



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Always Steadfast

James 1:2-25

David Anguish

### *Introduction*

1. As a lifelong follower of our country's major sports, I am exasperated by a big part of the media's coverage of those events. The Super Bowl best illustrates it, but is not unique: Analysts spend hours telling us what we'll see. Other analysts tell us what we are seeing. Then, they come together to tell us what we saw.
2. In response, I do my best to find out what time the big game actually starts and tune in then.
3. But, there's a reason I can do that. Because I keep up with the sports via news reports and watching at least some games along the way, I come to the championship games with at least some of the perspective the pre-game shows are (in theory) designed to give.<sup>1</sup>
4. Perspective helps us make sense of an activity or event. We need it in Bible study, too. We get more from a Bible book if we have a sense of the writer's aim. Just by reading all the way through a book before analyzing it in detail, we'll understand it better.
5. Which brings us to James. What is his argument? Does he even make one? Students have long noted how he moves from subject to subject, and sometimes comes back. Is this just a random collection of exhortations or is there more here than first appears?

### *Body*

- I. Of Structure and Theme.
  - A. To better see why this question is asked, look at the different themes he addresses.
    1. In chapters 2-5, we can identify twelve different sections and topics.
      - a) The sin of partiality (2:1-13).
      - b) Faith and works (2:14-26).
      - c) Controlling the tongue (3:1-12).
      - d) True and false wisdom (3:13-18).
      - e) Strife and double-mindedness, along with problems caused by uncontrolled tongues in people guided by worldly wisdom (4:1-10).

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<sup>1</sup> We do this with other interests, too. People attending a play or concert typically do not go in "blind" (a play program will often explain the story/setting). Around every Presidential speech – on any network – we see the same three-step process I described above. Those who can skip the pre- and post-speech analysis and still have a decent grasp of the content and arguments have probably watched and read a good bit on their own.

- f) A pronouncement against judging (4:11-12).
  - g) Denunciation of arrogant traders (4:13-17).
  - h) Denunciation of rich landowners (5:1-6).
  - i) A call for patience until the Lord comes (5:7-11).
  - j) Condemnation of swearing (5:12).
  - k) Miscellaneous examples showing the value of prayer (5:13-18).
  - l) A call to win back those who wander (5:19-20).
2. At least chapters 2-5 contain several longer sections where the themes are elaborated as James moves from subject to subject; not so in chapter 1.
- a) Being joyful when meeting trials (1:2-4).
  - b) Praying for wisdom (1:5).
  - c) Warning against wavering in double-mindedness (1:6-8).
  - d) Commendation of the lowly brother and warning to the rich (1:9-11).
  - e) A blessing on the one who is steadfast in trials (1:12).
  - f) Explanation of the correct source of temptation, lust and sin (1:13-15).
  - g) A call for a correct, undeceived view of God (1:16-18).
  - h) Warning about anger and a call to replace wickedness with meek acceptance of the word (1:19-21).
  - i) A call to be doers (1:22-25).
  - j) Defining religion (1:26-27).
- B. No wonder crafting an outline is such a challenge.
1. Some give up, seeing James as “a ‘storehouse’ (Dibelius and Greeven 1975:11), into which all kinds of diverse materials have been gathered, so that readers can help themselves to whatever might be useful to them for their own purposes.”<sup>2</sup>
  2. We understand their frustration, but find more structure than that in James.
    - a) But, we must let James define it, not impose something on him.
      - (1) In the West, we expect writings to make a case sequentially, in linear fashion, driving toward a particular point.
      - (2) We may even be influenced by Paul’s letters, which typically argue in a more linear fashion.
    - b) But, what if James is using a different style?
      - (1) Do you remember the first *Karate Kid* movie?
        - (a) Daniel wants to learn karate, but Mr. Miyagi makes him wash and wax the car: “Wax on, right hand. Wax off, left hand. Wax on, wax off. Breathe in through nose, out the mouth. Wax on, wax off. Don’t forget to breathe, very important.”<sup>3</sup>
        - (b) Daniel doesn’t see it, but Mr. Miyagi was already teaching him karate.
    - c) What if James is doing something similar?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage*, 61.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087538/quotes>. Accessed March 4, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> From a Palestinian Jewish author, especially one with a Galilean Jewish background, “we might expect something unlike typical Greek (or Western) linear letter structures...” (Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 62). Furthermore, Jewish letters of this type from the period — from a Palestinian teacher to Diaspora Jews — often offered a series of instructions for preserving faithfulness to Jewish ways in an antagonistic culture (see McCartney, 58)

3. In fact, James employs a loose structure that cyclically touches on his different subjects to illustrate the theme that is common to all.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Overview of Chapter 1: Are We Consistent in Our Faith Commitment to God?

### A. Analysis of the opening and closing verses of the two sections in 1:2-25.<sup>6</sup>

1. Some divide it differently, but there is a repetition of themes here; we see it well when we put vv. 2-4 and 12 side by side where we see the following prominently featured in both: “trials,” “testing,” and “steadfastness.”
2. Now, notice some ideas that are repeated in different ways.<sup>7</sup>
  - a) There is the idea of productivity.
    - (1) Verses 3 and 4 refer to “working” faith (v 3: “produces” - ESV) and to steadfastness having its perfect “work” (v 4: “full effect” - ESV).
    - (2) Verse 12 puts the same idea in terms of the reward given “to those who love him” (cf. 2:5, 8).
  - b) There is the idea of being rewarded / recognized for steadfast faith.
    - (1) In v. 4, the goal is to “be perfect and complete.”
    - (2) In v. 12, he “who remains steadfast” will receive “the crown of life.”
3. There are also ties between 2-4, 12 and the close of the section in vv 22-25.
  - a) “Perfect” (4) refers to the “the law” the doer of the word is to keep (25).
  - b) ESV uses “perseveres” in v 25; this is not the same as “steadfast” in vv 2-4, 12, but is a word that expresses roughly the same idea (NASB has “abides”; NIV, following KJV / ASV, has “continues”).
  - c) The reward for doing the steadfast life is again being “blessed” (12, 25).

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<sup>5</sup> A theme he holds together in a loose chiasmic arrangement. See McCartney, especially 62-63; also Bauckham, 66-67, 72-73. A “chiasm” in this sense refers to a rhetorical device in which the order of themes presented in the first part of a literary segment is reversed in the second part, in an ABC-CBA pattern. About this device, especially as it is used in developing the themes introduced in chapter 1 in chapters 2-5, Bauckham writes: “This is a roughly chiasmic structure which gives some sense of returning to the themes with which the work started as one nears the end of the work. But this pattern applies only very broadly: there are many correspondences which do not fit that chiasmic pattern” (Bauckham, 72).

We should also note the presence of certain “markers” that suggest James was structuring his epistle, especially James’s use of the vocative “brothers” (15 times in all) and certain proverbial statements that appear along the way. See McCartney, 63ff., and Bauckham, 64ff. We should note, however, that James sometimes links his sections with the repetition of a key word or idea (e.g., “lack” in 1:4-5), so the proverbial statements should also be considered loose markers.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Davids has perhaps the most developed “double-opening” hypothesis for chapter 1. See his *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, 22-28. McCartney, 59-60, grants that this theory is “promising” and even that chapter 1 does repeat its themes twice, but finds the questions it raises too challenging to accept Davids’s view completely.

Regarding the break I’m making after verse 25, most commentators include 1:26-27 with the double-introduction of the book’s themes. I do not completely disagree, but given the first major subject (partiality against society’s outcasts) to which James turns in chapter 2, verses 26-27 seem to me to be something of a bridge text from the introduction to the rest of the writing. Actually, 1:19-27 might be seen as a transition passage. To some extent, I am following Robert W. Wall here. He sees 1:19-21, and especially 19, as setting out the major themes for the rest of the writing’s direction to the community of the wise: quick to hear (1:22-2:26), slow to speak (3:1-18), and slow to anger (4:1-5:6). Like all attempts to outline or find a linear structure in James, his is not without problems. But, it does offer a fresh way to look at the writing that I think has some merit. His comments appear in his *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James*, 34-38, and are essentially repeated in his article, “James, Epistle of,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, 557-559.

<sup>7</sup> One thing to keep in mind as we read James is that he loves synonyms.

- d) Finally, while the word “work” (ESV : “acts”) is repeated (v 25), the synonym “do” is more prominent (vv 22, 23, 25).
- 4. The theme that emerges in these verses: doing a life that shows a complete and consistent loyalty of faith.
- B. The rest of the chapter illustrates how to and not to do steadfast faith.
  - 1. Positively, two things are commended.
    - a) Being steadfast for God, no matter what (2-4, 19-25; see 4:4-8).
    - b) Depending only on God for direction and blessing (5, 17-18).
  - 2. Negatively, two things are to be avoided.
    - a) Wavering (better than “doubting”) between loyalty and disloyalty; this stems from a wrong view of God (6-7, 16).
    - b) Being of two minds where commitment is concerned, seen in the temptation to be overly enamored with things that do not last and giving in to our evil desires (8-10, 13-15).
- C. Here, then, is James in a nutshell.
  - 1. How we treat people, especially society’s have-nots (2:1-17; 5:1-6), how we relate with our fellow believers and what drives those interactions (3:1-4:12), our priorities generally (4:13-5:6), and whether we’ll remain patient as we wait for the Lord’s coming (5:7-11) will always depend on and exemplify our seriousness in steadfastness to the faith.
  - 2. That is the point undergirding every subject in the epistle.

### *Conclusion*

- 1. Having begun with an illustration from sports, I’ll close with one. Let me tell you the biggest reason I was no more successful as a baseball player than I was.
  - a. It wasn’t speed; I was pretty quick back in the day.
  - b. It wasn’t defensive ability; I could catch the ball and had a decent, accurate arm.
  - c. It was my inability to consistently do what my dad (and an uncle or two) kept repeating from the earliest games he played with me: “keep your eye on the ball.”
  - d. If I did that, I could hit the ball. I just didn’t do it steadfastly.
- 2. Pretty simple, but then the most important things in life often are. James is like that. He calls us to have the kind of steadfast faith that always depends on God, makes his priorities ours, and consistently does what we know to do.
- 3. We should think about that as we decide our response during our song and after we leave.

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*www.davidanguish.com*