that they "become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (James 1:18). Believers will be judged on whether they respond in faith and actions that reflect this generous, merciful nature of God (2:12-13). James adjusts the covenantal pattern when he says the word has been "implanted" in believers' hearts (1:21). Kamell writes, "Here we see the first hint that James has moved into a new covenant theology, affirming the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-34."
2. Kamell writes that according to James "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." To live out their new identity – as people in whom God has implanted his saving word – requires their willing obedience (James 1:19-22). This reveals they have been reborn in the image of the generous, merciful God. "James does not teach salvation by works," Kamell concludes, "but a salvation made possible by obedient preparation for the word to work, reflecting the teachings of Jesus."
3. Assign small groups to study Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23. As the people tithed first fruits, they expressed gratitude for God's gifts of the land (Deuteronomy 26:1-3) and rescue from Egypt (26:5-10), and generously shared their bounty with the poor (26:11-12). The tithers became emblems and enactors of God's grace. The Apostle Paul describes the resurrected Christ as himself the first fruits; his resurrection is an emblem of God's mercy and it extends that new life to all believers. Discuss how, according to James, believers have been given new life through "the implanted word" in order to become both emblems and enactors of God's grace and mercy.
4. Kamell notes the reciprocal nature of mercy in the wisdom tradition: the wise are shown mercy by God and, in turn, they are merciful. This is captured in Jesus' beatitude "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Linking the "law of freedom" by which believers are judged with the "word of truth" that birthed them, Kamell writes, "Judgment will be done *according to the same entity* as that by which we are saved.... That encouragement, however, is paired with the equally strong warning of the necessity of mercy...[for] a lack of mercy indicates a failure of fruit from the implanted word, and reveals us as self-deceived as to our status."
5. Bert Montgomery suggests that James's choice of Abraham, Elijah, and Rahab as exemplars of faith-in-action requires a gracious memory of their lives. None of these characters are "pure" through and through, and their exemplary actions follow closely on their grateful obedience to God's gracious call. They do not show us how to pull ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps, but how to respond to God's gracious initiative.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.