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# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

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## A Humble Servant

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In an article on why so many young people are leaving the Christian faith, Drew Dyck included the explanation given by one young man to justify his departure to Wicca.

Ultimately why I left is that the Christian God demands that you submit to his will. In Wicca, it's just the other way around. Your will is paramount. We believe in gods and goddesses, but the deities we choose to serve are based on our wills (Dyck 2010).

In a world of double-speak and excuses, his candor is refreshing. And his assessment of what “the Christian God demands” is correct. Christian faith does call for submission to God’s will. Jesus said as much:

Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great” (Luke 6.46-49; cf. Matt 7.21-27; John 14.15; 15.14).

But while emphasizing this reality, it is important to also say that God does not use his power like a despot to force us to obey him. He wants us to be humble, a submission that entails recognition of his rightful sovereignty wherein we listen to his wisdom and respond to his love, not

merely capitulate to overwhelming force. Humility also entails acknowledging our failures and need for God and then reorienting our lives to follow the right path on which he directs us. Humble people accept that God tells us how to live because he wants things to go well with us (cf. Deut 4.40; 5.16; 6.3; et.al.). They also understand that the Lord's commands show compatible sides of his love: his desire to protect us from what will harm us; and his interest in providing what is best for us. In Jesus' words, he wants us to "have life, and have it to the full" (John 10.10 NIV).

James's letter begins with a demonstration of humility. He identified himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Jas 1.1). But more significant, perhaps, is what he did not include. In today's terms, as Jesus' physical brother who, by the mid-first century, was recognized as the prominent leader in the original Jerusalem church, we would say James was "connected." So, we would not have been surprised had he written a name-dropping opening something like the following: "James the Just, from the sacred womb of Mary, congenital sibling of Christ his brother, confidant of the Messiah" (Hughes 1991, 17).

Instead, we find the unadorned phrasing of James 1.1. James saw himself as merely a *δοῦλος* (*doulos*), a "servant," "slave" (NET), or "bond-servant" (NASB) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Bible students, we're not surprised to see the word "servant," but we do need to take care to understand it as people in James's world would have. As Dan McCartney explains,

The English word *servant* is sometimes used [today] to describe even executives and rulers (who refer to themselves as "public servants"), but the social class of *δοῦλοι* typically had only slightly more self-determination than slaves of recent centuries (McCartney 2009, 78 n. 3).

In other words, in referring to himself as a *doulos* James used one of his world's most self-effacing words. And the demands we read in his letter, grounded as they are in frequent echoes of Jesus' teaching, must be understood against the backdrop of that humility.<sup>1</sup>

Broadly speaking, his humility is evident in two ways. First, he said he was a *doulos* "of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Jas 1.1). It is important to remember that "when a Jew put the words 'God' and 'Lord' together, the Lord in view could only be God (cf. 1:7, where 'from the Lord' means 'from God')" (McCartney 2009, 78). Second, James said Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the "Christ." He saw Jesus as the anointed deliverer-king the Jews had been awaiting, exalted to a position of prominence that can only be described with the glorious title "Lord."

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<sup>1</sup> Among the notable features of James is the echo of Jesus' teaching in the letter. McCartney for example, lists 21 points of correspondence between the Sermon on the Mount/Plain and James (see e.g., Jas 5.12 = Matt 5.34-35, 37). He also notes that James's teaching "bears ... close affinity" to the wisdom teaching of Jesus found in the gospels (McCartney 2009, 50-51).

Because James saw himself as a *doulos* of God and the Lord Jesus he could credibly call on his readers to submit to God's will. Much of his letter's body is bracketed by the repeated uses of the Greek noun and cognate verb "humble" (ταπεινός, *tapeinos*; ταπεινώω, *tapeinoō*; 1.9; 4.6, 10). He also urged his readers to show "meekness" (πραΰτης, *prautēs*), that is, to yield their strength to God's control (1.21; 3.13). He told them that when they faced trials, they were not to try to tough it out with self-reliance, but instead "ask God" for the "wisdom" that comes "from above" (1.5; 3.17). He specified what God-dependence should look like in action by contrasting it with what it should not be, namely, the bitter attitudes and divisive behaviors that were causing quarrels and fights among his readers (4.1-3). Those attitudes resulted from temptations to which they had surrendered when they were "lured and enticed by [their] own desire" (1.14; cf. 3.15-16). The way to overcome temptations and their consequent sins was, again, to submit; they needed to humble themselves by cleansing their hands, purifying their hearts, and drawing near to God (4.1-3, 6-8, 10).

Is such a life demanding? Yes. But as James also emphasized with another of his major themes, it is also wise. James took the Lord Jesus at his word, showing by his actions and message that he understood that "whoever would be great among you must be your servant (διάκονος, *diakonos*), and whoever would be first among you must be your slave (*doulos*)" (Matt 20.26b-27).

And so it remains.

## Works Cited

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' July 11, 2023"*

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