

James

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James

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Introduction

As I wrote this I asked myself, “Does *James* even need a commentary?” The letter contains so many straightforward lessons that explanation seems unnecessary. As I dug into the letter, however, I realized that understanding who James was, his role in the Church, the people to whom he wrote, and their circumstances reveals much more. It clarifies why James said some of the things he did the way he did.

Following James’ lead, I have kept the background information brief and to the point.

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Background

One of the challenges in filling in the background of the letter is that we don't know when James wrote it. A date of 49 is reasonable, a year after the council in Jerusalem described in *Acts 15*. At this point, the Church was still largely Jewish, but it had fully accepted Gentiles and James had ruled that they weren't required to follow the Law of Moses. Later dates are possible but don't much affect the circumstances.

About James

First, the name "James" used in English translations of the New Testament should actually be "Jacob." John Wycliffe, who created the first English translation of the Bible around 1382, made this unfortunate decision, and it became a tradition. Jacob's namesake, whom God named Israel, was the grandson of Abraham and the father of the twelve men whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. This is why "James" is such a common name in the New Testament.

James was the oldest of Jesus' four younger brothers.¹ Imagine growing up with Jesus as your older brother, hearing, "Why can't you be more like your brother Jesus?" Jesus never sinned, he had a supernatural understanding of the Scriptures, and everyone respected him.² It seems that their father Joseph died sometime after Jesus was twelve years old,³ and Jesus was the head of the family until he left to start his ministry. Jesus, the perfect role model, shaped James, and we should expect to see much of Jesus' character in James.

The family practiced wood working, probably making plows and yokes for oxen.⁴ This provided a small income, so that they were not poor but not wealthy.

During Jesus' early ministry, James wasn't impressed.⁵ However, at some point James had a change of heart, and after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to James.⁶ The Apostles soon appointed James as the bishop, or the chief leader, of the church in Jerusalem.⁷

1 *Matthew* 13:55

2 *Luke* 2:46–47, 52

3 The Gospels don't mention Joseph during Jesus' ministry, and Jesus, while he was on the cross, called upon the Apostle John to take Mary into his home—*John* 19:25–27.

4 See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 88. Justin grew up in Samaria in the early second century.

5 *John* 7:2–5

6 *1 Corinthians* 15:7

7 See *Galatians* 1:18–19, where Paul visited Jerusalem after leaving Damascus around 32–33; James was already an important leader. See also Eusebius' *Church History* II.1.3, which says the Apostles Peter and John appointed James as bishop.

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In 48, James played a key role in the Jerusalem council that resolved the differences between Paul and the Jewish believers who opposed him.⁸

In 57, when Paul brought a benevolent gift from the churches in Galatia, Macedonia, Asia, and Greece to Jerusalem, he delivered it to James and the elders in Jerusalem.²

Early Church tradition indicates that the Pharisees martyred James in 62. It also indicates that he was known as James the Just, a comment on his lifestyle and character. Tradition indicates that even the non-believing Jews respected his commitment to the Law of Moses, although this tradition is not completely reliable.

About the Culture

James wrote to believers in young churches around the Roman Empire. The cultures in which these churches sprung up varied, but they shared some common characteristics.

Ancient cultures generally valued personal reputation, prestige, and conformity, even among the low classes. This led to several behaviors.

- People felt compelled to protect their reputations, often by responding with anger or even violence to small offenses
- Reputation mattered more than personal integrity
- Wealth and benevolence brought high status
- Society condemned failing to keep one's place or to show respect
- Society condemned acting selfishly or disruptively

Rome had a well-defined class system. About 33% were slaves, while the vast majority were poor commoners. Rome had two levels of aristocrats. Wealthy merchants could join the equestrian class, while the senators were the highest class. Romans senators were for banned from personally engaging in business, so they lived for civil service and extravagant luxury. They typically owned enormous estates worked by slaves and commoners and managed by slaves or former slaves.

Outside of Italy, about 20% were slaves. The class system was less strict, but the vast majority of people were poor.

Wealthy people gained prestige by sponsoring philosophers and artists and by organizing and financing public worship activities, such as athletic games and poetry contests. In Rome, this led to a formal system of patrons and clients.

8 Acts 15:13ff

2 Acts 21:17ff

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Rome had abundant wealth because of its conquests. This money flowed out of Rome to the provinces to buy luxury items, giving merchants willing to travel great opportunities to make money.

Especially in Asia and Galatia, in what is now modern Turkey, philosophers took classical Greek philosophy and merged it with Jewish and Christian religion and eastern mysticism. While each teacher tended to come up with his own variation, one popular theme was that people could attain salvation through special knowledge; Buddhist ideas about enlightenment may have influenced them. In addition, they considered that the physical world was inferior and evil; therefore, many of them taught that a person's actions were unimportant. These teachings later became known as *Gnosticism*, from the Greek word for knowledge. While these teachers talked about Christ, their teachings created a different religion.

About the Audience

At the time James wrote, small churches had sprung up around the Roman Empire. The churches considered Jerusalem the mother church, but the church in Antioch was well-established and growing rapidly. Paul and Barnabas had worked with the young churches in Cyprus, and they had also established four sizable congregations in the Roman province of Galatia, in what is now modern Turkey. At the time James wrote, Paul and Silas were in the process of establishing churches in Macedonia and Greece.

In addition, the church in Rome was well-established; traditions says that Peter had journeyed there and helped it grow and mature. The Christians had made enough progress that unbelieving Jews had caused disturbances, leading the Roman emperor Claudius to drive the Jews from the city, including Aquila and Priscilla.¹

The members of the churches reflected the cities in which they lived; many were slaves or poor working-class, and some were wealthy. At least one Roman Senator had believed, Sergius Paulus, proconsul of Cyprus.² The Paulus family owned large estates around Pisidian Antioch; this may be why Paul went to establish a church there.

At this point in time, the churches could not afford buildings in which to meet. Often, a wealthy believer, or the wife of a wealthy unbeliever, would open his or her house to a group of believers for weekly worship. These house churches were the basic units of the church in each city.

Overall, James' audience was very diverse, with different cultures and different mixtures of Jews and Gentiles. At the same time, certain challenges and problems were common to all of them.

1 Acts 18:2

2 Acts 13:7

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About False Doctrines

The Apostles were responsible for defining, teaching, and maintaining the doctrines of the Church. As Jesus' disciples and eyewitnesses of the events of his ministry, they were uniquely qualified to teach about what Jesus said and did. As prophets, the Holy Spirit guided them to correctly understand how to apply Jesus' message. The authority of the Apostles became a cornerstone of Church doctrine for centuries.

However, certain individuals and groups frequently rose up and taught things contrary to what the Apostles taught. From the perspective of the Church, these were false doctrines.

One of the first individuals to do this was a man named Simon, as recorded in *Acts* 8:9–24. He used magic to impress people and to gain prestige. He was baptized, but the Apostle Peter soon exposed his heart. This Simon, who became known as Simon Magus, traveled to Rome and had himself proclaimed a god. He taught a corrupt message about Jesus and became known as the “author of all heretics.”¹

At the same time, a group formed within the church in Jerusalem called *Judaizers*. They taught that believers in Christ must observe the Law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul called them the Circumcision Party because they demanded that Gentiles be circumcised. At first, they weren't noticed because all the believers were Jews who had put their faith in Jesus, and they continued to observe the Law as they always had.

However, when the Apostle Peter accepted Gentiles without first requiring them to observe the Law, the Judaizers rose up and opposed him.² The Judaizers backed down, but they didn't change their attitudes. As the Apostle Paul began his ministry to the Gentiles, the Judaizers attacked him verbally and even tried to force Gentile believers to be circumcised and to observe the Law. Paul responded by writing *Galatians*, where he boldly condemned the Judaizers and their teaching.

The conflict between Paul and the leaders of the church in Antioch reached a point where the leaders in Antioch called for a council in Jerusalem. Both sides presented their cases, and the Apostles Peter and Paul testified. James settled the issue when he decided in Paul's favor. However, the Judaizers refused to accept it, and their teachings continued to plague the churches.³

The Judaizers had taught that salvation required faith *and* observance of the Law, rather than salvation by grace through faith. Other individuals followed the path of Simon Magus. These individuals began teaching doctrines only required special knowledge. Where the Judaizers required observing the Law, these teachers said, “Obtain the special knowledge!”

1 Eusebius, *Church History*, II.13.6

2 *Acts* 11:2

3 *Titus* 1:10 mentions the Circumcision Party specifically as causing problems.

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and required *no actions at all*. James called these teachings “faith-only.” Compare this to what Jesus said in *Matthew 7:21*.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven; instead, it will be those **doing the will** of my Father in Heaven.”

These teachings were destructive to the Church, as they openly allowed people to sin and even encouraged it. Jude, who was also a brother of Jesus, said of them,

¹⁶These discontented grumblers, going after their own passions, **talk pompously, flattering people for profit.**

¹⁷But you, beloved, remember the words the Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ previously spoke, ¹⁸which they kept saying to you. “In the last time, there will be mockers going after their own irreverent passions.” **These are the ones causing divisions**, unspiritual, not having the Spirit. (*Jude 1:16–19*)

Both the Judaizers and the “faith-only” teachers exploited wealthy homeowners who sponsored house churches. By gaining the support of the homeowner or the believing wife of a wealthy man, these teachers gained a captive audience for their doctrines and protection from the church elders. Furthermore, many of these teachers demanded financial support from their patrons.

Paul spoke of them to Titus, saying,

¹⁰For there are even many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. ¹¹They must be muzzled; **they upend entire houses**,¹ teaching what they should not **for the sake of shameful profit.** (*Titus 1:10-11*)

These false teachers caused great conflict, not only with the elders but with each other as they competed for influence. They employed slander as a tool.² All this led to strife and believers speaking badly of one another.

About the Letter

The early Church used James’ letter but did not consider it Scripture until the late 300s, most likely because it was not written by an Apostle or someone closely associated with an Apostle. The letter’s practical value for teaching and James’ role as bishop of the church in Jerusalem seems to have led to its eventual acceptance.

James writes to the “twelve tribes in the dispersion,”³ as he is writing to Jewish believers outside of Judea and Galilee. However, James treats the Gentiles as adopted children of

1 The Greek word means a house, or the members of the house; that is, a household or family. Here, Paul is referring to the believers who meet in wealthy individuals’ houses.

2 See *Galatians 1:10*, *20*, *2 Corinthians 10:10*, *Romans 3:8*.

3 From the Greek word we get *diaspora*.

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Abraham, and while he expresses himself as a Jew speaking to Jews, he is equally speaking to the Gentile believers.

The letter is entirely practical; James only briefly discusses doctrine. The rest of the letter addresses believers' attitudes and actions. He issues commands 55 times; James doesn't encourage, plead, or demand; he *directs* his audience how to think and act.

James' style is blunt; he speaks like a Galilean villager. He doesn't waste words or cushion what he has to say, and his deep conviction and unassuming authority leave no room for those who hear to question or debate.

James covers a number of practical issues; however, he doesn't write simply to dispense wisdom. The main reasons for his letter were the false doctrines taught by self-appointed teachers and the resulting factions and disorder. James places these two issues at the center of the letter, where his tone goes from blunt to bludgeoning. James sees these not as problems but as threats to the integrity of the churches.

The letter's language is simple but clear; most likely, James dictated his thoughts and let someone else with strong Greek language skills write the letter. Peter indicated that he did this with Silas—*1 Peter* 5:12.

James often makes a series of short points, and each point stands on its own. At the same time, James groups the points into sections having a common theme. The individual points are easy to understand, but understanding the theme of each section is also important. James starts each section using an expression like, "my brothers," or, two times, "Come now!" However, this is not a rule, and James occasionally adds an extra "my brothers" in the middle of a section for emphasis.

James and *Matthew* share the same Jewish view of Jesus' teachings. For example, James introduces himself as a slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. In *Matthew* 20:20ff, Jesus tells the Apostles that whichever of them wanted to be the greatest had to be the slave of the others. Those who are familiar with *Matthew* should look Jesus' influence on James' teaching.

James especially reflects Jesus' teaching on believers caring for each other. The following is the parable of the sheep and the goats from *Matthew* 25:31–46.

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the messengers with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the Tribes will be gathered before him, and he will separate them from one another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world! For I was hungry, and you gave me *food* to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger to you, and you took me in

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as a guest, ³⁶naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you looked after for me. I was in prison, and you came to me.'

³⁷"So the godly will answer him saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and take you in as a guest, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and come to you?'

⁴⁰"Then the King will answer them, saying, 'Amen, I tell you, **as much as you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.**'

⁴¹"Then he will say to those on his left, 'You accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the Slanderer and his messengers! ⁴²For I was hungry, and you didn't give me *food* to eat. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me anything to drink. ⁴³I was a stranger, and you didn't take me in as a guest, naked, and you didn't clothe me, weak and in prison, and you didn't look after me.'

⁴⁴"So they will answer him saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or weak or in prison, and we didn't minister to you?'

⁴⁵"Then he will answer them, saying, 'Amen, I tell you, **as much as you didn't do for one of these least, neither did you do for me.**'

⁴⁶"And these will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life."

We can see from where James learned his blunt teaching style. A core message in James is that believers will be judged by how they treat other believers, something that Jesus strongly emphasized.

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A Few Notes

The translation is my own, and it is overly literal.¹ I want to expose those reading *James*, as much as possible, to the actual words used in the Greek. The wording will sound strange, but this forces readers to think about words and how James used them.

As I mentioned above, *James* is filled with commands. Technically, it is filled with the *imperative*, which typically represents a command and sometimes a polite request. In Greek, this stands out; to make this apparent in English, I use *you must*. For example, instead of *Let not many of you become teachers*, I have *not many of you must become teachers*.

One Greek word can mean *works, deeds, actions*. Scholars have built much doctrine around which English word translates this Greek word, so I use the following English words to express specific meanings, depending on what I think James meant.

- Work—a process that produces a result, such as *perseverance must finish its work*
 - This is different from many translations and the doctrines built around them
- Deed, deeds—the observance of the rules and rituals required by the Law of Moses, such as circumcision or resting on the Sabbath
- Action, actions—a thing that we do, our behavior

I don't use the words *righteous, righteousness*, etc. because, in the twenty-first century, they have come to mean *self-righteous*. The Greek word has the idea of behavior that God judges acceptable, so I use *godly, godliness*, and *upright* instead.

In Greek, the difference between *you* as an individual—singular—and *you* as a group of people—plural—is apparent. In most places, James is speaking to a group; however, there are some places where James switches to speaking to an individual for effect. To make this clear, I mark this with *you_{sg}* when James is speaking to an individual.

I haven't emphasized chapter numbers because the chapter breaks generally don't follow the flow of the text. Instead, I've added three headings that capture the flow:

- General Remarks
- Specific Issues
- Closing Remarks

1 By literal, I mean as close to the Greek words as possible. Greek grammar is much more nuanced and fluid than English, and Greek to English translation involves a good deal of interpretation. The fancy term is "formal," as in, "This is a formal translation."

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The Letter

Opening Remarks

James opens his letter by discussing four topics of general interest.

Greeting (1:1)

1 ¹Jacob,¹ a slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion.
Greetings.

James opens with a brief greeting. Although he has a very common name, he assumes that his audience knows who he is. At the same time, he identifies himself as a slave of God and of Christ. Everyone knew that he was Jesus' brother and the leader of the mother church, but James calls Jesus, "Lord."

He addresses his audience in a typical Jewish fashion. The great majority of the several million Jews lived outside the Jewish homeland; they viewed themselves as living in foreign lands, and James is clearly speaking to them.

James makes no effort to address the Gentiles separately; in his mind, they were now part of the "true" Israel dispersed among the foreigners.

Tests and Temptations (1:2)

²My brothers, you must consider it all joy whenever you encounter various tests,² ³knowing that the proving³ of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must have its perfect work,⁴ so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

First, the Greek word for *test* also means *temptation*. A test involves the temptation to turn away from godliness, and temptations test whether our resolve to be godly is genuine.

James says that tests and temptations are opportunities because they produce perseverance, and ongoing perseverance works to perfect us. Note that the Greek idea of *perfect* involved bringing something to its full potential; it didn't have the idea of mathematical flawlessness. The Greek word for *perfect* can also be translated as *mature*, *complete*. He insists that believers rejoice in hardships, viewing them as opportunities for growth.

1 Traditionally in English translations, *James*.

2 The Greek word also means *temptations*.

3 The process of conducting a test to prove that something is genuine or pure, such as gold or silver.

4 Perhaps, *must cause its perfect action*. See the BDAG 3rd Ed. entry for ἔχω, item 8.

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⁵If someone among you lacks wisdom, he must ask God, who is giving, with all sincerity and without reproaching,¹ and it will be given to him. ⁶But he must ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like a billow² of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷For this person must not expect that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded person, unstable in all his ways.



As we go through life, James says that there will be times when we become confused by the hardships we experience. During these times, we must ask God for wisdom to guide us. We must ask sincerely and without complaining or blaming God, and God will give to us.

However, James says that we must control our doubting. The Greek word typically means *judge* or *dispute*; doubt is like having two voices in our heads arguing about what is right. James says we must silence those voices, deciding that God is in control and that he is working for our good. Otherwise, we become like the sea when a strong wind is blowing, with waves rising and crashing all around and spray blowing everywhere. James tells us that God can't give us wisdom when our minds are in turmoil.

David, the great king of Israel, cried out,

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest. (*Psalms 22:1–2, ESV*)

Jesus quoted from this psalm while he was on the cross.³ There is room for us to cry out to God and express our pain and our fears. However, James insists that, after we find peace through prayer, we approach God calmly and seek guidance.

⁹The lowly brother must boast in his high position ¹⁰but the wealthy man in his lowliness, because like a wild grass' flower he will pass away. ¹¹For the sun rises with scorching heat and dries out the grass; its flower falls and the beauty of its appearance fades. In this way, the wealthy man will wither in his journeys.

James seems to veer off-topic when he compares the poor and the wealthy merchants. James views the poor as exalted because their only shield against hardship was their faith, while the merchants' wealth protected them from most hardship. Thus, the poor had many opportunities to practice perseverance, while the wealthy didn't. James warns the wealthy that

1 Modern translations follow the translation made in the KJV, "God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not." The Greek adverb ἀπλῶς, meaning "sincerely," could apply to either "must ask" or "giving." The KJV assumed that it applies to "giving," but this requires translating it as "liberally" to make sense, which is not the ordinary meaning. Applying the adverb to "must ask" makes more sense of both phrases as instructions about how to ask.

2 The top of a wave when it is blown by the wind, sea spray.

3 *Matthew 27:46*

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their wealth won't last past their deaths, when they will be left with nothing, while the poor will have their perfected faith.

James has a poor opinion of the wealthy, and that becomes more evident as the letter goes on. He had seen many pompous people flaunting their wealth during feasts in Jerusalem and had watched as landowners, or their foremen, failed to pay laborers at the end of the day. Landowners had likely cheated James and his family, failing to pay them for work done. He didn't accept the conventional wisdom that the wealthy and powerful were better, smarter, or more blessed by God.

Jesus also shared this view. He clearly favored the poor and dismissed the rich—see the blessings and woes in *Luke* 6:20–26. James, following Jesus' lead, was trying to replace the honor systems' values of reputation, anger, and wealth with personal integrity, restraint, and treating everyone as if they were created in God's image.

¹²Fortunate¹ is the person who endures, because he who has been proved genuine will receive the victor's crown² of life that God promised to his beloved.

James points out the reward for a lifetime of perseverance. Those who have proved themselves will receive eternal life, which God promised to those he loves. Greek athletes had to train diligently even to participate in competitions, and only the winner received this prize. However, each believer who perseveres will emerge from this life victorious, and God will recognize them before all of Heaven.

¹³No one being tempted³ must say, "I am being tempted by God." For God is untempted by evil, and he does tempt anyone. ¹⁴Each one is tempted by his own desires, drawn away⁴ and lured. Next, desire, having conceived, bears sin; sin, having come to completion, give birth to death.

James tells us that we must not blame God for our own temptations. Note that this is the same Greek word translated *tests* above. James says that God is not tempted by evil and that God doesn't tempt anyone. Instead, temptations come from our own desires, including wanting to be in control or to protect ourselves. James twice uses conception and birth to describe the process that follows. He does this to indicate that desires tend to build up to produce sin, and sin has to build up to produce death. We have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to watch over ourselves, dealing with temptations and sin before they destroy us.

1 Traditionally, *blessed*. The Greek word has the idea of a person who enjoys the benefits of God's favor.

2 The victor's crown, a garland made of laurel branches, was awarded to the winner of a competition. Over time, it was also awarded to victorious Roman generals. It was not a diadem, nor did it indicate royalty.

3 This is the same word translated above as *tested*.

4 The Greek word implies some initial resistance, *dragged away*.

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Don't Be Led Astray (1:16)

¹⁶My beloved brothers, you must not be led astray. ¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect present is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or changing shadow. ¹⁸According to his will, he gave birth to us by the true message, in order for us to be a kind of firstfruit of all his creations. ²

James moves to a new theme, where he warns against going astray. The word he uses implies that we go astray because we are deceived by thinking that godliness is depriving us of something good.

James tell us that *everything* that is good comes from God. He then points out that God is completely reliable; therefore, his commitment to us and to our needs is unwavering. Furthermore, God gave birth to us through the Gospel message, and he did this so that we would be the crowning achievement of his creation. In all this, we have no reason to look anywhere but to God to have our needs met.

Thinking that God was somehow holding out led to the original sin.

^{3:1} Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” ² And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵ **For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,** knowing good and evil.” ⁶ **So when the woman saw that the tree was good** for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and **that the tree was to be desired** to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Genesis 3:1–7, ESV)

The serpent lied to the woman, telling her that God was holding out on her because he didn't want her to be equal to him. The woman bought the lie and deceived herself into thinking that the tree was good, and she then acted in a way that brought death to herself and all her children. Of course, the man was standing there watching all this, and he went along.

Many people think that they have to make all sorts of sacrifices in order to follow Jesus. James says that we only give up what seems desirable but actually harms us.

True Religion (1:19)

¹⁹My beloved brothers, you must know *this*. Every person must be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. ²⁰For a person's anger doesn't produce the godliness of God. ²¹Therefore, having rid

¹ Or, *deceived*.

² Or, *creatures*. James seems to have more in mind than just plants and animals.

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yourselves of all filth and abundant evil, with humility you must receive the implanted message that is able to save your souls.

James moves on to the theme of true religion. For the Jews, religion was often a matter of ritual observance; for Gentiles, this was even more the case. Instead, James calls believers to godly living. He says that we must restrain ourselves; in particular, we must be willing to listen instead of expressing our opinions, and we must control our anger. Ancient honor cultures valued respect over integrity, and any sign of disrespect required a quick angry response. James says that angry defensiveness doesn't lead to godliness.

Generally, believers must rid themselves of all filth and harmful—the Greek word for *evil* also means *harmful*—behavior. Instead, they must humbly focus on Jesus' teachings, which have power for salvation.

²²You must become doers of the message; do not be only hearers, *thus* deceiving yourselves.¹

²³For if someone is a hearer of the message and not a doer, he is like a person looking intently at his natural² face in a mirror. ²⁴For he contemplated himself and, having gone away, he forgot what sort of person he was. ²⁵But the person, having looked intently into the perfect law of freedom and having remained, not having become a forgetful hearer but a doer of actions, this person will be fortunate in what he does.

Many Jews prided themselves on their knowledge of the Scriptures and the Traditions of Pharisees; our modern equivalents would be memorizing the Bible and studying systematic theology. James warns that such study, when it doesn't lead us to change in our lives, produces self-deception. He compares it to a person who looked at themselves in a mirror, saw smudged makeup or patchy stubble, and then walked away thinking that they were all good.

This sounds silly, but walking away from our study time without applying what we learned to ourselves is dangerous. Bible study, prayer, and going to church help us to grow in godliness. However, they are *tools* intended to build us up. If we turn these tools into rituals, then we begin to think that doing these rituals makes us godly. Over time, we end up just going through the motions. We may feel busy with all of our religious activities, but our daily lives, which reveal the overflow of our hearts, tell another story.

James call us to use these tools diligently as we work to perfect our lives. He leaves unsaid that we must work to change our hearts, under God's guidance, for this to happen. If we do this, God will bless us.

1 Literally, *Become doers of the message and not only hearers deceiving yourselves.*

2 Literally, *birth.*

James

James mentions the *perfect law of freedom*. He is referring to the Gospel message, which he views as the fulfillment of the Law of Moses. James diligently observed the ritual of the Law of Moses, but his focus was on the Gospel.

Note on Horses and Bridles, Bits

A *bridle* is the headgear that a rider puts on a horse in order to control it. A bridle consists of three parts. A *bit*, a metal, bone, horn, or wooden rod that goes in the horse's mouth. Straps that go around the horse's head to hold the bit in place. *Reins*, long straps attached to the bit that the rider uses to control the horse. The bit is the important part of the bridle because it actually controls the horse.

When used as a verb, *bridle* means to restrain and to guide, like a rider guiding and slowing a horse.

²⁶If someone considers himself to be religious without bridling his tongue—but instead deceives his heart—this person's religion ¹ is useless. ²⁷Religion that is clean and undefiled before the God and Father is this: to watch over orphans and widows in their afflictions, to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James warns that a person's religion is useless if they don't control their tongue; instead, they deceive themselves by thinking that God accepts them because they perform meaningless rituals. Much of the Law of Moses could be reduced to empty rules and rituals if not done with a reverent heart. James will say much more about the tongue in chapter 3.

In *Isaiah* 1:10–20, God expresses his feelings about empty ritual.

¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!

Give ear to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹**“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?**
says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

¹²“When you come to appear before me,
who has required of you
this trampling of my courts?

¹³**Bring no more vain offerings;**

1 The Greek word refers especially to religion that focuses on ritual.

James

incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—

I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;

your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶**Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;**
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,

¹⁷**learn to do good;**
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.

¹⁸“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

¹⁹If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;

²⁰but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (*Isaiah 1:10–20, ESV*)

James says that true religion is to show concern for those in need, and to avoid worldliness. He specifically mentions widows and orphans, two of the most lowly groups in ancient society, whom the world generally ignored. Watching over them was a long-term, often thankless task.

James

Don't Show Favoritism (2:1)

2 ¹ My brothers, you must not keep the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with favoritism. ² For suppose, in your gathering place, ¹ a person with a gold ring and splendid ² clothes came in and also a poor person in soiled clothes. ³ Should you have looked with favor upon the one wearing splendid clothes and said, "Please, you_{sg} must sit here in honor," and said to the poor person, "You_{sg} must stand there," or, "You_{sg} must sit below my footstool"³? ⁴ You were double-minded⁴ in yourselves and became judges with wicked thoughts, didn't you?

James says that believers must not show favoritism. He then describes a hypothetical situation where believers honor a wealthy person while treating a poor person with contempt. James calls those who do this double-minded; they *know* they are wrong but continue to do it. He also accuses them of judging with evil intentions.

⁵ My beloved brothers, you must listen! God chose those poor in the world to be wealthy in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he announced to his beloved, didn't he? ⁶ But you dishonor the poor! The wealthy exploit you and drag you before the courts, don't they? ⁷ They slander the good name by which you were called, ⁵ don't they? ⁸ If, however, you fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself,"⁶ you do well.

James, knowing that favoritism was widespread, insists that the believers listen to him. God chose the poor to become heirs of his kingdom, but the believers were disrespecting the poor. Meanwhile, the wealthy generally treated poor believers badly and spoke against the name of Jesus. James points out the irony in the situation. Few of the believers were wealthy, yet they, whom God had chosen, showed special honor to those whom God rejected. This was the world's way; Jesus called them to something better, including loving everyone regardless of their situation.

⁹ But if you show favoritism, you labor at sin, being convicted by the law as violators. ¹⁰ For anyone who keeps the whole law but stumbles in one thing has become liable ⁷ to all of it. ¹¹ For the command having said, "You_{sg} must not commit adultery," also said, "You_{sg} must not murder." So if you_{sg} don't commit adultery but you_{sg} murder, you_{sg} have become a violator of the law. ¹² In this manner you must speak and in this manner you must do, as those destined to be judged by the law of freedom. ¹³ For there will be unmerciful judgment to the person having not practiced mercy.

1 The Greek word means *gathering place*; from it we get *synagogue*. James is thinking of house churches.

2 The Greek word typically means *bright, radiant*. Here, it implies an open display of wealth.

3 That is, sitting on the floor next to the footstool, so the speaker's feet are level with the poor man.

4 Literally, *disputed* or *doubted*. See verse 1:6, where James associates this word with being double-minded, which captures the meaning.

5 That is, the name of Jesus Christ.

6 *Leviticus* 19:18

7 Figuratively, *guilty under the whole law*.

James

James brings home the seriousness of the situation. Showing favoritism is sin, and those who keep on doing it are guilty before God. Using the Ten Commandments as an example, he says that a person obeying nine out of ten of the commandments is still a lawbreaker. He notes that believers are still subject to judgment, especially when it comes to mistreating other believers.

James saw that believers were taking sin lightly. In the minds of many believers, favoritism was more like a misdemeanor than a felony; James might respond that a misdemeanor will still land you in jail.

We might complain that James is excluding God's grace, but Jesus preached the same message in the parable of the sheep and the goats. God forgives sin committed unintentionally, but sin committed willfully in the face of correction reflects a lack of faith. We shouldn't put God to the test.

Mercy triumphantly boasts over² judgment!

James ends by promoting mercy while rebuking favoritism. Mercy is rooted in love, while favoritism is rooted in judgment. He portrays Mercy as a warrior boasting over its fallen foe, Judgment. His choice of words adds an edge; believers should choose to be with the victorious and not the fallen.

Central Issues

James begins to address the core issues facing the churches, false doctrines and the teachers that promote them. They are causing widespread quarreling and disorder.

True Faith Produces Action (2:14)

¹⁴My brothers, what is the benefit if someone claims to have faith but doesn't have actions; faith isn't able to save him, is it?

In verses 2:12–13, James said that believers are still subject to judgment, and now he says that faith can't save! Many have claimed that James is refuting Paul's teachings that salvation comes by grace through faith; that is *not* the case.

James isn't opposed to faith; in fact, he clearly believes that faith is the basis for salvation. Instead, James is talking about the nature of *true* faith; he says that "faith" that doesn't produce action is unable to save.

¹⁵If a brother or sister are naked and are lacking daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warm and be filled with food," but he doesn't give them the necessities of the body, what's the benefit? ¹⁷Likewise, faith in itself, if it doesn't have actions, is dead.

² The Greek word means *boast over, vaunt*. The cause of this boasting could be a victory on the battlefield.

James

James provides a somewhat disturbing illustration. He describes a believer who sees another believer in dire need and says something like, “Jesus loves you! Hardship makes you perfect!” and then walks away. James says that, just like an empty blessing, faith that doesn't produce action is dead.

¹⁸ Yet someone will say, “You_{sg} have faith, and I have deeds.” You_{sg} must show me your faith without actions, and I will show you_{sg} my faith by my actions.

This verse is a bit confusing because James addresses two individuals as if he was in a three-way debate.

First, a Judaizer argues with James' teaching. This person acknowledges that James thinks that faith is important; however, he thinks that doing the rituals of the Law, or deeds, is more important. The Judaizers were still active, but the council in Jerusalem had ruled against them, and James mentions them only to ignore them.

He wants to make clear that he is talking actions generally and *not* about ritual observance of the Law.

Next, James addresses a “faith-only” teacher. By asking this teacher to demonstrate his faith through his inaction, James exposes the contradiction of demonstrating something by doing nothing. He will demonstrate his faith through his actions.

The following chart illustrates James' position.

Faith-Only Factions	James	Judaizers
Faith Only (Knowledge)	Faith Producing Actions	The Law Plus Faith

James is not at an extreme; he is in the center with extremists on either side. From this perspective, James and Paul agreed completely.

¹⁹ You_{sg} believe that God is one; you_{sg} do well. Even the demons believe, and tremble!

To the faith-only teacher, James says that even demons acknowledge God and tremble with fear.

²⁰ O empty¹ person! Are you_{sg} willing to realize that faith without actions is useless?

James continues to address the faith-only teachers bluntly. In his mind, they are emptied of goodness and filled with evil; they refuse to acknowledge the Gospel in spite of clear demonstrations that they are wrong.

However, James is really addressing both those who have followed these teachers and those who still hold to sound teaching. He is not engaging in a religious debate about points of doctrine with the false teachers. Instead, he is battling with these teachers for the hearts and minds of the believers.

1 When used of people, it indicates a person drained of good, with evil filling the void.

James

Paul had already faced the same situation with the Judaizers a few years before in *Galatians* 1:6-7.

⁶I marvel that you are so quickly **deserting the one¹ who called** you in Christ's grace **for another gospel—⁷ which isn't another**—except some are confusing you and **wanting to distort the Gospel of Christ**.

Paul and James both saw the message at risk of distortion to the point where it was no longer the Gospel. People's faith and salvation were at risk.

²¹Our father Abraham, having offered up his son Isaac on the altar,² was justified by actions, wasn't he? ²²You_{sg} see that faith was working together with his actions, and by actions faith was perfected. ²³And so, the Scripture was fulfilled that says,

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as godliness.”³

And he was called God's friend.

James brings up Abraham, the father of faith. After Abraham demonstrated his obedience to God by his willingness to offer Isaac, God commended Abraham.

¹⁵And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, **because you have done this** and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷**I will surely bless you**, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸and **in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.**” (*Genesis* 22:15–18, ESV)

God tested Abraham's faith, and he perfected it through Abraham's obedience.

²⁴You must see that a person is justified by actions and not by faith only. ²⁵In the same way, Rahab the prostitute also was justified by actions, having entertained the messengers⁴ and having sent them out by different route.⁵ ²⁶For even as the body without the spirit is dead, likewise faith without actions is dead.

James offers a second example, that of Rahab, who lived in Jericho. Joshua sent spies who stayed in Rahab's inn. When the king of Jericho sent to arrest them, Rahab hid them and sent them away safely. She believed that God was about to destroy Canaan starting with Jericho, and she sought favor to save herself and her family. Rahab became one of the ancestors of King David and Jesus.

1 Whether this is God or Paul is unclear. I think Paul meant to refer to God.

2 See *Genesis* 22:1–19.

3 *Genesis* 15:6.

4 These men were Israelite spies.

5 See *Joshua* 2:1ff; 6:15–25.

James

Teachers, Selfish Ambition, and Discord

James starts a long section that deals with teachers, selfish ambition, and discord; this section includes all of chapter 3 and ends in chapter 4 at verse 12. In the previous section, James addresses the doctrines that some teach. Now, he addresses the teachers themselves and the problems they are causing.

Not Many Teachers (3:1)

3 ¹My brothers, not many must become teachers, knowing that we will receive a greater judgment.

James' first admonition on this topic is that only a few should seek to become teachers. Among Jews and Greeks teachers received honor and prestige, and they could be paid as well. In the churches, many were tempted to pursue the role for selfish reasons, instead of viewing it as a weighty responsibility. James warns that teachers will receive a greater judgment. He had in mind the teaching in *Hebrews* 13:7–8.

⁷**Endure hardship as discipline;**¹ **God is dealing with you as sons.** For what son isn't disciplined by his father? ⁸But if you are without discipline, in which all of us have become companions, then you are illegitimate² and not sons.

God actively disciplines all believers as a good father disciplines his children, but James says that his expectations, and the resulting discipline, are greater for those who teach. Of course, this applies to anyone having a public role in the Church.

Control the Tongue (3:2)

²For we all stumble in many ways. If a person doesn't stumble in speaking, this is a perfect person, able to bridle his entire body. ³Now, when we put bits in horses' mouths in order for them to obey us, their entire body changes course as well. ⁴Behold! Also ships, being so large and driven by hard winds, change course because of a tiny rudder, wherever the inclination of the one steering wills. ⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, and it boasts of great things.

James notes that everyone often falls short. He then says, with a bit of hyperbole, that a person who is able to avoid sinning in what they say is able to avoid sin entirely.

In *Matthew* 12:34, Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees.

“Viper's spawn! How are you, being evil, able to speak good *things*? For **out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**”

Our goal should be to purify our hearts so that we don't sin in what we say. If we control what we say only to conceal the intentions of our hearts, then we risk hypocrisy.

1 Specifically that given during the training of children.

2 In ancient times, people looked down on those born outside of marriage.

James

James notes that people are able to control horses by putting bits in their mouths and to steer ships using rudders. Both horses and ships are much larger than people, and yet people are able to direct them with small devices. In the same way, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it guides the entire person. At the same time, it boasts greatly.

How small a fire ignites how large a forest! ⁶And the tongue is a fire! The world of ungodliness, the tongue is set among the members of our bodies, defiling the entire body, setting the wheel of one's life¹ on fire and being set on fire by Hell.² ⁷For every creature: beast and bird, reptile and sea animal, has been subdued by humankind, ⁸but no one is able to subdue the tongue, an unstable evil, full of death-dealing poison.

James uses colorful illustrations to show how serious sinful talk is. Many believers were Jews raised to be upright from childhood; they suffered from gossip and slander, rather than sexual sin or drunkenness. However, their ungodly talk defiled them just as much as debauchery did the Gentiles.

⁹With it we praise the Lord and Father, and with it we curse³ people, the ones created in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come a praise and a curse. My brothers, things like this ought not to happen! ¹¹A spring, out of the same hole, can't pour out fresh water and bitter, can it? ¹²A fig tree isn't able to produce olives nor a grapevine *to produce* figs, are they? Neither is saltwater *able* to produce fresh.

Much of the sinful talk James addresses had to do with believers talking badly about other believers. The root of this was jealousy and envy,⁴ as would-be teachers competed for position and prestige in the Church and stirred up their followers. James points out the ugly irony of the same mouth praising God and then speaking badly of others.

True Wisdom is Humble (3:13)

¹³Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? He must show it by good conduct, his actions resulting from restraint⁵ that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition⁶ in your hearts, you must not boast, and you must not lie against the truth. ¹⁵This isn't the wisdom coming down from above; instead, it is earthly, natural, demonic. ¹⁶For where there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is turmoil and every foul practice.

1 This odd expression probably means *one's entire life*.

2 Literally, *Gehenna*, which comes from the Hebrew for *Valley of Hinnom*. This valley lay on the southeast corner of Jerusalem; the Jews considered it cursed and filled with demons.

3 In the sense of wishing evil on them.

4 My simplistic definitions are that jealousy is the desire to protect what we think is ours, while envy is the desire for what others have.

5 The Greek word has a range of meanings, from *restraint* to *gentleness* to *humility* to *lowliness*. All these meanings are bundled together here, starting with restraint.

6 The Greek word also means *strife, rivalry*. Selfish ambition leads to rivalry and strife.

James

¹⁷But the wisdom from above is indeed first holy, next peaceful, forbearing, easily persuaded, full of mercy and good fruit, nonjudgmental, not hypocritical. ¹⁸The fruit of godliness coming from peace is sown by those making peace.

James calls those who claim to be wise and knowledgeable among the believers to prove it by their good conduct; such proof must be established over a long period of time. This conduct is the sum of a person's actions when godly wisdom guides them to be restrained, gentle, humble, and even lowly in the sense of being willing to overlook a slanderous attack.

The opposite of godly wisdom produces contention leading to factions and sin, such as stubbornness, anger, debates, and slander. This comes from people filled with jealousy and selfish ambition seeking positions of power in the churches, in particular the role of Teacher, and those who follow them. This is the wisdom of the world; James goes so far as to call it demonic. Those who have this worldly wisdom shouldn't boast as if it is something good or lie about it, pretending to be godly.

James describes spiritual wisdom in terms of character traits that it produces.

- Genuinely devoted to God, both walking with God and staying clear of sin
- Quick to listen, slow to speak, not angry or insistent, calming disputes
- Willing to listen to opposing views, not needing to have the last word
- Making a genuine effort to see the other side of an issue, willing to change an opinion when presented with good evidence
- A lifestyle of patient service, especially showing mercy
- Not criticizing others, even when they are clearly wrong
- Doing all this sincerely, without any deception or hidden agendas

James summarizes this by saying that godliness among the believers comes from the peace and harmony produced by those who sow peace, not discord.

The world looks at godly wisdom as weak and ineffective; however, the world's wisdom often leads people to ruin, while practicing godliness actually proves to be effective. However, the reason believers practice godliness isn't to get ahead in the world but to store up treasures for the life to come by pleasing God now.

This raises the question, is James practicing what he preaches? He has been speaking somewhat harshly, and he is about to get even more intense. The answer to this question lies in James' role in the church and the circumstances.

James lays out the proper behavior for *teachers* in an orderly church. James is more than just a teacher, he is the *bishop* of the mother church. Leaders have authority, in extreme circumstances, to take strong action that teachers don't.

James

Disorderly behavior had been going on for at least ten years¹ and was getting worse, in spite of the efforts of James and the Apostles. This had forced the church in Antioch to seek help from the church in Jerusalem because of the Judaizers. Now, “faith-only” teachers threaten the Church.

James speaks harshly to those causing factions, along with their followers. They are damaging the churches; his strong words reflect his role in extreme circumstances. Note that Jesus also spoke harshly at times, especially when dealing with the religious leaders who opposed him, see *Matthew 23*.

Friendly Toward the World, Hostile Toward God (4:1)

4 ¹From where come² wars and fights³ among you?⁴ They come from here, out of your pleasures battling in the parts of your bodies, don't they? ²You crave and don't have, you murder and pursue and aren't able to obtain, you fight and war. You don't have because of your not asking; you ask and don't receive because you ask for yourselves evilly, so that you might splurge on your pleasures.

⁴Adulteresses! You know that friendship toward the world is hostility toward God, don't you? So the person who desires to be friendly toward the world becomes hostile toward God. ⁵Or do you suppose that for no reason the Scripture says: The Spirit, whom he caused to dwell in us, longs enviously? ⁶Yet he gives greater grace. Therefore, it says,

“God opposes the haughty,
but he gives grace to the lowly.”⁵

James describes the disputes among the factions using bold, colorful language. He says that they were at war with and that they were murdering each other, playing on Jesus's teaching that anger and name-calling are like murder.⁶ James also calls them adulteresses, which looks back to the Old Testament. God compared Israel to an adulterous wife because they had turned away from him to idols—see *Hosea 2* for an example. The believers had devoted themselves to Jesus, but now they were giving themselves over to worldliness.

The problem was that they are giving in to sinful desires, especially for power and prestige. These desires either caused them to forget about God or to ask God for assistance in achieving their ungodly goals. Either way, God wouldn't help them.

1 That is, when the Judaizers first confronted Peter over Gentile converts. This led to the Jerusalem council.

2 Literally, *Whence wars and whence fights among you?*

3 Or, *quarrels and conflicts*. James seems to use these military terms for hyperbole's sake.

4 More literally, *Whence wars and whence battles among you?*

5 See *Proverbs 3:34*; James quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

6 *Matthew 5:21–22*

James

James tells them that they can't love the world and God; by choosing the world, they make themselves enemies of God.

In verse 5, James doesn't quote the Law of Moses; instead, he summarizes several places where God says that he is jealous and that he won't tolerate idolatry. He warns those who are striving for prestige that the Holy Spirit, whom God put in them, also longs for their devotion. The Greek word for envy always had a negative sense, adding to the ominous tone of this warning. Fortunately, God also gives grace. Those committing sin should stop being haughty and humble themselves.

⁷ So you must submit to God! You must oppose the Devil, and he will flee from you ⁸ You must draw near to God, and he will draw near to you! You must cleanse your hands, sinners, you must make your hearts holy,¹ double-minded, ⁹ you must become miserable, you must mourn, and you must wail! ¹⁰ You must humble yourselves before God, and he will exalt you!

James demands repentance in the strongest possible terms; his goals were:

- To make crystal clear that God does not tolerate maverick doctrine, factions, dissension, or talking badly about others
- To cause as many as possible of these teachers to repent
- To cause those who have followed these teachers and shared in their sin to pull back from them
- To cause the rest of the believers understand the seriousness of the situation

We shouldn't think that James spoke like this normally; Luke portrays him as calm and reasonable in strained situations—see Acts 15:13–29, 21:17–26. The circumstances were so bad that he felt that he must issue a powerful rebuke. He wanted to provide the wayward teachers and their followers every chance to repent, but he also wanted to stop their sin from spreading.

Don't Speak Badly of One Another (4:11)

¹¹ Brothers, you must not speak badly about one another. The one speaking badly of a brother or judging a brother speaks badly of the law and judges the law. If you_{sg} judge the law, you_{sg} are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² One is the Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy, but who are you_{sg}, Judge of Your Neighbor?²

After blasting the divisive teachers, James assumes a calm tone. He reminds all the believers not to slander each other. Many were caught up in the sins of the few, and James admonishes them to cool off and return to godly behavior.

He refers to Jesus' teachings about godly living as "the law"; he doesn't view them as suggestion but as commands. He says that the right attitude is to obey the law without sitting in

1 Something is holy when it is devoted to God and God alone.

2 The Greek grammar indicates that James uses this as a wry title.

James

judgment of others. James implies that judges put themselves above the law. Jesus is the Lawgiver and Judge; James pokes fun at the would-be judges.

Closing Remarks

Having finished with the false teachers, James finishes by discussing various topics.

Warnings to Merchants (4:13)

¹³Come now, those saying, “Today or tomorrow we’ll go into such and such a city, stay there for a year, do business and make a profit.” ¹⁴You who don’t know tomorrow’s happenings, what is your life? You are steam¹ that appears for a little while and then disappears. ¹⁵Instead you *ought* to say, “If the Lord wills, we too will live and do this and that.” ¹⁶But now you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is wicked. ¹⁷So, to the person knowing to do good and not doing it, to him, it is sin.

James starts a new section with “Come now!” instead of “My brothers.” He is addressing wealthy merchants who journey about and earn huge profits, and he makes clear that he isn’t impressed. He says that they are self-reliant and over-confident, planning business trips and assuming that all will go smoothly. James rebukes them because they act as if they don’t need God. Just like everyone else, they don’t know what will happen tomorrow, and, in God’s sight, their lives are like little clouds of steam coming from a boiling pot when one lifts its lid. James says that their boasting about all they will accomplish, without asking for God’s help in their journeys much less his guidance about their lives, reveals the arrogance in their hearts.

Verse 17 makes more sense with an illustration. Book, Chapter, and Verse was an evil practice among modern Christians that seemed to die out in the 1990s. Too often, a person receiving correction, instead of accepting the correction, that person would demand, “Book, Chapter, and Verse! Show me a verse in the Bible that says that!”

James had heard something similar to Book, Chapter, and Verse from many wealthy merchants. They looked down on the woodworker-become-leader; they would only accept a correction from him if it was clearly based on a well-known teaching of Jesus or the Law of Moses. James simply tells them that if they know it’s right, then they must accept it. Jesus need not have stated a rule, “Making plans without prayer is sin,” for it to be true.

Please note not that James *didn’t* intend to say, “Every time you think of some good thing you could do, you have to do it.” That would be like taking the Law of Moses and its deeds to an extreme.

Warnings to the Wealthy (5:1)

⁵ ¹Come now, the wealthy! You must wail, crying out because of your coming miseries! Your wealth has decayed, and your clothing has become moth-eaten! ³Your gold and silver have corroded,

¹ Or, *smoky vapor*. The Greek word means steam from a pot, or the smoke of a volcanic eruption.

James

and their corrosion will be a testimony against you and will eat your flesh with fire! You stored up treasure in the last days. ⁴Behold! The wages of the workers who have reaped your fields, having been stolen, cry out! And the outcry of the reapers has reached¹ the ears of the Lord of Hosts!² ⁵You lived for self-indulgence on the earth, and you lived in excessive luxury; you fattened your hearts for a day of slaughter!³ ⁶You condemned, you murdered the upright! They aren't opposing you!

James has just rebuked the wealthy merchants for their pride and arrogance; now, he condemns the aristocratic landowners. Given that he doesn't make any mention of repentance, he is very likely not talking to believers here. Instead, he condemns the people that the believers often bowed down to, envied, and even idolized.

Merchants could become wealthy, but landowners had true wealth and power. Slaves and hired hands worked their enormous estates while they lived in palaces in the cities and involved themselves in politics. Especially in Rome, the influx of money and slaves from the conquests of Greece, Carthage, and Egypt had led to extreme debauchery and immorality among the aristocracy. The Roman emperor Augustus had tried to outlaw the worst of it, but his laws failed. In the same way, the Sadducees and Chief Priests owned enormous estates in Galilee and lived in luxury in Jerusalem. James had no doubt witnessed hired hands going unpaid after working hard all day. In addition, he had seen the wealthy using the courts to bully poor people who got in their way.

James says that these wealthy aristocrats are fattening themselves even as the judgment day approaches. God sees their incredible selfishness and the injustices they commit, and he will judge them. Believers shouldn't respect or envy them; instead, believers should turn their heads in horror, knowing the condemnation that the aristocrats were bringing upon themselves.

Patience and Endurance (5:7)

⁷So brothers, you must have patience until the coming⁴ of the Lord. Behold! The vinedresser waits for the precious fruit of the earth, having patience with it until he receives the early and the later rains.⁵ ⁸You also must have patience, you must strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord is near.

1 Literally, *entered*.

2 Literally, *Lord Sabaoth*. *Sabaoth* is the Hebrew word for *hosts*, or *armies*. See *1 Samuel* 1:3, which has the first use of *Lord of Hosts* in the Old Testament.

3 Literally, *fed your hearts in connection with a day of slaughter*.

4 From the Greek word *parousía* we get *Parousia*, the *Coming of Jesus*.

5 The early rains came in the fall and the late rains in the spring. The early rains allowed for the planting of barley and wheat, and the late rains brought the crops to maturity for harvest. The barley harvest came in early spring and the wheat harvest in late spring. The grape harvest started in late spring and went through the summer, followed by the fig and olive harvest in late summer and fall.

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James calls the believers to have patience while they wait for the coming of Jesus. At the time, the Church believed that Jesus would come within their lifetimes to bring the world to an end. He would punish the wicked and save his people. The Romans destroying Jerusalem in 70 met this expectation of coming judgment, but the world didn't come to an end as many believers expected.

Jesus is quite capable of putting a stop to a hardship that we are experiencing without bringing about the end of the world. Sometimes, however, God uses that hardship to perfect our faith. We should patiently work with God, praying for wisdom, knowing that God will make good come out of even bad situations.

⁹Brothers, you must not moan¹ against one another, so that you aren't judged. Behold! The Judge stands at the gate!

Many believers, rather than having patience, took out their frustrations on each other. James tells them to stop, warning them that Jesus had little tolerance for believers who complain about other believers.

¹⁰Brothers, you must accept the example of the suffering and the patience of the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name. ¹¹Behold! Fortunate are those who endure! You have heard of Job's endurance and the outcome he saw from the Lord, because the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

Many of the Old Testament prophets suffered greatly because of their ministries; Jeremiah and Ezekiel stand out. They didn't live to see the fruit of their ministries, but their efforts made a huge difference in helping the Jews survive the Exile and recommit themselves to God.

James also brings up Job, whom God allowed to suffer in order to demonstrate to Satan that Job's upright behavior was real. Long story made short, Job suffered terribly, but God restored Job in the end so that Job has twice as many possessions as before. This is an excellent illustration for believers, who won't have mere possessions but eternal life.

Final Thoughts (5:12)

¹²My brothers, before anything else,² you must not swear an oath, neither by Heaven nor by the earth nor by anything else. For you, it must be, "Yes, yes" and "No, no," so that you don't fall under judgment.

James starts a new section containing a few bits of practical direction. He warns against swearing oaths; an oath is a vow made while calling upon something greater than oneself to back up one's words. This was a problem among Jews because of one of the Pharisees' Traditions. It said that an oath was binding only if it was made against something especially

1 The Greek word means *groan*, *sigh* as an expression of affliction or discontent. Here, James has in mind complaining or grumbling that isn't openly expressed.

2 Figuratively, *most importantly*.

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holy; otherwise, the oath meant nothing. This opened the door for a Jew to deceive another Jew who wasn't aware of the rules. Apparently, this was a significant issue, as *Matthew* brings it up twice—5:33–37, 23:16–22.

Generally, James tells believers to be trustworthy and to mean what they say. Those who use their words to deceive others will be subject to judgment.

¹³Is anyone among you suffering evil? He must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He must sing. ¹⁴Is anyone ailing among you? He must call the elders of the assembly,² and they must pray over him, anointing him with olive oil in the Lord's name. ¹⁵The faithful prayer will save³ the sick person, and the Lord will help him up. If he has committed any sins, they will be forgiven him.

James gives directions about how to behave in various circumstances, in particular, what to do if someone is sick. The person who was sick should call upon the elders to pray over them and anoint them with olive oil. Putting a small amount of olive oil on a sick person's head was a traditional healing practice. James focuses on the power of prayer, which will lead to God bringing healing.

Ancient peoples generally believed that illness was the result of the gods punishing a person who had angered them in some way. Jews believed that illness resulted from sin. James assures the believers that God, while healing the person, would also forgive any sins.

¹⁶You must confess your sins to one another, and you must pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a godly person works quite powerfully. ¹⁷Elijah was a person with the same weaknesses⁴ as us. He prayed a prayer so that it wouldn't rain, and it did not rain upon the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸Again he prayed a prayer, and the heavens yielded rain and the land produced its fruit.

James continues on the theme of prayer and healing. He tells the believers that, if they are sick, they should confess their sins to each other and then pray. Perhaps James is prescribing confession and prayer as a way of avoiding illness as well.

James then notes that prayer is powerful. In saying this, he doesn't mean that prayer has magical power in itself; instead, it calls upon God, who is able to do anything. He uses Elijah as an example, where Elijah called for a drought in Israel that lasted three and a half years because of King Ahab and his idolatrous wife, Jezebel. Elijah then called for a showdown between himself and Jezebel's prophets of Baal. God sent down fire from the heavens in answer to Elijah's prayer, which led the Israelites to believe in God, rather than Baal. After that, Elijah prayed privately, and the drought ended with a huge storm—see *1 Kings* 17–18.

2 Traditionally, *church*. The Greek word refers to the citizens of the city assembling to conduct the city's business.

3 That is, save him from the illness.

4 Or, *of the same nature*. The Greek word focuses on having the same weaknesses and desires.

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¹⁹My brothers, if someone among you strays from the truth and someone turns him back, ²⁰you must understand. The person who turns back a sinner from his straying path will save his soul from death and will cover up a multitude of sins.

James ends his letter abruptly with an encouraging observation. He notes that helping another believer who has strayed return to the narrow path saves their soul; their sins won't be held against them at Judgment.

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Additional Information

Bishops

Bishop comes from the Greek word *episkopē* which means *overseer*. From this word we get the name Episcopalian.

In the New Testament, *overseer* and *elder* seem to refer to the same role. However, early Church tradition clearly indicates that each city had one overseer, or bishop, who had authority over the elders of that city. The bishop of a large city, such as Jerusalem, Antioch, or Rome, had authority over the overseers in the neighboring cities. This leadership hierarchy provided the churches with unity and stability. The word *metropolis* comes from the Greek word *mother city*.

Tradition provides the names of the early bishops, starting with James. The following lists some of them and the dates that they likely took office.

- James, 31, Jerusalem
- Euodias, 53-54, Antioch
- Timothy, 56?, Ephesus
- Titus, 56?, Crete
- Linus, 68, Rome

From this list, we see that James was the only bishop appointed during the first 20 plus years of the Church; this likely includes the time at which he wrote his letter. As the bishop of Jerusalem, all the churches looked to him for guidance.

The First Twenty Years of the Church

Many Jews had journeyed from around the Roman Empire and beyond to Jerusalem for the Pentecost Feast in 30.¹ Some heard Peter's first sermon, became believers, and eventually returned home. During the following years, small churches grew around these early believers as they shared their faith with their fellow Jews.

During the first year or two of the Church, a Pharisee named Saul—or Paul, his Roman name—began to persecute the church. However, as Paul was traveling to Damascus to extend his persecution, Jesus met him, called him to repent, and appointed him as Apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul, however, met with little success sharing his new faith. Within three years he visited Jerusalem briefly, speaking only to Peter and James.² The Jews chased him out, and he

1 Acts 2:7–11. Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, and Arabia were all outside the Roman Empire at that time, but Jews had lived in those lands since the fall of Samaria around 721 BCE.

2 Galatians 1:18-19

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ended up returning to his hometown of Tarsus, northwest of Antioch, and remaining there for years.

Sometime in the middle to late 30s, Peter allowed Gentiles to become Christians without first requiring them to observe the Law of Moses; the first step of that process was circumcision.¹

However, this quickly exposed a faction that had formed in the church in Jerusalem. Some Pharisees had become believers,² and they insisted that Gentile believers must observe the Law of Moses. While they initially accepted Peter's decision, they didn't change their minds or follow Peter's example. We know them as the *Judaizers*, because they insisted that Gentiles become Jews before becoming Christians.

Early in 41, Herod Agrippa, whom the Roman emperor Claudius had just appointed king, came to Judea and persecuted the church in Jerusalem. He killed the Apostle James and arrested Peter, who escaped. This forced the Apostles to flee and to minister abroad, and it led the Apostle Matthew to write the first Gospel. Meanwhile, Barnabas built up the church in Antioch, a major city in the province of Syria, and the believers actively reached out to Gentiles. Barnabas brought the Apostle Paul to Antioch to mentor him.³

Around 45, Barnabas and Paul went to Jerusalem and spoke privately with James and the Apostles Peter and John. These leaders agreed that Barnabas and Paul should continue their work with Gentiles. Peter soon came to Antioch to encourage the Church. However, the Judaizers had become stronger, and they traveled to Antioch to oppose the work done by Barnabas and Paul, which led to open conflict.⁴

In 46, Barnabas and Paul left Antioch and traveled to Cyprus and then to the Roman province of Galatia, returning in 47.⁵ While in Galatia, they started new churches in four cities. Paul openly taught his doctrine of salvation by faith apart from observing of the Law.

Some Judaizers quickly followed after them, denounced Paul as a heretic, and attempted to force the Gentiles to observe the Law, starting with circumcision. Paul, fearful and angry, responded by writing *Galatians*, in which he denounced the Judaizers and reaffirmed his message.

We may assume that *Galatians* brought the conflict between Paul and the Judaizers to a head. It forced the church in Antioch to call for a formal meeting in Jerusalem to answer the question, "Must believers in Christ observe the Law of Moses?" In 48, James and the elders listened to Paul, Barnabas, and the Judaizers, as well as the Apostle Peter. James made a

1 Acts 10

2 Acts 15:5, 11:1-18

3 Acts 11:25

4 Galatians 2:1-14.

5 Acts 13-14

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decision favoring Paul against the Judaizers and sent out a letter to the churches that formally settled the debate. Faith in Christ, without observing the Law, was enough.¹

However, the Judaizers continued to oppose Paul and his teachings at least until 57, when Paul wrote *Romans*. Even as the Church resolved conflict with the Judaizers, a new fringe of teachers had begun to teach that only knowledge mattered, apart from one's actions.

¹ Acts 15:1-35