



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

A Review of James

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An expositor of my acquaintance once shared a practice he had adopted—one he learned from the example of an expositor of his acquaintance. Upon the completion of an expository series on a book or section of Scripture, he would do a summary sermon. In my experience, such summaries have taken different forms. For example, after studies of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) and the seven churches of Asia (Rev 1–3), I sandwiched interpretative readings of the text from a different translation between brief introductory and concluding remarks. For other series, I’ve organized my remarks around a review of the main ideas in the book.

Upon completing an expository series on James, I focused on two sections of the text that are representative of the book’s main theme (1.2–18; 3.13–4.10). In this essay, I will share the essence of that sermon.

General Observations

It is evident from the outset that James is especially concerned with how believers face trials. Immediately after the customary self-identification and salutation, he writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds” (Jas 1.2). His exhortation is striking, first, because it is realistic; James does not suggest what his readers might do *if* they should face trials; he tells them how to respond *when* (ὅταν, *hotan*) they faced them. But he also shows that trials are not merely neutral troubles; they also include the temptation to and commission of sin, whether it is our own (1.13–15) or that of others that affects us (1.9–11 [cf. 5.1–6]; 3.14; 4.1–2).

Thus, James is not concerned with trials for their own sake. Rather, he accentuates them because of the threat they pose to unwavering faith. As he continues in 1.2–4, he says that trials should be utilized to help develop “endurance” (v. 4 NET; “steadfastness,” ESV; “perseverance,” NIV; ὑπομονή, *hypomonē*). It’s important to remember that trials can help us build endurance because it is also possible for them to expose double-mindedness and wavering faith (1.6–8; 4.8). Indeed, James repeatedly emphasizes that, when handled poorly, trials will lead to behaviors that are the opposite of what should characterize enduring faith (1.13–15; 3.14, 16; 4.1–4).

It is because of his emphasis on these ideas that we are convinced that James’s primary theme is not trials, practical behavior, or even faith. Rather, his letter is about the *commitment* that leads to the practice of the faith wherein God’s people don’t waver, but live righteously and benefit from their trials—both those that are neutral and those that are sinister.

Two Ways—We Must Choose

Two times in the letter, James uses the word “double-minded” (δίψυχος, *dipsychos*), the only appearances of the word in the New Testament. In this, he stands firmly within the traditional teaching of Judaism, as seen in the Old Testament (cf. Deut 11.26; 30.15; Jer 21.8; Ps 1; Prov 2.1–4), intertestamental and Qumran writings (Sirach 21.10; *Testament of Asher* 1.3–5; 2 *Enoch* 30.15; 1QS [Manual of Discipline] 3.14–4.26), the ministry of Jesus (Matt 7.13–14; Luke 13.23–24), and finally the rabbinic writings (Mishnah *Aboth* 2.9) (cf. Bock 2002, 148–149; McCartney 2009, 73). James accepts that we can be enticed to do evil (see “desire,” ἐπιθυμία [*epithymia*] in 1.14–15, and the cognate verb ἐπιθυμέω [*epithymeō*] in 4.2), and that we must choose between devotion to God on the one hand and to the world on the other.

James 4.4 is, therefore, the letter’s key thematic statement, expressing the theme and point alluded to in other passages: “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” This verse, and those that immediately surround it, point to where the definitive either-or choice must be made. Fights and quarrels were plaguing the community because they were seeking worldly things and had not yielded to God (4.1–3, 5). Inferentially, their double-minded friendship with the world was traceable to pride (4.6) and a failure to draw near, cleanse their hands, and purify their hearts (4.7–8).

In 3.13–18, the passage just prior to 4.1–10, James shows that, ultimately, their choice of friendship was determined by the voice they chose to follow. On the one hand, “wisdom from above” required “meekness” (πραΰτης, *prautēs*) that is, submission (3.13), which would lead to behavioral results including purity, peaceableness, gentleness, reasonableness, showing mercy, being fruitful, impartiality, and sincerity (vv. 15, 17). On the other hand, the anti-wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual, [and] demonic” engenders jealousy, selfish ambition, boasting, falsehood, disorder and every evil practice (vv. 14, 16). Only the “wisdom from above” will yield the intended “harvest of righteousness” (v. 18).

Chapter 3 is not the first time we see these ideas in James, however. It’s an elaboration on what he introduced in chapter 1 where he points to “wisdom” as the way to correctly confront trials and

the only appropriate response to God, who gives without reservation (1.5–8). The one who doesn't blame God or give in to his personal desires, but instead submits to God's wisdom, will experience blessedness and can expect to receive "the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him" (1.12, 13–15).

We must understand the teaching in James 1.9–11, 16–18 in light of these ideas. To take verses 16–18 first, James tells his readers to not be deceived (*πλανῶμαι*, *planaō*; v. 16; cf. 5.20) by the world's enticing bait (cf. 1.14–15). Instead, they are to remember that God, who is always the same, gives nothing but good and perfect (*τέλειος*, *teleios*) gifts (v. 17). That assurance about his character and its good outcome for us (v. 18) is what will motivate the submission needed for unwavering faith and assure our friendship with God. That submission will be demonstrated by our response to "the implanted word which is able to save your souls" (vv. 19–21).

James 1.9–11 introduces the temptation to trust in worldly riches, an aspect of making the choice for or against God that James elaborates and applies throughout the remainder of the letter as, for example, in his denunciation of favoritism in the assembly (2.1–13), neglecting the needy (2.14–17), doing business as if God does not matter (4.13–17), and succumbing to the temptation to give in to the rich landowners instead of waiting for the Lord in faith (5.1–11). Many find James's repetition of this theme uncomfortable. But, as 1.9–11 shows, it is necessary, for the problem is not per se in being rich or having things, but in being devoted to things that do not ultimately last. The solution is, again, to humbly surrender, as the exemplary poor man did.

This Is Urgent!

This, then, is what James is about: Will we be unwavering in our determination to be friends of God, demonstrating our commitment by submission to his will? Or will we compromise and be a friend of the world? (Significantly, this letter never envisions anyone among its readers who was not at least nominally involved with the community of faith.)

For James, this is the most urgent matter, a point which is reinforced by one other distinctive characteristic of this letter: It contains "more imperative verbs per word ... than in any other NT book" (Moo 2000, 249), 54 in 108 verses (fifteen percent of the letter's 358 verbs). Twenty-one of the imperatives are in 1.2–18 and 3.13–4.10. He begins the letter, and each sub-section in 1.2–18, with one of them (vv. 2, 5, 9, 13, 16). He uses thirteen of them in 3.13–4.10 (ten in 4.7–10). This commanding language reinforces the urgency required in the definitive either-or choice we are called to make. Unwavering faith is not just a good idea; it's a matter of spiritual life and death (cf. 2.26).

Works Cited

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An Additional Thought on James

“If James has a distinctive viewpoint [from Paul], it is his insistence that faith and actions are inseparable. If we take the body/spirit analogy seriously (2:26), his point is not that faith gives life to actions, but that actions enliven faith. Faith may define actions, even give them shape. Feeding and clothing the poor may be charitable deeds, but when they are done in the name of Christ, they are more than acts of charity; they are actions of faith. James cannot separate faith and actions any more than he can conceive of inhaling without exhaling. Or, to frame his theological viewpoint in terms of Gen 15:6, righteousness for James has an inescapably practical dimension—righteousness can only be lived; theoretical righteousness is an oxymoron.”

~ Carl R. Holladay. 2005. *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ*. Abingdon Press, 475

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