

James, First, Second, and Third John

Kelly Anderson
and Daniel Keating



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Most Reverend Earl Boyea, Bishop of Lansing
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Editors' Preface

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking

through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written”—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the commentary notes and explains the most important differences between the NABRE and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV). Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information, and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe,

signifying the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the †grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

Maps and a glossary are included in each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of suggested resources, an index of pastoral topics, and an index of sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson
Mary Healy
Kevin Perrotta

Note to Readers

The New American Bible, Revised Edition differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NABRE is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NABRE is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross-references given in the commentary.

Abbreviations

†	Indicates that a definition of the term appears in the glossary
//	Indicates where the same episode occurs in two or more Gospels
AB	Anchor Bible
ACCS 11	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 11, <i>James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude</i> , edited by Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000)
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
c.	circa
Catechism	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> , 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003)
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
d.	died
DS	H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, <i>Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum</i> . 33rd ed. (Barcelona: Herder, 1965)
DSBS	Daily Study Bible Series
ESV	English Standard Version
FC	Fathers of the Church
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ISB	Ignatius Study Bible
KJV	King James Version
Lectionary	<i>The Lectionary for Mass</i> (1998/2002 USA edition)
LXX	Septuagint
NAB	New American Bible
NABRE	New American Bible (Revised Edition, 2011)
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NPNF ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , First Series

Abbreviations

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OWC	Oxford World's Classics
PL	Patrologia Latina [= <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina</i>], edited by J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris, 1844–64)
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
SP	Sacra Pagina
TWOT	R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr., and B. K. Waltke, <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> , 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980)
v(v).	verse(s)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WSA	The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century

Books of the Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Tob	Tobit	Ezek	Ezekiel
Exod	Exodus	Jdt	Judith	Dan	Daniel
Lev	Leviticus	Esther	Esther	Hosea	Hosea
Num	Numbers	1 Macc	1 Maccabees	Joel	Joel
Deut	Deuteronomy	2 Macc	2 Maccabees	Amos	Amos
Josh	Joshua	Job	Job	Obad	Obadiah
Judg	Judges	Ps(s)	Psalms(s)	Jon	Jonah
Ruth	Ruth	Prov	Proverbs	Mic	Micah
1 Sam	1 Samuel	Eccles	Ecclesiastes	Nah	Nahum
2 Sam	2 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab	Habakkuk
1 Kings	1 Kings	Wis	Wisdom	Zeph	Zephaniah
2 Kings	2 Kings	Sir	Sirach	Hag	Haggai
1 Chron	1 Chronicles	Isa	Isaiah	Zech	Zechariah
2 Chron	2 Chronicles	Jer	Jeremiah	Mal	Malachi
Ezra	Ezra	Lam	Lamentations		
Neh	Nehemiah	Bar	Baruch		

Books of the New Testament

Matt	Matthew	Eph	Ephesians	Heb	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col	Colossians	1 Pet	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom	Romans	1 Tim	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor	1 Corinthians	2 Tim	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal	Galatians	Philem	Philemon	Rev	Revelation

Introduction to James

The brilliance of the Letter of James lies in its understanding of faith, the human person, and salvation. While at first glance the letter seems to contain simply a collection of counsels and exhortations about proper conduct, its message is actually much more profound. James holds that a person's change of behavior begins with a change of heart. Because inner attitudes affect outward behaviors, he probes the interiority of the person, explaining where evil tendencies arise, how to fight them, how to progress along the way to maturity, how to tell whether one is progressing or regressing, and, ultimately, how salvation is attained. Although the letter is not a systematic theological treatise, James manifests a beautiful understanding of the Christian life and provides a strong support for all those limping painfully along the path of perfection.

Who Is James?

The name "James" is the English rendering of the Greek *Iakōbos*, itself a Greek rendering of the Hebrew *Yaaqob*, which is translated as "Jacob" in English versions of the Old Testament. Jacob was the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel, and his name was common among Jews in the first century. Besides giving his name, the author of this letter identifies himself only as "a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).¹ The lack of further introduction suggests that James is already well known to his readers. It also might indicate that he is an authoritative figure, since Church leaders like Peter, Paul, and Jude also refer

1. The Greek term *doulos* can mean either "slave" or "servant." Most English translations, such as the NRSV, NJB, and NIV, translate *doulos* in James 1:1 as "servant," but the NABRE translates it as "slave."

to themselves as slaves of Jesus Christ, and the Old Testament refers to Moses as a slave (in most translations, servant) of God.

Three important figures bear the name “James” in the New Testament, two of whom were among the original twelve apostles. The first, traditionally called James the Greater, was a son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John (Matt 10:2; Mark 1:19–20). He was beheaded around AD 44 by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1–2) and therefore probably died too early to have written the letter. The second, traditionally called James the Lesser, is referred to as the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), but the New Testament says nothing more about him. The third James, who became a major leader of the church in Jerusalem, is referred to by Paul as “the brother of the Lord” and a “pillar” of the Jerusalem church (Gal 1:19; 2:9). Later writers, including the Church historian Eusebius (263–339), refer to him as the first [†]bishop of Jerusalem.² This James has traditionally been considered the author of our letter.

Saint Jerome took the view that the apostle James the son of Alphaeus was the same person as James the brother of the Lord. Because of the respect accorded Jerome, this identification became a common though not authoritative opinion in the Western Church. However, today most scholars do not identify James the brother of the Lord with James the son of Alphaeus on account of the lack of evidence in the New Testament and other early Christian sources.³

A number of scholars have questioned the traditional attribution of the letter to James the brother of the Lord and have proposed that the epistle was written pseudonymously in the late first or even second century by an admirer



Figure 1. A nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox icon of James the Just

2. *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.2.

3. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 93.

of James who wished to perpetuate his teaching.⁴ This position is suggested for three reasons. First, the slow pace at which the Church accepted this book as part of the †canon of Scripture implies that there were doubts regarding its authorship. The Letter of James is not included in the Muratorian Canon (a list of approved books, c. 170), it is not mentioned by name by ecclesiastical writers before Origen, and its canonical status is described as disputed in the early fourth century by Eusebius.⁵ Second, some scholars have doubted that a Galilean peasant could write such polished, elegant Greek as is found in James. Third, some have doubted whether enough time had passed before AD 62, when James was martyred, for a letter to have been written in response to Paul's teaching about faith and works.⁶

Recent commentaries, however, have generally moved away from the view that James is a pseudonymous composition. Some suggest that the letter presents the oral teaching of James the Lord's brother, written down by a disciple and circulated as a letter.⁷ Others find no compelling reason to reject the tradition that the letter was actually written by James. The late acceptance into the New Testament canon could be due to the mistrust of Jewish Christianity that characterized the predominantly Gentile Church during the second to fourth centuries. As to the letter's polished language, the example of the Jewish historian Josephus shows that a first-century Jew could learn to write excellent Greek; even a humble background in Galilee would not necessarily exclude a gifted person from acquiring facility in that language. Finally, it is quite likely that an important figure like James would have made use of an amanuensis (a writing assistant), which could likewise account for the letter's fine Greek style. As regards the date of James in relation to Paul's writing on faith and works, Galatians is generally dated in the early to mid-fifties, which would have allowed adequate time for James to have responded to problematic interpretations of Paul before his death in AD 62. Also, the letter appears to have been written earlier than the advocates of pseudonymous authorship suggest, since it shows no knowledge of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in AD 70, nor does it mention the more highly developed Church

4. See Martin Dibelius, *James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 17–21; Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 388; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 741–42.

5. *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.3

6. J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 18.

7. Ralph P. Martin, *James*, WBC 48 (Waco: Word, 1988), lxxvi–lxxvii; Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, SP 14 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 24–25.

structure depicted in 1 Timothy and Titus. The letter also contains references to Jesus' ethical teaching without using the formulations found in the Synoptic Gospels, suggesting that James may have written prior to the solidifying of the tradition in written form.

What do we know about James the brother of Jesus? There are a few indications in the Gospels that Jesus' relatives did not initially accept him as the †Messiah (Mark 3:20–21; 6:1–4; John 7:5), although nothing explicit is said about James in this regard. James later became the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 21:18; Gal 2:9). His most important contribution recorded in the New Testament was his leading role at the Council of Jerusalem, where he taught that converted †Gentiles need not follow the regulations of the Mosaic law (†Torah) and proposed instead that they merely abstain from eating meat of animals offered to idols, from unlawful marriages, from the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood (Acts 15:13–21).

Paul mentions James in both Galatians and 1 Corinthians. In Gal 1:19 Paul recounts his journey to meet Peter, noting, "I did not see any other of the apostles, only James the brother of the Lord," suggesting that Paul regarded James as an apostle, although the Greek text here is ambiguous.⁸ Paul considered James one of the "pillars" of the church in Jerusalem (Gal 2:9) and presented his preaching of the †gospel to him, along with Peter and John, seeking their confirmation (Gal 2:2–6). In 1 Cor 15:3–7, Paul lists James alongside those to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared, indicating his importance to the first generation of Christians.

In the early Church, Origen (d. 253), Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), and Jerome (d. 420) referred to him as "James the Just," a testimony to his righteous and devout conduct.⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea recounts a tradition from the writing of the chronicler Hegesippus (110–80) regarding James's holiness and solicitude for his flock:

He was in the habit of entering alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel, in consequence of his constantly bending them in his worship of God, and asking forgiveness for the people.¹⁰

Two important accounts of the martyrdom of James at the hands of Jewish authorities in Jerusalem have come down to us. The Jewish historian Josephus

8. See Johnson, *Letter of James*, 94.

9. Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.47; Clement, quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1.4; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 2.1, 3.

10. *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.6.

(d. AD 100) recounts that James was put to death in AD 62 under the high priest Ananus II, a Sadducee, whom Josephus describes as arrogant and harsh in his judgments.

Ananus saw he had the opportunity to act since Festus [the Roman prefect] was now dead and Albinus [Festus's replacement] was but upon the road. So he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others . . . ; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.¹¹

Some of the leading Jewish citizens of Jerusalem objected to the killing of James and appealed against Ananus to Albinus on his arrival. The result, Josephus reports, was that King Agrippa removed Ananus from his post as high priest after he had held that position for only three months.¹²

Eusebius provides a longer account:

After Paul, in consequence of his appeal to Caesar, had been sent to Rome by Festus, the Jews, being frustrated in their hope of entrapping him by the snares which they had laid for him, turned against James, the brother of the Lord, to whom the episcopal seat at Jerusalem had been entrusted by the apostles. The following daring measures were undertaken by them against him. Leading him into their midst they demanded of him that he should renounce faith in Christ in the presence of all the people. But, contrary to the opinion of all, with a clear voice, and with greater boldness than they had anticipated, he spoke out before the whole multitude and confessed that our Savior and Lord Jesus is the Son of God. But they were unable to bear longer the testimony of the man who, on account of the excellence of ascetic virtue and of piety which he exhibited in his life, was esteemed by all as the most just of men, and consequently they slew him.¹³

Audience

James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes in the dispersion” (1:1). “Twelve tribes” seems to indicate those Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah and were dispersed or scattered away from Palestine, the promised land. But Gentile Christians also considered themselves to be part of the renewed Israel, and

11. *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200.

12. *Jewish Antiquities* 20.201–3.

13. *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.1–2. Although Eusebius's version simply says that “the Jews” turned against James, Josephus's account indicates that many leading Jews in Jerusalem were unhappy enough about Ananus's execution of James to appeal successfully for his removal.

1 Peter, which is written to Gentile Christians, begins “to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion” (1:1). Thus the Letter of James could be addressed to either Jewish or Gentile Christians. But given that the letter does not address the vices that Jews typically associated with Gentiles (idolatry, sexual promiscuity) and focuses attention on the Mosaic law and refers to the community as a “synagogue” (2:2 [literal translation]), it is more likely that the letter was written to Jewish Christians.¹⁴ What is most probable is that James the Just, bishop of Jerusalem, heard of problems in the Jewish Christian communities around the Mediterranean and sent a circular letter to these churches to encourage them to amend their ways and persevere in the midst of trials.

James addresses his audience as “brothers” and even “beloved brothers,” but he has no qualms about sternly rebuking them, using words such as “ignoramus,” “adulterers,” and “sinners.” He consistently uses the second personal plural “you.” When addressing the problem of favoritism, he says, “If a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into *your* assembly . . .” (2:2); on the necessity of works he says, “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and *one of you* says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well’ . . .” (2:15–16). Admonishing them for factions and divisions, he asks, “Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among *you* come from?” (4:1).¹⁵ James’s pattern of addressing his readers as “brothers,” coupled with his honest, straightforward criticism, indicates his concern for the holiness and salvation of his audience. The letter is not a generic writing on holiness but a letter written by a pastor-teacher who is very aware of the concrete problems in the Christian communities to which he is writing.

It seems that the intended readers of James are struggling with both internal divisions and external pressure. The first verses of the letter indicate that they are undergoing temptations and trials (1:2–5). While this might refer to persecutions by outsiders, James also makes it clear that there are problems within the community, since he chastises his readers for flapping their tongues, showing favoritism toward the rich, and allowing factions to develop. But the latter part of the letter also suggests that these Christians are suffering oppression at the hand of the rich and powerful. In reference to these people, James adopts the tone of the Old Testament prophets who announced judgment, warning the rich of their impending condemnation because they are oppressing the righteous poor (5:1–6). In response to the painful situations caused by the Christians’ own lack of faith and charity, James counsels deeper conversion by repentance

14. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 742.

15. See Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 32.

and humble reception of the word that has been planted in them. In response to oppression at the hands of rich and powerful outsiders, James counsels patient perseverance and prayer, and he reminds his audience of the fate of the wicked.

Genre

Scholars debate whether the Letter of James can rightly be called a letter since it lacks some typical characteristics of letters at that time, such as a prayer-wish at the beginning, a personal greeting at the end, and the names of at least some of his addressees. Some suggest that the letter originally circulated as a written sermon and was later put into the form of a letter by the addition of an opening greeting.¹⁶ However, the presence of the standard Greek salutation in 1:1, “greetings” (*chairein*), and the concluding exhortation to call a brother or sister back from sin, without any final greeting, suggest that the work was always a letter. This ending, which seems strange to us, is quite similar to the endings of 1 John and Jude. The First Letter of John finishes by exhorting the community to pray for sinners, and the Letter of Jude challenges readers to act on behalf of an erring brother or sister, indicating that early Christians had an alternative way of concluding letters that was different from that of Paul.¹⁷ Finally, the letter’s lack of personal greetings of individuals by name is similar to other “diaspora letters.” These were letters that were sent from Judea by someone of recognized authority for circulation among Jews living outside the land of Israel and that offered advice on how to maintain integrity as the people of God in a foreign land.¹⁸ If, as seems likely, James’s letter was meant to serve the needs of Jewish Christians in a variety of places, it is perfectly natural that no individuals are singled out for a personal greeting.

Literary Features

James is a master teacher and uses a variety of literary techniques to keep his readers’ attention and make them reflect more deeply. He likes paradoxes, teaching that those suffering temptations should rejoice (1:2) and that the poor should exult in their high standing while the rich should boast of their lowliness (1:9–10). James employs a lively array of similes and metaphors drawn from ordinary life, including the waves of the sea (1:6); sun, grass, and flowers

16. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 726.

17. Hartin, *James*, 286.

18. McCartney (*James*, 39) points out other diaspora letters in 2 Macc 1:1–2:18; Bar 6; Acts 15:23–29.

(1:10–11); mirrors (1:23); dead bodies (2:26); horses and ships (3:3–4); fire (3:5–6); fresh and salty water (3:11); and corroded metal (5:3). These techniques engage readers and allow them to enter more fully into what is being said.

Since James is written as a letter of exhortation, it is natural that imperative verbs predominate. In 108 verses there are some 59 imperatives, more than in any other book. These usually are followed by reasons why the instructions should be followed.¹⁹ James's sentences usually are short, producing a staccato rhythm and a sober tone.

Theological Themes

Faith, Works, and the Law

A predominant theme of this letter is the strict relationship between faith and works (especially 2:14–26). For James, a saving faith does not consist in simply believing that God exists, but must be “completed by the works” (2:22) that accord with faith. Mere belief without corresponding action (2:15–16)—“faith alone” (2:24)—does not justify, but is “dead” and “useless” (2:17, 20, 26). Instead, faith must be accompanied by conduct that manifests the new life in Christ.

James seems to be responding to a misinterpretation of Paul's important teaching that Christians are justified by faith rather than works (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8–9). It is clear from the Pauline Letters that faith should be completed by works, and that Christian conduct is crucial.²⁰ Paul's emphasis on faith arose from two concerns. First, he needed to counter the Judaizers, who taught that Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised and observe the ritual elements of the law of Moses. Second, he considered it important for everyone to realize that salvation in Christ is a gift from God, not something that anyone can earn or achieve by human effort (Eph 2:8–9; Phil 3:9; 2 Tim 1:9).

Far from contradicting these points, James himself identifies the gospel, the “word of truth” (1:18 [see 1:21]), as the means of our salvation. And even though he writes to Jewish Christians who probably continue to practice circumcision and observe the dietary laws, James focuses on the ethical aspects of the law, especially the “royal law” that Jesus himself prioritized, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8; Lev 19:18; Mark 12:31), which Paul also teaches (Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14).

19. Johnson, *Letter of James*, 8.

20. See Rom 6:12–23; Gal 5:6, 19–21; Eph 2:10; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:8.

Ethical Conduct in Daily Life

Which works illustrate that one has saving faith? For James, “religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows” (1:27). James advocates care for the poor and warns of the danger of riches. God has chosen the poor in the †world (2:5), but the rich will suffer the judgment of God (5:1–6). A Christian ought to care for the material needs of the poor and not show favoritism to the wealthy. In keeping with this theme, James says that one should not be greedy or a lover of the world (4:1–5), and that employers should pay their workers’ wages promptly (5:1–5).

When it comes to personal comportment, the height of perfection is evidenced when a person controls the tongue. Mastery over speech indicates spiritual maturity; the life of a person whose words are uncontrolled burns with the fire that his or her speech produces. James devotes a great deal of the letter to admonishing his readers against sins of the tongue such as cursing (3:9–10), slander (4:11–12), and boasting (4:16). Finally, James instructs his readers to conduct themselves with gentleness and mercy (2:13; 3:17) and to pray, no matter the circumstances they find themselves in (5:13–18).

Humility and Double-Mindedness

James’s explanation of the lack of charity among some who profess to love Jesus is simple: they are unfaithful in their relationship with God (“Adulterers!” [4:4])—that is, in their hearts they have not fully surrendered to him and been transformed by his love. According to James the primary way to overcome this defect is to embrace an attitude of humility before God.²¹ The alternate path that James warns against most is that of being double-minded (1:8; 4:8; 5:12). The double-minded person has not completely submitted to the will of the Lord (4:7) and thus is a slave of personal passions (1:14–15) and someone whose prayers focus on material gain (4:3). The person’s lack of interior unity is manifested in exterior conflict. Wars, factions, bias toward the rich, speaking evil of others, boasting, disorder, and “every foul practice” indicate a person who is divided within.²²

James’s strategy for overcoming these behaviors is not to recommend a rigorous program of self-discipline, but rather to urge his readers to humbly welcome the word of the gospel that has been planted within them, to ask God

21. See James 1:9, 21; 3:13; 4:6, 10.

22. See James 2:9; 3:14, 16; 4:11, 16.

for the wisdom they need, and to repent (1:5, 21; 4:7–10). Through humility and repentance, we can obtain God’s grace and be lifted up by God himself (4:6, 10). Thus, James makes it clear that a good relationship with God is a gift to be received, and not something earned. Only by turning to the Lord can a person reach spiritual maturity, and this requires profound humility and thoroughgoing repentance.

The Two Ways

Sharp contrasts inform not just James’s view of a faith-filled life but all aspects of his worldview: there is a wisdom from above and a wisdom from below (3:13–18), self-exaltation or submission (4:7, 16), a way to life and a way to death (1:12–18). For James, a person either has saving faith or does not: one keeps the whole law or is guilty in respect to all of it (2:10); one is a friend of God or an enemy (4:4); one is a doer of the law or only a hearer (1:22–25); one blesses or curses (3:10); one produces pure or salty water (3:11); and one is either filthy or pure (1:21, 27). There is no middle road; waffling and indecision amount to choosing against God. Faith requires a total commitment to the ways of God, and one’s charitable actions demonstrate one’s faith.

Anointing of the Sick

In keeping with an apostolic practice mentioned in Mark 6:13, James 5:14–15 teaches the importance of anointing the sick with oil. Largely on the basis of this passage, the Church recognizes the anointing of the sick as a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ.²³

The Timeliness of James

While still a young abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux said, “There are more people converted from mortal sin to grace than there are religious converted from good to better.”²⁴ What the saint noted among the monks of his community could be applied to many of us today and is cause for reflection. Some people go to Mass every Sunday year after year and say rosary after rosary yet never become holy—that is, spiritually mature. Wholehearted disciples seem to be few and far

23. Council of Trent Fourteenth Session (1551), “Doctrine on the Sacrament of Extreme Unction,” 1.1 (DS 1695).

24. Thomas Dubay, *Deep Conversion, Deep Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 12.

between, and Jesus' call to holiness is brushed off as too lofty and unrealistic. But James insists on spiritual perfection for *all* his listeners and shows that the way to get there is a deep conversion that flows from humility and repentance. The Letter of James echoes Jesus' words, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). James invites us to make an honest interior search to see where we are double-minded, where we have not submitted to Jesus, and where we are seeking the things below instead of the things above.

James's challenge to confront the sin in ourselves is provocative, and even painful. Who doesn't need to bridle the tongue? Who can claim to have never judged anyone? Who never shows favoritism? And who consistently acts with gentleness and mercy? Human nature, sin, and temptations do not change, and the interior battle for holiness that James's audience fought then is the same that we Christians fight today. James, like Jesus, taught that holiness is not only possible but is an imperative for every Christian. The Letter of James, written by a godly man who knew, spoke with, and touched Jesus Christ and who walked the arduous path to perfection before us, can serve as a beautiful guide for all who want to live a deeper life with Jesus, a life where charity and peace reign, where wisdom and mercy abound, and where holiness becomes possible.

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Kelly Anderson

Outline of James

- Part 1 Greeting (1:1)
- Part 2 Trials and Joy (1:2–11)
 - A. Trials, Testing, and Perseverance (1:2–4)
 - B. Asking in Faith for Wisdom (1:5–8)
 - C. The Poor Exalted and the Rich Humiliated (1:9–11)
- Part 3 God’s Desire for Our Life (1:12–27)
 - A. Life and Death (1:12–15)
 - B. God’s Perfect Gift (1:16–18)
 - C. Welcoming the Life-Giving Word (1:19–21)
 - D. Obedience to the Word (1:22–27)
- Part 4 Faith and Love (2:1–13)
 - A. Avoiding Partiality toward the Rich (2:1–4)
 - B. God’s Choice of the Poor (2:5–7)
 - C. The Law of Freedom (2:8–13)
- Part 5 Faith without Works (2:14–26)
 - A. Faith without Works Is Dead (2:14–17)
 - B. The Faith of Demons (2:18–19)
 - C. Works That Justify (2:20–26)
- Part 6 The Destructive Power of the Tongue (3:1–18)
 - A. The Tongue (3:1–12)
 - B. The Wise Person (3:13–18)
- Part 7 Lover of the World or Lover of God (4:1–10)
 - A. Passion Is the Source of Conflict (4:1–3)
 - B. The Lover of the World Is at Enmity with God (4:4–6)
 - C. Humbly Submit to God (4:7–10)

- Part 8 Exhortations against Pride (4:11–5:6)
 - A. Avoidance of Defamation (4:11–12)
 - B. Living in God’s Will (4:13–17)
 - C. Condemnation of the Rich (5:1–6)
- Part 9 Patient Perseverance (5:7–11)
 - A. Be Patient Until the Lord Comes (5:7–11)
- Part 10 Final Instructions (5:12–20)
 - A. Avoidance of Swearing (5:12)
 - B. Constant Prayer (5:13–18)
 - C. Bringing Back Sinners (5:19–20)

Greeting

James 1:1

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

OT: 1 Kings 8:53, 66; Ps 90:13, 16; Isa 11:1–10; Ezek 47:13

NT: 1 Cor 15:3–8; Gal 2:9; Acts 12:17; 15:1–31

Catechism: perpetual virginity of Mary, 499–501, 510

Letters written in Greek in the first century typically began with three elements: **1:1** the sender, the addressee, and the greeting. This letter begins with all three. The sender is **James**, one of the most prominent figures in early Christianity, known as “the brother of the Lord” (Gal 1:19) and leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18), whom the fourth-century Church historian Eusebius refers to as the first ¹bishop of Jerusalem (see introduction). But James identifies himself as **a slave of God**. The fact that James does not stress his familial relationship with Jesus or his leadership position in the Jerusalem church, but identifies as a slave, shows a profound humility.¹ The term “slave” (*doulos*) refers to a person who is the property of another. The Old Testament refers to the Israelites as “slaves” or “servants” of God (Pss 90:13, 16; 102:15, 29) and uses the term as a title of honor for Moses, David, and the prophets (1 Kings 8:53, 66; Jer 7:25). In the New Testament, Christian leaders sometimes refer to themselves by this

1. Many translations render this phrase as “servant of God” to avoid associations with the degrading enslavement of Africans in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries most familiar to American readers. Generally speaking, the practice of slavery in ancient Israel and Rome was more humane, as evidenced by the fact that when offered their freedom, it was not uncommon for slaves to choose to remain in that condition, motivated by love for their master or the desire for financial security.

term (see introduction). By calling himself “a slave of God,” James emphasizes his position as one who belongs to God and lives in humble obedience to him.

James also identifies himself as a slave **of the Lord Jesus Christ**, indicating his aim to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the servant of the Lord par excellence, who through his obedient suffering ransomed many (Isa 53:11). By pairing Jesus with God, James places the two on the same level. James uses two titles for Jesus: “Lord” and “Christ.” The first title, “Lord,” was the title for God in the Greek Old Testament, and in the New Testament it is applied to Jesus to acknowledge him as God (1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:11). James uses “Lord” both for Jesus (2:1) and for God the Father (3:9). The second title, “Christ,” is the Greek form of the Hebrew word “[†]messiah,” which means “anointed one.” In the Old Testament, “messiah” originally referred to Israel’s anointed king, but it came to refer to the descendant of David who would come and save his people from their enemies (Isa 11:1–10; Luke 1:69–75). In calling Jesus the Messiah, James, with the early Church, confesses his belief that Jesus is the promised one whom the prophets foretold, and that the fulfillment of the messianic hopes of Israel is realized in him.

The recipients of the letter are **the twelve tribes**, which is a reference to Israel. The nation Israel was composed of twelve tribes descended from the patriarch Jacob. Ten of those tribes virtually disappeared from history after being exiled by the Assyrians in 721 BC, but the Old Testament and later Jewish writings speak of the hope of the restoration and reconstitution of the twelve tribes.² James understands the Church as the fulfillment of this restoration, which Jesus Christ has initiated (see 1:18).

The **dispersion**, or diaspora, refers to the large number of Jews who resided outside the land of Israel. Faithful to their religion, they built synagogues and sought to follow the teachings of Moses. The first Christians were Jewish, and the [†]gospel message was first preached in their synagogues. James, whose pastoral ministry was directed to Jewish Christians (Acts 21:18–25; Gal 2:9), seems to be writing a letter for Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Mediterranean world.

Finally, James finishes his salutation by offering **greetings**—literally, “re-joyce” (Greek *chairein*). The typical greeting among Jews was “peace” (Hebrew *shalom*). James’s word choice is more typical of the Hellenistic world; perhaps he chooses this greeting to lead into his exhortation to have “joy” (*chara*) in the next verse (1:2).

2. Ezek 47:13; *Testament of Benjamin* 9:2; *Psalms of Solomon* 17:26; *War Scroll* 2.1–3. See Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 79.