



FAITH AT WORK

Teaching the letter of James

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1 Introduction to James

The book of James is often treated as the poor man's relation to Paul's epistles. Luther infamously described it as an "epistle of straw" and I think many, like him have seen it as troublesome, potentially in conflict with the message of justification by faith and salvation by grace alone that we see in Romans, Ephesians and Galatians. Occasionally someone will pull out a quote about the danger of the tongue or use chapter 5 to instruct on healing ministry. However, it isn't a go to book for preaching series in the same way that the aforementioned Pauline epistles are.

I suspect another factor is that the style is very different to other New Testament books and that makes for a challenging read. The structure and flow take some work to follow. In my opinion, there are similarities in terms of genre with the Old Testament wisdom literature. Try reading it in the same way as you would the Proverbs and put out of mind your approach to reading Paul and that might help.

If the book has been neglected, then that is a shame. Far from contradicting Paul, James complements his teaching. The letter has much to teach us about what it means to follow Jesus and to live fruitful lives as a result of God's grace to us.

Date and Author

The date and authorship of the epistle are wrapped up together to some extent. There were a number of possible candidates in the New Testament church who took the name James, or more properly Jakob. The most obvious options are James, the apostle, one of the twelve disciples and the brother of John or alternatively James, the brother of Jesus who became an elder in the early church and seems to have been recognised as having apostolic status.

James, the disciple tends to be ruled out quickly because it is assumed that the earliest date for other books would have been from the 50s onwards. Galatians is often presumed to be the first piece of New Testament literature written and James is seen as a response to this. This would make the letter too late for the disciple to have written it given his early martyrdom.

So, James, the brother of Jesus, is the one most often associated with the letter, although unlike Jude, the author doesn't mention his relationship to Jesus beyond being "a slave" of him. However, if the letter is a response to Paul, this might make sense given that James, directly or indirectly seems to have been connected with the Judaizers in Galatians 2. So, it is possible that this James would want to set the record straight.

However, perhaps there has been too much of a tendency to read James in the light of others and as Scott McKnight suggests, we simply need to "read James in the light of James."¹ There are strong arguments that far from being a response to Paul, this letter, especially James 2:14-26 point away from the author having a detailed knowledge of Galatians.² Perhaps in fact, rather than seeking to respond to another apostle, James is writing on his own terms to deal with other concerns and maybe, just maybe, Paul would have agreed entirely with him and made the same points if in his own way.

¹ McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 1.

² Carson, Moo and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 414. See also Bernier, *Rethinking the dates of the New Testament*, 198.

Certainly, when James deals with the issue of works and faith, his concern is more with charitable deeds than ceremonial Torah observance. This means that it is possible that those James is engaging with have corrupted Paul's teaching to turn it against its opposite intent of love and welcome to the most needy in the church. It is also possible, that the Judaizers had corrupted James' reminders that good works are a part of the Christian life and evidence of faith.

All of this means that the letter may well have been written prior to AD44 and even as early as the late 30s. This means that it is possible that James the disciple could have written it. However, James, the brother of Jesus still seems more likely. Certainly, church tradition from earliest times has pretty much universally associated the letter with him.³

Crucially, the letter is from one of the early leaders of the church, it is written by a close companion and eyewitness of Jesus. If it is from the disciple, then this was a man whose reputation was one of "the sons of thunder" and who had craved power and position in Christ's kingdom. If it is from the brother, then this was one who had initially been a cynic, considering his brother a madman. Either way, then, the letter bears testimony to the power of the Gospel, through the work of the Holy Spirit to change a person's life completely. Neither the disciple, nor the brother would have written these kinds of things before the resurrection.

Intended audience

Unlike Paul's letters to specific churches, James writes more generally. His letter is addressed "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations."⁴ This suggests that the letter was intended to be circulated to various young churches around the known world of the time. The description of "scattering" indicates that it is intended for Christians who have been exiled from their homelands. This could refer to the Jewish diaspora, many Jews had not returned from exile and were spread out throughout the Empire, these were often the first witnessed to by Paul and others on their missionary journey. There are clues in the vocabulary of the letter, such as the reference to synagogues that James may have primarily intended a Jewish Christian audience. However, there were also Gentile Christians who had been dispersed through persecution and it may be that the reference to the "twelve tribes" is intended more figuratively for the whole church as God's people.⁵

My inclination is that the primary recipients were Jewish Christians and this will help us to understand the context of the letter better. However, I would have expected Gentile and Jewish converts to be worshipping together in the same congregations and so, the letter would have had broader application, just as it is relevant to believers today.

What is James all about?

James' reason for writing can be found right at the start of the letter. As we've already seen, the letter is written to those "scattered" this already alludes to the audience being those who are likely to have suffered loss and persecution, whether now or in the past. It also sets them up as the underdogs in the society they now live in. James goes on to write:

² Dear brothers and sisters,¹ when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your

³ McKnight, *The letter of James*, 15.

⁴ James 1:1.

⁵ See Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 414.

endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

This confirms that James' concern is for those who were experience trials and suffering. He wants to encourage them to persevere and not to give up on Jesus and the Gospel.

If they were suffering, then we will next want to think about what the cause of the suffering was and where the danger was coming from. Now, it is possible, probable even that there had been outside persecution. They lived in a world that would have been hostile to them and their beliefs. If they were Jewish Christians then they were subject to double the discrimination.

However, James sees the primary danger as coming not from the outside but from inside the church. There are two related aspects to this. First, the biggest danger is not that they will suffer physical harm but that their faith will take a knock, that they will lack grounding and stability.⁶

Secondly, especially with shallow and unstable faith, there is a risk of selfishness as people seek to survive and look after themselves in harsh. So, a great danger is that they will be divided, that they will fail to look after one another and so suffering will be exacerbated, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable. All of this could happen whilst covered with a veneer of piety.⁷

This may help us to understand a bit better what is going on in the letter and particularly those areas that have become controversial. When James writes about faith and works, his concern is to ensure that the believers have a true, deep, robust faith that will last and that will enable them to live for Christ by loving one another. This also helps us see why towards the end, James will pick up on the question of faith, prayer and healing. It is highly likely that Christians facing suffering will have had to endure sickness as part of that. The big question then is whether their response to sickness, as with other suffering will be characterised by faith and whether that faith will lead to practical action.

James, therefore, speaks to us today. We live as God's people, spiritual exiles, scattered in his world and this means that we will to different degrees face different types of suffering. How will we respond? Will the way that we face our trials and look out for each other evidence deep trust in Christ, a growing faith and love, or will it point to something different?

Structure and Overview

I would suggest that the argument in the book develops as follows.

Greetings to a scattered people (1:1) James identifies himself as a slave of God and Christ and writes to an audience of scattered exiles.

Hope for a suffering church (1:2-18). James writes to Christians who are suffering, in order to encourage them in two ways. First, he encourages them by reminding them of the good purposes of suffering, God tests, proves and refines us for our good and his glory. Secondly, he identifies the great need of believers when facing fiery trials as "wisdom." This is something we are to exercise faith in trusting God for. James is a piece of wisdom literature.

Faith and Words, hearers and doers (1:19-2:26) Jesus used the parable of the wise man who built his house upon a rock to show that we need to be both hearers and doers. It is no surprise then to find James arguing that true wisdom is about faith and works, hearing and doing together.

⁶ James 1:6.

⁷ James 2:1-26.

Wisdom and Self-control (3:1-18). Self-control is a fruit of the spirit and evidence of faith and wisdom. This is exemplified by what we say as well as what we do. The tongue can be used to build up or to destroy.

Faith and submission (4:1-12). If Solomon argued that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, James will say that faith is about submitting to God, not siding with the world and not resisting him. So, submission will lead to sanctification as God works in our lives.

Boasting and the Future (4:13-5:20). True faith and true wisdom are characterised by humility. This means that we have grounded hope in God to preserve us but we do not boast and make grand claims and plans for the future. In fact, such grand boasts may be an escape from the reality of suffering now. Instead, again our eyes are turned back to what it means to live with practical faith now because of confident hope in the future promise. This includes repentance and the prayer of faith, seeking God’s help in times of trouble.

The Message of James

We can sum up the message of James as being about how we live in the face of suffering with faith. Faith in Jesus enables us to face our own suffering with joy, to help others in their own suffering and to confidently seek help through prayer as we face our own.

2 James and Paul: Law, grace and faith

Does James contradict Paul? This is one of the big questions that has been asked of his letter and it is the primary reason why some people have been suspicious of the letter. Paul has been keen in his letters to argue that we are saved by grace alone and justified by faith. In Ephesians 2:8-9 he says:

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

In the letter to the Galatians, he spends most of his time insisting that justification is by faith and not by works of the Law. He uses this as his primary argument for showing why the agitators there are wrong to insist on circumcision for the Gentiles. In Romans 4, he shows that both Abraham and David are justified by faith. Again, he points out that righteousness is something credited to Abraham before, not after circumcision. He quotes Genesis 15:6 and 22:

“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”⁸

James uses the same quote but seems to use it differently⁹. He argues that for Abraham, both faith and works come together, so that his justification is based on both.¹⁰ So, when James sees people arguing that they have one of these and not the other, whether faith without deeds/works¹¹ or works without faith¹² he insists that one without the other is dead. True faith comes with works included.

So, does this contradict Paul? Is James seeking to add something to the Gospel of grace? It's worth observing three things. First, when James talks about Abraham being counted as righteous, he associates it with his willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. However, the statement that Abraham was counted righteous was made prior to the sacrifice. So, James, states that the action of offering Isaac fulfilled the statement about justification. In other words, he treats Genesis 15 as having a prophetic dynamic. The faith was already present in Genesis 15, but it would be proven when God put Abraham to the test. He would show that he really did trust God by how he responded to that test in obedience.

Secondly, notice that Paul's particular concern in Romans and Galatians is with Torah obedience concerning rituals and ceremonies. You can't be justified by keeping these religious rites such as circumcision. His focus is not so much then on obedience that arises out of trust. However, when talking about how we respond to trials and suffering, Paul will say:

... we¹³ also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.¹³

This sounds very similar to James' introductory comments:

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,¹³ whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let

⁸ Romans 4:3.

⁹ James 2:23.

¹⁰ James 2:24.

¹¹ James 2:14.

¹² James 2:18.

¹³ Romans 5:3-13.

perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.¹⁴

James and Paul have a similar theology of suffering. God uses our trials as we learn to endure in order to work in our lives for our glory, to refine and prove our faith so that we are rooted and established in Christ.

Thirdly, notice that in Ephesians 2:10, having said that we are saved by grace, not works, Paul goes on to say:

¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Works do have a place for Paul as well, we are not just saved to get our ticket to heaven but in order to serve God. We were made for good works and we are redeemed for them too. As someone once said, "We may be saved by faith alone but that faith never comes alone." It seems then that Paul would agree with James, that if you want to see someone's faith, then the evidence will be its fruit, the good works you do.

Both Paul and James agree that faith and works go together. God does not save us because we do good works, it is an act of grace but faith, or trust is a living, active thing, demonstrated by obedience. Our faith will be tested and proved as we go through the fiery trials of suffering and persecution. We can either respond to such suffering by hiding away, thinking that we've pocketed our ticket to heaven or by actively demonstrating our faith in God to protect us, provide for us and bring us safely home. That's what faith and works is all about.

¹⁴ James 1:2-3.

3 Greetings to scattered people

Theresa May in her 2016 party conference speech described her opponents as “citizens of nowhere.”¹⁵ She was arguing that those who saw themselves as citizens of the world, especially those who were using this kind of language to attack Brexit supporters as nationalists lack roots. The speech understandably ruffled a few feathers.

The reality of course is that many people do struggle with a sense of split loyalties. What about the person who has migrated into this country either seeking better economic conditions or fleeing war, corruption or persecution for asylum? Of course there’s always been a suspicion of the foreigner in our midst, the Jews have particularly suffered much throughout the centuries to a perception that their loyalties are divided and so they are not to be trusted. Mind you, there is a form of hypocrisy at work. Brits abroad expect to be able to enjoy a better life whether down under in Australia or on the Costa-del-Sol whilst retaining their British identity and the privileges involved.

The idea that if you have loyalties to a higher authority or relate to a wider community than your immediate ethnic kin should be something that Christians will be grieved about. We above all people owe our allegiance to someone greater, we above all people are aware of bonds of love that join us more closely to people around the world than it sometimes does to our immediate neighbours. We have always been a scattered people in exile.

A look at the text (Read James 1:1).

The author of the letter is James, or rather Jacob. There were several New Testament figures called Jacob or James, most notably one of the twelve disciples and one Jesus’ brothers. We’ve ended up with the name James probably through a corruption of the name via Latin and arguably because this suited the sponsor of one of the formative English translations of the Bible, The King James version.

When we remember that the author was in fact Jacob, we are reminded of the Jewishness of the book. Jacob took his name from one of the main patriarchs or founding fathers of Israel and the Jewish race. The original Jacob was the father of the twelve tribal heads and the grandson of Abraham. There is therefore something significant in a letter from a new Jacob being sent to the 12 new, reconstituted tribes of Israel.

Jacob, or James¹⁶ introduces himself not by promoting his own status as a brother of Jesus, a leader of the church or an apostle but simple as a slave, someone owned by and serving the will of another. He is a slave “of God” and “of Jesus Christ.” That his full allegiance is offered to both is a strong Trinitarian statement indicating that full loyalty can be given to Christ without compromising our submission to God the Father.

James writes to “the twelve tribes” by implication, these are the twelve tribes of Israel but they are not gathered into the promised land. They are part of “the diaspora” or those who have been scattered around the world, referring here to the known world of the time, the Roman Empire.

In the standard style of letters at the time, James having introduced himself and identified his audience, he then greets them.

Digging Deeper

¹⁵ [Full text: Theresa May's conference speech | The Spectator](#) accessed 18-08-2023.

¹⁶ We will stick with the better known name for the sake of convenience from now on.

As we've observed earlier, the reference to 12 scattered tribes is most likely intended to indicate a Jewish audience. These were Jews, scattered around the Roman empire, probably focused on modern day Turkey and Greece who had become Christians through the missionary journeys of the apostles and also as the early church was dispersed out from Jerusalem due to persecution.

However, whilst there is a literal audience in mind, the wider New Testament reminds us of two things. First, that we are all ingrafted into God's people, we are part of Israel and therefore included among the 12 tribes.¹⁷ Secondly, all believers are in a sense scattered, exiles, who are not yet arrived at their true home.¹⁸ James may have written initially to Jewish believers but his words have meaning and implication for Gentiles too, both in his own day and in ours.

A Look at ourselves

We may at times feel like we are "citizens of nowhere." This may feel literally true for many in our churches who have been uprooted from their home countries to flee suffering and persecution. Some will have experienced rejection and hostility instead of welcome from a host community. There will be others feeling uprooted just from moving home within the country and some will have felt abandoned by family and friends at times.

So, it is good to start this letter with a reminder that we do have an identity. We are citizens. We belong to someone and somewhere. Like James, the slave of Jesus, we belong to Christ. Like those he was writing to, we may be scattered exiles but we have a home in heaven and we are citizens of God's kingdom.

¹⁷ See especially Romans 11.

¹⁸ Consider Peter's introduction to his first letter.

4 Hope for a suffering church (1:2-18)

James begins his letter by talking about how Christians can and should face suffering. They are to see the trials they go through as a source of joy because of what it leads to, through endurance it brings us to the place of perfect hope (1:2-4). This endurance will require wisdom, something to be asked of God with faith (1:5-8). This faith is rooted not in our circumstances but in God and therefore in our future hope of his fulfilled promise in Christ (1:9-11). Therefore, those who endure are blessed, they know that their circumstances are God's good gift and that God is not tempting them, he works all things together for good (1:12-18).

4.1. A strange source of joy

It is easy to be happy and contented when things are going well, when there's good news and obvious hope. How do we respond however, when things are not going so well?

A look at the text (read James 1:2-4)

James says that we aren't only to find happiness in the good times. Instead, we are to be joyful when facing trials, or suffering. In fact, the language seems hyperbolic here. We are to "count it all/pure joy." It's not just that we find some reasons to be joyful in our suffering but the suffering itself is a fully joyful thing. The trials referred to are likely to be external opposition and struggles, particularly including economic hardship (v2).¹⁹ The reason for this is because when we face these trials, they serve a purpose. Trials are designed to test or prove the state of our faith and the result of this is that this leads to patient endurance or steadfastness (v3). The result of endurance is completeness/perfection. In other words, if we are able to ensure through these trials, then we will learn to persevere to the end and see Jesus face to face when we will be like him (v4).

Digging deeper

We can see links here with what Paul says in Romans 5:2-5. There Paul talks in terms of boasting which has a similar sense to the "counting it all joy", in James, when we suffer. For Paul, endurance leads to character and from there it produces hope. There's a similar theme in 1 Peter 1:6-7 where tested and refined faith glorifies Christ at his appearing.

Each have in common an eschatological dimension. They look forward to what the result will be when Christ returns.²⁰ The result is a perfecting quality. This means that we can make sense of experiences now by looking forward. The experience may not in and of itself be good. However, the outcome is and this means that God's purpose is good even when Satan and other human beings seek harm.

Suffering is used by God to produce sanctification in us. We endure, neither by trying harder in our own strength (legalism) or by just going with the flow of the world around us but by exercising real faith, by trusting God enough to keep living differently and so clinging more and more to Christ so that we bear his image. We become Christlike.

A look at ourselves

Today we are under pressure to conform in lots of ways to the world around us by accepting the values of our culture. Failing to tow the line may lead to you being singled out and could prove costly in different ways. This is particularly stark in some countries where a state religion is given

¹⁹ McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 75.

²⁰ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 66.

prominence and those who confess Christ may find that their exam results are reversed or their qualifications count for nothing. I've met Christians in other countries where there is a real economic cost to saying yes to Christ. We too may find ourselves in situations where faith proves costly. Sticking close to Christ and living a different life however, even when mocked, isolated or subject to harm is how we grow in him, become more Christ like and learn to endure.

4.2 Ask and you will receive

Jesus famously said:

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door[Ⓜ] will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

It's that theme from the sermon on the mount which James picks up on here. We've seen how James is following a similar line of argument to Paul in Romans 5:2-5 and Peter in 1 Peter 1:6-7. Both of those passages set out how we can face suffering against the context of what we have been given from God. Paul specifically links it to being justified and receiving peace.²¹ Peter talks about the new birth we have received and inheritance that we have been promised.²² So, James too will argue that we are equipped for the trials we are going to face. He will talk in terms of wisdom.

A Look at the text (Read James 1:5-8)

James recognises that there will be some who lack wisdom and so he says that if this is you, then you should ask God for it. God is the one who is generous. He doesn't withhold gifts. He doesn't "chide/rebuke" when we ask. Some translations say "he doesn't find fault" or in other words, doesn't look for a reason to say no to us when we ask but also I think there's the sense here that we shouldn't feel shame because we currently lack something within our character as though God will judge us for it. These are the grace gifts of a loving heavenly father(v5).

When you ask God, you are to ask with faith, you are not to come doubting. Doubting reflects a problem in a person's character, it suggests fragility and instability. A wave is not in control of itself but shaped and blown by the wind. So, too a doubter is subject to the influences of others (v6). The consequence is that whilst God is generous and not fault finding, the doubter won't receive (v7). The point that they are unstable is reinforced. They are caught in two minds, likely to ruminate and go to and throw between decisions (v8).

Digging a little Deeper

We will want to consider two questions. First, why does James put the focus on wisdom? Peter Davids describes it here as "the gift of God which enables one to be perfect or in James' conception to stand the test."²³ We might also consider how the Psalms and Proverbs describe "the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom." Then we remember that "Christ is the manifestation of wisdom, especially in his sufferings (e.g. 1 Cor 1:24)."²⁴ So, wisdom is not primarily an intellectual quality but rather it is a moral one and a relational one. In fact, wisdom is closely related to faith. We might even define wisdom as being trust in God practically lived out through our dependence on Christ.

²¹ Romans 5:1.

²² 1 Peter 1:3-4.

²³ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 71.

²⁴ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 72.

Secondly, why is James so hard on those who doubt? Is he promoting a prosperity type Gospel, that we need to have enough faith and not struggle with it? It is helpful here to consider a couple of things. First, by considering what it is that we are asking for, the nature of wisdom and its connection to faith. Perhaps there is a sense in which we receive wisdom through beginning to exercise it, by responding to God in trust and reverence (fear). Secondly, notice that James' issue isn't with the strength of faith that someone has but with a concern that they might be in two minds. It's this double mindedness and inability to settle that he is concerned with. Doubt here is not so much that we struggle to have confidence in something uncertain but rather that we know the certainty of it and still choose to listen to our doubts. As Varner observes, this is something rooted in Scripture and so, the readers would be familiar with the issue.²⁵ For example:

"The concept of 'doubleness' is found in Ps 12:2: 'With a double heart do they speak,' as well as in 1 Chron 12:33 and 1 Kgs 18:21. It is the opposite of what is commanded in Deut 4:29: 'You shall seek the Lord your God and you shall find Him when you seek Him with your heart and with your soul.'"²⁶

Thirdly, doubt here is about failing to trust God and believe in his promises. It's not about being uncertain as to whether something is right or available for me. It's about my view of God, his goodness and his faithfulness. Fourthly, there is the practical point that if I am in effect walking away from what God is offering me, refusing to accept it then I won't receive it.

A look at ourselves

It is important then, that we don't use the words of James 1:5-8 to cajole those who are struggling and fragile. We are more likely to beat faith out of them than into them. Nor should we use these words to insist that everyone must be united and unquestioning about our particular desires and projects or to blame them for a lack of faith if things fail. What these words encourage are a single minded pursuit of and trust in God, coming to him and saying "Lord I believe, help my unbelief."

4.3 Evaluation

It may surprise us, given Scriptures warning about pride, arrogance and boasting that New Testament authors, including Paul as well as James do argue that there is a place for boasting. The surprising twists concern who can boast and the basis of their boast.

A look at the text (Read James 1:9-11)

James contrasts the lowly or poor brother with the rich brother. Both should boast, or rejoice in different things. The poor man "in his exaltation" and the rich man "in his humiliation."

The first person is introduced as a brother, indicating that they are definitely a believer. The sense is that the poor or lowly person is already going through their trial and so a day will come when they will overcome and receive their reward. That's what they should boast in (v9).

The rich person is not introduced as a brother, leaving open the question of their spiritual state. He appears to be enjoying comfort and success now. They should not boast in that seeing it as a mark of their status and their relationship with God. James does not believe in a prosperity Gospel. Rather, the surprise is that they are to look forward to a day when they will be brought low, when all their

²⁵ Varner, James, *A commentary on the Greek text*, 69.

²⁶ Varner, James, *A commentary on the Greek text*, 69.

wealth, power and status will be stripped away. That is what they are to boast about. This is the surprising twist (v10a).

The reason for this is that they are called to recognise the fleeting, temporary and fragile nature of success and prosperity. James compares them to wild flowers that quickly shrivel and fade under the scorch of the sun. The fading away may refer both to the eventual loss of prosperity or even to death itself (v10b -11).²⁷

Digging Deeper

The call for the rich man to boast “in his humiliation” seems a strange idea. It seems almost as though he is being called to take delight and pride in his eventual judgement and condemnation, especially if we are to presume that they are not a believer.

Here is what I think is going on. The key, as I suggested above is to see that this is about evaluation. Both men are to look forward and instead of evaluating themselves based on their present circumstances, they are to make their assessment based on what is to come. So, first of all, we may possibly trace an element of irony in James’ advice to boast about humiliation. He’s in effect saying what do you really have to boast about? What do you have to show for all your so called success at the end?” His thinking here is rooted in the teaching of the teacher in Ecclesiastes.²⁸

The rich man should not put confidence in his riches. They will fader and perish and so, he will either die with his riches, still trying to hold onto them and so meet the same fate, or he will be brought low before then. If he loses grip on his prosperity before he dies and that forces him to learn to cling to Christ, then he will find himself like his poor brother, exalted and raised up on Resurrection Day. In other words this is:

“a ‘heroic boast of believers’, encouraging ‘God’s people to look towards the future ‘when riches will mean little and being in God’s plan will mean a great deal.’”²⁹

A Look at ourselves

Where is your confidence right now? Is it in your present circumstances, your status, popularity, economic worth? Or are you looking forward in hope, knowing that Christ has bought you for himself and so you will be kept safe through trials and even through death to the other side?

4.4 Tested

How do we respond when we face trials and testing? This is particularly important when testing involves suffering. We may at times be tempted to give up on seeking to do what is good and right. This was certainly a temptation that the Psalmists faced when they looked around and saw the wicked prospering. We may at times be tempted to blame God, to see him as the cause of our

²⁷ William Varner notes that in verse 10b, the subject of “fade away” could either be the rich man himself (explicit), or his riches, he prefers the latter (implicit). Varner, *James*, 75-6. However, v 11 seems to point to the rich man himself fading/passing away, even in the middle of his activities.

²⁸ Although Blomberg and Kamell are sceptical as to whether the strong irony of asking someone ‘to take pride in what amounts to his own eternal condemnation’ is credible. Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 58. I however think irony is possible in the terms suggested above noting that the jury is out as to whether James is speaking of eternal judgement. Varner certainly does not think that the words used point to eternal condemnation. Varner, *James*, 75-6.

²⁹ Drake Williams, cited in Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 58.

suffering and to excuse ourselves when we fall by saying that it is his fault. James cautions against such options

A Look at the Text (Read James 1:12-18)

Christians are to perseverance in the face of trial because this will lead to blessing and a crown. Note the link back to verse 2, trials are a joy, trials are a blessing(v12).³⁰ They are also to careful when identifying the cause of their trials. They are not to blame God for their temptation.³¹ The cause of temptation is their own sinful desires. Note that sometimes we attribute temptation to the devil and this is true in some cases but James puts the emphasis on our own responsibility (v13-15).³² Rather, they are to recognise that God is good and therefore that he is the one who gives good gifts and only good gifts (v16-18).

Digging Deeper

James is explicitly clear that God does not tempt us, therefore, we should properly attribute temptation to Satan and to our own sinful desires. However, Scripture does at times talk about God testing us. The two most obvious examples are when Abraham is tested in Genesis 22 and when Job announces that the Lord both gives and takes away.³³ What are we to make of this?

The point James is making concerns God's character, that he is good and therefore the source of all goodness. This helps us to understand his intent and purpose. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph will therefore recognise that the same outcome can have two originators but with very different motives, people intend harm, as does Satan but God intends good. Paul makes it explicitly clear that not only does God intend good but that this is what he achieves when he insists that "all things work together for the good of those who love him."³⁴

In this specific instance, James' point is that the reason why something becomes a test and indeed temptation is not to do with external causes. It's not that God is seeking to trip us up. Indeed, it is not even about blaming Satan. Rather, "what makes a given situation a test is not that God has put one there ... but that the person is willing to disobey him."³⁵ Or, to put it another way:

"What can change a trial into a temptation is the attitude with which we meet it and we fail the trial when turn to blaming God."³⁶

A look at ourselves

I remember a preacher once declaring to the congregation that he had been offered an old second hand car from some well-intentioned Christians. He had turned it down because, as he put it "his heavenly father was a good father who would only give him the best." Now, I don't know what state the car was in, perhaps it was a rust bucket. We certainly shouldn't be giving away things that are useless to us making them someone else's problem. However, if the preacher was relying on James 1 for his stance, he had misunderstood James' point. This is not a form of prosperity gospel teaching here. James is clear that trials and testing will come our way. In fact, he is clear that these will work

³⁰ C.f. Blomberg & Kammel, *James*, 69.

³¹ "Possibly people in James' congregations are blaming God for their trials, making up an excuse for their own failures." Blomberg & Kammel, *James*, 70.

³² Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 79.

³³ Job 1:21.

³⁴ Romans 8:28.

³⁵ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 81.

³⁶ Blomberg & Kammel, *James*, 70.

for good so we can rejoice in them. His point is that even our challenges and trials become good blessings in the hands of the living God. We are not to resent God and blame him, seeing him as seeking our harm but to trust him in trials to bring good through them and from them.

Conclusion

James' teaching is rooted in Biblical wisdom. He is teaching us to know and fear God. When we know the truth about God's character, that he is faithful, good, sovereign and kind then this enables us to go through trials and remain faithful with our eyes fixed on the certain hope of glory.

5 Faith and works, hearers and doers

Central to James argument is that living faith results in transformed lives, particularly in the crucible of persecution and suffering. This transformation affects character (1:19-21) and attitudes (2:1-7) because it is about our lives being shaped by love for God and for neighbour (2:8-13). This means that there should also be a change in behaviour (2:14-17) because this is the evidence that our faith is alive and well (2:18-26).

5.1 Slow to anger

My mum used to remind me when I was little that I had two ears and only one mouth. The moral of this, she argued, was that I should spend twice as much time listening as talking.

A look at the text (Read James 1:19-21)

James says that we must be quick when it comes to one thing and slow when it comes to two others. We should be quick or prompt when listening but slow in our response to what we see and hear, slow to speak, to give our own opinions, slow to get angry (1:19). This is because our anger, some versions refer to it as “human anger” because it’s anger that belongs to humans, doesn’t result in the righteousness and justice that God desires for us (v20). We are to remove from our lives the things that cause this kind of sinful anger, filth and evil. Instead, faith is about believing and accepting God’s word and allowing it to take root because unlike our anger, it does produce the result God desires, salvation. This suggests too that the thing we are specifically to be prompt and eager to listen to is God’s Word (v22).

Digging deeper

James is continuing to paint a picture of the difference between the person who has faith and the one who doesn’t. If the faithless, doubting person is agitated, unsettled and not dependable, then that will also come out in their hastiness to speak, to give their opinion and to show their emotions, often reflected in anger. ³⁷This is because:

“anger refers not so much to general outbursts of frustration as deep seated wrath or rage.”

The person who has faith on the other hand can be seen to be listening to, trusting and resting in God Word which settled them and gives them peace. Notice that James, as Paul would, treats righteousness and salvation as synonymous. The righteous person is the one who has been saved, rescued from God’s judgement on sin.

A look at ourselves

Anger, bitterness and blame seem to dominate much of the culture of society around us. Think about how much of social media is dominated by this. Consider the refrain of the advertisers “Where there is blame, there’s a claim.” When people see how we respond to our circumstances and to what is going on in the world, do they get the impression that we are angry people or do they see something different?

³⁷ Blomberg & Kamell, *James*, 86.

5.2 Hearers and doers

So, we are to be slow at speaking and slow to anger, just God is slow to anger and abounding in love and prompt in listening. However, this desire to listen is not meant to be passive. Jesus talked about his followers being “both hearers and doers of his word”, so too does James.

A look at the Text (Read James 1:22-27)

If you only listen and don't put what you hear into practice then you are a fool. You've managed to deceive yourself (1:22). James compares this type of person to someone who is so forgetful, that when they look in the mirror in the morning, they forget their own image as soon as they glance away (v23-24). In this case, the mirror represents God's law which upholds up a reflection to us of what we are meant to be like if we are righteous. There is freedom when we look, remember and act. This leads to blessing (1:25).

This wise, righteous, obedient living includes self-control. If you are slow to speak and slow to anger, then you've got control over your tongue (1:26). It's about more than that, though, not just about restrictions and guards, about what we don't do but about what we positively do and say as we show practical love to others. James particularly singles out our care for the vulnerable, for orphans and widows. When we are self-controlled in what we say and compassionate in our actions, then we are refusing to let this world corrupt us into its ways of thinking, speaking and acting (1:27).

Digging Deeper

What is this “perfect law”? Wasn't the Law something that we could not keep? Didn't Paul argue that if you submitted to one command, then you came under the condemnation of the whole law? Is James talking about something different here, a law of freedom? Yes and no. Paul will contrast the Law of the Spirit with the written code and argue that this gives life where the code brings death. However, the point is not that God gives different words, different commands. Rather, it is that God's perfect Law is the Law perfected by Christ, fulfilled by him and then through the Holy Spirit made possible for us to obey not just the external forms of the commands but from the heart. It's the Law as summed up by “Love God and love neighbour.”

A look at ourselves

If we are not just hearers but also doers then our lives will be characterised by love. This is only possible when God has poured out his love into our lives.

5.3 Partiality

One of the crucial concerns that the New Testament letter writers shared was that church gatherings would be characterised by unity. For Paul, a significant aspect of this was the wiping out of ethnic divisions between Jew and Gentile, for James, the focus was on divisions based on class and wealth.

A look at the text (Read James 2:1-7)

James instructs the believers as brothers and tells them that there shouldn't be favouritism among them. Literally, the word is about “paying attention to someone's face. Blomberg and Kamell identify this as a probable Semitism.³⁸ This is one of the ways that they are to live out their faith in Jesus, acknowledged here as the Lord of glory. There are not many direct references to Jesus in the

³⁸ Blomberg & Kamell, *James*, 106. Davids also notes that the phrase isn't found in Greek texts outside of Scripture and so appears to be a word coined by the early Christians to interpret a Hebraic concept. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 105.

letter but where he is mentioned he is given high status and is presented as the motivation for their godly and faithful living (2:1).³⁹

The specific example of discrimination that James identifies is when two different people come into the gathering. They are described in terms of their dress, one identified by his luxurious clothing and jewellery as rich. The other is poor and dressed in filthy, smelly rags (2:2). The implication seems to be that this is a real rather than hypothetical example. James pictures the rich man welcomed, waited on and given a seat of honour, whilst the poor man is expected to stand around and listen. Blomberg and Kamell draw a link between the “hasty speech” of chapter 1 and the “hasty judgement” of chapter 2.⁴⁰ Both may have been allowed into the gathering but only one is truly welcome. They have shown favouritism (2:3-4). This faulty judgement is sinful and an example of evil thoughts.

James identifies three reasons why this is foolish and lacks wisdom. First, they have failed to recognise how God sees the poor. He says that these are the ones God has chosen, materially poor but spiritually wealthy because they are heirs to God’s kingdom. So, the church are dishonouring the very people God honours. “The messianic community thus steals the honour God has granted the poor.”(2:5).⁴¹ Secondly, whilst they seek to honour the rich but these are the very people who are exploiting and taking advantage of them (2:6). Thirdly, it has been the rich and powerful who have dishonoured God and blasphemed Jesus. They are not real friends. So, the church have picked sides, they have joined with those who have shown themselves to be the enemies of God and his people “They have made the church into a tool of persecution(2:7).⁴²

Digging Deeper

James is here following themes found both in Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching. Jesus declared in the Sermon on the Mount that the poor were heirs to God’s kingdom and blessed.⁴³ Paul reminds the Corinthians, also stricken with rivalry and partiality that God had chosen the weak and foolish not the strong, powerful and rich for his glory.⁴⁴

Some people talk about the Gospel having a bias to the poor. It’s important to note that the Gospel is for all parts of society. Rich people do follow Jesus and find salvation. Poverty does not make you right with God. However, there was and is a tendency to assume that wealth was a mark of God’s favour. James challenges this assumption. Poor people who through their poverty have learnt to depend on Christ alone are blessed.

A look at ourselves

Too often we see the same examples of partiality in the church today. Of course, we wouldn’t exclude people from our churches based on class, gender or race but we can still put barriers up which exclude and make it clear that people are not welcome. This can happen in the wider church,

³⁹ “It is interesting to note that this is the second and last mention of Jesus Christ in this entire epistle., which has led to speculation that these references (1:1; 2:1) were added later in an effort to make an otherwise entirely Jewish epistle somewhat ‘Christian.’ As we have observed however James was well versed in Jesus’ teachings; indeed, the whole epistle is heavily dependent upon them, so such theories fail to convince.” Blomberg & Kamell, *James*, 107.

⁴⁰ Blomberg & Kamell, *James*, 109.

⁴¹ McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 196.

⁴² Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 112.

⁴³ Matthew 5:3.

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

especially when we see a mission focused on reaching students, graduates and suburbs rather than inner cities and estates. We also need to watch that these attitudes don't take root leading to the same barriers in our own local church.

5.4 The Perfect Law

James' emphasis on practical faith could be mistaken for legalism. How does this fit with the Gospel? Well James now helps us to think about what it means to obey the Law of God, specifically as it relates to favouritism.

A look at the text (Read James 2:8-13)

The Law is "the royal law" of "The King's Law", a reference perhaps both to the fact that even the kings of Israel were subject to the Law but more importantly that it is the law from our King, Jesus.⁴⁵ This means that "this command is no whim" it is "carrying the king's authority."⁴⁶ James identifies this Law as summed up by the commandment to love your neighbour. Those who love their neighbours are living well, they are living righteously (2:8).

However, showing favouritism is to sin and become a law breaker. In other words, partiality is the opposite of loving your neighbour as yourself (2:9). This is because we need to think of the Law as not being a series of instructions which we can achieve 60, 70 or 80% of and meet the pass mark. Rather, the Law is to be understood as a whole. If you fail to keep part of it then you break all of it. The different commands are aspects of how we love and come from the same king. James uses the examples of murder and adultery to show that you cannot pick and choose between commands because they come from the same king to show that you cannot choose to recognise some of Jesus's teachings such as the offer of forgiveness to you whilst discarding others such as the warnings not judge and to show the same mercy you have received (2:10-11).

Christians are to live as those who are going to be judged by the law of freedom (2:12).⁴⁷ This is because if you lack mercy yourself, then you won't be shown mercy either. In other words, if you are not living in and by love, then love will be absent in your own judgement (2:13). However, God's mercy always triumphs in the end, either in that we receive mercy or our lack of mercy is condemned (2:14).

Digging Deeper

James' teaching here aligns with Jesus' teaching. When questioned he insisted that the Law was about loving God with your whole heart and your neighbour as yourself. Jesus too would tell a parable about an unforgiving servant who had been offered mercy but failed to show mercy to his debtor. The result was that the offer of mercy was removed from him. Like Paul, James insists that you cannot divide up and pick and choose when it comes to the Law.

Blomberg and Kammel note that this also raises questions as to whether or not the focus is on a worship service or a law-court type setting, with the church making rulings between brothers as Paul advises in 1 Corinthians 6. They favour the latter option in which case, the sense here is that you will

⁴⁵ So, Blomberg and Kammel emphasise that this is the law as fulfilled by Christ. The same would apply to James' later description of the law of freedom. Blomberg & Kammel, *James*, 116. See also on verse 13, David, *The Epistle of James*, 118.

⁴⁶ David, *The Epistle of James*, 115.

⁴⁷ We might refer to this as the free law, the law which brings freedom or the law that arises out of a context of freedom in Christ.

be judged as you judge.⁴⁸ I don't think we need to over divide, the point is that in the life of the Christian community that we are making judgements and discernments, of course the worship service should not have the feel of a harsh law court and that is perhaps part of the point, we should not bring the ways of the world in but there will be judgements made about who we have fellowship with, share the Lord's Supper with and pay attention to when it comes to gifts of the Spirit being exercised.

Partiality and favouritism is a both a failure to love others and it is way of judging without mercy and compassion. I assess some people as beneath my love and care. James would insist that if I treat others like this then I have broken God's Law and shown that I am lacking in compassion and mercy, therefore I am subject to the full standards of the Law.

A look at ourselves

Are my dealings with others and our dealings with them as churches characterised by mercy and compassion or judgementalism and favouritism? If the latter then that leaves open the question about whether I have truly understood and responded to God's grace and compassion to me.

5.5 What does saving faith look like?

"How are you?" It's a standard greeting but not one we expect a response to. We ask it, expecting the other person to say "I'm fine." So, what do we do when the other person misses the social cues and gives an honest and reasonable answer to the question? Do we say "Bless you" and try to curtail the awkward conversation to welcome the next person? Do we maybe offer to pray for the person realising we probably won't achieve this?

A look at the text (Read James 2:14-17)

James argues that faith that doesn't come with works is useless, it's unprofitable so that you won't gain from it. In a shocking statement, he tells his readers that this kind of faith is unable to save. This is the kind of claim that will make us sit up and pay attention. Aren't we saved by faith alone (2:14).

So James sets up an example. We would hope that it is hypothetical but it may be based on actual reports. He describes a Christian who is without food and clothing, in dire need. Another Christian blesses them, telling them they can know peace, that God will provide for them all that they need. In effect, encouraging the person without to show faith and trust God to provide. However, they do nothing to practically help, they fail to offer a meal, they won't buy clothes for them or even lend them some of their own old clothes. James asks "What's the point in that (2:15-16). This reinforces his point that the person's faith is "dead". It's useless and powerless.

Digging Deeper

This may sound shocking and we may even think that it contradicts other parts of the bible until we think a bit more carefully about it. First, consider how Jesus taught about those who fed and clothed him by caring for the vulnerable among them and contrasted them with those who didn't. Those who failed to care for the least showed that they did not know and recognise Jesus, they belonged with the goats and Christ's verdict was that he did not know them.

Secondly, Paul in Ephesians 2 says that we are saved by grace through faith but that we are saved for good works. In other words, salvation is meant to result in changed lives. Paul and James would

⁴⁸ Blomberg & Kammel, *James*, 110-111.

agree that living faith results in actions. It's not that we add works to faith in order to do something that faith lacks. It's that our works show whether or not we really have true faith in God.

A look at ourselves

Whilst we may have things to learn here about our compassion for the wider community around us, the focus here is primarily on how we relate to each other in the church family. If there is someone who is facing hardship in the church then the onus is on others around them to show faith. I show faith by being willing to share generously, trusting God that when I am generous that he will continue to provide for me. I show faith because I demonstrate that God through Jesus has genuinely brought about change in my life by removing my selfishness and greed.

5.6 Can I choose between faith and works?

James continues to tease out the relationship between faith and works to show that the two go hand in hand together. Having used a practical example, he now uses logic by setting up a hypothetical debating partner.

A look at the text (Read James 2:18-26)

The hypothetical interlocutor suggests that it is possible for one believer to have faith and another to have works. James responds by saying that it is through his works that he is able to show that he has faith (v18).⁴⁹ To emphasise his point, he observes that intellectual assent to the existence of God falls woefully short. Even Satan's army of demons can recognise this. You don't need faith to know that there is a God. You need faith to live in a right relationship with Him (2:19).

Rhetorically, James asks if his interlocutor really needs proof that faith and deeds go together (2:20) before going on to offer two pieces of evidence. First, he uses Abraham, his willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice was considered righteous (2:21). James argues that this is evidence of faith and works working together. Abraham puts his trust in God into action (2:22). Note, that his actions fulfil what God has already declared about Abraham. He has had his faith credited as righteousness but now his obedience proves the reality of his faith. He has the legal status of righteousness and there are relational consequences. Abraham is known as a friend of God (2:23). So a person is considered righteous not just by their faith but by the evidence of that in their actions (2:24).

James' second example is of Rahab the prostitute. Abraham was considered godly and was not only part of God's covenant people, he was the founder of that people and recipient of the covenant. Rahab by contrast had an ungodly backstory and was outside of God's people but brought into the people through her faith. Again, it is her faith in action that matters, she steps out in faith by protecting the spies sent to Jericho (2:25). Faith and works together is embodied. You need both body and spirit for life and can't separate the two. So too with faith and works (2:26).

⁴⁹ David notes that commentators have struggled with the text here with uncertainties about where the quotation should begin and end. At first glance, it doesn't seem that the interlocutor is disagreeing with James because they are claiming to have works. So, some have suggested that James introduces the third party as someone agreeing with him, however that would be syntactically and stylistically novel. So others have suggested that we've lost the interlocutor's speech and only have James' response but there is no evidence for this. The most likely option therefore is that the conversation partner is speaking more hypothetically, the sense being "one has faith and another has works and it is okay to separate the two. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 123-125.

Digging Deeper

It seems unlikely that someone would believe that they could positively have works without faith, so it seems that the force of the hypothetical interlocutor's rhetoric is to attempt to show that it is possible to have faith without works. In other words, some people might argue that you can start out in faith with a simply affirmation of Jesus as saviour, the other things can follow later. Godly living then becomes an optional extra. James is absolutely clear that this is not possible. Faith and works must be there, together, interlinked from the beginning.

A look at ourselves

One contemporary equivalent of this kind of thinking has been the attempt to distinguish believers from disciples. Some people have suggested that you can become a Christian by putting your trust in Jesus and that this is enough. However, they then encourage a second stage to faith, a higher life, whether through personal effort or spiritual experience which leads to greater holiness and obedience. You start by knowing Jesus as saviour but move on to submitting to him as Lord. It is very clear that there is no place for such thinking in James' theology. Faith in Christ should result in radical life change.

Conclusion

Far from being in contradiction or competition with Jesus or Paul, James' teaching is rooted in the words and deeds of Jesus. It complements and support's Paul's teaching. We are saved by faith for good works which are the evidence that our trust in Jesus is real.

6 Wisdom and Self-Control

James places great emphasis on self-control in our speech. This means that we shouldn't all be rushing to be teachers and leaders in the church because of the scrutiny and responsibility that comes with this (3:1-2). The tongue, representing speech and conversation is to be tamed, to be controlled because it has power to do both good and harm (3:3-8). We are not to be duplicitous, the fruit of our hearts will be reflected in what we say. We cannot be on the one hand speaking words of blessing and encouragement whilst in other contexts hurting and destroying others in our words. We cannot praise God and revile those made in his image with the same breath (3:9-12). Our words reflect our hearts. Are those hearts centred on true, pure peace seeking, godly wisdom from Christ or worldly wisdom that harbours envy and bitterness (3:13-18).

6.1 Don't rush to be a teacher

James has already said that we should be slow to speak. He now begins to provide specific examples of where this is so and to explain why it matters.

A Look at the Text (Read James 3:1-2)

James expresses caution about too many rushing to be teachers. The role of teacher had high status in the early church, comparable to the Jewish status of rabbi and so was something people would have aspired to.⁵⁰ James, however, offers this an example of where there should be slowness or hesitancy. He gives a crucial reason for this. Those, and he includes himself in this, who teach are judged by stricter standards (3:1). He points out next that we are all imperfect, we all have weak points and failings. Where I fail might be different to where you fail. If you never have said anything wrong, then you are perfect and able to maintain self-control over your whole body. I suspect there is an element of sarcasm at this point. James shows that in fact, we cannot deal with the small matter of our speech, such is the problem of sin and so we cannot expect to deal with wider aspects of our lives. However, he is also identifying where our proprieties should be, even imperfectly, as we pursue godliness. We should begin by focusing on our speech as the expression of our thought life (v2).⁵¹

Digging Deeper

What does James mean when he says that teachers are judged more strictly? Is he suggesting that there is a different standard for salvation? I don't think so. However, before we minimise his point remember two things. First, that Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 talks about those who escape as though through the fire but with nothing to show for it. This means, that our works will be judged on the final day and the focus in 1 Corinthians also seems to be on leaders and teachers. The one who escapes as through fire, is the pastor/preacher whose salvation is secure but it becomes clear on the day that the achievements they boasted in, in fact counted for nothing. Thirdly, our works are evidence of what is happening in our lives. A teacher's works include his teaching and also his teaching includes his works (the example of his life). So, the teacher's life is under greater scrutiny and lack of fruit does raise questions about their heart condition too.

A look at ourselves

⁵⁰ C.f. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 136.

⁵¹ Blonberg & Kamell, *James*, 153.

First the challenge here is for those who either are or aspire to be teachers in the church, whether as pastors and preachers or in other contexts such as small groups and children's work. We need to take seriously the responsibilities that go with this calling.

Secondly, I think that this means we shouldn't also rush to teach, even when we already have that role. In other words, we should think and prepare carefully before speaking, especially when it comes to teaching in church.

Thirdly, there is a general point for all of us when it comes to using gifts. There should be the right balance between an eagerness to use those gifts to help build up the church and a concern to do so for the right motives, it is particularly important that we should not seek position, status or responsibility in the church in the hope that this will lead to personal reward.⁵²

6.2 The Taming of the Tongue – or otherwise

The old proverb "Sticks and stones might break my bones but words will never hurt me" is challenged by James. Words do matter. Our speech has consequences.

A look at the text (Read James 3:3-8)

James illustrates the power of the tongue by comparing it first with the bit of a bridle. It's placed into a horse's mouth, to control it. As the bridle is pulled, the horse, responding to the pressure on its mouth moves its head and changes direction (3:3). Similarly, a boat can be in the fiercest of storms, driven by a powerful wind. Yet despite the size of the ship, its direction can also be altered by the smallest of parts, the rudder at the stern (3:4).

In a third illustration, James compares the tongue to a spark that can set off a great fire. The tongue, although small, makes great claims or boasts about itself. Here James personifies the body parts in a similar way to Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 (3:5). Continuing with the image of fire, James describes the destructive power of the tongue. Note the tongue as something that can cause fire, in other words burning like damage to our selves and others and also as something that itself is set on fire "by hell" or influenced by Sin and Satan (3:6).⁵³

James laments the destructive power of the tongue. We have managed to tame all kinds of animals but we cannot exercise control over our own mouths. Our words too often end up like poison (3:7-8).

Digging Deeper

How does the tongue do this. Well, James' primary point by comparing the tongue, or speech, to rudders and bits is not on speech as guiding/directing us but rather showing the amount of power that something proportionally small can have. Our words can build up or tear down, encourage or discourage, guide or deceive.

However, there are ways in which our speech does direct and influence. First, our self talk, what we say to ourselves about ourselves, others and God affects our emotions and behaviour. Secondly, our speech is often what first and most of all affects how others perceive and respond to us which in turn

⁵² 12 Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 136.

⁵³ The text here talks about the tongue as "being appointed" or "appointing itself" for evil. The former (passive) would suggest that God makes us that way but the latter, middle voice or reflexive meaning personifies the tongue "as the embodiment of our sinful nature." C.f. Blomberg & Kamell, *James*, 158.

affects our behaviour. Thirdly, linked to verses 1-2, the tongue, especially when it is the teacher speaking shapes the direction of the whole church.

A look at ourselves

Psalm 19:14 says

“May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

These are good words to pray for ourselves and each other.

6.3 Two ways to speak

James now addresses the duplicity of our speech. What kinds of things do we say? What impact do our words have?

A look at the text (Read James 3:9-12)

The same person, with the same tongue or mouth can both praise God and at the same time curse other human beings. Yet, this shouldn't be the case given that other humans are made in God's image. The implication is that whilst you sing praise directly to God, by despising those made in his image, you are in effect denigrating the one whose image they bear (3:9). “How can this be possible?” James asks? Is it really possible for us to contradict ourselves in the same breath (3:10). He uses two illustrations, its not possible for water to be sweet and bitter, or fresh and salty at the same time. The salt will influence the taste of the whole fountain. Nor, can a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine figs. The tree will produce fruit after its own kind (3:11-12).

Digging Deeper

Here James draws on themes that we hear from Jesus and Paul, First, that the fruit of our lives shows what is really going on in our hearts. Secondly, that you cannot mix good with bad, without the bad contaminating the good. Here again is an outworking of the big theme in the letter, our deeds, what we do and say are an outworking of our faith.

A look at ourselves

I frequently am reminded when I read Ephesians 5, that if the church is the bride of Christ, then we cannot claim to love Jesus but at the same time speak ill of his beloved bride. The same illustration comes through here. I cannot claim to be worshipping and loving God whilst doing down my brothers and sisters.

6.4 Two sources of wisdom

Wisdom is a central theme in James letter but what is true wisdom like and where does it come from?

A look at the text (Read James 3:13-18)

This section begins with a call, an invitation or challenge. Those who are truly wise are invited to step forward and demonstrate their understanding. The evidence or fruit will be a good life characterised by humility. The wise person doesn't need to boast. The proof is in what they quietly get on with doing for the Lord (3:13). In contrast, those who don't really have wisdom, or have a different, worldly kind of wisdom are characterised by bitter, jealous hearts. That's something best

kept to yourself! Don't boast about it (3:14). The kind of life is not rooted in heavenly wisdom but earthly or even demonic wisdom (3:15) The fruit of this is seen in sin and division (3:16).

God's wisdom has different characteristics. Divisiveness which arises out of a struggle for power is replaced with a willingness to submit to one another, compassionate mercy and consideration. Heavenly wisdom is pure and loves peace (3:17). Wise believers are those who seek to bring about peace and the result is a righteous harvest. In other words, there is a relationship between being right with God and right with each other (3:18).

Digging Deeper

James here helps us to see that wisdom, and I would argue with it, faith are not to do with intellect, knowledge and cognition. Rather, wisdom is a moral characteristic. It is about having God and his ways at the centre of your life. Notice too how this centres upon two crucial New Testament themes, peace and justification. Of course, Paul will draw the same links in his own way in Romans 5:1-2.

What we realise at the end of the chapter is that here James is telling us the true secret of how we control the tongue. It starts with the heart. Remember that for the rudder to move or the bit/bridle to be pulled, someone's hand needs to be on it. The rudder and the bridle are connected to something else. The tongue matters because it connects directly to the heart and what we say comes from there. If my heart is centred on Christ and godly wisdom then it is Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who controls my tongue and my speech.

A look at ourselves

These verses are a challenge for us to read against the backdrop of contemporary culture which encourages us to emote and to let it all out. It is important to remember that James is not advocating a British "stiff upper lip" which denies our emotions or the reality of our experience. However, he is encouraging us not to be consumed and taken over by resentment, not to allow our hurts to dominate our thoughts, words and deeds. Instead, we are encouraged to draw our strength not from our own stories but from God's great love to us in Christ and to allow that to shape how we think, speak and act.

Conclusion

What we say both has an impact on our lives, how we behave and is itself an outworking or evidence of what is going on in our lives and our hearts. It is important that we get our lives right by centring them on Christ and finding true wisdom in him. That wisdom is reflected in humility, purity and peace and is worked out in words that build up. We should not rush to speak, whether in conversation or even more so as teachers before we have resolved those heart issues first.

7 Faith and Submission (James 4:1-12)

We are beginning to see, that just as in Corinth, there were divisions, factions and conflict in the churches James writes to. He identifies the cause of this being divided human hearts where sinful desires were not being put to death. The result of this was also seen in ineffective prayer, a failure to ask God for the right things in the right way (4:1-3).

We cannot allow this kind of divided loyalty. Believers must choose. We are either friends of the world and enemies of God or friends of God and enemies of the world. Our guilt in this area is rebuked but at the same time God's grace is offered as the solution, grace that brings our pride to an end, humbles us and then reconciles and restores us (4:4-6).

In response to God's grace our response should be to submit to him, resist Satan and so choose our side. This requires repentance, humility and a change of heart as we seek to be holy (4:7-10). Pride is characterised by a slanderous judgementalism which sets us above the law. This is the opposite to submission to the true judge of all who is able not only to condemn and destroy but to forgive and save (4:11-12).

7.1 Friendly Fire

What is the cause of suffering amongst the Christians James writes to? Sometimes suffering is caused by external persecution because God's enemies want to attack us as we seek to live godly lives. Sometimes our suffering is simply down to our circumstances, we live in a fallen world. Both of those factors may have been at work at the time and certainly were amongst many of the early churches. However, it seems that a significant cause of suffering was due to internal problems, to friendly fire if you like.

A look at the text (Read James 4:1-3)

The Churches James writes to are struggling with conflict, quarrels and divisions. The root cause of this lies in the hearts of each believer. The body corporately is divided and in conflict because individual members are at war within themselves. They are struggling to control their passions, in other words, their longings, desires and emotions are controlling them, instead of being controlled by them (4:1).⁵⁴

Their inner desires and longings lead to sin. As well as coveting, James, shockingly even accuses them of murder. This is because they seek to meet their own desires and longings instead of asking God to meet them (4:2). Even when they do ask God, they ask from the wrong motives. Their requests to God come from lust and greed rather than a desire for what is necessary and godly (4:3).

Digging Deeper

We are often tempted to skip over the words that we find difficult or troubling. However, often spending time on them can be rewarding. So, we may be tempted to gloss over the word "murder" here. The idea that actual murder might be taking place among Christians seems unthinkable and so some have suggested that we have a textual corruption here and another sin should be mentioned.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ "The word for 'passion' is the source of the English word 'hedonism,' but in James' day it simply implied an intense pleasure or enjoyment ... though more and more it was coming to have connotations of lusts, especially involving improper sexual desires." Blomberg & Kamell, *James*, 187.

⁵⁵ This was Erasmus' view. C.f. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 158.

Others have treated this is metaphorical but the problem is that there isn't evidence in other literature of "murder" being used metaphorically.⁵⁶

McKnight argues that it is sadly possible that Christians were even resorting to murder. Given that they were willing to take their brothers and sisters to court (1 Corinthians 6), to engage in sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5) and to deprive one another (James 2), we must take this possibility seriously.⁵⁷ The point then is that when we are governed by our own selfish desires, we may find ourselves drawn further and further into sinful and harmful actions, doing whatever it takes to get our way. We should also note that when Jesus describes our heart sins as being the same as outward sins, he isn't saying that you metaphorically commit adultery with lust. He's saying that it really is unfaithfulness. Hatred in our heart and with our words really is murder, really does kill. The destructive impact is just as bad as if someone stops physically breathing as the result of being stabbed or shot.

A look at ourselves

We are seeing the outworking of James 3:13-18 here. Is my life centred on Christ and ruled by his wisdom? If it is then the fruit will be humility, purity, peace. I will be loving, patient and kind. However, if I allow sinful, worldly passions to control me, if I allow selfishness and envy to take over then I am likely to be divisive and cause hurt and harm with my words and actions. The way we relate to each other in the church will be shaped one way or the other by what is going on in our hearts.

7.2 Who is your friend?

We don't like to choose sides. As I write, the BBC have got into a spot of bother whilst reporting on conflict between Israel and Hamas. The BBC have studiously refused to call Hamas a terror organisation because they see this as going against a duty of impartiality. This begs the question though, "Can you be impartial on an issue like this?" Similarly, we saw Christians wrestling with a general desire for peace and whether they should take sides between Russia and Ukraine. The problem is that if you don't take sides, if you refuse to condemn one side or the other then in effect, you do take sides. We can never be neutral in the Christian life. We are either with God and his people or we give tacit support to those oppose God and persecute his people.

A look at the text (Read James 4:4-6)

James continues the rhetoric, if in verse 2, he had accused believers of murder, here he accuses them of adultery. Here, it's spiritual adultery, unfaithfulness to God. He says that friendship with this world, meaning human systems, structures and cultures means that we actively choose to be God's enemies (4:4).

If James' readers don't recognise this then they are ignoring what Scripture teaches. The Holy Spirit is jealous for our loyalty. We tend to think of jealousy as a negative thing and it is when driven by selfish control and desire but there is a right jealousy which seeks wholehearted loyalty where it should be given. For example, it is right for a wife to be jealous for her husband's love and vice versa (4:5).

God's solution is "more grace." What we need when we are in conflict with God is for him to show his underserved love and favour to us. Note though how he does this. James quotes Proverbs 3:34.

⁵⁶ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 158.

⁵⁷ McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 326.

God resists those who are proud and raises up the humble. This reflects James' previous comments about the fate of rich and poor (4:6).

Digging Deeper

Two things should strike us here. First, that the solution to our waywardness and rebellion is not more law but grace. The New Testament solution is always the Gospel rather than legalism. The second thing is the form that grace takes. Grace is seen when God lifts us up in our humility when we are broken and low. He restores us. However grace is also seen in the way that he opposes our pride, breaking us so that we are humbled.⁵⁸

A look at ourselves

The temptation to compromise is strong, sometimes it comes out of a genuine motive to be welcoming and make the Gospel message attractive to unbelievers. We can find it hard then to know what is just culturally neutral and what is idolatrous. Sometimes it comes from fear as we worry about opposition and persecution, as we fear losing friends.

Of course when we think about it, we cannot keep those friends, we risk losing both their friendship and rejecting the friendship of God. When we replace fear with trust in God, we discover that he is able to overcome and take us through opposition. We also learn that the Gospel is winsome in its own right and on its own terms. God does not need us to make the good news more attractive.

7.3 A call to true repentance?

How does grace work in the life of the believer? The answer is that it does in pretty much the same way as in the life of a new convert. God's grace by bringing down the proud and lifting up the humble starts by working repentance in our hearts

A look at the text (Read James 4:7-9)

First, James calls us to submit to God, to recognise his sovereignty, his authority, his Lordship in our lives. Submitting to God means resisting the devil, saying no to his temptation. Notice that this comes with a promise. If we resist the devil, he will flee (4:7).⁵⁹ There's a further promise to follow, if we draw near to God, then he will draw near to us.⁶⁰ There's the promise of reconciliation, restoration and intimacy. This drawing near involves a commitment to sanctification and James' audience are rebuked as sinners.⁶¹ There's an outward demonstration through hand washing but this metaphorically represents a heart change, we are to purify ourselves and a change of mindset, we are no longer to be double minded or divided in our loyalties (4:8).⁶²

⁵⁸ Note I am with McKnight here in seeing the whole of v 6 as being God's grace at work. McKnight, *The letter of James*, 342. Davids seems to suggest that grace is the solution to God's jealousy but this would suggest that the jealousy itself is part of the problem whereas I would suggest that his jealousy for us is itself grace. C.F Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 164.

⁵⁹ Davids notes that this is the same language as James uses to describe how God resists the proud. Davids, *The Epistle to James*, Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 166.

⁶⁰ Davids notes that "drawing near" is "cultic language" it describes the access that the priests have into the sanctuary to offer worship and sacrifices. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 166.

⁶¹ The language is potentially more forceful still given that McKnight believes that James is directly addressing the teachers and wannabe teachers in the churches. McKnight, *The Letter to James*, 352. 351.

⁶² On "double-minded, McKnight notes this is "a word used else-where in James of the person whose confidence in God is shaken and whose faith is unstable (1:8). McKnight, *The Letter to James*, 352.

Repentance is to be expressed in sorrow. Jesus talked about “blessed are those who mourn” and here we see that this grief and mourning is a spiritual mourning over our sin and the grief and death it brings (4:9). Repentance requires humbleness. Sin and rebellion are linked to our pride when we become complacent and self sufficient or even seek to rival Christ for status and position in his church (4:10).

Digging Deeper

The call to wash your hands reflects on three things. First, it is a reminder that those in rebellion against God have been accused of murder. They have blood on their hands. This reminds us that sin is harmful and destructive to others. Secondly, it draws to our attention the Psalm which says:

Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD?

Who may stand in his holy place?

⁴The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.⁶³

Notice how the Psalm links rebellion with idolatry and how it, as in James brings together the outward image of clean hands with the inner reality of pure hearts. Thirdly, the call to wash your hands is an appeal to loving, godly conduct in all that we do.

What we seen in these verses is a fleshing out of the promise of God’s grace and what it means for God to resist the proud and favour the humble. The proud are not a distinct, other category of people but rather, it’s you and me, believers when we become stubborn, complacent and self centred. God resists us so that we become broken and repentant. Then God shows favour to us in our humility, repairing and restoring.

A look at ourselves

It is helpful to be challenged and this Bible passage invites us to a reset in our lives. Have you been tempted towards bitterness and resentment towards others in the church, the church itself or even God. James reminds us that there is a close tie up between bitterness and pride. What do you and I most need in such a situation? The answer is that we need a Gospel encounter with the living Christ which both humbles us and lifts us up to restore us.

7.4 Who judges?

God’s grace is seen as our pride is removed and we are brought to a place of humility? So what does this humility look like in practice? James now answers that question. All of this links in to the theme of being slow or cautious to speak.

A look at the text (Read James 4:11-12)

James warns against slander, or speaking evil against brothers and sisters in Christ. The issue with this is that you are setting yourself up as the one in judgement over others. More than that, you are setting yourself above instead of below the Law. You are not required to keep it but in fact you are the one who judges the Law. James says that in effect, you slander/speak evil of the law (4:11). If you seek to judge your neighbour, then who exactly do you think you are? You are getting ideas above your station. There is only one who can take that role of judge, the one who gives the Law

⁶³ Psalm 24:3-4. McKnight also notes a link to Psalm 73:13. McKnight, *The Letter to James*, 352.

because he is the one with power over life and death, the one with power to condemn or forgive, to save or destroy (4:12).

Digging Deeper

How do we end up slandering the Law by judging others. There are three aspects to this first as Davids notes the slanderer is themselves breaking the law,⁶⁴ they are picking and choosing which laws they will obey.⁶⁵ Indeed, they also break the law by failing to love their neighbour.⁶⁶ Secondly, they misuse the Law to cause harm rather than to enable love causing the law itself to be seen in a bad light. Thirdly, when you slander someone, then you either accuse them of doing something wrong when the law judges factually that they have not, or you accuse them of something that the Law does not consider wrong. Therefore, you are claiming to know better than the Law itself but this suggests that the perfect Law given by God is wrong. The implication of course is that you are claiming to know better than God.

A look at ourselves

I remember a few years back when someone who had started coming to our church spoke to me after the service. They were anxious about certain things in their life and wanted to know what the church would think of them. My response was that it didn't matter what the church thought but rather what God's verdict on them was. The church then had to get in line with that. I was able to talk them through the little booklet "Two ways to live" and encouraged them to go home and have a look at the prayer at the end to decide if they were ready to pray it. They came back joyfully the next week to say that they had prayed, trusting Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

We have seen in these few verses another example of how hasty talk reveals our heart condition. If we judge and slander others then we forget that Romans 8:1 says that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." We cannot judge in our hearts those who God does not condemn.

Conclusion

What we see in our churches is the magnified effect of what is going on in our own hearts. The solution to the problems our churches face is not more rules and better structures but for us to have hearts centred on Christ as we submit humbly to him.

⁶⁴ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 169.

⁶⁵ Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 197.

⁶⁶ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 169.

8 Boasting and the future

As we move towards the end of the letter, James is continuing to help us to see what true faith is all about. Faith can easily be confused with confidence and so there is a warning against boasting. This is particularly given to the wealthy who may be tempted to go around talking with pride and confidence about their business and travel plans. They are reminded about the fragility and uncertainty of life (4:13-17). Not only that, but because material gains are momentary and will corrode away, even their possessions and achievements will stand as testimony against them in the future, exposing the shallowness, greed and corruption of their hearts and their methods (5:1-6).

In contrast to the way of the wealthy, James encourages patient faith. This kind of faith is not seen in grand boasting or swearing of oaths but the kind of patient perseverance which means that you keep your word (5:7-12). This enables the believer to face the world around them, secure in their relationship with God and so respond to all circumstances whether suffering, happiness or illness with prayer and praise. Believers are to recognise that what matters is not their circumstances but the state of their heart and so healing and wholeness is as much about forgiveness as it is about physical wellness. This kind of patient faith is exemplified by Old Testament prophets like Elijah. To save someone out of a sinful lifestyle is just as much life saving and medical intervention (5:13-20).

8.1 A different kind of invite

Frequently in Scripture, there is a sense that people are summoned, called. Sometimes they are invited to come and receive good things from God, at other times they are summoned to give an account for themselves and to face judgement and consequences. It is in the latter sense that James issues an invite or summons to his wealthier readers.

A look at the text (Read James 4:13-17)

Those who make grand plans are invited to “come now”, an echo of the Prophets’ invitation to “come and reason with the Lord.” They are described as those who make confident declarations, announcing their travel and business plans, confident of success as they are sure that they will make a profit (4:13). James warns against such confidence, you are not acquainted with tomorrow, you don’t know what it will bring. Certainty about such things isn’t possible because life is frail, fragile and short. James echoes the language of the preacher in Ecclesiastes, we are like vapour, like the morning breeze (4:14). Believers should acknowledge that God not only knows but has determined the future. We are dependent upon him for our very life and so, it is only if he wills it that our plans will come to pass. James’ readers should acknowledge that their plans are conditional upon God’s purpose (4:15).

James accuses them not just of over confidence in their certainty but of arrogance and boasting. He strongly denounces such boasting as evil (4:16). It’s sin, or evil because they should know better. They know, not to boast, they know the importance of faith but choose self confidence (4:17).

Digging Deeper

James is focusing in on a specific group of people here, a merchant class who would belong among the wealthy.⁶⁷ Remember that throughout the epistle, the two big questions have been to do with whether God’s people have faith and wisdom. True faith is demonstrated by actions. Do God’s people act wisely, where wisdom is a moral rather than intellectual characteristic. The rich are

⁶⁷ Cf. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 173 and McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 376.

frequently seen as having neither wisdom nor faith and this becomes clear here because they have already been told what kind of boasting is permissible, it is boasting that understands that God controls our end destiny. To make grand plans is to boast about our own control over the future and to show dependence on our own wealth and resources not on God.

In that respect, those who do not show true faith in action are seen as temporally ignorant and so foolish. They forget the past and what God has done for them (1:13) and here are seen to be ignorant about the future too both in that they do not and cannot know what tomorrow holds and even if they will live to see it but also in that they do not know that they are ignorant and helpless in regards to the future.

A look at ourselves

Our attitude towards the future demonstrates the kind of faith that we have. We can fail in faith both by being unduly fearful about tomorrow, overwhelmed with anxiety and worry, and also by being over complacent. Both attitudes demonstrate that our confidence is not in God.

8.2 The fate of the rich

A look at the text (read James 5:1-6)

The invite to the rich is repeated, they are summoned to come but not to celebrate and receive, rather to weep and mourn as their true destiny is revealed to them (5:1). All of their achievements and prosperity have been assessed and found lacking. We are given a glimpse of the future and although their riches and possessions look beautiful and glamorous now, they will not last but rot away as precious metals corrode and cloth perishes, eaten by moths. In fact, when it comes to judgement day, the condition of their riches and possessions will act as evidence against the rich, showing up the futility of their priorities.⁶⁸ Not only does the corrosion act as witness but also it is personified as bringing judgement, like a consuming fire that burns flesh, so just as their possessions perish, so too do the rich because it turns out that there was nothing more to them except their possessions (5:2-3a). They have been storing up treasure on earth, not in heaven as Christ instructed. Notice too that this shows a lack of awareness regarding timing and urgency. They have been doing this “in the last days” (5:3b).

Not only have their priorities been wrong but their methods too. They have become rich through injustice and oppression. They’ve fraudulently failed to pay their workers a fair wage, creaming off what they owed to increase their profits. God has heard the cry of their labourers, the farm workers who have been exploited (5:4). The rich have grown fat through exploitation. There is a double edged irony to this. If it is their own hearts that have been fattened, then they should remember that the calf is fattened up for slaughter, another pointer to the way in which they have condemned themselves (5:5). Not only have they oppressed others through economic exploitation but they have used their power to act unjustly by bringing false accusations and condemnation against the righteous.

Digging a little deeper

⁶⁸ “He writes in the perfect tense, the most heavily marked tense, here perhaps used in a prophetic sense. In James mind, it is a certainty that these riches will go bad, and so he speaks of it as having already occurred. Blomberg & Kamell, *James*, 220.

Who are these rich people? Can they truly be believers if they stand so roundly condemned? Yet, if they were not part of God's people, then why would James be addressing them in his letter? McKnight suggests that these are in fact outsiders to the church.

“There is nothing in this passage that indicates that the ‘rich people’ are messianists ... The tendency to read letters written by Christians as addressing only Christians is an unnecessary entailment of how Christians have learned to read the Bible canonically and for applications in life. If James picked a model for his letter, it was not Paul, instead his letter, especially 4:13-5:6, sounds more like a prophetic remonstrance with a variety of groups than like a pastoral letter to pious Christians huddled into a corner waiting for the coming of the Lord.”⁶⁹

Whilst on one level, this argument sounds plausible and attractive, I'm not convinced. Of course, James does not use Paul as a model for his letter, indeed if his epistle came early, we may as much be looking for evidence that Paul models his letter writing on James but of course each will bring his own style for his own context. However, as I've argued previously, the differences between Paul and James have been overstated and the similarities under recognised.

Furthermore, we have no reason to assume that anyone outside of the scattered community of believers would have reason to pay attention to James. They are unlikely to be bothered about an apostate sect leader and relative of a failed rebel. Nor does James have particular reason to deliver a message to them. Whilst considering the way that we've been conditioned to read Scripture, it is worth remembering that despite such conditioning on our part, letters and book writing were not the primary medium for prophetic utterances which were normally delivered in oral form first.

Those likely to be reading James' letter would be fellow believers and if James' words here were directed to those outside of the church, then it begins to feel like he is preaching to the gallery with contented believers nodding their agreement.

Crucially though, James has made it explicitly clear in 1:1 and 2:1 that he is addressing those who at least profess the name of Jesus. He is speaking to those who claim to be believers. The very crux of the matter though is whether or not that faith is genuine. McKnight's insistence that the audience sound nothing like “pious Christians” seemingly ignores the evidence both of our contemporary experience and of the other New Testament speakers and writers both that the church included those who were struggling, weak backsliders and those who were not truly saved at all. It is impossible to hear the parables of Jesus, read Paul's instructions on church discipline or study the warnings of Hebrews 6 and miss this.⁷⁰

It seems to me that the most obvious and straight forward solution is the most likely. James has made it clear throughout his letter that it is possible to give an appearance of faith, to be present with believers, to make the same profession and confession with your lips whilst being far away from God in your heart. The wealthier members of the congregations James writes to have demonstrated by their actions that they haven't got true, life changing faith, they are still captivated by the idolatry of their riches.

A look at ourselves

Perhaps, James' words here leave us a little bit uncomfortable. We cannot take them literally can we? We wouldn't want to end up sounding more like socialist fire brands than preachers and

⁶⁹ McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 383.

⁷⁰ Perhaps then there may be a warning to preachers and commentators here about the danger of seeking to be clever, edgy and provocative whilst missing the obvious staring directly at us.

pastors. So, it is tempting to quickly generalise the teaching here and draw out principles concerning faith, deeds and how we relate to each other.

Yet, I think we would do well to recognise that in every age and our own, every culture and our own, wealth and greed are temptations with a particular hold. Like the tic that burrows itself into your skin and won't be dislodged allowing a crippling infection to get into your bloodstream, so too the love of money tends to get its teeth into us. Whilst perhaps few of us would consider ourselves to be truly wealthy and whilst perhaps we would never seek to directly exploit or defraud, to what extent do we benefit from unjust and unfair trading? How seriously do we take concerns about ethical business practices and the source of cheap goods? Does our silence and acceptance make us complicit?

Whilst there are wider implications and applications arising from the principles involved here, perhaps we would do well to start with this specific, concrete example and widen our application from there.

8.3 Patience as a better way

How do you respond to hard times? The temptation, and the one that the richer members of James' audience had fallen for, is to look after yourself at any cost. The motto of such people is "Let everyone else suffer, I'm not so weak." So, difficult times encourage exploitation as we seek to protect our own interests by taking advantage of others. If profits are falling and you are not going to be able to keep your own family in the comfort to which they are accustomed, cut the wages of others. If costs are rising because of inflation and tax increases, then make sure you pass on those costs to your customers, even if this means that those most in need are priced out of the market. James now offers an alternative and better response.

A look at the text (Read James 5:7-12)

If the rich have been acting as wicked, exploitative farmers, there is the good farmer who offers a better example. A farmer is patient, he ploughs, sows and waits, knowing that the rainy season will come and cause the crop to grow and bear fruit. So too, believers should be patient knowing that just as the rains will come, so too, we can look forward to Christ coming in order to end suffering, put all things right and reward faithfulness (5:7). If the farmer's focus is on preparing his land and sowing seed, the believer's responsibility during trials and suffering is to cultivate their heart, to grow in love and faithfulness (5:8). This is worked out, as we've seen previously in our attitudes to one another. This goes beyond not exploiting, it also means that we are not to resent or grumble against others even when we feel worse off than them. This ties into previous comments about not being hasty to judge, to grumble against others is to judge them but true judgement is coming when our own hearts will be exposed (5:9).

James now provides another example, turning from geography to history he encourages his readers to follow the example of the Old Testament prophets who lived and spoke faithfully for God, even when this led to suffering (5:10). He offers the specific example of Job, who Satan tested, to try and get him to curse God. Job refused to blame the Lord. Not only do we have the example of these Old Testament heroes of faith but we also know what their faith was in. So, thirdly, James points us to God's character. What will keep us going through hardship? It is by knowing that God is loving and compassionate, that his purpose is to do us good (5:11).

The outworking of patient faith, will be seen in our speech, just as we've seen through the letter. Believers are to be people who keep their word. Furthermore, simple commitments and promises

should be enough. The believer does not swear on other things, in other words, just as we can trust God, so others should be able to trust us and rely on our word and character (5:12).

Digging a little deeper

Notice the emphasis here on “the coming of the Lord.” James sets his expectations for believers against the context of Christ’s return. This helps us to understand a bit more about what James considers faith to be. Faith is about trust in God’s promise and that promise is salvation in Christ. So, for the believer, our faith is both that God has kept his promise in Christ’s death and resurrection to deal with our sin and that God will keep his promise to bring about a new creation and our resurrection when Christ returns.

How we live here and now, how we respond to suffering, persecution and testing will be shaped by our eschatology, what we believe about where the future is heading. There is an imminence to James’ eschatology, he expects his believers to expect that Christ’s return could be at any point soon. They are to live now, ready for judgement, knowing that their own hearts will be exposed. They are to live now, knowing that the trials they are going through are momentary and so they can look forward to what is beyond, the harvest to come.

A look at ourselves

Are we living in expectant hope of Christ’s return. How does that shape our priorities? How does that help us respond to the trials and struggles we face?

8.4 Faith, prayer and healing

So, how are we to respond to our trials? What does real, living faith look like? Well, James has been showing us that real faith is trust in God which is put into action. This affects how we speak to and about one another, it affects our attitudes and actions towards each other. But faith, in face of suffering is fundamentally about our relationship with God. So, prayer is key.

A look at the text (Read James 5:13-20)

Prayer should be the believer’s response to all circumstances, whether trouble (hardship and afflictions endured) or joy where the latter should be expressed in singing praise (5:13).⁷¹ This applies to specific examples of trouble, so those who are ill are to call the elders of the church to pray for them.⁷² The elders are also to anoint them with oil which may suggest either the use of oil for its medicinal properties or as a symbolic action, a reminder of the Holy Spirit’s anointing. Whilst the former is possible, I believe that in this context due to the linking of healing and forgiveness that the focus is more on oil as symbolic (5:14). The promise is that as a result of prayer, they will receive healing for physical sickness and forgiveness for sin (5:15). So, the believers are encouraged to confess their sin to one another.⁷³ Note that this is public, mutual and corporate and not the private confessional to a priest of church tradition (5:16).

Just as we have seen previous examples of faith in action with Abraham and Rahab, so too with regards to prayer as an outworking of faith, we are offered an Old Testament example. James,

⁷¹ Expressions of concern for one’s health also tended to form part of the customary ending of letters. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 191.

⁷² Davids notes that the illness must be serious if the elders are summoned rather than the person going to them. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 192,

⁷³ On the different uses of oil for both its medicinal qualities and as a symbol, see McKnight, *The letter of James*, 437-440.

reminds his readers of Elijah who persevered in prayer, first for a drought to demonstrate God's judgement on Ahab and then for the rain to return. Elijah is an example of someone who keeps going, keeps trusting God and keeps putting his faith into action (5:17-18).

Our mutual care for one another through confession, correction and repentance is reinforced as believers are reminded that calling someone back from a sinful direction is literally life saving (5:19-20).

Digging Deeper

It seems that in this particular context, that sickness and sin, forgiveness and healing are closely connected. This does not mean that sickness is always a direct consequence of sin, although it is a result of the Fall. However, there can be occasions when ill-health directly results from sin, particularly when we feed anger and bitterness in our hearts.

However, I believe that there is another reason as to why James makes the connection between healing and forgiveness. In Luke 5:17-26, Jesus heals a paralysed man. However, before he heals him, he declares him forgiven much to the consternation of watching Pharisees. Jesus insists that he has authority to forgive and demonstrates this by healing the man physically. I would suggest that in this context too, the physical healing after the elders' prayer acts as an outer sign of the inner healing through forgiveness.

So, first of all, whilst I take the encouragement to ask the elders for prayer to be general, I believe that there is a specific benefit when the ill person is suffering from guilt and shame as well.

A look at ourselves

Practically, the responsibility lies with the one who is suffering to ask for prayer. So, generally speaking, we are all encouraged to be consistently praying in response to our circumstances. However, there may be specific occasions when you are aware through the Holy Spirit's prompting that you need to seek out prayer from the elders.

In such a situation, the elders should meet with the person and take time to hear them. They should be ready to gently probe to seek to get to the bottom of the matter, why is it that the person has come to see them. This means not rushing to pray simply for healing but wanting to get to the heart of things.

The elders should pray for the person. I would pray first that they would know God's grace, forgiveness and peace in relation to the underlying situation and then that as a sign of this, they would experience physical healing too.

Conclusion

True faith does not resort to idle boasting and grand standing but is seen in our character which should be marked by a readiness to pray and praise in all seasons of life, a reputation for keeping your word, short accounts, repentance and forgiveness.

9. Summing up

Far from sitting in contradiction to the rest of the New Testament, particularly Paul's epistles, the letter of James can be seen to compliment and flesh out both Paul's teaching and that of Jesus. James offers us a vision of the practical Christian life with obedience to God flowing out of and demonstrating our faith so that works/deeds and faith/grace are not in tension.

9.1 Self Examination

The evidence of our faith is our deeds because words and actions result directly from the state of our heart. This means that we shouldn't see the practical instructions here as a kind of check list. You know, if you manage to give to the poor, keep your temper and remain humble then you are saved, if you fail in any of these things then you are not. This protects us against legalism and is vital because it is so easy for us to tempt ourselves into thinking we are doing okay when we have a long way to go. For example, I may congratulate myself for managing to bite my tongue and hide my emotions when seething with anger and to be sure, it is perhaps better to hold my counsel than to lash out with an angry outburst. However, Jesus consistently put the focus on the heart and I've still got a lot of work to do if I'm simply suppressing my emotions but harbouring frustrating, bitterness, envy or even hate. Similarly, it is not enough for me to set up a standing order to give to charity if my heart is left unmoved by the plight of the poor. James' letter should encourage us to serious self-examination.

9.2 The Air we breathe

You've probably heard the sermon illustration about faith where the preacher talks about the difference between saying you believe that a chair will hold your weight and proving this by actually sitting in the chair. We were talking about this illustration at our Life Group in relation to James 2:18 and the relationship between faith and deeds.

One person observed that in fact, we rarely if ever pause to think about it. We don't go through a conscious mental calculation about whether or not we trust the chair. This becomes more obvious when we think about other things from standing up on the ground through to pouring a drink. We instinctively and habitually know that we can trust the ground to hold our weight and the drink to refresh and nourish us without poisoning us. We do those things as naturally as we breathe the air around us. And, under normal circumstances, we definitely don't pause to decide whether or not we trust the air.

This may help us to think further about what faith is. First of all remember that faith isn't an abstract concept but is specifically about our trust in Jesus. Secondly, Ephesians 2:8 describes faith itself as a gift from God. It's something we receive from him and it is tied very closely into us receiving new life. Just as God breathed life into Adam and Eve's lungs, so, he breathes new life through the Holy Spirit into us.

So, faith in action should be as natural and instinctive as breathing and as all of the things that we normally do that are part and parcel of living. New living is about showing compassion for those in need, saying no to sin, sharing the good news etc. Living out our trust in Jesus should be as normal as breathing the air in and out.

9.3 Life Together

Reading James will also remind us of the corporate dimension to our faith. This is not a letter to be read and applied individually in the privacy of your own home. I should apply what it says to my own

life but I should also, all the more, see it as something written for whole churches to hear and put into practice together.

We shouldn't just be looking at the state of our individual hearts. Rather, the question we need to ask is whether our local church congregation is characterised by true, living faith or are we a people of mere lip service to Jesus? Is our church humble, reliable, prayerful, compassionate? This means that a church may appear to have all of the right doctrines, may be lively in worship and active in evangelism but like the church in Sardis that John has a letter from Jesus to, then the risk is that we are part of a dead or dying church. James' letter should be seen not just as a wake up call to individuals but to churches as well.

